Practical Hope:
Inspiration for community action

Community guide to flood risk

What communities can do to influence planning, respond to floods and manage flood risk naturally

tcpa

Practical Hope

Inspiration for Community Action

Contents

Introduction

To effectively address flood risk, we need local people's voices to be at the heart of decision making.

You will know from direct experience how flooding can affect your local area, and how important it is for communities to have the right to input on what happens locally and how funding is spent. This guide is designed to support community action, by showcasing the positive work communities are doing to secure their future. One way community groups can be part of positive change is to build a shared vision. This can be based on the simple question 'are we building in the right place, and to the right design, to reduce the risk of flooding?' All across England communities are building their knowledge of flood management and the planning system to influence flood risk management in their areas. They are making their voices heard to secure the long-term survival of their homes and neighbourhoods.

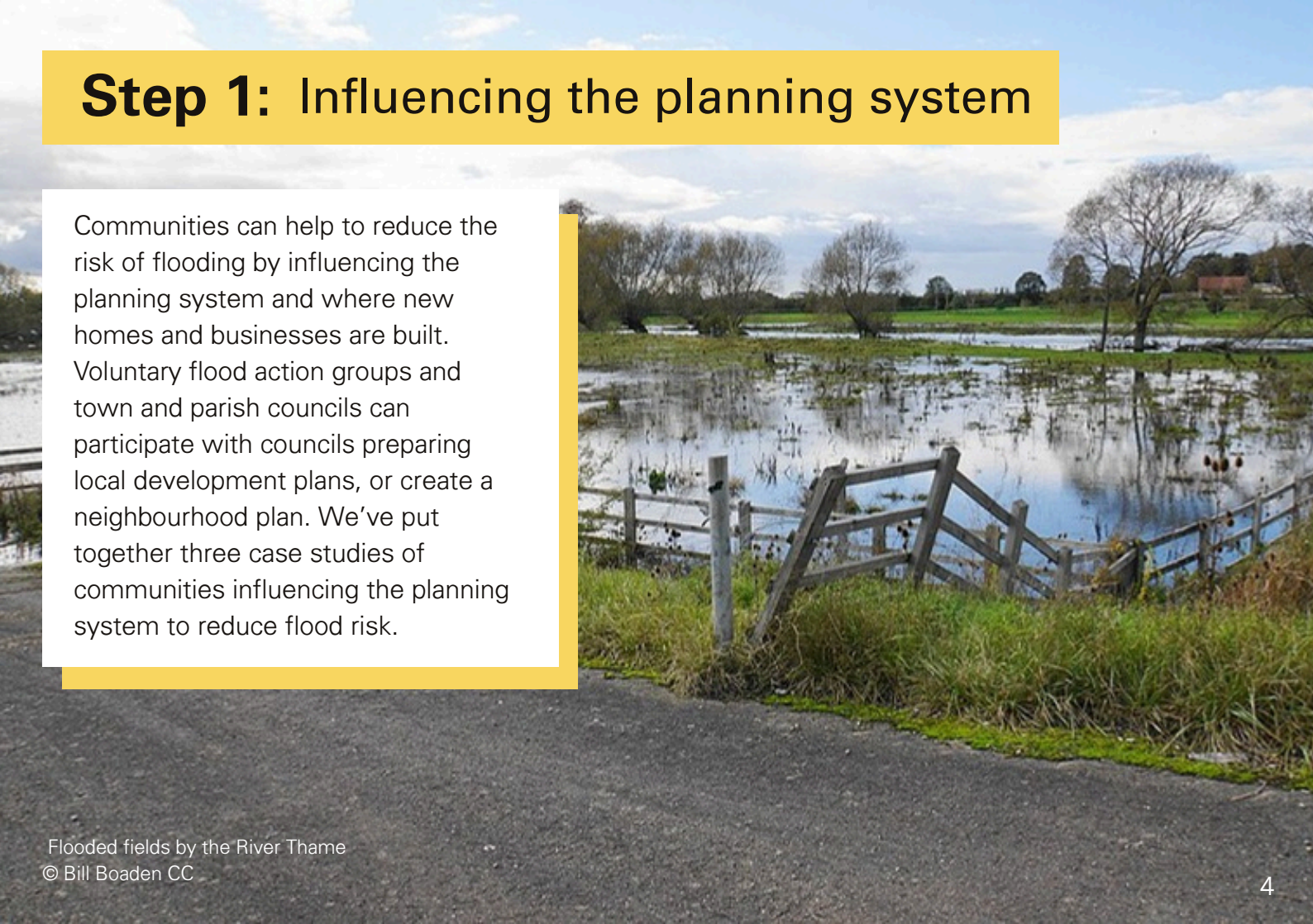
Key benefits of community action to address flood risk:

1. Better preparedness for flooding, reducing negative impacts and risks.
2. Influencing decision makers and opportunities for local investment.
3. Increased biodiversity and improvement of local green spaces.
4. Increased sense of community ownership and cohesion, and educational and volunteering opportunities.

Drainage ditch © Natural England CC

Step 1: Influencing the planning system

Communities can help to reduce the risk of flooding by influencing the planning system and where new homes and businesses are built. Voluntary flood action groups and town and parish councils can participate with councils preparing local development plans, or create a neighbourhood plan. We've put together three case studies of communities influencing the planning system to reduce flood risk.



Flooded fields by the River Thame

Case study 1: Thame Neighbourhood Plan, Oxfordshire

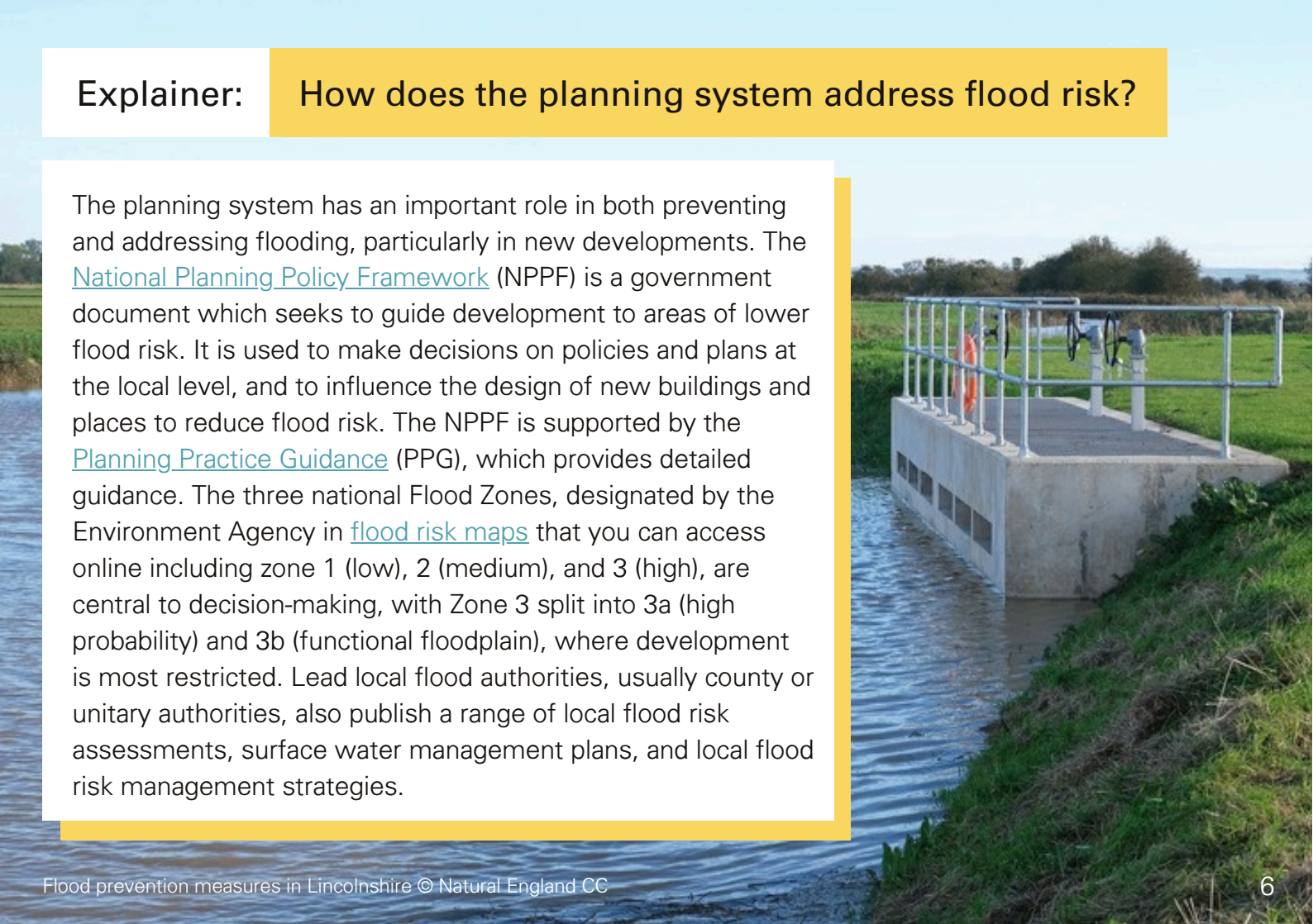
Thame, located in Oxfordshire, faces flood risk from the River Thame and Cuttle Brook. In the Thame Neighbourhood Plan 2, their second plan which was made in 2025, Policy 'NEF1 Flood Risk and Sustainable Drainage' sets out local expectations on flood risk and sustainable drainage.[1] The policy presents clear criteria around the town's preferences for Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) and specifies what types should be prioritised. Additionally, the plan outlines the town's vision for street greening, seeking to identify and support the reuse of underused green spaces and roadside verges for rain gardens and wildflower meadows to reduce surface water runoff.

Case study 2: Hadley Wood Neighbourhood Plan, London

Hadley Wood is a suburb located in the London Borough of Enfield. Their neighbourhood plan, made in 2023, recognises the need to take a broader approach towards flood risk in the context of climate change .[2] They hope to tackle increased surface water flood risk caused by the proliferation of hard surfaces in front and rear gardens. Policy 'HW-3: Paving of Front Gardens' requires all new and replacement front gardens to be at least 25% unpaved, unless they come under a size threshold which means they fall under Permitted Development and do not require a planning application. As most front gardens in Hadley Wood are large, this is expected to help to halt the significant increase in impermeable surfaces in the area seen in recent years.

Explainer: How does the planning system address flood risk?

The planning system has an important role in both preventing and addressing flooding, particularly in new developments. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is a government document which seeks to guide development to areas of lower flood risk. It is used to make decisions on policies and plans at the local level, and to influence the design of new buildings and places to reduce flood risk. The NPPF is supported by the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG), which provides detailed guidance. The three national Flood Zones, designated by the Environment Agency in flood risk maps that you can access online including zone 1 (low), 2 (medium), and 3 (high), are central to decision-making, with Zone 3 split into 3a (high probability) and 3b (functional floodplain), where development is most restricted. Lead local flood authorities, usually county or unitary authorities, also publish a range of local flood risk assessments, surface water management plans, and local flood risk management strategies.



Flood prevention measures in Lincolnshire © Natural England CC

Case study 3: Saham Toney Neighbourhood Development Plan, Norfolk

Saham Toney is a small village in Norfolk at significant risk of surface water flooding. Policy 8 of their Neighbourhood Plan, 'Surface Water Management General Provisions', echoes the guidance of the NPPF, but goes further by setting out the expectation for development proposals to meet other national non-statutory guidance such as DEFRA's 'Non-Statutory Standards for Sustainable Drainage'.[3] The Parish Council worked closely with Norfolk County Council and Anglian Water as well as external consultants to draft this policy and develop detailed flood risk assessments for nine housing sites allocated in the plan, helping to provide evidence that could be used when assessing planning applications for these sites where the local authority had not yet done so.

References

[1] Thame Neighbourhood Plan 2: Made Version. Thame Town Council, Feb. 2025. https://www.southandvale.gov.uk/app/uploads/sites/2/2025/02/Thame-Neighbourhood-Plan-2-Made-Version.pdf

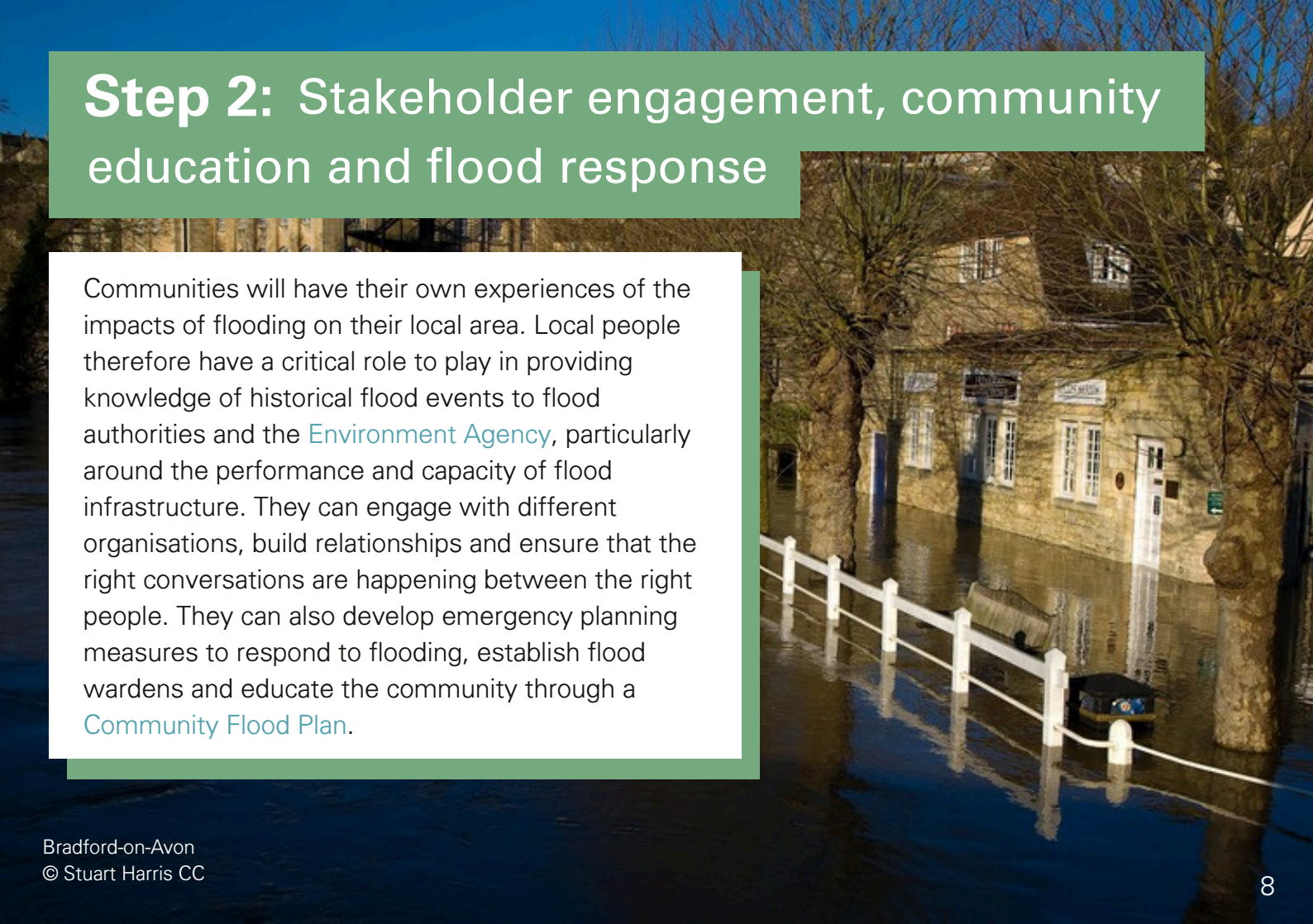
[2] Hadley Wood Neighbourhood Plan 2022-2039. Hadley Wood Neighbourhood Planning Forum, November 2023. https://www.hadleywoodnp.co.uk/_files/ugd/480f61_4a8ce42053e24265a121485ba666893c.pdf

[3] Saham Toney Neighbourhood Development Plan 2019-2026. Sahom Toney Parish Council, November 2021. https://www.breckland.gov.uk/media/19567/Saham-Toney-Neighbourhood-Plan/pdf/Saham-Toney-Neighbourhood-Plan-Final-Version-Optimized-for-_Web3.pdf?m=1639155180940

Saham Toney village sign
© Adrian Pye CC

Step 2: Stakeholder engagement, community education and flood response

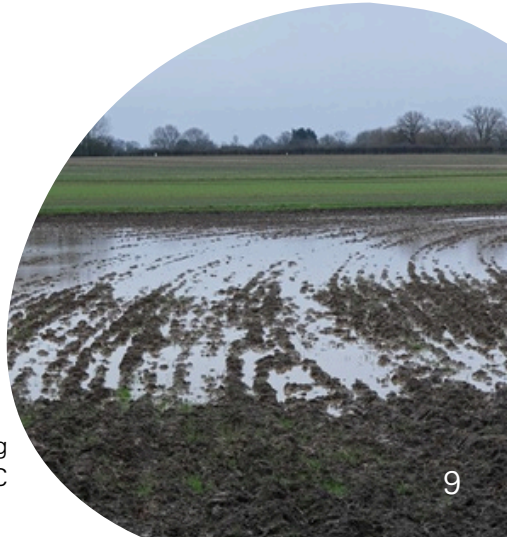
Communities will have their own experiences of the impacts of flooding on their local area. Local people therefore have a critical role to play in providing knowledge of historical flood events to flood authorities and the Environment Agency, particularly around the performance and capacity of flood infrastructure. They can engage with different organisations, build relationships and ensure that the right conversations are happening between the right people. They can also develop emergency planning measures to respond to flooding, establish flood wardens and educate the community through a Community Flood Plan.



Bradford-on-Avon

Case study 4: Bradford-on-Avon Town Council, Wiltshire

Following two flooding events in 2024, Bradford-on-Avon Town Council has worked to convene the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council to discuss flood risk in the area. A meeting with the major stakeholders was held in December 2024, which has led to the Environment Agency reviewing the town's flood risk management plan, which had been put on hold due to a funding gap in 2019.[4] The town council has hosted a Bradford-on-Avon Flood Forum with Wessex Water, Wiltshire Council and the Environment Agency to update residents about their work on flooding in the town centre, which was attended by 350 local residents.[5] The community also plays a role in responding to flooding events, with the town council coordinating the Community Emergency Volunteers (CEVs), who provide support during extreme weather events and civil emergencies. Although challenges remain in addressing flooding in Bradford-on-Avon, this engagement has led to discussion around the historic character of the Town, and a renewed focus on community-level flood resilience.



Surface water flooding
© Natural England CC

Explainer: Who is responsible for flood risk in England?

The Environment Agency is a government body which has responsibility for managing flood risk from main rivers, the sea, estuaries and reservoirs nationally, while Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFAs), typically county councils or unitary authorities, are responsible for dealing with flood risk from local sources. This includes rain and drainage issues, known as surface water, minor rivers and groundwater.

Water companies manage flood risk from piped drainage and sewer systems, and Council highways departments also have a role in managing surface water flooding. Some areas with lots of low lying land also have Internal Drainage Boards which deal with water levels.

Councils planning departments also work with the Environment Agency on flooding issues, but decisions about which flood management projects get funding can be complex and are often made nationally.

Flooded verge near Wellingham, Norfolk © Richard Humphrey CC

Case study 5: Willingham Parish Council, Cambridgeshire

Willingham Parish Council has worked to capitalise on local expertise, with two local expert volunteers investigating the drainage of the village. In April 2024, the volunteers and the Parish Council met with Anglian Water about the flooding issues in the village.[6] The Parish Council also participated in and promoted a series of Community Flood Group Conferences in 2023, hosted by the Community Flood Action Programme team, part of Cambridgeshire County Council's Flood Risk team.[7] The conferences brought together residents and members of community flood groups, as well as representatives from local parish and town councils, and other surrounding local authorities.

References

[4] 'Meeting called on Bradford-on-Avon: future flood plan'. Webpage. Wiltshire Times, 2025. www.wiltshiretimes.co.uk/news/24781143.meeting-called-bradford-avon-future-flood-plan/

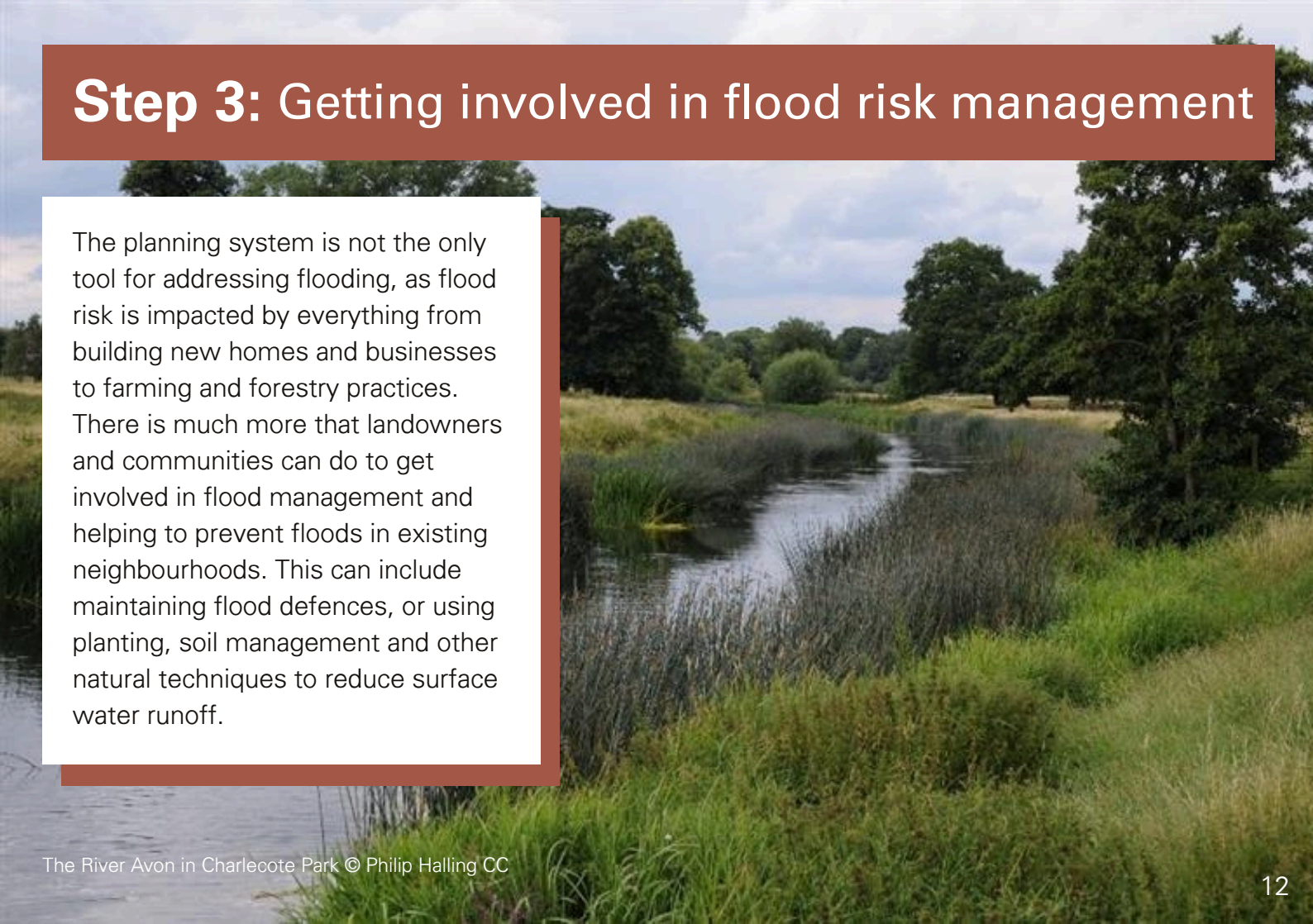
[5] "Hundreds attend Bradford on Avon Flood Forum event". Webpage. Bradford on Avon Town Council, 22 July 2025. http://www.bradfordonavontowncouncil.gov.uk/news/hundreds-attend-bradford-on-avon-flood-forum-event

[6] Flooding'. Webpage. Willingham Parish Council, 2025. https://willinghamparishcouncil.gov.uk/flooding/

[7] 'Flood Action Conference 2023'. Webpage. Cambridgeshire County Council, 2023. https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/business/planning-and-development/flood-and-water/community-flood-action-programme/flood-action-conference

Step 3: Getting involved in flood risk management

The planning system is not the only tool for addressing flooding, as flood risk is impacted by everything from building new homes and businesses to farming and forestry practices. There is much more that landowners and communities can do to get involved in flood management and helping to prevent floods in existing neighbourhoods. This can include maintaining flood defences, or using planting, soil management and other natural techniques to reduce surface water runoff.



The River Avon in Charlecote Park © Philip Halling CC

Case study 6: Wellesbourne and Walton Flood Action Group, Warwickshire

The Flood Action Group was founded in 2018, and they work to reduce flooding of the local brook and river which have flooded three times since 1968, as well as a near miss in 2019.[8] Work was completed in September 2022, and volunteers and a contractor worked together with the local landowner, an agricultural college, to convert part of a field into a partial wetland by opening up the northern bank of the watercourse, allowing it to flood during periods of intense rainfall and to drain slowly afterwards. There are a range of other local projects the Flood Action Group is interested in bringing forward including installing two leaky dams. The group received financial support from the Parish Council and worked closely with the Environment Agency, Warwickshire County Council, Severn Trent Water and Severn Rivers Trust, highlighting the value of a partnership approach.

Case study 7: Slow the Flow, Calderdale, West Yorkshire

Following severe Christmas floods in 2015, Slow the Flow Calder Valley in West Yorkshire was founded by residents to address flooding through natural flood management techniques.[9] Their volunteers have supported the Hardcastle Crags project on 40 hectares of National Trust woodland. Hundreds of volunteers built 520 wooden leaky dams, with an additional 100 leaky dams being delivered by local contractors in harder to reach areas.[10] Volunteers have also created several large attenuation ponds to provide temporary storage for water during storms. The groups have reported that this project has noticeably reduced the height of the flood peak in towns downstream of Hardcastle Crags.

Explainer: What is natural flood management?

Natural Flood Management methods restore or emulate natural river systems to reduce flood risk. Instead of building walls and damns, they use tree planting, wetlands and changes to rivers. It often means undoing changes that humans have made to the natural environment, to slow down the flow of water and increase water storage. This can help to reduce flooding downstream if done correctly. There are also opportunities for communities to get involved in helping existing flood defences to operate correctly, including by removing blockages to drains and watercourses, small scale sediment and silt removal, and managing vegetation. But it is important than any flood management and maintenance measures proposed by communities do not inadvertently increase the risk of flooding further downstream. They should consider obtaining professional advice and approval from flood authorities prior to undertaking any work.

River Stour floods at Shillingstone © Marilyn Peddle CC

Case study 8: Shipston Area Flood Action Group, Warwickshire

The Shipston Area Flood Action Group was formed by residents to help address flooding within Shipston and the wider Stour catchment in Warwickshire.[11] As part of their work, the group seeks to engage with farmers and other landowners, reviewing surface water flow on sites and identifying areas for natural flood management together with experts from Coventry University. Over the last seven years, the group have delivered 860 natural flood management interventions. However, their work continues after the delivery of these interventions: they carry out onsite monitoring of the projects after heavy rainfall events, as well as preforming inspections and maintenance on the various assets on at least an annual basis.

References

[8] Wellesbourne & Walton Flood Action Group Presentation: Annual Parish Meeting, 14 March 2023. Wellesbourne & Walton Parish Council, Mar. 2023. https://www.wellesbourneandwalton-pc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/147/2023/04/Annual-Parish-Meeting-140323-Wellesbourne-Walton-Flood-Action-Group-Presentation.pdf

[9] 'About Us'. Webpage. Slow The Flow, 2025. www.slowtheflow.net/about-us-2/

[10] 'Hardcaste Crags'. Webpage. Slow The Flow. 2025. https://slowtheflow.net/hardcastle-crags/

[11] 'Who We Are'. Webpage. Shipston Area Flood Action Group (SAFAG), 2025. https://safag.org/about/who-we-are/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

What communities can do

1

Help local authorities and the Environment Agency to identify priority local flood management schemes (including natural flood management), and, through a neighbourhood plan, allocate or safeguard land for their delivery.

2

Use a neighbourhood plan to set requirements for flood risk assessments and new developments that respond to local priorities and flood risk issues (e.g. linking to SuDS standards or guidance, or property flood resilience measures).

3

Influence Local Plan allocations, including through a neighbourhood plan, to ensure that they are not in areas of flood risk and to identify areas where SuDS or rain gardens would be beneficial.

4

Engage with local residents and businesses to promote grey water harvesting and other sustainable water practices on a local scale.

5

Work to secure funding and directly implement natural flood management schemes in partnership with other agencies, as well as working collaboratively with land and homeowners to address run off management practices which contribute to flooding.

Why it matters

There is limited funding to address flooding events, but climate change means these are becoming more frequent and severe. You know your place best, and can help to find the right solutions to flooding problems in your community. There are significant opportunities for local communities to influence the conversation around flood risk and what can be done to address it. Coming together to take collective action, and building community spirit, are vital when flood events impact your local area.

River bank management in Lincolnshire,
© Natural England and Peter Roworth CC

Further resources

Resource	Source
Building a safer future: a guide for communities on the planning system and flood risk	TCPA
Check the long term flood risk for an area in England (maps)	Environment Agency
Community flood plan	Environment Agency
Natural Flood Management evidence, including woodland management and agricultural run-off management	Environment Agency
Community Flood Resilience Toolkit	The Flood Hub
Flood Guide 19: Flood Related Roles of Parish Councils and Communities	Oxfordshire County Council
What is Natural Flood Management?	Catchment Based Approach
Guidance on enabling community maintenance for local flood risk management	Construction Industry Research and Information

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