

Notes of the Flood Group meeting of 13th January 2025 at 7pm at the Beacon

In attendance:

Iain Cameron (Mayor of Wantage and current Chair of Committee)

Louise Brown (Wantage Town Council Communications & Events Officer)

Barry Gooch (Future Flood Resilience group)

Colin Lloyd (Future Flood Resilience group)

Councillor Alistair Menzies (Wantage Town Councillor)

Councillor Keith Morris (Wantage Town Councillor)

15 members of public

Welcome and Meeting Overview

Iain Cameron (Mayor of Wantage and current Chair) welcomed all attendees and provided a brief introduction for those attending the meeting for the first time. He outlined the primary aim of the group: to improve Wantage's capacity to prevent and respond to flooding.

IC confirmed that a leaflet drop had been carried out since the last meeting to encourage wider community participation, explaining that the intention is to establish a group that can respond to immediate flooding issues, providing hands-on support where needed.

Regarding existing flood response, IC noted that while the Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and Environment Agency can provide support, their responses do not typically cover immediate, on-the-ground assistance such as distributing sandbags or deploying flood barriers.

Finally, IC clarified that the group's focus will be primarily on Wantage, while recognising the potential to support surrounding areas as and where possible.

A member of the public (MOP) emphasized the importance of including people from surrounding areas, such as Grove, noting that broader participation would strengthen the group's efforts.

IC confirmed that he would welcome members from all areas; however, funding from WTC would cover the Wantage area only. Residents from other areas, such as Grove, would need to contact their respective parish council, which is responsible for funding in those locations

IC stated that his intention is to get the group started, but he may not have the time or expertise to serve as a long-term chair.

Barry Gooch (Future Flood Resilience Group) introduced himself and provided an update since the last meeting. BG explained why he and Colin Lloyd began volunteering on flood matters, following a meeting in February 2024 in response to severe flooding in East Hanney

Barry explained that the first step was data collection, and flood reports have now been gathered. CL is analysing this data and has found that previous assumptions were incorrect: the Letcombe Brook is not a classic chalk stream and does not behave as one. Most of the water flows directly off the downs into the brook, causing rapid rises in water levels.

Additionally, Barry highlighted that the Wantage Sewage Treatment Works is discharging significant amounts of raw sewage into East Hanney, with leaks entering the brook. Investigations also revealed that the SUDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) installed in 2010 for newer estates—designed to temporarily hold water in ponds until flooding subsides—often do not function correctly, as many lack a hydro-brake to control flow. Consequently, these systems are not capable of coping with current weather conditions.

Barry explained that under Grove and East Hanney there is a perched aquifer, essentially an underground river located about one metre below the surface and gravity-fed. In some areas, notably Grove Green, this water is emerging into people's homes, an issue only identified through the group's own research.

BG confirmed that following investigations with Thames Water and the Environment Agency, there is no longer any water extraction from the downs, apart from the Manor Road water plant. No other extractions are taking place, including by farmers, and since the closure of the Childrey Wallow, pumping there is now reserved for emergencies. This is significant, as without knowing what is entering the brook, it is impossible to manage flooding effectively.

BG highlighted that flooding in the area has two main causes:

Letcombe Brook, which rises rapidly during rainfall.

Flash flooding, where drains are unable to cope due to the very old sewage and water system in Wantage.

To improve monitoring, the group has purchased 15 gauges, and CL has built a publicly available website to display the data in real time.

BG also noted that sluice management, previously handled by authorities to regulate the brook and check sluice conditions, has largely been lost. The intention now is to re-establish coordination among authorities and involve people with technical knowledge to provide advice.

BG reported that the group has secured an upgrade to the Wantage sewage works, which will increase treatment capacity and reduce the severity of sewage discharges during storms.

BG highlighted four locations around Wantage and Grove, including Locks Lane and Old Mill, where raw sewage currently emerges from drains during heavy rainfall, causing environmental damage and harming fish in the brook. The group has arranged for an engineer and area manager to visit on 10th February to assess the issues, with the aim of developing an overall strategy for managing these problems.

BG expressed a desire to engage all affected parishes and Wantage Town Council to put pressure on VWHDC to introduce planning conditions that would prevent new housing developments unless sewage systems are proven to cope with additional capacity.

The group is mapping all areas of Wantage prone to flooding, as identifying these locations is essential for effective intervention. More importantly, this information can support a Section 19 report under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, which requires the lead local flood authority to investigate flooding if it meets specific criteria. Official recognition through a Section 19 report would place these flood-prone areas on the radar of the authorities..

The group has received a grant to install weather stations and monitoring equipment in areas that previously lacked coverage, including between the Downs and Marcham. An infiltrometer will be used to measure how water filters through soil, which varies depending on soil condition. This data will help understand current flooding risks and inform future planning.

Based on the Met Office projections (aligned with current UK government guidance), future weather patterns are expected to include hotter, drier summers with occasional storms and wetter, more stormy winters.

The group has received a grant from the Vale to develop educational materials on climate impacts. BG noted a knowledge gap between central government guidance and the understanding at local council level, emphasising the need to bridge this gap.

Questions and Answers

MOP: You mentioned the new build estate and the hydro break-have you had any interaction with the developers there?

BG: We have spoken to the local district council, who have a legal duty to inspect these systems. Across Didcot, Wantage, and Grove, there are several sites that do not have hydro breaks at all. We plan to install a gauge over one of the SuDS in Grove to gather specific evidence that can be taken to the developers as we suspect there may have been calculation errors.

MOP: What is the risk of the proposed reservoir adding to the water load, will it impact the flow of water?

BG: We have been working with Thames Water to find ways to minimise potential flooding issues from this. GUARD and Thames Water have differing perspectives, but Thames Water has a legal duty not to flood homes, so working collaboratively on water management solutions such as diversions is likely to be more effective. This is a constantly evolving situation. GUARD has taken a hardline approach in the past, which has sometimes reduced their credibility with authorities. A more measured approach is better for the community.

MOP: It would be beneficial to have a representative from Grove Parish Council at these meetings.

IC: Suggested contacting Chris MacCarthy, Chair of Grove Council.

MOP: Since VWHDC reduced the frequency of gully emptying during council cutbacks, this has negatively affected the drainage system.

IC: Confirmed some gully cleaning has been carried out recently.

IC then Confirmed that the next step is to form an official Flood Group and asked if everyone present was happy to participate. Emphasized the need to start taking practical steps forward. Iain also confirmed that Wantage Town Council can support the group financially, including purchasing equipment and ensuring it is readily available when needed.

MOP: Asked whether these funds would also be available to Grove Parish Council.

Iain: Confirmed that all councils' funds come from the precept, so Grove would have access to equivalent resources.

Decision: Everyone present **agreed to be part of the Active Flood Group**, formally establishing the group.

Action: LB will collect the names and contact details of all attendees for the group's records, set up an email chain, publicise the launch of the group through the Wantage Herald and the councils own communications channels

Date of Next Meeting: Tuesday 3rd March 2025.

Meeting closed at 20:47.