

Cam Valley Floods Update Issue 4

With the “Section 19” flood investigations now published, this marks the final Cam Valley Flood Update. As mentioned previously, we’ve never before written and distributed newsletters of this nature before, so we’d be keen to hear your thoughts on how useful (or not!) they might have been. Please send any feedback you may have to paul.elliston@somerset.gov.uk.

“Section 19” Flood Investigations

The “Section 19” reports have now been published at <https://www.somerset.gov.uk/beaches-ports-and-flooding/flood-investigations/>. Anyone who has had a chance to look already will note that there are four separate reports for the Cam Valley, such was the widespread nature of the devastating May 2023 flooding.

The amount of rain that fell during the day is hard to quantify, with the storm situated away from rain gauge installations. What is clear, however, is that the volume of rain was considerable and beyond any amount in living memory. The sudden deluge led to considerable surface water run-off and quickly overwhelmed the defined watercourses. Even the top of the catchment experienced significant flooding.

Whilst the sheer quantity of rain must be considered the principal cause, the reports highlight other factors which may have exacerbated the extent of the flooding:

- Lack of holding areas (wetlands, ponds etc) to temporarily store water and slow the flow
- Poor land management practices contributing to greater run-off
- Blocked drains, culverts and ditches as well as fallen trees in the river impeding flow
- The length of time taken to close flooded roads allowing passing traffic to send up bow waves that flooded homes

The response to the event was also hampered by:

- The extent of the flooding preventing access to some areas
- Reduced capacity and lack of defined procedures in the only recently formed Somerset Council
- Lack of reporting by those impacted hampered getting support to where it was needed
- Lack of communication mechanisms to help ensure responding agencies fully understand the situation on the ground

On the back of the investigations, there are a number of recommendations made in the report for the consideration of National and County Highways, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA), the Lead Local Flood Authority, Planning, Environment Agency and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG). There are, however, also recommendations for communities and residents to consider if they wish to become more flood resilient in the future. Given the nature of this newsletter, it’s those we will now focus on.

Recommendations for Communities and Residents

The fact that this was the most significant flood in living memory should not tempt us to believe it will never happen again in our lifetimes. As confirmed by climate models, intense rainfall events are

becoming more frequent so, as it says in the reports, “communities must be prepared for the inevitable increase in frequency and severity of flooding events”.

To be able to respond well during a flood event, it is recommended that Parishes develop their own Community Emergency Plans (a process already underway having been given impetus by the new Community-Based Flood Warning System), recruiting volunteers who can put these plans into action. Please contact your Parish Council/Meeting if you feel that you could help.

Volunteering opportunities also exist for those who wish to become Flood Wardens or become part of a community Flood Group. Such groups can take various forms, from a focus on advocacy to raising awareness of flood risk and from organising small projects and work parties to supporting community members to be as prepared as possible. If you'd like to investigate this idea further, then you're welcome to contact the Environment Agency (wessexenquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk) or the SRA (paul.elliston@somerset.gov.uk)

Working together, for example, communities may wish to map watercourses and flows across their parish with a view to better understanding the system as well as identifying who is responsible for what. This is often unclear and, as a result, ditches and other watercourses can become neglected and unable to cope with high flows. The (floodwessex@environment-agency.gov.uk) or the SRA (paul.elliston@somerset.gov.uk) would be very happy to provide training for any community who wants to better understand watercourse ownership (known as riparian ownership), rights and responsibilities. All responsibilities when it comes to managing water and flood risk can be seen in the attached graphic.

On the basis of the mapping, residents can set up a system between themselves to keep an eye on things. This helps any issues such as fallen trees to be dealt with before they contribute to a flood. It also might give rise to initiatives such as adopt-a-gulley, where local residents commit to keeping a drain as clear as possible of fallen leaves so that they can work efficiently. The SRA (paul.elliston@somerset.gov.uk) can help support community mapping.

Mapping also allows a community to identify areas where additional measures, such as ponds, bunds and scrapes could be added to reduce future flood risk. The Environment Agency and FWAG are already looking at such Natural Flood Management (NFM) opportunities in the Cam Valley and roy.hayes@fwagsw.org.uk would welcome hearing from anyone willing to contribute to this process. Somerset Wildlife Trust (contact Natalie.barnett@somersetwildlife.org) and Somerset Prepared (somersetprepared@somerset.gov.uk) can also support a wider process of developing a Climate Adaptation Plan to help communities respond as well as possible to changing weather patterns.

At a household level, there are various measures that can be incorporated to better withstand and/or recover from flooding. Some of these we've covered in a previous Flood Update, but www.floodmary.com has some great information in this area. There are also cheaper and more temporary measures than can be deployed when needed. Further information on these and on writing a recommended Home Emergency Plan can be found by contacting Somerset Prepared (somersetprepared@somerset.gov.uk)

Lastly, if the worst should happen and you do find yourselves flooded again, then please do report this to Somerset Council and the Environment Agency (<https://fort-somerset.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/>). Reporting allows the authorities to best understand the situation and helps with the process of getting the right support to the right places.

