



postnote

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Floodforum.net

an online discussion examining perspectives on managing flooding

Background

Before and after the heavy rainfall and extensive flooding in the UK in Autumn 2000 a number of reviews have been conducted of certain aspects of inland flooding. These include technical approaches to managing flooding, emergency response, funding, etc.

To ensure that Parliament is kept abreast of these developments, POST has published a briefing that draws on the various reviews and examines the policies and practices for the management of inland floods. The briefing is available on POST's web site at: www.parliament.uk/pn169.pdf

Flood defence professionals¹ recognise the importance of liaising with the public in developing flood defence. Four key reasons are advanced - i.e. the need to:

- gain support for the allocation of public funds
- achieve appropriate behavioural change
- appraise environmental and social concerns as part of acceptable decision-making
- comply with legal requirements for consultation and public participation.

Despite these stated aims, research² on public perceptions of flood risks and flood defence has identified areas where people's perspectives differ, as laid out on the next page. Therefore, to enable the social dimensions of flooding to be properly incorporated into flood defence planning, more attention is needed on the extent of the 'gaps' between perspectives and their implications for flooding policy and practice. As such, it is also increasingly recognised that developing a dialogue between these groups would be a useful way to address these gaps³.

Why an online discussion?

The Hansard Society *E-democracy Programme* is increasingly using internet-based discussions to enable a wide range of citizens to participate in the affairs of Parliament, and to contribute their views and experiences⁴. In recent years this has included assistance to a number of select committee inquiries, supporting their scrutiny of government policies and actions. The box on the next page provides some insight in this area.

An internet-based discussion is likely to be of use in exploring people's perspectives flooding. The format allows a considered and informed dialogue to develop among participants, enabling all to observe and contribute as desired.

In addition, the House of Commons authorities have recognised the potential of internet-based discussions, and have requested that the exercise on flooding be used as a 'test-bed' to explore its potential and practicalities in supporting the workings of Parliament.

Therefore, POST is working with the Hansard Society to explore the potential for this technique, to develop it further and provide evidence of its usefulness in facilitating communication and enhancing Parliamentary processes.

Aims of the forum

POST's role is to support Parliament on science and technology-based issues. The first aim of the online discussion forum, therefore, is to enhance and inform Parliamentary debate on inland flooding expressed through people's experiences and understandings.

A few relevant quotations

"I believe that the information revolution can revitalise our democracy. The Hansard Society through its innovative electronic media programme is pioneering new ways of involving people of all ages and backgrounds in citizenship through new internet and digital technology. That can only strengthen our parliamentary democracy and I welcome it."
 Rt Hon Tony Blair, Prime Minister, quoted in *Building Digital Bridges*, Hansard Society, June 2001

"There is an urgent need for better means of exploring the views of citizens on issues of scientific uncertainty. Among the possibilities are 'deliberative' techniques which allow consideration in greater depth than is the case with simple opinion poll questions. The citizen must be given every appropriate opportunity to participate in discussion about the scientific judgements that drive policy."
 House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2001. *Public Participation: Issues and Innovations: The Government's response to the Committee's sixth report of session 2000-01*. Session 2001-02 First report. HC 334, November 2001.

"There are also opportunities in which the Commons can harness the new technologies to connect with the wider electorate and with civil society. The internet, for example, gives opportunities for two-way communication and could be used more systematically for consultation with the public by Select Committees."
 Robin Cook, Leader of the House of Commons. *Modernisation of the House of Commons: a reform programme for consultation*. Memorandum to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. HC 440, 12 December 2001.

"Such consultations are clearly of considerable interest to parliamentarians, as they represent a new opportunity for democratic representatives to listen to their electorate and inform themselves on the issues of the day."
 House of Commons Information Committee, July 2000

"We look to POST to maintain a watching brief on the development of public consultation and dialogue on science-related issues, and to keep members of both Houses informed."
 House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, report *Science and Society*, March 2000

Moreover, as the UK Parliament is increasingly recognising the potential of the internet to broaden consultation and to strengthen representative democracy, this project will also have a wider role of providing evidence on the utility and practicality of such processes in assisting in the Parliamentary process.

Objectives

To meet these aims, the principal objectives of the online discussion forum are to:

- stimulate debate
- capture the differing experiences, perspectives and understandings of the participants
- summarise the issues arising from the debate
- provide an outline of what actions could be taken to address the issues
- inform POST's work on managing inland flooding
- provide a report on the experiences gained from the process.

A further possibility might be that the forum could stimulate and inform debate on this issue outside of Parliament. It must be noted, however, that the forum is not aimed at achieving a consensus among participants on the necessary steps to address the issues arising. It is hoped that this could occur elsewhere.

Scope

The discussion would cover three main strands:

Context

This will include different understandings of:

- the causes of flooding (e.g. its 'naturalness', unusual weather/climate change, poor maintenance of rivers and defences, rivers versus sewers)
- the purpose of flood alleviation (e.g. to prevent or minimise the risk of flooding, to provide warning and advice, to provide post-event recovery)
- the process of planning and designing flood alleviation (e.g. complexities of system, scope of appraisal process, acceptance of 'hard' versus 'soft' and temporary versus permanent defences).

Consequences

This will include the relative importance of:

- physical damage (immediate and longer-lasting, e.g. damp) and the necessary repairs, restoration and actions to increase preparedness
- psychological and health effects (e.g. stress, fear, trauma, lack of trust, fatalism, loss of a sense of 'home', effects on physical health from stress and from contaminated water)
- other impacts (e.g. effects on local communities such as dislocation of population, need for temporary accommodation).

Communication

This will include:

- flood forecasting and warning (e.g. perceptions of warning as useful or intrusive)
- informing people about general and specific flood risks; particularly for vulnerable groups, and providing guidance on appropriate action
- advice on risk management measures, such as flood-proofing, adaptation, recovery after a flood, etc.

Taken together, the online discussion forum is intended to examine:

- the **extent** of the differences in perspectives
- **explanations** for the differences, focussed on lay and professional knowledge and experience
- **implications** of such differences for the planning and operation of flood management
- possible **approaches** to addressing areas of difference.

Method

It is intended to include:

- people with direct experience of flooding - i.e. those people who have no professional affiliations with organisations related to flooding, but yet have a stake in the issue (e.g. people affected by flooding).

- people who work in the flooding professions - e.g. this would include flood defence scientists, engineers and planners, members of flood defence committees or drainage boards, insurance companies, etc.
- political representatives - especially constituency MPs, members of the House of Lords, and local councillors.

The Hansard Society will recruit participants by inviting known bodies and individuals and through targeted advertising (e.g. local newspapers and radio). On recruitment, participants will be required to register, including providing certain personal information⁵ (see box on last page). Participants will be invited from a number of localities particularly badly affected during flooding over the past few years (e.g. a sample of those communities where many homes were flooded, or where there had been a number of flood events during the past few years). The list is long, but it is intended that participants should come from locations that reflect the geographical pattern of severe flooding observed in the UK since 1998.

Process

The Hansard Society will set up, administer and run the discussion forum over a four-week period on a dedicated internet site (www.floodforum.net). Care will be taken to ensure that participants have ready access to an internet connection (e.g. via local libraries etc). The discussion will be moderated by the Hansard Society. It will be structured along three parallel strands:

- *Context*
- *Consequences*
- *Communications*

At the start of each strand, 'keynote' papers from a range of perspectives will be posted on the web site to kick off discussion on the relevant topic. As the process unfurls, participants will be able to introduce new strands and 'threads' of discussion, although the moderator will ensure that these are compatible with the overall objectives of the process. In addition, the fourth week will be used to work towards some generic issues and means to address them. All contributions will be captured, and the Hansard Society will provide weekly summary reports, an overview ('Findings' report), and an analysis of the exercise (a 'Process' report) see below.

Evaluation

Aims of evaluation

The Hansard Society will evaluate the process to provide evidence of its quality and effectiveness. A balance needs to be struck between avoiding using the evaluation to undertake detailed academic research and to provide sufficient information to gauge the effectiveness of the process, without over-burdening the participants. As such, the Hansard Society will use its established evaluation scheme (see box on last page), and this will be supplemented with a few questions that are specific to this particular study on flooding (shown in the box in italics).

The evaluation will seek to capture:

- increasing understanding of the practicalities and utility of the online discussion process
- extending involvement in policy-related discussions, particularly related to the work of Parliament
- extending the range of 'social intelligence' available to Parliamentarians on an issue of public policy
- increasing understanding of the perspectives on flooding held by participants
- improving relationships between participants

Method of evaluation

In the last days of the consultation, the Hansard Society will post an evaluation form onto the website to gather feedback from participants (see box). A hard copy will be sent to those participants who do not complete the online form. In addition, there will be targeted follow-up discussions with some participants.

To identify whether any changes have occurred in the perspectives of the participants, the registration process will also capture some information regarding participants' expectations of the process and previous experience of taking part on online discussions. This will be compared with information collected from the post-consultation surveys.

Analysis

In keeping with their standard practice, the Hansard Society will undertake analysis of the results from the evaluation. Qualitative analysis, using an inductive coding framework will be undertaken (using analytical software where appropriate). The results of such analyses will be posted on the website for participants to read. Printed copies will also be made available.

Quantitative data relating to the process inputs and outputs will also be captured, such as the number of participants, the number of messages posted, the time spent online, the number of survey forms returned. In addition, project management data (related to resources required such as personnel, time and cost) will also be collected. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data will enable an assessment to be made of the cost-effectiveness of the process.

Timing

There will be a phased approach to the forum in relation to POST's wider study: The POSTnote briefing highlighting the outcomes from the various reviews was published in December 2001. This signalled that the forum will take place in January/February 2002, and that a seminar will be held in Parliament before Easter 2002 to bring everything together. Further details will be published on POST's web site as appropriate.

Information to be collected during *Floodforum*

Registration

Basic:

Name, address, telephone, email

Further information:

gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of people in household, number of children, willingness to participate in further events related to this consultation, views on what would make this a successful process, type of living accommodation, previous use of internet, previous involvement in online consultation, location of internet access, awareness of this consultation, membership of a political party, previous contact with MPs, expectation of MPs' interest in results of online discussion, voting in last election, expectation of MPs' interest in participant's individual contributions, means of access to news, previous experience of flooding (personal, relatives, friends).

Post-consultation evaluation

Outcome

- assessment of whether consultation was worthwhile
- extent of learning from other contributors
- new contacts made as a result of the consultation
- willingness to participate in further online parliamentary inquiries
- effect of participation on links to Parliament
- thoughts regarding MPs' interest in contributions
- satisfaction with MPs' inputs to the discussion
- thoughts on whether the consultation will make a difference to policy on flooding
- examples of where mind or opinion has changed as a result of the discussion
- extent to which the consultation tackled all the issues participant thought were relevant
- one issue or problem that MPs should work on after the consultation
- willingness to engage in further debates on flooding
- willingness to engage in further debates on other issues of public policy

Process

- difficulty of finding a computer to take part in the consultation
- feelings about using the website
- ease and difficulty of use
- number of times logged-in and taken part in the discussion
- attitude to replying to others peoples' messages
- attitude to being able to start new discussion threads
- preference for replying to other people's messages or posting individual messages
- more or less steering by the co-ordinator
- which section found most useful
- what would have helped increase contribution
- use and value of any of the links to gain extra information
- use and value of the User's Guide
- use and value of the Help page on the website
- other problems participating in the consultation
- views on ease of following the discussions
- ways to improve the discussion
- any other comments

Based on: Hall, N. (2001) *Building Digital Bridges*, Hansard Society, June 2001.

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Endnotes

- ¹ e.g. researchers and practitioners such as the Flood Hazard Research Centre (FHRC), the Environment Agency (EA), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology Wallingford (CEH Wallingford) and the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM).
- ² e.g. Tunstall, S., Tapsell, S. and Wills, W. (1997). *Public perceptions of flood risk, rivers and flood defence*. Paper presented to the 32nd Conference of River and Coastal Engineers, July 1997.
- ³ e.g. DEFRA and the EA are sponsoring a research project to explore risk communication and participation in decision-making in relation to flood defence.
- ⁴ e.g. Hall, N. (2001) *Building Digital Bridges - Creating Inclusive Online Parliamentary Consultations*. Hansard Society (see: <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/DigitalBridges.pdf>)
- ⁵ This will include a statement that all personal details will remain confidential and information will not be used individually, or passed onto any other organisation. See Appendix 1 of *Building Digital Bridges* (endnote 4).

POST is an office of both Houses of Parliament, charged with providing independent and balanced analysis of public policy issues that have a basis in science and technology.

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