



Investigating and appraising the involvement of volunteers in achieving FCRM outcomes

Project Summary SC120013/S

This suite of four reports describes the findings of work by Forest Research to develop a consistent approach to evaluating the benefits of working with volunteers as part of flood and coastal risk management (FCRM) activities in England. The research is helping the Environment Agency to understand how it can best work with partners and volunteers, and it is informing the development of guidance to support Environment Agency staff.

Volunteers are adding value by building community resilience and preparedness that is helping to make communities more self-reliant. Use of volunteers brings benefits to the Environment Agency, its partner organisations, local communities and the volunteers themselves.

The methods used in the research included:

- a background review of FCRM volunteering (97 examples were identified)
- development of a prototype evaluation framework
- an online survey of FCRM volunteers
- use of volunteer activity diaries
- four case studies involving interviews, document analysis and visits

Some 63 volunteers took part in the survey and 61 were involved in the interviews and diaries. Twenty staff from the Environment Agency and partner organisations were interviewed and a workshop held with members of the Environment Agency's community engagement team.

Survey participants were predominantly male (72%), aged over 54 years (84%), retired (68%) and living in rural areas (63%). The main motivations for volunteering include: taking action to prevent flooding; helping the community; and taking on a leadership role in a community's response to flooding. The main activities carried out by volunteers involved:

- monitoring river or tide levels
- participating in a flood group or forum to work with others to develop flood plans, raise awareness and monitor water levels
- passing on flood warnings to the community
- operating flood gates or pumps

The case studies explored four different models of volunteer engagement to identify which would be the most effective and efficient in different contexts. These four models provide a range of ways for the Environment Agency to engage with volunteers, allowing adaption to local context and opportunities.

- The Lincolnshire Flood Warden Scheme was an example of 'direct management' by the Environment Agency.
- The Cornwall Community Flood Forum and associated local flood groups was an example of 'partnership working' and communities working 'for themselves'.
- The River Stewardship Company in Sheffield was an example of the Environment Agency working 'through others'.
- The Bodenham Flood Protection Group in Herefordshire was an example of communities working 'for themselves'.

The case studies revealed that it is difficult to describe any given example of FCRM volunteering by one of the four models. In areas with high flood risk, there has been a move away from traditional direct management of volunteers by the Environment Agency towards more complex arrangements. This evolution has been accompanied by a shift in partnership working, the scope of engagement, motivations and benefits, the range of activities and the level of engagement.

The detailed information from the case studies also highlighted the dynamic multi-way flow of information between organisations and volunteers that helps to increase the knowledge of these groups about flood risk and how to cope with it.

The evaluation framework used in this study consists of a set of criteria and indicators (input, output, outcome and process) and accompanying evaluation protocols. It is intended as a resource for the Environment Agency to:

- evaluate future FCRM volunteering initiatives
- demonstrate the range of benefits they deliver

- identify success factors and areas for improvement

A number of opportunities were reported during the research whereby the Environment Agency could better understand, evaluate and improve its engagement with FCRM volunteers both at a strategic and operational level. Many of these points stem from the diversity in approaches to volunteer engagement seen across the country. These opportunities include:

- Balancing a consistent approach with flexibility to local circumstances
- Transferring successful approaches across volunteer groups
- Capturing the value of volunteering
- Continued monitoring and evaluation
- Clarifying volunteer flood warden roles
- Recognition of FCRM volunteers
- Reimbursement of expenses
- Clarity on what insurance is required for volunteers
- Training for volunteers and staff
- Pooling and sharing volunteer resources
- Sharing lessons and good practice
- Encouraging corporate volunteers outside the Environment Agency to volunteer
- Widening volunteer diversity

Overall, the research highlights the important contribution that volunteers can make to flood resilience. To realise these benefits, the value of this contribution needs to be better understood and incorporated into decision making so that volunteers can be managed and supported effectively by the Environment Agency and the partner organisations it works with.

This summary relates to information from project SC120013, reported in detail in the following output(s):

Report: SC120013/R1

Work Package 1 report: FCRM volunteer baseline data and typology development

Report: SC120013/R2

Work Package 2 report: Developing an FCRM evaluation framework

Report: SC120013/R3

Work Package 3 report: Case study, survey, diary and interview research on FCRM volunteering

Report: SC120013/R4

Work Package 4 report: Issues and options concerning FCRM volunteering

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