

The Case for Morpeth's Flood Defences

This document has been produced by members of Morpeth Flood Action Group for presentation to Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, on his visit to Morpeth 11 May 2009



Morpeth
Flood Action Group

Flood Alleviation
Latest News
Insurance Issues
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Community
Voices

Morpeth Flood Action Group's aims are to support the community of Morpeth in the aftermath of the events of 6 September 2008, and to engage with relevant authorities to plan future flood defences.

www.morpethfloodaction.org.uk



The Chantry, Telford Bridge and St George's Church



The Library



The Health Centre



The Ambulance Station



The Leisure Centre

The Town of Morpeth

The county town of Northumberland has a long history: there is evidence of an early settlement on the site in the 4th Century. The Normans recognised the strategic importance of the town in 1095 with the construction of a castle and Morpeth continued to develop as a market town in subsequent centuries principally due to its location on the River Wansbeck which runs through the town centre.

The town has several buildings of historic and architectural interest and hosts the offices of Northumberland County Council.

The local residents are rightly proud of their town and many have lived here most of their lives. They take great interest in the affairs of the town as evidenced by the fact that hundreds of residents attended a recent presentation by the Environment Agency when the options for the proposed flood alleviation scheme were unveiled.

The September 2008 Flood

Morpeth has been susceptible to flooding over the years, but the rain that fell on the town and the catchment area of the River Wansbeck between 4 and 6 September 2008 was unprecedented. An Environment Agency press release stated "The flooding experienced by Morpeth last September was the most severe ever recorded for this location, with more than three times the long-term average rainfall for the whole month - more than 150 millimetres - falling on the town in less than 48 hours. The normal monthly average rainfall is 50 millimetres."

The rainfall eased during the late afternoon of 6 September, but not before hundreds of properties, both residential and commercial, were inundated with water at depths sometimes exceeding 5 feet. Public buildings suffered major damage including the library, the leisure centre, St George's Church, the Chantry, the health centre and the ambulance station. A major evacuation (in parts somewhat disorganised) had taken place throughout the day involving the emergency services and the RAF. Morpeth rarely if ever appears in national news coverage. During one weekend in 2008 it suddenly became, for that brief moment, headline news as footage of the flood was broadcast worldwide.



The Vets

The Government should resolve the issue of which organisations should be responsible for the ownership and maintenance of sustainable drainage systems. (Pitt Review)



Oliver's Mill

In some parts of the town the first flood waters came from drains that backed up. There is still a risk from those drains.



Oldgate Bridge

A tourist guide describes Morpeth as one of Northumberland's major market towns and the centre of administration for the county.

The Impact of the Flood

Official figures record that over 1,000 properties were affected by the September Flood, most of them residential. The occupants were scattered throughout the Borough and further afield in rented accommodation and hotels and B&Bs.

The biggest impact of the flood has been on the townspeople themselves. Gradually the town is starting to return to normal in that some of the public facilities have reopened, but 50% of the displaced residents have not yet been able to return to their homes. The efforts of the emergency services combined with a considerable element of good fortune meant that no residents lost their lives on the day of the flood. However, many residents suffered in the months that followed. Take Kathleen Murphy for example. Kathleen had lived in the same house on the High Stanners for most of her life. A dignified lady and much respected by her neighbours, Kathleen had served as Mayoress of the Borough in the past. She was a widow who lived alone in recent years following the death of her son. Kathleen's garden was renowned as the best tended in the neighbourhood and she could be seen early every summer morning in the garden weeding and dead-heading the flowers. On the day of the flood Kathleen was carried from her home by fire officers and rescued by boat. The trauma of the day was further compounded by the damage to her home and the loss of her possessions. Kathleen died on Christmas Eve before work had started to dry out her home.

Many elderly people living in the centre of Morpeth are preoccupied with the thought that another major flooding event could happen at any moment. Some residents of the housing association's retirement bungalows at Challoners Gardens have decided that they cannot suffer losing everything again and have not returned home, choosing instead to move into residential care homes. So many ordinary lives have been changed forever.

One unforeseen impact of the flood has become apparent in recent months. The insurance companies are gradually re-assessing the risk of another flood in Morpeth and policy terms are already being varied for many residents. Substantial policy excesses in the region of £10,000 are becoming fairly commonplace.

In 2008 Morpeth was optimistic about its future. Substantial new investment had been attracted to the town to develop a shopping centre, bus station and other facilities. The flood has seriously dented that sense of optimism. On the day of the flood town was within two hours of having its entire commercial centre submerged.



Riverside Home

**The Government should develop a scheme which allows and encourages local communities to invest in flood risk management measures.
(Pitt Review)**



Bennett's Walk

Insurance helps you minimise the financial cost of damage from flooding, but it cannot remove the trauma and misery of the experience. Children are particularly affected.



Mitford Road

On the day of the flood children were rescued by helicopter, in boats and with ladders from upstairs windows.

The Morpeth Flood Alleviation Scheme: What DEFRA can do for us!

It is a sobering thought to imagine what would happen if Morpeth experienced another similar or worse flooding event. The town is unlikely to fully recover a second time round. The 2008 flood was bad enough, but the impact of another or more serious flood would be catastrophic. Many homes and businesses within the town are now subject to high insurance excesses and owners would be unable to fund the cost of repairs second time round leaving the town blighted by derelict properties on every street. Businesses would move away, unable to survive a further interruption of trade or absorb future risks of flooding following the withdrawal of insurance cover.

The Morpeth Flood Action Group fully supports the efforts of the Environment Agency to develop a flood alleviation scheme to minimise the future risk of flooding in Morpeth. A scheme which combines upstream water storage with defences within the town is our preferred option and we believe that such a scheme is also the preferred option of the EA and the overwhelming majority of residents. We ask the Secretary of State to consider the following issues in the forthcoming assessment by his Department of the Morpeth Flood Alleviation Scheme:-

- 1 The rainfall over Morpeth in two days last September can no longer be viewed as a freak event. It is a sign of changing weather patterns and suggests that Morpeth may be at much greater risk than probabilities based on historical data may indicate.
- 2 The Morpeth Flood Alleviation Scheme must aim to provide the maximum level of protection for the town which is technically possible, limited only by the physical attributes of the river and the surrounding area. It is understood by most residents (particularly in the current economic climate) that Government money is not infinite, but Morpeth now has a once in a lifetime opportunity to achieve a level of protection lasting for generations to come. Producing a scheme limited mainly by budgetary constraints which would provide flood protection little better than that which may have saved the town last September would not, in our view, be the most sensible use of Government money bearing in mind the worsening effects of climate change.



Goosehill

There is a growing risk from surface water flooding in future and land use is important in managing that risk. Climate change brings uncertainty. Strong governance and investment are needed.



Low Stanners

£75,000 - The average cost of reinstating a home after it has been flooded. This includes the cost of contents.



Millrace Court

Morpeth Flood Action Group is drawn from people affected by the September floods and who want to be kept informed or be actively involved.

- 3 In technical terms we have the opportunity to protect the town to a 1 in 300 year level. Under the terms of the national prioritisation process, DEFRA will determine the overall budget of the scheme by applying the cost to benefit and other criteria. If necessary we ask the Department to go beyond current budget provision to achieve the 1 in 300 year level of protection taking climate change into account.
- 4 More than 1,000 homes lie within the 1 in 100 year risk level on Morpeth's flood plain. The commercial centre of the town is also at serious risk as well as historic buildings and substantial public infrastructure. The impact of future flooding on the lives of the local residents should take precedence above all else.
- 5 In assessing the budget requirements for the scheme we ask for maximum possible funding to be applied to upstream storage facilities. Local residents generally accept the need for additional defences within the town, but would wish to limit those defences in height wherever possible if upstream storage can be maximised. Defences exceeding 2 or 3 metres in height would alter the character and the landscape of the town forever to the detriment of residents and visitors. The County Town would take on the appearance of a fortress and local people would become disconnected from the River, the one principal element which has defined the town through the ages.
- 6 Reliance on defences within the town alone is an uncertain strategy for Morpeth. The River bends through the centre of the town and a scheme attempting to confine it at every location within high walls is complex. It relies too heavily on temporary barriers to infill gaps and does nothing to restrict flow into the town. Local residents have little confidence in local defences without upstream storage.

In conclusion we ask the Secretary of State to ensure that Morpeth gets the flood alleviation scheme it needs.