

Ring-fenced spending on flood defences

Responding to legitimate public concerns, Defra have allocated protected extra investments in flood protection for communities and agriculture. By this they seem to favour the traditional capital schemes (see our Position Statement on the related River Maintenance) which infers what has become known as 'hard engineering'. The secret of this is what was formerly called flood prevention until we cleaned up our language to remove ourselves from the awesome and impossible tasks posed to himself by King Canute!

Tyne Rivers Trust gets behind the newer title for the Environment Agency and lead flood authority activity of 'risk management' for rivers, the coast, and including the erosional impacts of flood. Managing the risk of flooding is not just about engineering and requires a catchment approach not instinctive to river engineers however recently graduated!

For example, in our Environment Agency-funded Catchment Restoration Fund project for Haltwhistle Burn we have secured the cooperation of Forestry Commission, Natural England and others for 'slowing the flow', a widely proven impact reduction measure for flood affected communities at e.g. Pickering and Hebden Bridge. River Catchment Services, Tyne Rivers Trust's consultancy arm, is busy advising the Haltwhistle Burn project but also travelling regularly to Hebden Bridge to advise, through community engagement, headwater options for 'slowing the flow' (e.g. by better controls on moor burning, drainage, restoration of derelict upland properties and building developments).

Headwater actions have two vital roles to complement the traditional engineering approach: they 'slow the flow' which may de-synchronise a rapid response catchment so that its runoff does not hit the houses as fast and they creak off a small proportion of the runoff volume: we are aiming for 10% at Hebden Bridge and the same goes for Haltwhistle.

The Tyne does not have many high risk communities but it does have rapid response tributaries such as those of the South Tyne which bucketed in runoff on the 18th of May 2013, and those that whistle off moorlands into rural settlements like Bellingham and Haltwhistle. Our view is that simply keeping the water out of properties with hard engineering is not acceptable. It takes the responsibility for self-help (as developed by Northumberland Community Flood Partnership) away from communities, it threatens ecological integrity (therefore working against the Water Framework Directive) and it sets up a damaging and expensive ritual of maintenance.

At the very least, Tyne Rivers Trust, through its community links and experience with green engineering can suggest subtle, reasonably-priced alternatives to hard engineering and can also advise how to manage the impact of flood defences on the critical hydromorphological properties vital to our EU Water Framework Directive burdens of Good Ecological Status and No Deterioration.