

Chapter 1 The importance of flood recovery

“So you see the flood doesn’t happen in a few weeks, or a few days where it floods your house and this happens, it’s all the knock-on effects of everything and it just goes on and on and on and every day there’s something.”

Leanne, resident,
Interview, 29th November 2007

“It affects everything... You know, you’re not in your own place anymore. I don’t know... It affects, it depresses me to go back to that house, even to pick up mail and stuff like that. I don’t like it. It smells, it’s cold... It’s just, it is really upsetting me. It’s depressing. It’s horrible.”

Charlotte, resident and frontline worker
Interview, 14th November 2007

1.1 Introduction

The floods of summer 2007 were the most serious inland floods to affect England and Wales since 1947. Around 48,000 households and nearly 7,300 businesses were flooded and, tragically, 13 people lost their lives (The Cabinet Office 2008). This report is focused on the flooding in the city of Kingston-upon-Hull, where one person was killed and over 8,600 households and 91 of the city’s 99 schools were affected (Coulthard *et al.* 2007b). The biggest event in Hull occurred on June 25th when over 110mm of rain fell, overwhelming the city’s drainage system and resulting in widespread pluvial flooding. However, a smaller number of houses were affected 10 days earlier on June 15th, during more localized incidents within the city.

For those affected by these events, the floods themselves were only the start. This report is about what happened next when the flood waters receded. In the pages that follow, we show that the experience of flood recovery continues long after the rain and flood waters have gone. It extends long after the emergency services have returned to their day to day duties. It is an experience marked in part by coming to terms with the impact of the flood event itself. However, it is through the process that follows, in the struggle of rebuilding the social and physical fabric of homes and communities, that the impact of flood is most felt. The process of recovery is one that carries with it the challenge of adjusting to displacement (caravans, living upstairs, rented accommodation, living with family), managing the process of physical recovery (loss adjustors, insurance companies, builders, retailers), trying to maintain ‘normality’ in everyday life (work, school, child care, illness, deaths, births, celebrations) and trying to rebuild social life (adjust to a new home, new community relations, build trust in the future). It is one that disrupts, reveals and produces forms of both vulnerability and resilience, forms that appear only on the margins of policy frameworks for support.

It is this recovery gap which occurs between the prolonged struggle to recover from flood and the lack of support during that process (cf. p.9) – that is the focus of this report. Based on the diaries, interviews and group discussions of residents living in Hull we offer an in-depth account of the experience of flood recovery following the June floods of 2007 and assess the implications for future policy and practice. What is the experience of putting life back together? What does it involve? What does it mean for people? How are different strategies employed by key agencies – such as water companies, government departments, regulators, local authorities, the insurance industry – in providing forms of social support as well as interventions in the built environment impacting on the recovery process? Most importantly, what can we learn for living with flood, for making space for water? How can we better understand the possibilities for building resilience to future floods (and other hazard events)? This project and the report that follows from it is about the everyday experience of flood recovery, told through the accounts of flooded householders as well as those involved in the flood recovery process.

1.2 Context, aims and objectives

Understanding the flood recovery gap is crucial to existing flood management. Given that with climate change (Hulme *et al.* 2002; Cabinet Office/HM Treasury 2006) floods are expected to become increasingly unpredictable and multi-sourced and to occur in areas that have less recent experience of large scale floods, the need to better understand how resilience can be built is all the more acute. Indeed, if we are to ‘make space for water’ and ‘learn to live with flood’ then it is crucial that policy better understands the process of recovery from flood (Defra 2005, The Cabinet Office 2008). A growing body of work has sought to understand the social, economic and health impacts of flooding and the relationship between social and physical parameters of community resilience and preparedness (Twigger-Ross 2006, Thrush *et al.* 2005b, Tapsell *et al.* 2005, Kirschenbaum 2002, Gordon 2004). However, there is a dearth of empirically-based understanding about the processes people go through in recovering from flood disasters in the UK and the role of institutional support and investment in the built environment within that. Often those ‘post-flood’ studies that have been undertaken (e.g. Tapsell *et al.* 2001, Werritty *et al.* 2007) have been limited to retrospective work or repeat visits which only capture one point in time, and which struggle to capture the extended, systemic and interactive nature of social, economic and health impacts, as well as the interaction between different individual, community, institutional and engineering responses.

The aim of our project *Flood, vulnerability and urban resilience* was to undertake a real-time longitudinal study using an action research model to document and understand the everyday experiences of individuals following the floods of June 2007 in interaction with networks of other actors and organisations, strategies of institutional support and investment in the built environment and critical infrastructure. Focusing on the ‘forgotten city’¹ of Hull, the project design adopted a tried and tested methodology

¹ Hull was described by as a ‘forgotten city’ by Councillor Carl Minns after the city was perceived to have received less attention and support than other flooded areas across the UK (BBC News 2007).

previously used to investigate recovery following the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease disaster (Mort *et al.* 2004, Mort *et al.* 2005). Our project adopted a longitudinal, qualitative, diary-based method developed to capture people's everyday experiences as they move through the drawn out process of recovery. The objectives were:

- To identify and document key dimensions of the longer term experience of flood impact and flood recovery, including health, economic and social aspects.
- To examine how resilience and vulnerability are manifest in the interaction between everyday strategies of adaptation during the flood recovery process, and modes of institutional support and the management of infrastructure and the built environment.
- To explore to what extent the recovery process entails the development of new forms of resilience, and identify the implications for developing local level resilience for flood recovery in the future.
- To develop an archive that will provide an ongoing public resource and enable researchers to bring different perspectives to the analysis of peoples' experiences of the flood recovery process.

1.3 The approach of this report

The strength of the project upon which this report is based lies in the richness and depth of material that has been generated. Following the lives of 44 people for 18 months through their diaries, interviews and group discussion has resulted in an unique collection of thoughts, experiences and documents. We cannot claim to capture the full intensity of that material in this report – that is why the archive is a key objective, to enable future analysis. However, as described more fully in our methodology (see Chapter 2), we have identified key issues through the systematic analysis carried out by the research team, engagement with the diarists through group discussions throughout the project, discussions and presentations with steering group members² and other interested stakeholders, and finally, engagement between diarists, the steering group and other stakeholders through a project workshop.

The report is set out in the following way to capture the full extent of the flood recovery journey:

- Chapter 2 sets the conceptual and methodological background to the study (*Researching Flood Vulnerability and Resilience*).
- Chapters 3, 4 and 5 then chart the process and experience of flood recovery. Chapter 3 *The Impacts of Flood Recovery Journeys* starts from the problem of defining flood, identifies the emotional and health impacts of flood and flood recovery, charts the 'ups and downs' of the recovery process and raises the question of what recovery means. The chapter also highlights the importance of understanding the different basis for forms of vulnerability that emerge from flood. Chapter 3 therefore sets the scene in terms of describing the flood and some of its key impacts but leaves us with the question of what is involved in the recovery process?

² See p.24 for a list of organizations involved in the steering group.

- Chapter 4 addresses this by outlining *The work of flood recovery*, including: the experience of ‘project managing’, challenges involved in continuing with everyday life, the experience of living with multiple roles and identities, and the particular issues faced by various ‘front line workers’.
- Chapter 5 looks more specifically at what it is that gets ‘recovered’ by drawing attention to the fundamental issues of ‘*Re-building social life*’ in relation to a sense of home, community relationships and the future.
- Finally, in Chapter 6 we look at the lessons to be learnt, focusing on the challenges of addressing the recovery gap and its relationship to current policy frameworks for flood management.