

science summary



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Managing the social aspects of flooding: Synthesis Report

Science Summary SC040033/SR6

Decisions on managing flood risk must take account of real or potential impacts on society. In order to understand these social aspects of flooding, six studies were undertaken between December 2004 and July 2005. These covered three central themes: impacts on vulnerable and deprived communities; working with stakeholders, including local government and local communities; and the role of social science within flood risk management research. This report draws out the main findings and conclusions from the six studies.

One substantive set of findings showed that people already experiencing social and economic deprivation are a significant proportion of the total numbers currently at risk from flooding and, for sea flooding, they constitute the majority of those at risk in England. This indicates that flood risk management will need to be increasingly responsive to the social distribution and social impacts of flood risk.

A second set of findings concerned working with others. The Environment Agency has enough research and guidance on how to carry out engagement processes in general terms, but less which is specifically focussed on flood risk management. Working in partnership will also challenge current structures and require the organisation to learn how to work alongside other organisations in addition to its role, in some contexts, as the lead decision maker.

The studies also highlighted some of the structural challenges within the Environment Agency which currently limit understanding and the use of knowledge derived from social science. Several recommendations are made which would enable the organisation to derive greater benefit from social science knowledge and findings. These include:

- developing a clear vision and strategy for the role of social science within the FCERM R&D programme;

- developing an approach to embedding social research, perhaps using Flood Risk Management as an 'early adopter' function;
- developing new narratives for Flood Risk Management which combine technical and social languages;
- building staff confidence and skills in both social science methods and stakeholder engagement, by providing appropriate developmental opportunities and resources/information to draw on.

A final set of findings relate to the wider context of sustainable development. Here, the studies suggest that opportunities should be identified for tackling environmental and social issues together – for example, building local capacity and tackling flood risk problems and social exclusion simultaneously.

These studies represent a substantial body of work. It is clear that it is no longer tenable to separate out the "social" from the "technical" aspects of flooding. Flood risk management requires multiple approaches and disciplines and these studies provide a wealth of information and data from the social sciences, offering alternative ways of constructing and framing flood risk management.

This summary relates to information from Science Project SC040033/SR6, reported in detail in the following output:

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Project manager: Paula Orr, Social Policy Advisor

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Collingwood Environmental Planning, 4.2.3. The Leathermarket, Weston Street, London, SE1 3ER.

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