

Wantage Flood Group Meeting Notes

Date: Tuesday 21st October

Time: 7pm

Location: The Beacon

In attendance:

Cllr Iain Cameron – Mayor of Wantage and current Chair of the Flood Group

Paul Barrow – Former Vale District Councillor

Cllr Sinclair Third – Wantage Town Councillor

Cllr Jenny Hannaby – Wantage Town Councillor

Barry Gooch – Chair, Future Flood Resilience Group

Bernard Connolly – Member of the Public

Melanie Seymour – Member of the Public

Pip Titheridge – Member of the Public

Gideon Hammond – Member of the Public

Clive Manvell – Chair, Hanney Flood Group (established 2009/10)

Colin Lloyd – Future Flood Resilience Group

Richard Shackleton – Chair, Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) Reserve; retired Water Engineer

Louise Brown – Communications Officer for Wantage Town Council

The meeting opened with introductions from all attendees.

Cllr Iain Cameron (IC) then outlined the primary purpose of the group: to establish a community-led flood response group that is better prepared to act immediately during flooding events in Wantage. IC noted that flooding has affected the town in both recurring and new locations, and that a key aim of the group is to gather data on where and when flooding occurs, as well as to act as a first response team - helping with tasks such as distributing sandbags and flood barriers.

IC confirmed he was happy to continue chairing the group in the short term, but emphasised that the long-term goal is for the group to be independent of the council and chaired by a member of the public, with the council offering ongoing support. Attendees were encouraged to spread the word and invite others to join.

CM confirmed that the East Hanney Flood Group is similarly community-led, with local councillors being supportive.

IC also acknowledged that while flooding is just one of several potential emergencies a town may face, this group will remain dedicated solely to flood-related issues, not to wider emergency management.

CL highlighted that contrary to popular belief, the risk of flooding does not arise simply from a long spell of rain; rather, the accumulation of storms over the winter months increases risk. Many flooding incidents originate from surface water on streets, rather

than directly from the brook, although homes near the brook, such as those near Old Mill and Mill Street, remain high-risk.

RS added that while dry summer ground can initially absorb rainfall, by February or March, base flow levels (the normal flow in streams from groundwater) make flooding more likely.

BG explained how Wantage differs from East Hanney in having a perched aquifer—an underground water source about a metre below the surface. When the brook rises, this aquifer pushes water into surrounding areas, turning certain areas into marshland.

BG identified several key causes of flooding from the brook:

- The natural chalk aquifer.
- Compacted clay on the Downs, leading to surface runoff.
- New developments discharging water into the brook under the pretext of "natural run-off" - a claim he believes can be challenged.
- The perched aquifer

GH asked whether the aquifer on the downs was previously used to augment Letcombe Brook but has since been restricted. BG clarified that there is no current management of the aquifer.

MS asked whether she was responsible for the brook running under her garden; JH confirmed she likely is. This led to discussion on riparian ownership - many property owners do not realise they have legal responsibilities when a watercourse runs under or adjacent to their property. CM noted that there is currently no education during the property purchasing process to inform owners of this.

GH said that while personal flood plans are useful, they are of limited help during an active flood, when efforts shift to damage limitation. He suggested creating a list of authorities and their responsibilities.

BG confirmed that such a list is available on the Future Flood Resilience Group (FFRG) website but noted that responsibilities often get delegated to understaffed district councils, making action difficult.

GH asked about storm drains, and whether they fall under Thames Water or another body. BG said when they are typically under road the Highways authority is responsible otherwise it will be the responsibility of the landowner where they are situated, depending on the location, but it's often unclear and difficult to get action.

The agreed strategy is to hold water as much water on the Downs as possible, then direct it quickly through populated areas, and store it temporarily between East Hanney and Garford, an area designated as a flood reservoir in 2007.

BG discussed forming a Sluice Management Group, as the Environment Agency (EA) is inactive in this respect, despite historical involvement by the National Rivers Authority, and their predecessor. He is requesting access to archived records and trying to coordinate between relevant bodies.

JH said some after the 2007 floods grant funding had been secured to address issues at the Mill. There are around 8–9 riparian owners in the area who are unaware of their responsibilities.

BG noted that near Grove Green, the Ministry of Defence owns a bank adjacent to the road to Millbrook School but has not currently undertaken the work required to meet their riparian obligations. . The Local Lead Flood Authority should be encouraging them to do so.

GH asked whether BG was developing a map of waterways to show inflows and outflows. BG said this is extremely complex due to unauthorised alterations (e.g. garden pools, personal ditches). GH asked if this was a planning enforcement issue, but BG explained the EA has stated there is no funding for enforcement, so local action is necessary.

MS asked how the Letcombe Brook Project fits in. BG confirmed they are working with the group, and while it focuses more on ecology than flooding, there's room for collaboration and compromise. The group had been invited to attend this meeting but were unable on this occasion.

BG stressed that the flood group cannot tackle everything, but even small actions, like sandbag distribution, monitoring, and data collection, can help inform decision-making and demonstrate changes over time.

BG also explained delays in receiving updates on local issues, such as a high pressure sewage pipe in East Hanney that takes sewage uphill to the West Hanney pumping station. Modifying it is complex due to the high-pressure system and staff changes.

IC reiterated that while the council will continue to address wider issues, local insight and reporting are crucial. He noted that few people realise a flood only gets officially recorded if it's reported in a certain way, something the group can assist with.

GH noted that community members are willing to help but feel discouraged when authorities fail to act. BG said persistence and evidence are key to getting responses. He confirmed a comprehensive report on Old Mill had been submitted and well received.

IC brought focus back to the next steps: creating a community flood plan and encouraging wider involvement. The goal is to build a team that can respond quickly to flooding events, potentially preventing significant damage and to grow the number of people in the group.

Attendees were directed to the Flood Plan templates provided at the meeting.

MS suggested a leaflet drop to high-risk areas to encourage new members, which IC and LB agreed to explore.

Other agreed actions included:

- Publishing a summary of this meeting on the Council website and social media, including an invitation to join the group.
- Creating a summary of homeowner responsibilities with a view to sharing this data in the future.
- Include a flood group update in the November e-newsletter and December printed newsletter.

CM mentioned that the Oxfordshire Resilience Group has updated its “Are You Prepared?” leaflet, offering practical advice for flood preparation and emergency response. This will be linked via the Future Flood Resilience website.

CM gave a brief overview of how the East Hanney Flood Group operates, including monthly working parties to clear ditches and drains, and a WhatsApp group for real-time coordination during floods.

BG cautioned against over-publicising domestic property flooding due to the potential impact on house insurance and property values and this discouraging residents from joining the group.

BC asked about the potential impact of a new reservoir. BG and IC agreed this is not a priority for the group at this stage, and it should remain a separate discussion.

BG asked how the group would be structured (e.g. chair, treasurer). IC confirmed he would continue as chair for now but would step aside when the group is more established. BG suggested aiming for around 20 members to start with.

Next Steps:

It was agreed to hold another meeting in January. In the meantime, efforts will focus on:

- Publicising the group via newsletters and a leaflet drop.
- Encouraging new members to join. In particular targeting residents living in or near known areas subjected to flooding.
- Starting to build the framework of a community flood response plan.

Meeting closed at 20:45.