Shipston-on-Stour residents harness power of nature to increase the town's flood resilience

- Since forming, the group has installed more than 800 natural interventions to slow and store water from the River Stour and its tributaries

- Group is the result of one of 60 Government Natural Flood Management pilot schemes

Volunteers in Shipston-on-Stour in Warwickshire, who are harnessing the power of nature to increase flood resilience in their community, have been praised by the Environment Agency for their innovation.

Members of the community formed the Shipston Area Flood Action Group (SAFAG) in 2014. They have since become part of a government pilot to use Natural Flood Management (NFM) techniques, such as tree planting and pond creation, to slow flows and store water from the River Stour before it reaches the town whilst also creating habitats.

There are around 85 homes and businesses at risk of flooding in Shipston and around 30 additional properties at risk in surrounding villages across the catchment. Many properties flooded in July 2007 when the Stour reached its highest ever level.

The group now has members from Brailes, Long Compton, Tredington, Newbold and Alderminster as well as Shipston. Since 2017, it has installed more than 800 interventions, including leaky barriers and ponds, to hold back and slow the flow from upstream tributaries into the Stour during periods of heavy rainfall, benefiting some 17 villages and towns as well as numerous smaller settlements.

Today the group is highlighted in a new Government report on The Natural Flood Management Programme which received £15 million of government funding which completed this year.

SAFAG Volunteer Geoff Smith, who joined the group in 2016, said:

> Although my house isn't one of those at risk of flooding I was inspired and motivated to help the group to reduce flooding in Shipston. We've installed lots of ponds and barriers that can hold back water, and planted trees and plants which slow the run-off from rainwater into the river. Lots of small changes can help to make a difference.

> While it’s hard to scientifically prove that the interventions have decreased flooding, anecdotally people in the community have said it has made a difference and after last winter’s heavy rain we saw much less flooding than expected. The interventions won’t stop a major flood but they can help to reduce the frequency of flooding.

The core volunteer group was formed by Phil Wragg, a former CEO, Mike McCarthy, who has a background in the forces and fire service, and Geoff who worked in finance. Their combined experience helped them to raise funds, engage more than 50 landowners, undertake scheme design, obtain statutory consents and then procure the materials and contractors to carry out the work.

They used some ‘seed’ funding to recruit a PhD student from the Coventry University Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience as the group’s project officer in 2017-8, and then took over all aspects of the schemes from 2019.

Geoff added:

> If you’re willing to get stuck in and find some help to get started you can make a big difference to your community. It helps the community to take ownership of protecting their homes from flooding.

The wider group of volunteers monitors the NFM sites during heavy rainfall to review every asset in flood conditions and they have an annual schedule of works to maintain all the different interventions. The group was awarded the Environment Agency Flood and Coast Excellence 2021 Award for Community Partnership.

David Hudson, Environment Manager for the Environment Agency’s West Midlands Area, said:

> It’s fantastic to see the amazing work that volunteers have undertaken in and around Shipston to make these step-changes to their immediate environment to ease the impact of rainfall in the River Stour catchment.
>
> Reducing flood risk through nature-based solutions is not new to flood management, but what is changing is our understanding of how to work with others to implement the most effective blend of measures in the right locations.

James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, said:

> Natural flood management has a crucial role to play as we help the

country adapt to climate change, and this programme demonstrates the huge benefits it can offer to reducing the impacts of flooding as well as capturing carbon and creating habitats for wildlife.

Into the future, we're going to be doing even more to use the power of nature alongside conventional defences to help create a nation more resilient to climate change.

Read more in this blog on Using the power of nature to increase flood resilience by James Bevan.

Notes to editors

Natural flood management (NFM) helps manage flood and coastal erosion risk. It does this by protecting, restoring and emulating the natural processes of catchments, rivers, floodplains and coasts. NFM can include:

- planting trees and hedges to absorb more water, catch rainfall and slow the flow of water on the ground surface when there is excess rainwater
- covering the ground with plants to reduce water pollution and surface water run-off
- diverting high water flows and creating areas to store water
- creating leaky barriers to slow water flow in streams and ditches
- restoring salt marshes, mudflats, and peat bogs

- Report published today into the £15 million funded Defra Natural Flood Management (NFM) programme shows the benefit of using the power of nature to increase flood resilience.
- 60 pilot projects have implemented 4,500 natural flood management (NFM) measures, slowing and storing water upstream of 15,000 homes.
- The measures have included planting trees, creating leaky barriers, restoring peatland and restoring salt marshes.
- The report also shows the benefits that NFM can have to improve habitats, capture carbon and increase biodiversity with 4,000 hectares of habitat improved and 100 hectares of woodland planted.
- The programme has highlighted the power of partnership and the role it plays in going hand in hand with the Environment Agency's Capital Investment Programme which focuses on flood scheme construction to better protect properties from flooding. With NFM, local people have a role and leadership in their own area and managing their flood risk.
- NFM incorporates a huge variety of measures which need to be looked at across a catchment, often working in combination with more conventional, engineered flood and sea defences.
- Find out more about the successes of the programme and how people can use nature-based solutions to reduce flooding in their area in the Government report on The Natural Flood Management Programme.
- Concentrating on NFM and the benefits it can bring is fundamental in helping to deliver the ambitions of the FCERM Strategy for England, which highlights how the climate emergency will impact on communities and nature and how we must adapt to live in a changing climate.

- Whilst the NFM programme has concluded, NFM measures continue to be considered within all future flood risk management projects as part of the Environment Agency’s Capital Programme, in which £5.2billion will be invested over the next 6 years to better protect 336,000 properties.
- A full evaluation report for the NFM programme will follow in 2022 which will form part of an NFM evidence base.