



An analysis of actor collaboration in the Regional Flood and Coastal Committees

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Contents

| | Page |
|----------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Executive summary | 3 |
| 2. Scope of the research | 4 |
| 3. Context of the research | 4 |
| 4. Evaluation..... | 5 |
| 5. Key findings | 6 |
| 6. Recommendations | 10 |
| 7. Conclusions | 11 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 12 |
| References | 12 |
| Appendix | 13 |

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1. Executive Summary

This report summarises the key findings of research carried out by the University of Exeter and the University of East Anglia during 2014. The research aimed to assess the degree to which the Regional Flood and Coastal Committees (RFCC) provide a collaborative approach to flood management at local level through the involvement of local actors. It also sought to elicit actor perceptions of the Committee process. Two RFCCs, Anglian (Eastern) and the South West Region (covering Devon and Cornwall), were used as case studies to evaluate the extent of local actor influence on flood investment decisions. The two regions differ geographically and have different flooding and coastal issues.

Regional Flood and Coastal Committees were established after 2011 by the Environment Agency under Section 2 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 (UK Government: 2010), and replaced the Regional Flood Defence Committees (RFDC). These new Committees also cover coastal erosion to reflect the remit of the Environment Agency. The purpose of these Committees is to provide better management of flood risk and collaboration between agencies and local stakeholders such as local authorities, land owners and NGOs in the allocation of regional scale flood investments.

Findings of the research show that, generally, actors were supportive of the Committee process and felt that local level interests were – to an extent – integrated into decision-making. However, some considered the process top-down and in need of, albeit, limited modification. While different actors also felt that they had learned significantly about flood management in their region, the research uncovered only limited evidence of structured mechanisms to inform local communities on RFCC flood management initiatives or work programmes in the two regions studied. Interestingly, Committee members in both regions expressed similar views on the Committee structure, processes and level of local influence. Some recommendations for future evolution of the Committees are therefore forwarded.

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³ This funding scheme is specifically designed to promote the transfer of academic research to non-academic stakeholders.

2. Scope of the research

The research aimed to find the degree to which collaboration between different actors, thereby integrating local interests in investment decisions, was evident in the Committee process. A total of 17 interviews were carried out with members of the two RFCCs noted above, by telephone or face-to-face, over a period of 8 months during 2014. The researchers interviewed a broad cross-section of participating Committee members, including local government representatives (from regional Lead Local Flood Authorities), local experts and Environment Agency staff. In addition, data were gathered from documentary evidence, such as minutes of meetings and annual reports. The researchers also observed meetings, which were open to members of the public.

3. Context of the research

During 2007, there was widespread flooding across the UK. The Pitt Review (Cabinet Office: 2008) was subsequently commissioned by the Government after severe criticism of their response to the flooding. The recommendations for change highlighted in the Review were supported by the Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DEFRA sets the national policy for flood and coastal erosion risk management and provides funding through the Environment Agency to local authorities. The Environment Agency is responsible to, and sponsored by, DEFRA, and takes a strategic overview role in managing flooding and coastal erosion. Income for the Environment Agency is raised from charging schemes, flood defence levies and government grants from DEFRA. The local levy supports local flood risk management projects, but only County Council and Unitary Authority Members (representing the Lead Local Flood Authorities) of the Regional Flood and Coastal Committees can vote on the local levy.

The Committees have statutory functions and bring together members appointed by the Lead Local Flood Authorities with independent members who have relevant experience. The Committee Chairs are appointed by DEFRA; the Lead Local Flood Authorities appoint Members, and the Environment Agency appoints the remaining independent members through an open selection process. These members are appointed as individuals in part according to their expertise, not as representatives of others or of other organisations. The terms of office are up to 4 years although members can serve up to 10 years. Sub-Committees or joint Committees may be appointed if necessary, by the Committees themselves, to conduct work outside of the normal Committee meetings, in specific areas such as finance or conservation for example.

The Committees meet four times per year, with papers being circulated in advance of each meeting. Members of the public and press can attend meetings as non-participatory observers. Copies of Committee agendas and papers are available to the public via the Environment Agency on payment of any relevant charges. Minutes of the Committee meetings are often made public online.

4. Evaluation

The research involved consultation with the Chairs and Committee members from the two RFCCs (Anglian (Eastern) and South West) to gain an insight into how the local actors were involved in flood and coastal erosion management. The work aimed to identify and determine the effectiveness of the Committees and if they had led to towards greater collaborative governance, as intended by the 2010 Act. In this respect, 'collaboration' (Benson et al. 2013) is defined in terms of the degree to which local actors perceived they were influencing decision-making and outcomes.

4.1 Case study design

The research was based on a multi-case approach that employed qualitative 'elite' interviewing techniques. Given logistical, financial and time constraints it was not possible to research all the RFCCs in England and Wales. Therefore, the researchers selected two case study regions as representative of wider trends. Although geo-physically, economically and demographically divergent, the South West and Anglian (Eastern) regions were considered significant in terms of flood management research nationally. The South West is susceptible to both coastal and river flooding, and bore the brunt of the 2014 winter storm flooding. Low-lying East Anglia also faces increasing risks from coastal flood inundation linked to erosion and sea-level rise; coastal areas were significantly affected by the December 2013 surge.

4.2 Research methods

An interview programme was designed to elicit responses from RFCC members in these case study regions. A series of research questions (Appendix 1) were developed by the researchers as part of an interview protocol. Interviews, which were conducted either face-to-face or via telephone, generally lasted for around 30 minutes although some extended to over an hour. A semi-structured questioning style was used in which a standardised set of questions were asked but interviewees invited to talk freely around the themes discussed.

Committee members were consequently asked about their roles, the decision making process, and their perceived influence within the Committee structure. They were also asked about their personal learning experiences and how knowledge and decisions were disseminated to external individuals and other organisations. Interviews were recorded, with hand-written notes also taken, transcribed and then analysed by both researchers to enhance inter-reviewer reliability. The interviews highlighted recurring themes from both regions. These are outlined below in the key findings.

5. Key Findings

5.1 Committee meetings

A number of recurring themes were evident from the interview data. Most significantly, respondents were generally very positive about the Committee meetings, in particular:

- There was clear evidence that the Environment Agency staff were well regarded by other Committee members. They were viewed as high calibre, professional individuals who were well-prepared before meetings, presented information in a professional manner, supported local communities and their interests well, and were doing the best they could, often with limited resources;
- Meeting agendas were full, although much time was taken up at meetings by updates on achievements;
- The work programmes were created by the Environment Agency with input from the Local Authorities. These were then presented to the Committees;
- Members welcomed continuity of membership to build up expertise and a knowledge base;
- The new Committee system was regarded as transparent with some members suggesting that the old (RFDC) system was more skewed in favour of landowner and environmental interests;
- There was evidence to suggest that the sub-Committees facilitated an informal way to progress proceedings and fill gaps in knowledge by discussing and researching aspects commissioned to them by the Committee and reporting back.

5.2 Individual responsibilities of Committee members

There was evidence that members were genuinely interested and committed to contributing to flood management issues for the greater good of their communities. In part, this was demonstrated by their desire to take part, becoming selected through an application and interview procedure.

- Although members were not appointed to ‘represent’ anyone, many regarded their role as specific because they represented a particular area or interest such as coastal or environment. This occasionally led to minor tensions between the capacities allowed by their role as members of the Committee and the opportunity to influence decision-making; there was no evidence of overt confrontation, members sometimes expressed a mild frustration at this perceived discrepancy;
- There was some indication that individuals tended to concentrate on their own ‘patch’ rather than looking at the bigger picture. To this regard the role of the Chair was important: they often reminded Committee members and representatives of their frames of reference. However, individual learning on flood management issues was taking place through networking opportunities and site visits. These were raising awareness of geographical sensitivities within the regions and the conditions under which the Environment Agency operated;
- There were several examples where interviewees reported that recent flooding events had sharpened their focus and raised their awareness of the serious nature of their role as a Committee member.

5.3 Cohesiveness of the Committees

Several members reported that integration and a full understanding of the workings of the Committee took a considerable amount of time because the meetings only took place on a quarterly basis. This made it more difficult to develop strong working relationships and respondents suggested that these relationships were still maturing and evolving.

- The Chairs were appointed by DEFRA and played a key role in the cohesiveness of the Committees. One Chair regarded himself as a critical friend to the Environment Agency and viewed his role as trying to balance the representation of the Environment Agency expertise with the opinions of the regional stakeholders;
- Although there were examples of disagreements within the Committees, these were discussed openly and without hostility;
- Site visits and field trips organised by the Environment Agency helped with building working relationships among Committee members;
- Unsurprisingly, there was a general feeling across both Committees that local authority members were somewhat politically motivated, whereas the independent members appeared more concerned with building consensus and raising awareness and attention on issues of interest to the Committee as a whole (e.g. value of ecosystem services);
- One independent member reported that he had met with his counterparts on other Committees around the country. This had reduced his feeling of isolation and had made him more aware of what was happening in other parts of the UK;

- Both Chairs attended national-level Chairs' meetings and reported back to their Committee members on the outcomes of those meetings. It was suggested that each regional Committee operated in slightly different ways and the Chairs' meetings could be an opportunity to share best practice.

5.4 Decision making and influence

There was an acceptance by most Committee members that not all schemes and projects could be fully-funded by Government and that difficult decisions were inevitable. Nevertheless, the Environment Agency must have the consent of the RFCC for implementing the programme of works.

It was suggested that the local levies and local choices enabled some degree of influence but in practice most members felt that they could not always change outcomes. Some of the reasons for this limited influence are outlined below:

- Decision making could be restricted because of central Agency priorities and it was often led by Agency recommendations;
- The Environment Agency had legal obligations to fulfil and these could be used to justify decisions;
- The Regional flood risk managers can make decisions without reference to the Committee over certain expenditures, although that limit is agreed with the Committee;
- Not all members have voting rights (only councillors can vote on the levies) and some respondents suggested that this limited their influence. All interviewees agreed that they were able to put forward their opinions and that there was a genuine listening culture which gave members an opportunity to persuade members to acknowledge other viewpoints. Others felt that they were able to challenge the Environment Agency programme, although it was felt that this needed to be done before the programme was put before the Committee in order to better influence outcomes;
- One conservation member regarded the environment as often being low down on the list of priorities, and felt that biodiversity and water quality and social/recreational benefits could and should be better built into funding decisions on flood defences more often;
- In the Anglian (Eastern) region, there was evidence that some members did not feel that coastal issues were being covered adequately and that they had been 'tacked on' to flood issues. The previous RFDCs had not dealt with coastal erosion issues.

5.5 Effectiveness of the Committees

Some respondents felt that it was difficult to measure the effectiveness of their Committee. Nevertheless:

- It was suggested that the Committees were the key conduit in ensuring that all risk management authorities work together. However, there was an alternative view that at present there was still a 'many-tiered' approach which hindered effectiveness;
- Although several interviewees felt that projects would have happened without the Committees, nevertheless they had led to greater engagement with partners and stakeholders;
- There was agreement amongst many interviewees that the Committees could work more closely with local communities, for example through local flood groups/forums;
- It was generally felt that the new Committees were more transparent than the RDFCs, which were perceived to be skewed in favour of landowner and environmental issues;
- The expertise was largely with the Environment Agency engineers, but it was felt that projects sometimes slipped and in the event of significant flooding, funds could be reallocated to incident management which in turn resulted in capital projects being delayed;
- Most members found the financial processes and partnership funding scores complex. It was not clear whether any induction or training programme is in place for Committee members, and there was some confusion about how partnership funding could be secured;
- In the South West Region, it was noted that the coastal defence ownership was very fragmented, making it very difficult to achieve interconnectedness and coordination of any plans to tackle erosion and flooding issues.

5.6 External engagement

There did not appear to be any external formal engagement programme in place for Committees in either region, and any engagement that did take place appeared to be on an ad hoc basis which was dependent upon the individual Committee members. This may reflect the lack of specified external engagement priorities in the original RFCC remits, nonetheless:

- Both Chairs were keen to promote the work of the Committees and their influence, citing examples of liaising with ministers responsible for flood management. The evidence suggested that there was no public relations mechanism for notifying members of the general public about the work of the Committees. However,

members did highlight examples of events organised by the Environment Agency such as webcasts, question time panels and road shows;

- Most Committee members did not know how information on meetings and minutes were publicised to the wider public. Some thought that the information was available but that it was difficult to find and they were not aware of annual reports being published;
- It was generally felt that the Committees had enabled networking opportunities but there was limited two-way communication and knowledge exchange beyond the Committee process. Interviews from both regions highlighted examples of disseminating information about the Committee and its decisions to immediate contacts, for example, Parish Councils and conservation organisations, but not to the wider community;
- Several members regarded sharing the work of the Committee as a challenge.

6. Recommendations

The research was carried out across two RFCCs and therefore any recommendations are limited to evidence based on these two Committees. The findings suggest that collaboration of local actors is evident and certainly more advanced than the old RFDC system but that it could be enhanced. The influence of local actors is somewhat constrained, in part due to the structural make-up of the Committees which includes local authority members who are the only members with voting rights. Also, there are significant opportunities for the Committees to externally promote the flood defence capabilities of the Environment Agency by communicating Committee decision-making more effectively to the wider community.

In order for the Committees to improve the confidence of members and communities in the decision-making process, several recommendations are outlined below:

- Committee meetings and programmes of work should be publicised more widely, via local media/websites for example, to engage with local communities. This would lead to greater transparency of decision-making, raise awareness of regional priorities, promote community resilience in terms of 'self-help', and assist in managing local expectations when difficult decisions about funding projects were required. However, for this to work effectively, a structured, standard mechanism and procedure for publicity could be incorporated into the remit of the Committees to facilitate consistency across all regions. At present, external engagement appears to be limited to the initiative of individual Chairs and members.
- Committee members were genuinely eager to learn more about flood and coastal issues, not only in their own localities but in other regions. Horizontal networking across other Committees and regions could be put on a more formalised basis with a

programme of exchange visits to other regions and mechanisms for knowledge exchange. While it is acknowledged that there would be a cost implication, the sharing of best practice would be beneficial;

- Most members found the system of funding and ranking of projects very complex and difficult to understand. It is suggested that time should be set aside to train members so that they can understand the funding allocation procedure and how the programmes of work are devised. The evidence highlighted that members felt this complexity prevented them from changing outcomes, thereby limiting their influence. The general consensus was that that the Environment Agency priorities tend to be adopted by the Committees;
- Finally, greater use could be made of sub-Committees in order to integrate environmental and other locally significant concerns at an earlier stage of the funding decision process. In the South West, Committee members were already engaged in establishing such mechanisms at the time of the research.

7. Conclusions

The South West and Anglian (Eastern) Committees appeared to work well, featuring balanced representation of different actors. There were role differentiations on the Committees, with individual members bringing specialised knowledge, interests and priorities in specific areas. Notwithstanding, the group cohesion on both Committees appeared to be strong with no evidence of significant tension or conflict.

Respondents from both regions identified strong leadership from their respective Chairs who were well-regarded by the members. This pointed to an effective recruitment and selection procedure. Officers of the Environment Agency were equally well-regarded and respected. Their professionalism and expertise was highly valued and commented upon frequently by members.

The Committees were set up to provide greater local democratic control over flood and coastal erosion management and the Environment Agency must consult and have the consent of the RFCCs before it can carry out flood and coastal erosion work. While Committee members across both regions felt there was a consultation and listening culture, they felt their influence was somewhat restricted. In part, this may reflect actor voting rights and Agency priorities, and the way in which projects were ranked. There was a tendency for members to feel that some of the decisions simply endorse Environment Agency priorities. In addition, perceptions were that if there was a flooding emergency, funds could be reallocated to incident management work which in turn would result in the delay of capital projects.

Communication and publicising of the work being carried out by the Committees and the Environment Agency appeared to be limited and was dependent upon the local networks of individual members. Information on the Committees and the membership was difficult to find, as were meeting agendas and minutes. As a result, the extent and quality of publicly available information on the work of the Committee and its remit in these two regions was difficult to measure.

Finally, Agency priorities and obligations meant that they often took the lead on decision-making, thereby limiting the influence of the local members.

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Appendix 1

Research questions: collaborative floods governance

Background information

Date of interview:

Location of interview:

Duration of interview:

Name and contact details of interviewee:

Profession of interviewee:

General questions

- When did you first become involved in the Committee?
- How would you describe your role and responsibilities in the Committee?

Specific questions

- Do you think that local actors have influence over floods management decisions/investments under the new Committee system? How are local interests/values represented in flood investment decisions?
- How does decision-making occur in the Committee?
- What is the working relationship like among members of the Committee?
- Through participating in the Committee have you gained an increased understanding of flood management issues in the region? If not, why? If yes, how?
- Has your understanding of the wider issue of flood management in the UK changed as a result of your involvement? If so, please explain.
- Have you communicated / shared your knowledge gained as a result of participating in the Committee with others (both within your organisation and outside)? If so, to whom and in what way?
- In your opinion, what has the effect of the Committee been with regards to flood management in the region to date?
- Is there anyone else I should talk to?