

# Review of UK literature on public participation and communicating flood risk

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The special nature of the environment, uncertainties about natural processes and the effectiveness of policy options, contested expertise and fragile public trust make environmental decision-making a difficult task.

Political crises around environmental issues have shown that traditional approaches cannot deal with these difficulties appropriately.

This suggests that new approaches to environmental science and decision-making are needed to make policies more appropriate and to avoid similar crises in the future....

Often the most appropriate approaches involve qualitative deliberation as well as formal technical assessment... particularly in controversial and uncertain areas of policy.

Risky choices, soft disasters

## 1. Introduction

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### The brief

The requirements for this literature review were set out in 5.1 as detailed in the Environment Agency's proposal for ComCoast work package 4 – stakeholder dialogue and communication. The aims were:

- ❑ to review literature relevant to the BTwC and ComCoast to understand the main messages and evidence to support improving public participation and engagement around flood risk
- ❑ To understand what better public participation should and can deliver

### The approach

Following discussion with Environment Agency staff, the agreed focus for the literature review was to consider:

**“what does the literature provided tell us about how to make public participation and engagement around flood risk most effective in terms of how it is approached, and what it can and should deliver?”**

A total of 45 sources of information were reviewed. These are listed appendix 3. The results of the review are provided in three sections:

- key messages (this paper)
- evidence in support of key messages (appendix 1)
- practical guidance and tools (appendix 2)

### The key messages

Are given in summary form over the next few page and so are not repeated here. However most striking to us about the literature review was just how much practice, thinking and 'ad hoc' evaluation has already gone on, and just how consistent the messages are. However, in the paper by the World Bank on participation by communities, they conclude that any of the arguments for participation have been based on experience, and there has been little rigorous evaluations which have shown the real practical benefits. This is clearly a key challenge for all those building on the work to date: introduce consistency and rigour into evaluation of participation.

### Terms used

In this review we have used a number of terms interchangeably, reflecting both the varied use of terms within the papers reviewed and the transferability of key messages from one situation to another. In Appendix 2, the practical guides and tools provide some insight as to the differences between the terms used. However, there is value in producing a clear 'definition of terms' to accompany this review.

Terms that are used interchangeably include:

Participation, involvement, engagement, consultation

Stakeholder, community, the public, interest groups, citizens

## 2. Key messages – in summary

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### What can and should participation deliver?

- 1 Participation can help deliver acceptable solutions.
- 2 Participation can help deliver policy requirements.
- 3 Participation can help deliver robust decisions.
- 4 Participation can help deliver joined up thinking and working.
- 5 Participation can help deliver trust.

### When should participation be used?

6. Participation can help achieve a range of objectives, often simultaneously
- 7 Participation can be used in a wide range of situations

### How should participation be approached?

- 8 Be clear why you are doing it.
  - 9 Engage earlier rather than later.
  - 10 Consider systematically who to engage.
  - 11 Plan and tailor your process.
  - 12 Phase your process.
  - 13 Understand the unique characteristics of risk communications.
  - 14 Have appropriate skills and resources.
  - 15 Build on experience.
  - 16 Evaluate and learn.
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### 3. Key messages – and what to do about them

What can and should participation deliver?		
Key message	Why this is important	What to do about it
<p><b>1 Participation can help deliver acceptable solutions.</b> FRM solutions can no longer be imposed; they only work if they are accepted by local people ...and this requires effective participation</p>	<p>Participation cannot be considered a 'nice to do' activity, but as a sensible precautionary approach to getting the job done; it can reduce the risk of non-delivery.</p>	<p>Recognise participation is needed and enable the allocation of time and resources to it as a legitimate and necessary part of FRM. As flooding issues will be on the increase and will most affect the already disadvantaged, play particular attention to involving them in shaping and implementing solutions.</p>
<p><b>2 Participation can help deliver policy requirements.</b> Participation can help meet policy requirements for involving people at the heart of decision making. Traditional 'end of pipe' consultation methods are no longer considered sufficient.</p>	<p>Not 'doing' participation risks convening the Aarhus Convention, Water Framework Directive, internal and government policy. It also risks lower quality decisions and the generation of conflict.</p>	<p>Understand the requirements for participation, and the difference between participation and consultation. Wherever possible enable participation throughout the decision-making process, rather than consulting on options.</p>
<p><b>3 Participation can help deliver robust decisions.</b> Decisions can no longer be based on technical/'expert' knowledge alone. The quality and acceptability of decisions depends on the inclusion of social science and lay knowledge and ideas</p>	<p>If your communications, analysis, framing of risks or solutions do not include social science or lay knowledge and ideas, you will increase the risk that they are rejected, and that conflict will result.</p>	<p>Recognise you do not have a monopoly of knowledge or expertise, and don't assume that all Special Interest Groups are rank amateurs. Consider how to include science and lay knowledge and ideas within decision-making alongside traditional 'expert' opinion. Work hard and ensure transparency to maintain confidence in the information you provide</p>

**What can and should participation deliver?**

Key message	Why this is important	What to do about it
<p><b>4 Participation can help deliver joined up thinking and working.</b> It is no longer acceptable to work within traditional institutional, geographical or issue based 'boundaries'. Participation can enable joined up thinking and working across a range of geographical scales and on complex and uncertain situations</p>	<p>If you stick rigidly to your organisation working alone, within your existing organisational remit, you risk creating inappropriate, incomplete or inflexible solutions. The growing awareness of the systemic causes of flooding needs to be matched by systemic solutions.</p>	<p>Where possible extend the 'boundary' within which you are working – for example, geographically (eg to catchments scale); remit (eg to cover all forms of flooding rather than just tidal flooding); issues covered (including environmental, social and economic elements).</p>
<p><b>5 Participation can help deliver trust.</b> Government can no longer assume trust – it is earned, not given, and once lost it is hard to regain. Participation – especially if long term and deliberative in style - can help build trust.</p>	<p>People are more likely to accept an institution's advice and solutions if they trust the institution. Ongoing relationships are most effective at increasing trust. Trust is never absolute and unconditional – it has to be continually fostered and rebuilt</p>	<p>Spend time building trust building relationships throughout the work, starting before any conflict has broken out, to increase the chance that you are trusted and that decisions are accepted and implemented.</p>

<b>When should participation be used?</b>		
<b>Key message</b>	<b>Why this is important</b>	<b>What to do about it</b>
<p><b>6. Participation can be used to achieve a range of objectives..</b> often simultaneously</p>	<p>Participation can help achieve a wider range of objectives than is often considered.</p> <p>A lack of clarity about the range of objectives can result in the full benefit of participation being missed</p>	<p>Consider carefully what objectives participation could help deliver, thinking beyond 'we just have to do it' or 'we want to hear everyone's views' to genuinely understand the full and specific benefits that participation could bring to the work.</p> <p>Participation objectives may be practical (making something work), principle (moral or ethical reasons), or imperative (meeting pressures such as funding or legislation), or a combination of all three</p>
<p><b>7 Participation can be – and is – used in a wide range of situations...</b> so long as something is open to change as a result</p>	<p>Participation is often considered to be limited to certain situations – such as responding to situations where conflict has broken out, rather than pro-actively; or limited to a local level; or limited to certain roles played by the initiating organisation. This can result in missed opportunities – for example, preventing polarised conflict.</p> <p>Undertaking participation when the decision is non-negotiable will result in significant loss of credibility and trust.</p>	<p>Approach all decision making with a bias in favour of significant and meaningful participation, if</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- input and views can be taken into account in the decision;</li> <li>- there is, is likely to be, or has been concern about the issue;</li> <li>- public support of the decision is needed.</li> </ul> <p>Consider participation whether you are acting as a regulator, technical advisor or final decision taker.</p> <p>Consider participation whether the work is initiated and led by your organisation, if you are a partner in a joint process, or if you are providing expert input into someone else's process</p> <p>Do not undertake participation if the decision is non-negotiable or if the results of participation will not be taken on board.</p>

<b>How should participation be approached?</b>		
<b>Key message</b>	<b>Why this is important</b>	<b>What to do about it</b>
<p><b>8 Be clear why you are doing it.</b> Participation must be guided by an appropriate aim and focus problem or 'task', agreed by the organiser and the participants</p>	<p>A participatory process depends fundamentally on an appropriate agreed aim(s) and 'task' to work on. It is very easy to be 'woolly' about aims and to set the boundaries of the task too tightly (see message 4). This may cause participation to be unfocused, to generate inappropriate results, to raise unrealistic expectations and to breed disappointment and ultimately conflict and loss of trust.</p>	<p>Spend significant time – with others - considering your aims and the possible focus task. It is impossible to do this too much. Once you have developed an appropriate draft, check your aim and focus 'task' with participants. They will often improve on it, ensuring it encompasses their 'framings' and views.</p> <p>For example, having an aim such as 'informing our decision about what kind of flood defence wall to build and where' is not as open to negotiation (or to building trust) as 'informing our decision as to whether and how to respond to the flood risk in the area'.</p>
<p><b>9 Engage earlier rather than later.</b> Participation is most effective when used proactively - at an early stage - and maintained. This 'front-loading' will require more resources initially, but more often than not, this investment is repaid many times over in time and conflict saved later in later stages</p>	<p>Participation has tended to be used reactively, once things have gone wrong.</p> <p>Proactive use of participation and engagement can avoid costly conflict and rejection of FRM solutions.</p>	<p>Plan participation from the start. Do not wait for options (or a preferred option) to be developed first.</p>

<b>How should participation be approached?</b>		
<b>Key message</b>	<b>Why this is important</b>	<b>What to do about it</b>
<p><b>10 Consider systematically who to engage.</b> It is critical to be clear who needs to be engaged and how; including who needs to give any support of 'go ahead' required. This will not mean involving everyone on everything, but thinking beyond traditional conceptions of representativeness and reaching beyond the usual suspects such as statutory consultees</p>	<p>Without careful consideration of who to engage, your decision may be rejected on the grounds that it is uninformed, biased, unrepresentative. Your process may be taken over by the 'loudest voices' and you may not be able to reconcile different views.</p>	<p>Undertake a stakeholder analysis for all your work, wherever possible working with colleagues.</p>
<p><b>11 Plan and tailor your process.</b> Success depends on a planned, tailor made (but flexible) approach to participation, choosing from a wide range of techniques to fit the particular context and purpose</p>	<p>Every situation is unique and requires a unique participation design to ensure it is appropriate. As with any other piece of work, planning is key to ensure participation is fit for purpose.</p>	<p>Adopt a project planning approach to planning participation.            Ensure your participatory process fits with any statutory or technical process            Find out about the range of techniques available before deciding which to use            Review and amend your plans regularly during the participatory process to check they are still appropriate.</p>

<b>How should participation be approached?</b>		
<b>Key message</b>	<b>Why this is important</b>	<b>What to do about it</b>
<p><b>12 Phase your process.</b> Participation is often seen as a one off exercise to carry out options have been identified. Use participation within a phased process, working on and agreeing problems/risks before solutions and incorporating divergent and convergent phases. Where possible enable deliberation</p>	<p>For all but the most straight forward of issues, a remit to address a problem must be secured first. Otherwise conflict is likely to result when you ask about solutions – it will seem as though you’ve already made up your mind.</p>	<p>Consider the stages in the decision making process that you will be going through. Consider how participation could be made a part of each of those, where possible, ensuring there is an early phase of participation to secure buy in to the need to do something before you start to generate solutions. Within each phase consider how you can encourage divergent thinking (generating lots of ideas) before convergent thinking (honing in on a preferred way forward).</p>
<p><b>13 Understand the unique characteristics of risk communications.</b> Communicating about [flood] risk is inherently different to other communication and decision making processes</p>	<p>Risk adds a level of complexity that needs to be carefully managed. People perceive and react to risk in particular ways that can be prepared for and managed to ensure an effective participatory process.</p>	<p>Ensure you use best practice in risk communications Ensure you take ‘lay’ perceptions of risk seriously, and that you respond to them sensitively Consider the characteristics of your stakeholders and how they may react to risk, what kind of information or process would be most appropriate (bearing in mind it will be different for different types of people)</p>
<p><b>14 Have appropriate skills and resources.</b> The skills and resources required for participation are different to the ‘traditional’ – in terms of type, timing and amount. Appropriate skilling/ resourcing needs to be considered as part of the planning</p>	<p>It is not possible to just ‘add on’ a bit of time/budget to deal with participation. The tendency to do this at best results in participation not being taken seriously by either the organisers or the participants. At worst it results in commitments you cannot meet.</p>	<p>Plan your participation timing, resourcing and skilling as part of your project planning (see 11 and 12 above) Ensure your team has appropriate technical, communication, participation and legal skills Consider training staff in new skills Ensure staff have time dedicated to participation activities, and that these activities are valued and seen as a core part of the job.</p>

<b>How should participation be approached?</b>		
<b>Key message</b>	<b>Why this is important</b>	<b>What to do about it</b>
<p><b>15 Build on experience.</b> There are many tried and tested approaches to participation, and clear principles and criteria are emerging as a result. More could be done to support innovative, pro-active, deliberative processes.</p>	<p>There is no need to start from scratch – there are many case studies and much guidance to help you through a participatory process. It will help you avoid many of the pitfalls.</p>	<p>Read through at least four case studies to get an idea of the kind of approaches that have been used, and the techniques they have included. Use the guidance available.</p>
<p><b>16 Evaluate and learn.</b> Evaluation is essential to ensure participation is useful and effective, and to build staff and organisational understanding. There are many evaluation frameworks, but evaluation itself continues to be limited.</p>	<p>If evaluation is not undertaken as part of a participatory piece of work, it will reduce the transparency and accountability of that work. It will also mean that key lessons learned and skills will be lost – to the detriment of both staff and organisation.</p>	<p>Plan in evaluation from the start of the project. Do not leave evaluation to the 'end' of the work, but build it in throughout the work (eg having evaluation forms at public meetings, asking staff to use learning logs) Use one of the evaluation frameworks to ensure your evaluation is robust. Wherever possible, ensure participants take part in the evaluation.</p>