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The floods: Where do we go from here?

Support, recovery, and lessons learned: Two months after the Cumbrian floods we put six key questions to six key people



Dr Stephen Gibbs

CHAIR, CARLISLE FLOODS RESIDENTS' & BUSINESSES' ACTION GROUP



Glyn Vaughan

CHAIRMAN, EDEN RIVERS TRUST

1 How can homeowners and businesses be helped?



1 We need innovative central government leadership. Departments such as the Environment Agency are never in a position to address the 'whole catchment area' where rain falls. We must bring together all interested parties to look at how other countries deal in a sustainable way with repeated flooding. This includes relocating homes and businesses, and radical new housing design. The unthinkable needs thinking.

1 The Government and the third sector have grants available for householders and businesses to help recovery. For me, the biggest challenge is to get insurance companies to accept that they must build in resilience measures when renovating flooded properties, so that the impact isn't as great if they were to flood again in the future. Building in resistance measures such as waterproof doors will protect against smaller flood events.

2 What should be done about our damaged roads and bridges?



2 Limited investment in Cumbria and the region has led to a transport network unfit for 21st century competition. UK regions need upgraded transport links, in the context of an overall regeneration vision. Adopting a 20-30 year investment plan, building capacity ahead, not just patch and repair. Cumbria has to compete globally, and can offer a unique vision of an exciting balance of rural and urban economics.

2 Many roads affected in Cumbria are critical in linking communities. These need repairing as quickly as possible, and in a way that reduces the chance of damage in another big flood. There are some big decisions to be taken regarding some of our destroyed bridges. Should they be put back as they were? I believe they should be replaced by modern iconic bridges that wouldn't be affected by future flooding.

3 How can Cumbria put across the message that it's open for business?



3 Being battered doesn't mean broken. 24/7 media coverage was a golden opportunity to turn a perceived disaster to Cumbria's advantage. The wild, life-enhancing aspect of the UK's most beautiful county is its attraction, along with rugged weather, and contrasts with the unmoved Cumbrian hospitality. The message is move your business to a low cost, high living county.

3 Cumbria has done it before! Following foot and mouth in 2001 and the flooding in 2005 and 2009, we showed the world that we were still open for business through using the media positively to great effect, coupled with the sheer determination of the people who live here to rebuild their livelihoods. The world has just seen what a strong community spirit exists in Cumbria and this will draw people in.



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ENVIRONMENT AGENCY AREA MANAGER, CUMBRIA & LANCASHIRE

1 In the emergency phase, reception centres were set up for those needing shelter and basic support. Donations of clothes, bedding, toiletries, children's toys and even pet food came in from all over Cumbria and beyond. Since then the Government has announced packages of support for individuals and businesses, details of which can be found on our website www.cumbria.gov.uk

1 In the short term, those directly affected by flooding can be helped financially, to fund repairs and replace damaged items. There is a flood appeal, and the Government is providing funds. Longer term, flood victims and the wider community can all be helped through improved flood defences and more resilient energy, transport and communications infrastructure, though the scale of what is required is, it seems, huge.

1 They need immediate help to get their lives back somewhere near normal, but that still leaves the fear it could happen again. They then need practical advice on how they and their communities can try to protect themselves as much as possible. It shouldn't all be down to them. Government investment is essential, and we need to be acting elsewhere in their river catchments to manage how and where water moves.

1 We are working closely with community flood action groups, residents and businesses to provide support with the flood recovery. We are also working in partnership with Cumbria County Council, local authorities and the National Flood Forum. In January 2016, we, along with local councils and partners invited residents across Cumbria to a series of community drop-in sessions. These provided local people with the opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns and access information about the funding and support available to them. Our team of community support officers continues to visit affected areas to provide home and business owners with advice and guidance on how to be better prepared for flooding. I would also urge people to sign up for free flood warnings using the 24hour Floodline service on 0345 988 1188. Cumbria County Council has opted to use the extended Floodline service, available to all affected communities in the county. You can call this number to get information on where to receive insurance advice, how to get hold of sandbags, local support networks and support packages available. We continue to encourage all at-risk communities to ensure that they have a community flood or emergency plan in place. Visit www.gov.uk/prepare-for-a-flood for more information.

2 The damage to Cumbria's roads and bridges is far beyond the resources of the county council to address on its own. We are therefore working with the Government and lobbying hard to secure the funding to rebuild our infrastructure and get Cumbria open for business again as quickly as possible.

2 The risk posed by flooding to Cumbria's bridges, roads and railways needs to be thoroughly assessed. In rural areas, attention needs to be given to minor (B) roads which are, nevertheless, extremely important for rural villages and hamlets. Extensive flooding of the road network isn't just an inconvenience, it hampers rescue, evacuation and flood defence efforts and represents a risk to life and other properties.

2 We must consider both 'recovery' and 'resilience'. We need to get our infrastructure functioning quickly. The stress and financial damage to locals trying to live and earn their living is immense, and we need one eye on the impacts on our visitors later this year. Repairing infrastructure just to be damaged again is daft. Use fresh thinking, eg new bridges could be clear span but still designed and built to high standards.

3 Although the national media has been full of images of mass flooding, collapsed bridges and damaged roads, the reality is that once the waters receded the vast majority of the county is still accessible. The snow in mid-January showed off the Lake District at its best and we have asked Government to support a national campaign to ensure that visitors return to the county this year.

3 Through campaigns led by Cumbria Tourism and relevant sectoral interest groups. Also by word of mouth, and through the strong voices of our local MPs.

3 We need to wipe away the scenes the media have been showing since the beginning of December. The floods had to be reported and then analysed, but we must now move on. The majority of our visitors come because of our incredible landscapes, and we have to remind people of those, with exciting new images. Many individuals and groups will be choosing holidays now - this is urgent.

Where do we go from here?



Dr Stephen Gibbs
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FLOODS RESIDENTS'
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Glyn Vaughan
CHAIRMAN, EDEN
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4 What lessons have been learned from the December 2015 floods?



4 We cannot separate rural and urban visions. What happens upstream in the Eden Watershed, the incentives for low-yield farmers, must align with the vision for our urban spaces and current government budgets to make money from urban flood plain spaces. The event also exposes economic modelling and structures that pass problems from one parliament to the next. In Europe they engage regions, and separate powers more effectively.

4 The main one is that nature always wins! We can certainly be better prepared to minimise the risk from flooding, but there are always going to be extreme events, and these are getting more common with climate change. We have also learned that when things gets tough, the Cumbrian community spirit becomes even stronger.

5 What Government support would be most valuable in the short/long-term?



5 Fragmented government departments should, for a period, come under strong co-ordinated leadership to prioritise those at immediate risk. Storm Desmond and its later siblings may yet claim more lives. Fatigue from austerity, combined with multiple flood events, is resulting in loss of hope for some. Agencies look shocked themselves, their thinned ranks of middle management officials and experts awaiting an appropriate governmental response to complex social and political challenges.

5 Short-term support that includes financial assistance to homeowners and businesses to repair their properties, putting in resilience measures such as solid floors, waterproof walls, and flood proofed electrics. Support should also include funding for the repair of critical infrastructure. Long-term support should include a major review of critical infrastructure such as roads and bridges, and the funding to carry out proactive work to protect them from future major flooding.

6 What can be done to prevent further flooding?



6 What is termed 'whole life' thinking and 'whole catchment area' strategies. Piecemeal defensive thinking is flawed. International expertise from Holland, India and the USA, should urgently sit round the table with our technocrats and pull our vision outwards. The UK should creatively use this disruption to its pedestrian and utilitarian policies. Failure to articulate the UK and the Cumbrian business model leaves us at the mercy of competing visionary nations who don't go forward looking in the rear view mirror, as we often do. A geological shift in governmental leadership thinking is needed. Atop of which new practices, such as adapting to new weather patterns, sit.

6 No matter how high or how big we build defences, one day they will be overtopped. Higher defences also disconnect communities from the river. The way forward has to be a mix of hard defences, managing upstream catchments better, and more resilience to our homes, businesses, and infrastructure. We also need to stop development taking place on floodplains unless there is real justification. Communities need to be engaged to understand the risks and what they can do to reduce them. These will all reduce the risk of flooding, but of course will never remove it.



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4 Unfortunately Cumbria has a lot of experience of major flooding events and the emergency phase was well managed. During the recovery the spirit of Cumbria has been well and truly evident with the whole community pulling together to get us through. I am conscious that for many of those affected it is not over yet, but once it is we will look closely at any lessons that can be learned for the future.

4 I don't know what lessons the relevant authorities have learned. I do wonder if there are lessons to be learned from other countries with a history of flooding, such as the Netherlands.

4 For me, it is that now everyone must accept our climate is changing - how often can we use the word "unprecedented" to describe rainfall or flooding? And that flood defences in isolation won't always work. We just move the problem on to the next weak point or the water is simply deeper, wider or faster than the defences can cope with. Use local knowledge more, and combine hard defences with land and river management.

4 December was the wettest month on record across all of the UK since Met Office records began in 1910 and rivers across Cumbria exceeded the highest levels ever recorded. During Storm Desmond over 847 billion litres of rain fell over Cumbria. A new UK record for highest rainfall in 24 hours was recorded at Honister Pass (314mm). We have surveyed all flood affected communities in Cumbria and we are now holding sessions across the county to gather further local knowledge about the impact of the floods. This data will be reviewed and used to inform our future plans. We've had good feedback from people who have welcomed the chance to offer their local knowledge to inform future decisions. The flood recovery programme continues to progress. All temporary and emergency repairs are either complete or contingency measures have been implemented to ensure that our defences are providing the same levels of protection as before Storm Desmond.

5 The short answer is funding. Whether that is to support individuals and businesses that have been affected or to repair and in some cases replace the roads, bridges, schools and other infrastructure that has been damaged, it all takes cash. The county council is already struggling to fund the wide range of services it is responsible for without having to meet additional unexpected costs of this magnitude.

5 See my other answers

5 Homeowners and businesses directly affected have urgent need for support, but in the long term we need both significant investment and a change in mind set from Government, including research, resources to put this research into action, and a different approach to what we encourage land managers to do. Some places will always flood so any measures introduced should recognise this, and it will be interesting to see how the Flood Re insurance scheme operates.

6 There isn't one single answer. Clearly there needs to be a review of the existing flood defences which may need to be enhanced in some areas. There also needs to be a plan for the catchment area of each of our main rivers to look at managing the flow, whether that be by building dams, planting trees, allowing designated agricultural areas to flood or more likely a combination of all of these things. What we can't do is stop the rain so we need to learn to live with it.

6 I imagine this requires a combination of better hard defences and flood mitigation measures, including proven nature-based solutions - my organisation has a long history of looking at whether there is evidence if these work (see www.ceh.ac.uk/news-and-media/blogs/what-difference-could-natural-flood-management-techniques-make) and avoiding new building in flood-risk areas. In Cumbria, I am sure there is a lot of scope for upland tree planting, which I'd be in favour of, provided there is high confidence it will be effective and done sensitively ie planting native broad-leaved trees rather than conifers or non-native species.

6 Use factual knowledge. Everyone seems to have an opinion and many of these directly conflict. The answer is probably a little of everything, guided by scientific knowledge and local experience. Slowing run-off from land, avoiding natural or man-made pinch points and building effective defences all offer part solutions, but combining them may be the answer to resilience. If land managers are asked to compromise their land and production, it is only fair to compensate them.

5 The Government has committed to spend £2.3 billion on more than 1,500 schemes across the country by 2021, which will protect 300,000 households from flooding. Elizabeth Truss, the Environment Secretary has announced work to identify additional flood protection measures in Cumbria. The new Cumbria Floods Partnership group will consider what improvements to flood defences in the region may be required. The group will be chaired by Floods Minister Rory Stewart and made up of local authorities, the Environment Agency and community groups.