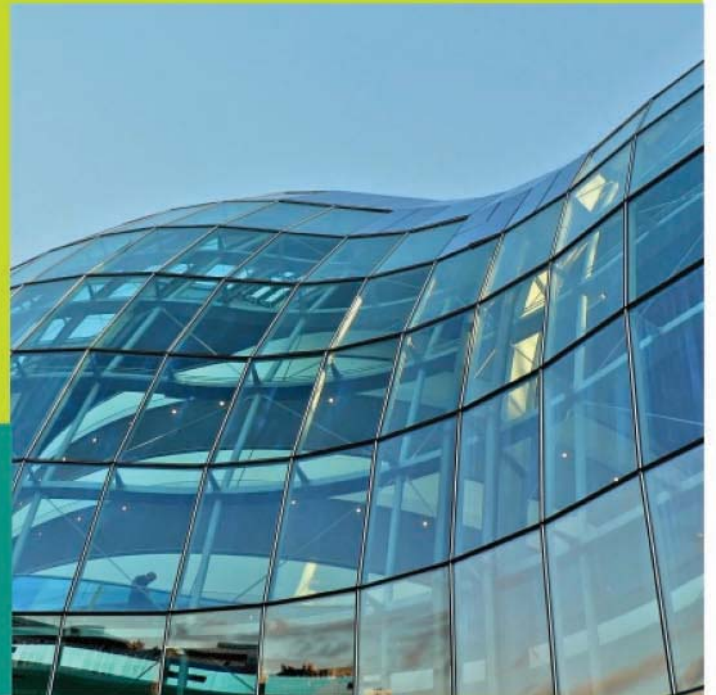# Flood Awareness Wales – Value of engaging young people to increase community flood resilience

Executive Summary

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Introduction

In December 2015, ERS Ltd. were commissioned by the Flood Awareness Wales (FAW) team at Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to undertake a review of evidence and primary research to consider the value of engaging young people to increase community flood resilience. Up to this point, NRW had focused engagement activities on children of school age and adults at risk of flooding. NRW acknowledged that there was a gap in their understanding of awareness, perception and attitudes towards flood risk in the 16-25 age group (referred to as 'young people' throughout this report). This report presents the findings of the evidence review carried out in December 2015 and January 2016, and a series of focus groups with young people aged 16-25years across Wales, which took place in February and March 2016.

Methodology

The team undertook a comprehensive review of evidence (i.e. academic literature and data trends), which informed the sampling of seven focus groups with young people across Wales. The evidence review highlighted key factors in the perception, attitude and behaviour of adults relating to flood risk. It also summarised theories about how the characteristics observed in young people could affect their perception, attitude and behaviour towards flood risk. Seven focus groups were chosen in areas at risk, or which had recently experienced fluvial and coastal flooding, in both urban and rural areas. Participants were selected based on the factors outlined in the evidence review, which were: living situation/ life stage and experience of flooding.

Findings

The focus groups explored the perceptions, awareness and attitude of participants using a hypothetical flooding scenario. Significant differences were observed based upon the life stage of individuals such as: perceived responsibility; perception of risk; level of concern; willingness to act; and sources of information and guidance. The main differences between those who had experienced flooding and those who had not was the degree to which they trusted flood defences or authorities to protect them. Having a past or future connection with an area was a key factor in whether participants showed concern for the wider community and a willingness to engage in social action related to community flood resilience. Similarities observed in almost all participants were: a general misunderstanding of risk as presented in probabilistic terms; low flood risk perception; and a tendency to underestimate or disregard weather and flood warnings. The findings suggest that there may be two main factors relating to life stage and response to flood risk. These are:

1. **Connection to property / belongings** – this can either be their family's or their own.
2. **Connection to their area** – either past (e.g. 'where I grew up'), present or anticipated future (e.g. planning to remain in an area).

These factors led to an initial characterisation of three potential 'life stages' (Table 1.1) which were observed in this study and could provide a useful way to understand how to engage young people.

The participants suggested that some form of education administered through schools or colleges would be broadly beneficial (in a similar way to how fire risk is addressed). In addition, the young people used social media regularly, were well connected online and would frequently turn to online

sources for information. Participants mentioned certain points at which flood risk information and planning would be most beneficial, and these broadly corresponded with key moments of transition in life, such as leaving home for the first time, and renting or buying their first property.

Table 1.1 Summary of life stage characteristics (continued overleaf)		
Dependence	**Transition to independence**	**Establishing independence**
Dependent but considering future independence.	*Varying degrees of dependence and independence depending on pathway e.g. leaving the family home for the first time to work or as a student.*	*Greater stability in career, residence, relationships etc.*
▪ **Living situation:** Living with parents/family/carers. ▪ **Risk perception:** Heightened sense of risk, tendency to panic and 'expect the worst'. Relatively high level of concern for the potential effects of flooding (on property, family, community). Referring to past flooding (or lack of) to arrive at judgement of risk. ▪ **Attachment:** Personal and emotional attachment to family, home and community. Sentimental attachment to family home. Possessing a past and current connection to the area. ▪ **Responsibility and agency:** Not the primary decision maker and therefore feel they do not have ultimate responsibility. ▪ **Responsibility for others:** Not ultimately responsible for themselves/ property or others, therefore able to offer support for others who are less able/ in need. ▪ **Support network/ social capital:** Likely to have established local support network of family and friends nearby. ▪ **Trusted sources:** Parental influence often still very strong – go to parents for guidance/leadership however possessing awareness of other (official) sources. Local knowledge deemed to be important, particularly for rural communities. ▪ **Behaviours:** Tendency to act under the guidance of others, unsure of own abilities but in actuality very capable and aware.	▪ **Living situation:** Living independently from parents but likely to be in shared accommodation e.g. shared housing or university halls of residence. Short tenancies and regular change of residence. ▪ **Risk perception:** Very low risk perception – even if risk identified/known, the likelihood of occurrence and outcome may be deemed insignificant. May not be familiar with the area and associated risks. Optimistic view that 'everything will be ok'. Local flood risk not considered important because of likelihood to move. Level of concern over the potential effects of flooding very low. ▪ **Attachment:** Low levels of concern for residence and/or possessions – the majority of items of sentimental value are kept elsewhere. Unlikely to have invested time or financial resources into property/ residence. Consider current location and situation as temporary and unlikely to have a past or future connection with an area/property. ▪ **Responsibility and agency**: Low levels of responsibility and perceived minimal control over situation. Perceived to have several 'safety nets' e.g. halls, university, family. ▪ **Responsibility for others:** May be a tendency to be self-focused/ egocentric with less concern for others and local community. ▪ **Support network/ social capital:** Local support networks are likely limited to peers in a similar living situation and life stage. Limited connection	▪ **Living situation:** Living independently of parents/family/carers. Responsible for own tenancy or owning a property. ▪ **Risk Perception:** Low risk perception of flooding compared to other risks. However, likely to consider risk and future risk if investing/settling somewhere (i.e. likely to have a future connection). ▪ **Attachment:** Greater emotional and personal attachment to property, community, possessions. More likely to have invested time or financial resources into property or possessions. ▪ **Responsibility and agency:** Greater responsibility for themselves and/or a dependent (pet, child or relative in need). Decisions increasingly made independently (e.g. on own or with partner rather than parents/family). Influencing the outcomes of flooding seen as their own responsibility. ▪ **Responsibility for others:** Thinking of themselves and their dependents/immediate family before others. ▪ **Support network:** Establishing a support network beyond parents and immediate family. ▪ **Behaviours:** May not take immediate action but nonetheless possess the knowledge and skills to act practically. Low risk perception may lead to complacency. ▪ **Trusted sources:** Parents remain an important source of information, advice and support. Learning new 'life skills' and sources of information, identifying advice outside social

- **Motivators for social action:** Personal and emotional attachment, connection with community, employability and CV development, gaining 'life skills' for later life. Concern for wider community and sense of own strengths e.g. physical/ knowledge.
- **Barriers to action/social action:** Lacking guidance or low confidence in own abilities.
- **Needs:** Requiring reassurance, guidance and leadership. Equipping with skills for future independence.
- **Engagement opportunities:** Via existing clubs, groups and initiatives where young people can engage in social action e.g. YFC, Cadets, DofE, Welsh Baccalaureate etc. Via school – education and 'life skills'/ practical actions. Social media and internet.

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to local community. Time of relative instability – moving regularly, changing social networks, changing routines.
- **Behaviours:** Potential for greater recklessness, exploration and trial and error, pursuit of fun, experience and spectacle, fear of missing out.
- **Trusted sources:** Potentially influenced by peers more than at other life stages. Trust placed in those perceived to be responsible for their safety e.g. parents, university, other 'authorities'. Mistrust of landlords and insurance companies.
- **Motivators for social action:** Opportunistic – would act if facilitated or enticed. Peer pressure and fear of missing out. Employability and CV development.
- **Barriers to action/social action:** Egocentrism, lack of concern for property and/or possessions (due to lack of investment or attachment).
- **Needs:** Information and advice to be held by those perceived to be responsible (e.g. university or parents).
- **Engagement opportunities:** At the point of starting university or renting a house. Via universities and landlords primarily. Social media and internet.

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networks and family e.g. flood alerts and what they mean, official sources of information. Mistrust of landlords and insurance companies.
- **Motivators of action/social action:** Loss or damage to personal possessions and/or dependents. Concern for wider community and sense of own strengths e.g. physical/ knowledge.
- **Barriers to social action:** Lack of urgency or reduced perception of risk due to lack of experience. Greater concern for self (and dependents) rather than wider community.
- **Needs:** A clearer understanding of risk. To know where to go to find practical actions.
- **Engagement opportunities:** Social media and internet. At the point of renting or buying a house via landlords or insurance companies.

Recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations were informed by the focus group findings, evidence review and discussions with stakeholders.

Engagement Strategy

Key opportunities for engaging with young people

The research suggests that there are points at which young people may be especially receptive to information regarding flood risk, depending on their life stage:

- Those who are preparing to leave the family home showed interest in understanding 'what to do', both to support communities and to equip themselves in preparation for greater independence.

- Those who are gaining more independence, renting longer term or purchasing property with a greater sense of permanence, showed interest in understanding flood risk and how to prepare themselves.

Recommendation: These two points of transition could provide the first opportunities for developing engagement related to life stage. Although suggestions have been made regarding how to engage with young people at these points (i.e. at school or via landlord/ during the house buying process), it would be worth investigating further which of these options are most feasible, including how these could be delivered and by whom.

Understanding life stages

This research has begun to identify life stages experienced by young people, which may serve as a useful way of understanding attitudes and behaviours beyond definitions based on age. Although the number of transition points may be particularly high for younger people relative to older groups, there are also several other life stages which have not been explored in detail in this research and that may provide opportunities for targeted engagement related to flood risk management.

Recommendation: There would be value in investigating whether key 'life course transitions' such as buying a house, starting a family, moving house or retirement could be effective points for targeted engagement relating to flooding, and whether these result in sustained behaviour change. Future engagement strategies could consider targeting engagement and messaging at life stages and 'life course transitions' to maximise effectiveness and should closely monitor the impact of this approach.

Messaging

Young people demonstrated a theoretical understanding of flooding in the study, but felt less confident about what actions to take before, during and after a flood. Suggestions included a short memory aide about 'what to do', presented visually or using video.

Recommendation: Communication about flood risk management should focus on clear messaging with practical actions for before, during and after a flood – with a preference for visual or multimedia presentation.

Internet and social media

The research shows that young people regularly use social media, particularly Facebook. They would use social media for contacting friends and family and to communicate information about flooding. Young people also use the internet and Google as a 'go to' place for any updates or guidance.

Recommendation: Given that social media and the internet are used so widely by young people, future engagement strategies should acknowledge the value of the internet and social media as tools for engagement. Social media could be used as an information source and also as an interactive tool for dissemination and sharing user-generated content related to risks. Actions could include looking at Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) of key sites and exploring the best way to use social media for flood risk engagement.

Education

The potential value of a school-based approach has been emphasised in this research. Education about flood risk management should focus on practical actions and on targeting any misconceptions or behaviours that continue to adulthood.

Recommendation: Any school-based approach should seek to link activities to the curriculum and offer opportunities for multidisciplinary learning. One option may be to begin by targeting communities most at risk of flooding with future roll-out in mind.

Partnership Development

Youth networks

The research has found that there are a number of active organisations, which allow young people to participate in social action in Wales. These organisations have well-established links with young people and there is some initial appetite to extend activities to cover social action related to flood risk management. Individual participants in focus groups however did not show a particular enthusiasm for participating in formal social action related to flooding unless they were already engaged in one of these organisations. This highlights the benefits of engaging via existing organised groups.

Recommendation: In light of these findings, it makes practical sense for NRW to identify and make initial contact with organisations that have existing links with young people and who may be receptive to developing a strategic partnership approach. These could include:

- Organisations responsible for young people to develop flood plans or strategies e.g. social housing providers, universities, colleges etc.

- Youth organisations to explore opportunities for a programme of youth social action at both a strategic and local level. Organisations worth considering include: YFCs, St John's Ambulance/Red Cross, Cadet Forces and local youth groups.

Policy Development

Landlord responsibilities

Young people in the focus groups assumed that landlords would be primarily responsible for preparing for flooding and addressing flood damage. Engaging with landlords could be a very effective way of

improved flood risk management, given the increasing number of young people who are renting properties.

Recommendation: One way of taking this forward would be to consider the introduction of, or changes to, policies to protect tenants. This might involve disseminating best practice guidance via landlords associations or exploring mandatory flood planning– e.g. obligations to protect tenants from flood risk and effects of flooding such as a flood plan or flood pack in all rental properties at risk.