Lewes Floods: 25th Anniversary Report

Actions that Lewes wants to see to reduce, prepare for and adapt to flood risk now

SEPTEMBER 2026

Friends of Lewes · love our Ouse · Lewes Climate Hub · Lewes Town Council · Chalk Cliff Trust · Lewes District Council · Sussex Resilience Forum

The exhibitors hall, Lewes Floods Conference, 1 November 2025. Image: Abbie Stanton

Foreword

2025 marked the 25th anniversary of the October 2000 floods that devastated Lewes, inundating more than 600 homes and 200 local businesses in a matter of hours, displacing over 1,000 people and costing more than £250 million in today's money.

Twenty-five years on in autumn 2025, Lewes Town Council supported a team of partners to bring together residents, businesses and professionals to remember and learn from those momentous events. Through a two-day event at Lewes Town Hall – one day for professionals and one for the public – plus a residents' survey, Friends of Lewes touring Lewes Floods exhibition and other satellite events, more than 1,200 people shared memories, insights and suggestions for future action.

This report is a distillation of those insights and ideas, and the wishes and wants of local people. We explore five core themes that emerged – ranging from how we think about building and development to the critical role of nature in so many aspects of flood mitigation and adaptation. We also summarise what now needs to happen to reduce Lewes' vulnerability to flooding in the face of more extreme weather and to improve our ability to recover should flooding on the scale of the October 2000 floods happen again.

Attendance at the Lewes Floods events and, more recently, at local screenings of the National Emergency Briefing film demonstrates the level of appetite for honest conversations about what needs to be done in the face of climate change and the risks if we do nothing.

I thank all the residents, councillors and council staff, community groups, professionals and suppliers who attended and contributed to the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary – many of whom are detailed overleaf. We hope the legacy of their hard work and generous support will be a deeper, broader understanding of the flood risks that towns like Lewes face now – and how we can address that risk alongside other climate-related risks positively, collaboratively and effectively.

Cllr Dr Wendy Maples
Town, District and County Councillor and
Lewes District Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Wellbeing.

The Lewes Floods Survey

This survey was conducted across the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events, presenting Lewes residents and other local people with four questions:

1. **What are your concerns for future flooding in Lewes?**
2. **What aspects of flood risk would you like to know more about?**
3. **What actions would you like to see (e.g. from councils, local volunteer groups and emergency services)?**
4. **Your suggestions for future flood resilience.**

More than 170 responses were received and findings are highlighted throughout this report, with full results in Appendix 4.

Scope of this report

The floods of October 2000 extended across the course of the River Ouse, deeply affecting many towns and parishes, including Uckfield, Isfield, Barcombe and Hamsey. While acknowledging these extensive impacts, this report focuses on Lewes, using its experiences to inform us about managing flood risk in the future and offer lessons for many towns across the UK.

Participants at the Lewes Floods Anniversary events

Friday 31 October and Saturday 1 November, 2025

SPEAKERS, CHAIRS & PANELLISTS

Norman Baker – Former Member of Parliament for Lewes
Graham Bickler – Former Director of Public Health, East Sussex, Brighton & Hove Health Authority
Matthew Bird – Director at Love Our Ouse and Climate Action Consultant
Nicholas Dias – Temporary Chief Superintendent, East Sussex Divisional Commander, Sussex Police
Lindsay Frost – Former Director of Planning & Environmental Services, Lewes District Council
Cat Fuller - Area Director for Solent & the South Downs, Environment Agency
Darrell Gale – Director of Public Health, East Sussex County Council
John Gower – Flood Lead, Friends of Lewes civic society
Karen Hall – Friends of Sutton Downs
Emma Holroyde – Market Engagement Manager, Flood Re Insurance
Jonathan Hunter – Manager, Flood and Coastal Risk Management, Environment Agency
Miles Jenner – Head Brewer and Joint Managing Director at Harvey's Brewery
Peter King – Director, Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust
Liz Mansfield – Environmental campaigner and Zane's Law spokesperson
Dr Wendy Maples – Lewes Town, Lewes District and East Sussex County Councillor
Siôn McGeever – Chief Executive, South Downs National Park
Emily O'Brien – Cabinet Lead for Climate, Nature and Food Systems, Lewes District Council
Juliet Oxborrow – Co-director, Lewes Climate Hub
Dr John Parry – Retired Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex and founder member of the Lewes Railway Land Wildlife Trust
Charley Pettitt – Emergency Planning, East Sussex County Council
Dr Pete Sudbury – Former Cabinet Member, Deputy Leader of Oxfordshire County Council
David Washington – Former Station Manager of Lewes Fire Station

HONOURED GUESTS

Keynote speaker: Henri Brocklebank – Director of Conservation, Sussex Wildlife Trust
Mr Andrew Blackman – HM Lord-Lieutenant of East Sussex
Councillor Emily Clarke – Mayor of Lewes, 2025-26
Johnny Denis – Lewes Bridge and Ringmer County Councillor and District Cabinet Lead for Arts, Culture, Tourism
Cllr Adrian Ross – Deputy Mayor of Lewes, 2025-26

EXHIBITORS

Blue Heart Flood Awareness
Coastal Communities 2150
East Sussex Fire & Rescue
Environment Agency
Flood Re
Friends of Sutton Downs
Lewes Climate Hub
Lewes Railway Land Wildlife Trust
Lewes Urban Arboretum
Love Our Ouse
Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust
RNLI
Sussex Police Cadets
Sussex Wildlife Trust
Zane's Law

LOCAL BUSINESS SPONSORS

Bill's Restaurant & Bar
Chandlers
Courtyard Shoe Repairs
Lewes Antiques Centre
Lewes Glass
Wenban-Smith

ENTERTAINMENT

Movingsounds
WishWorks Puppet Show

EVENT CO-ORDINATOR

Jo Smart

The organisers of the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events would like to thank all the community volunteers and Lewes Town Council staff who gave their support, expertise and time, and without whom these events would not have been possible.

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Please note: The comments and conclusions presented in this report are those of the report steering group, based on public and professional opinion gathered during the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events, and do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of Lewes Town Council. Any errors are the authors' own. If you have any comments about this report, please contact info@lewesclimatehub.org

Visual Notes by Michi Mathias
Many suggestions and observations were presented at the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary discussions, presentations and public Q&A. To capture them in an engaging way, Lewes-based artist Michi Mathias documented the ideas and themes as they emerged in real-time with her unique hand-drawn illustrations. Michi's illustrations open each section of our report.
www.michimathias.com

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Executive summary

- The floods that devastated Lewes and other parts of Sussex in October 2000 resulted after weeks of rain had saturated the 550km^2 catchment of the River Ouse

- The 2000 flooding followed a historic pattern, with flooding in Lewes occurring every 30-40 years since records began, reflecting the town's position on a tidal river in a low-lying floodplain

- Since 2000, a range of interventions – both physical defences and nature-based measures – have been taken to mitigate and protect against river flooding in the most vulnerable parts of the town

- However, the impact of climate change on rainfall intensity and rising sea-levels, ongoing plans to develop on areas of Lewes situated in the historic floodplain, plus ongoing pressures on sewer systems mean that the risk of flooding – and the risk of it inundating homes and businesses – remains high in many areas of the town

- The Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events, held in autumn 2025, looked to explore this risk through a major public meeting for local residents, a residents' survey, and professional panels featuring local authority leaders, environmental specialists, emergency services leaders, and community representatives.

Through these events, five core themes to address flood risk emerged, which we assess in detail in this report:

1. Reassess development on the floodplain
2. Address surface-water flooding risk
3. Enable natural flood management at scale
4. Strengthen local flood preparedness
5. Rethink our relationship with water

- Drawing on these five themes, we recommend seven priority actions to help Lewes reduce the risk of flooding, and improve its defence and resilience if it does happen:

  1. **Engage the town on community preparedness**
  2. **Only allow fully flood-adaptable development on the floodplain**
  3. **Launch a co-ordinated campaign to address surface-water flooding**
  4. **Put nature at the centre of flood strategy – and quantify the level of natural water storage needed**
  5. **Lobby to make flood management a statutory duty for the incoming Sussex Mayor**
  6. **Integrate flood management into a wider climate change adaptation programme**
  7. **Make flood action collaborative, catchment-wide and multi-generational**

As we say in the conclusion of this report, Lewes has an opportunity to be an exemplar of how towns can respond to flood risk, while still addressing the need for more housing and other infrastructure to support a growing population, jobs and tourism. We hope that the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events together with this report can mark the start of that process.

Lewes & Flooding: A brief history

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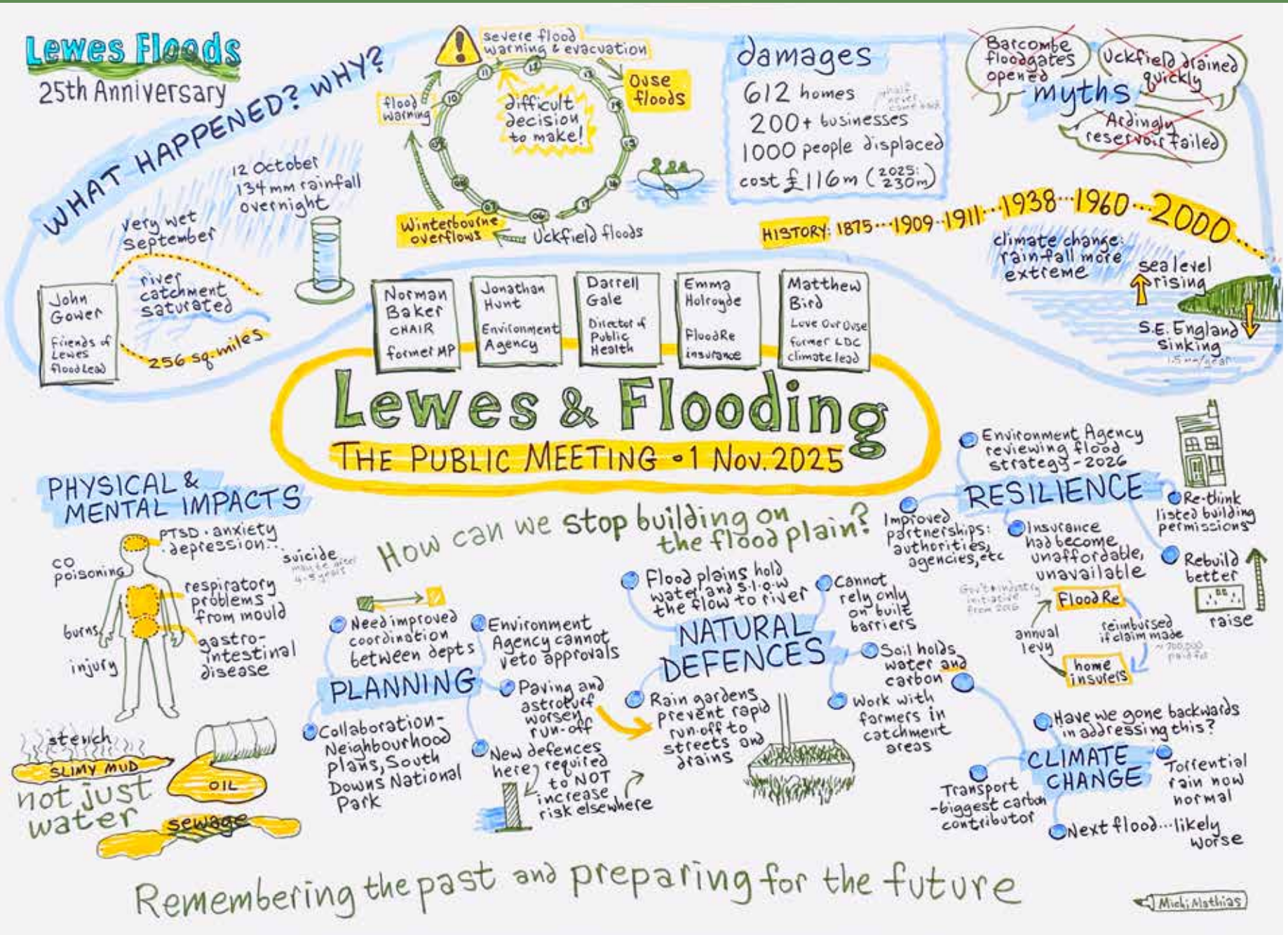


Lewes & Flooding: a brief history

Key points

- Lewes has a tendency to flood every 30-40 years
- Water from 1000+km of waterways across the River Ouse catchment must all flow through Lewes
- Centuries of intervention have created a floodplain that cannot fully function in the modern world.

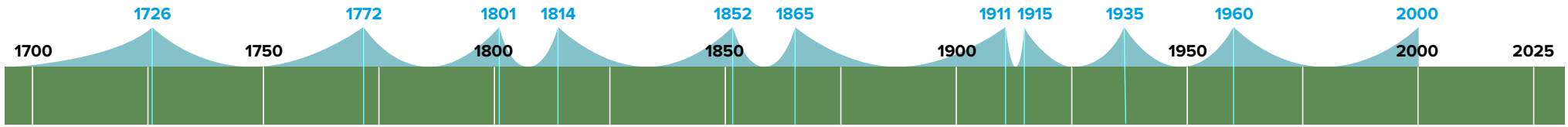
As many of the speakers at the Lewes Floods Anniversary events reminded us, Lewes is no stranger to flooding. Located on the floodplain of a tidal river, and with an often-steep river catchment that extends 550km^2, this low-lying town (on the same level as the coastal port of Newhaven) has a record of flooding that goes back centuries, becoming more frequent over the past 150 years – see Graphic 1.

Lewes' tendency to flood can be better understood when we know that in Roman times the town was a port, and only a few centuries ago the River Ouse was fully navigable up to Balcombe (the river is still tidal from Newhaven up to Barcombe Mills).

Malling Street in Lewes during the flood of 1960 – the fourth time the town saw major floods in the 20th century.

Image sourced from Lewes History Group

Throughout history, Lewes has experienced major flooding events



Graphic 1: Major flood events in Lewes since the 1700s. *Source: Friends of Lewes*

Lads 1909. Image: Friends of Lewes

Uckfield railway line 1911. Image: Friends of Lewes

Cliffe High Street 1960. Image: Friends of Lewes

Malling Street 1960. Image: Friends of Lewes

Major floods have occurred in and around Lewes approximately every 30 to 40 years back to when records began in the 17th century.

Types of flooding

- **River (fluvial) flooding** – When a river or its tributaries exceed capacity
- **Surface water (pluvial) flooding** – When intense rainfall overwhelms drainage systems
- **Groundwater flooding** – When water levels rise through permeable soils, particularly near chalk aquifers
- **Tidal influence** – When tidal surges exacerbate flooding along the lower River Ouse; long-term sea-level rise will also increase flood risk
- **Sewer flooding** – When sewers back up into property due to blockages or lack of capacity.

Hundreds of years of human intervention – straightening bends in the river, modifying tributaries, draining land for agriculture and building embankments and other flood defences – have resulted in a floodplain that can no longer fully function. Our changing needs for agriculture and trade have heavily modified and engineered a waterway that would naturally want to spread across the land at times of extreme rainfall.

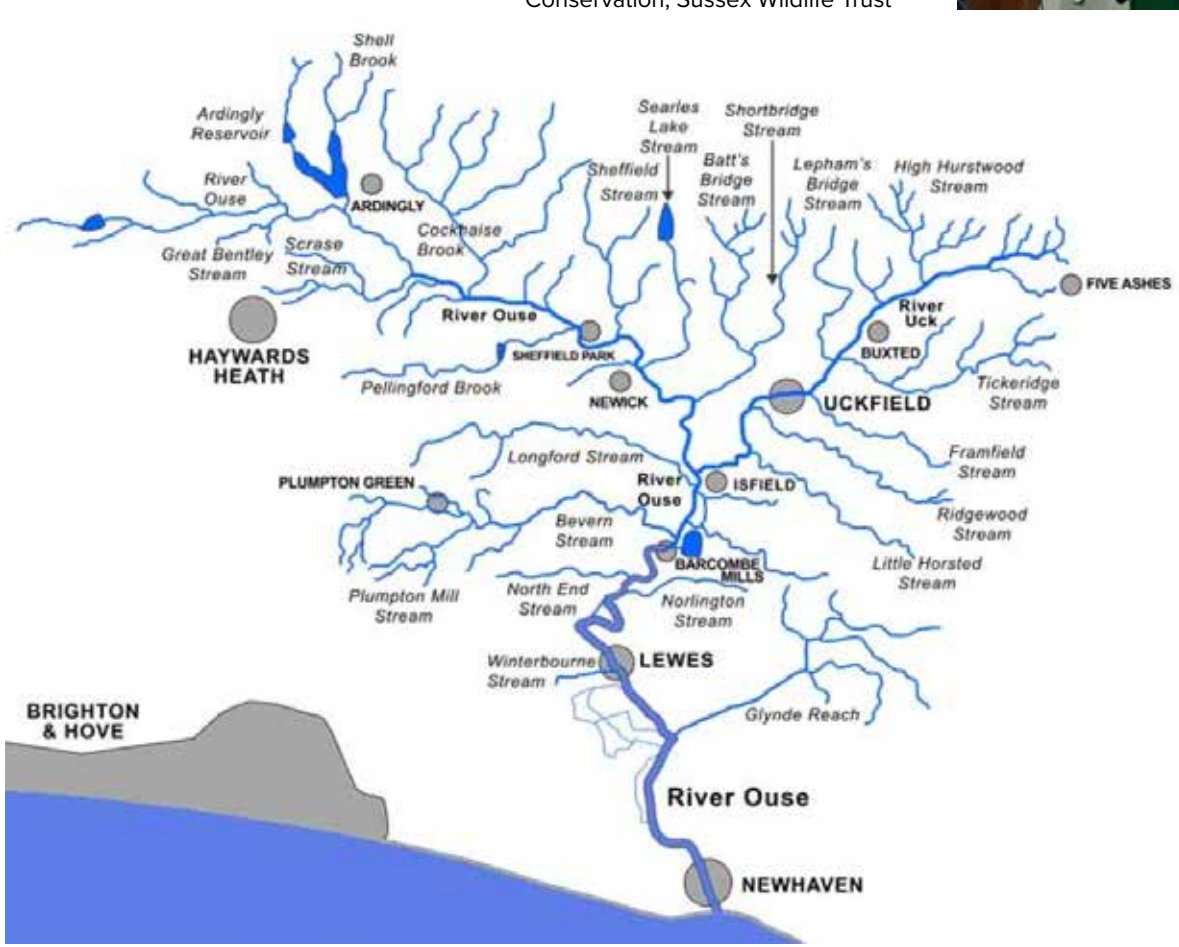
Over the past 150 years, Lewes has tended to flood every 30-40 years.

Georgian and Victorian development led to communities such as Cliffe and Malling being built on the site of a marshy swamp, next to the river. Perhaps most significant of all, the very centre of town – Cliffe Bridge – has imposed a 16-metre-wide bottleneck through which water from across 1000km+ of river, streams and tributaries of the Ouse north of Lewes must flow – see Graphic 2.

Put all this together with geological and climate factors (see page 20), and we have a town for which flooding has become a natural and frequent part of life. We have imposed ourselves and our economic priorities on the river geology for millennia: the question is how should we co-exist with it in the future?

"Flood banks have been put in place over hundreds of years to drain the land for agriculture and to keep the river in its track. This is a floodplain that isn't functioning with its river as a floodplain."

Henri Brocklebank, Director of Conservation, Sussex Wildlife Trust



Graphic 2: The Sussex Ouse Catchment – Over 1,000km of waterways across 550km^2

Image: Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

The October 2000 floods in Lewes

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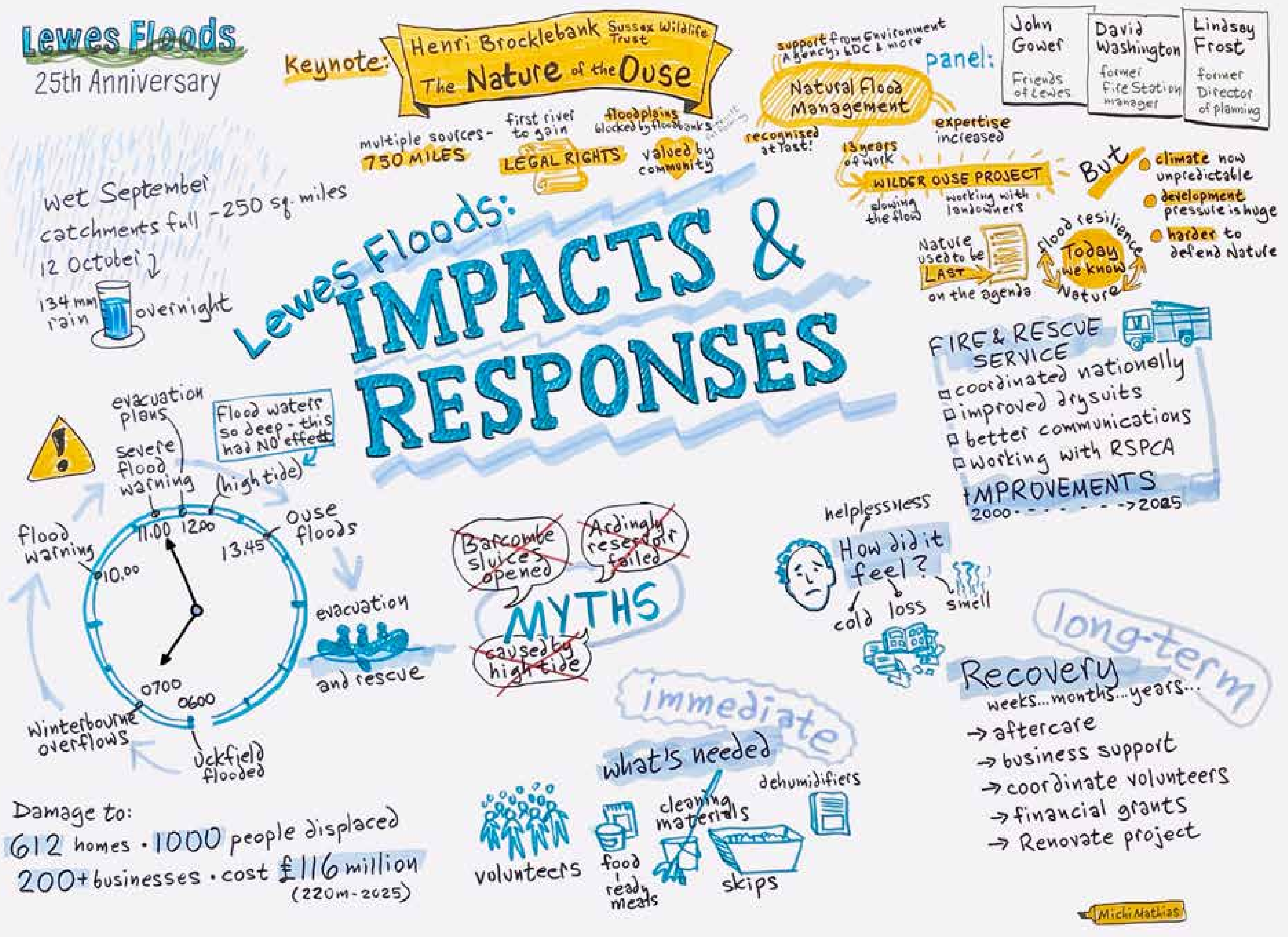


The October 2000 floods in Lewes

Coordinating a flood response

The October 2000 floods in Lewes

Key points

- More than 600 homes and 200 businesses flooded in Lewes
- Response and clean-up cost £118m (=£250m today)
- A legacy of learnings about flood preparedness and response came out of the 2000 floods.

The October 2000 floods took place after weeks of intense rainfall had saturated the 550km² Ouse catchment, up to a depth of 200mm in places. As storms coming in from the west intensified, Uckfield on the River Uck to the north-east of Lewes was the first town to see flooding early on the morning of Thursday 12 October.

A severe flood warning and evacuation call was given in Lewes at 11am, with the River Ouse bursting its banks just over two and a half hours later. Extensive parts of the town were flooded. The Winterbourne, a chalk stream running through the town and feeding into the Ouse, also broke its banks, inundating The Course and St Pancras Stores. Stretches of road in the Nevill and lower Malling became impassable – see Graphic 3.

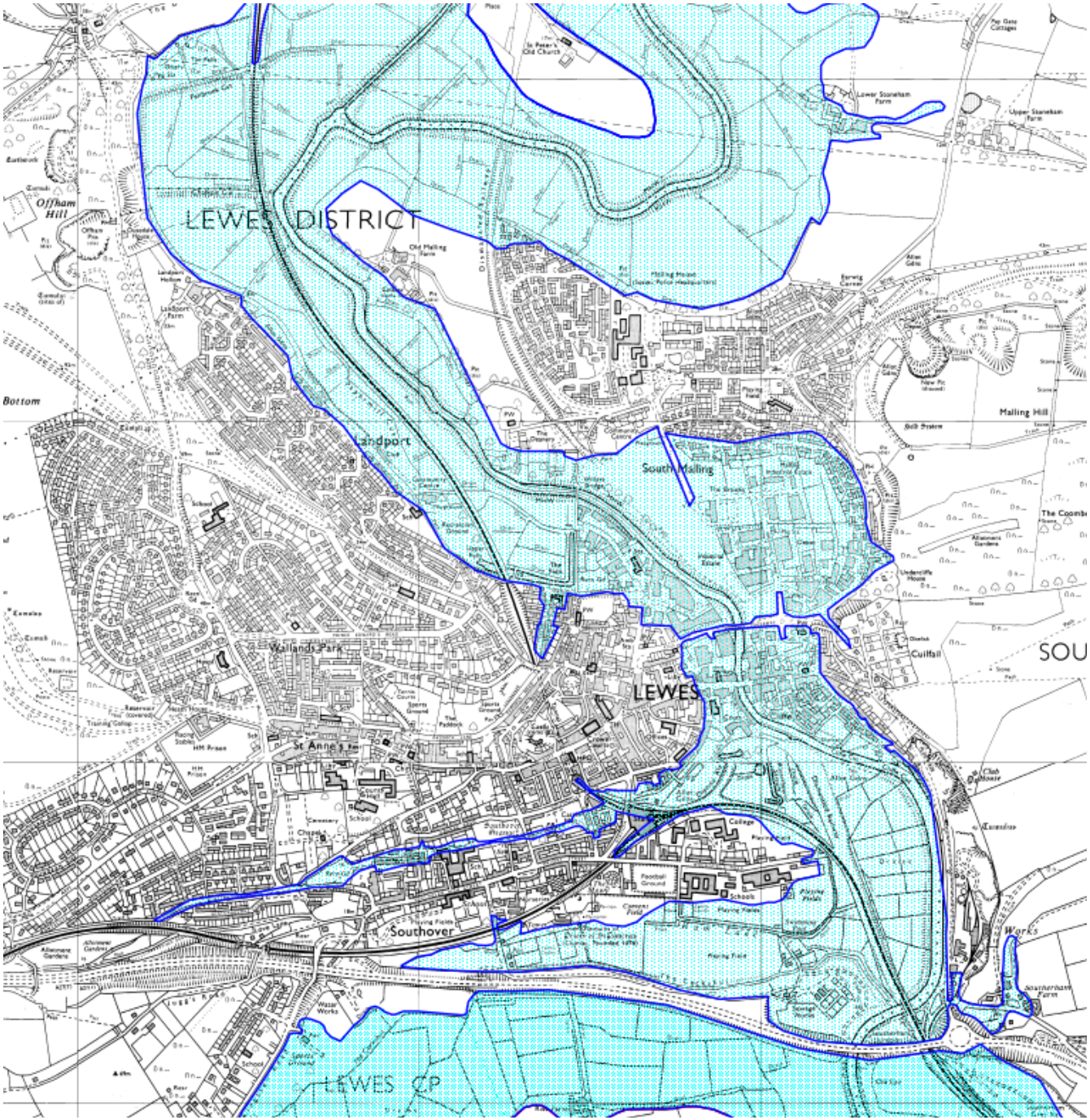
The town was cut in two for three days until the waters subsided. Electricity, gas and sewage services all failed in the centre of town so there was no light or power.

Peak flooding in Lewes in October 2000. *Image: The Environment Agency*

The flood waters became deeply contaminated, first by sewage as sewer and drain systems were overwhelmed – and also by oil and chemical pollution as two industrial estates either side of the river flooded. More than 100 properties were flooded by sewage from the inside as sewers backed up. There was looting and loss of livestock and pets, but, thankfully, no direct loss of human life.

The waters took several days to recede completely but it was months before many flooded residents could return to their homes. A clean-up operation that drew heavily on local authority resources took over two years to complete and cost £118 million (equivalent to over £250 million today). For many, the physical, emotional and financial toll took years to recover from, including reports of battles with insurance companies and some cases of unexplained illness (some potentially attributable to contaminated water).

The impacts on residents, emergency services, business, livestock and on wildlife were extensive. Many valuable lessons were learned from these traumatic events: the challenge now is making sure that we continue to remember and learn from them.



Graphic 3: Peak flooding on 12 October 2000 in Lewes
Source: Sussex Ouse – 12 October 2000 Flood Report, Environment Agency

Lewes 2000 Floods – a timeline

With thanks to Friends of Lewes

- **September 2000** – Rain throughout the month
- **Early October 2000** – Ground fully saturated
- **11 October 2000** – More than a month's average rainfall recorded across the Ouse catchment
- **12 October 2000** – Torrential rain coming in from the west
  - **6am** – River Uck bursts its banks, flooding Uckfield lower town centre
  - **7am** – Winterbourne Stream floods at Bell Lane
  - **8am** – Major incident declared by East Sussex Fire Brigade and Sussex Police: Strategic Coordinating Group (Gold Command) immediately initiated at Lewes Police headquarters
  - **10am** – Flood warning given – Lewes Resilience Forum meet
  - **11am** – Severe flood warning/evacuation called for Lewes
  - **1.45pm** – River Ouse bursts its banks at River Lodge and Lewes town centre starts to flood; livestock begins to be moved to higher ground
  - **2.30pm** – South Street, Pells, North Street and Cliffe areas flood
  - **2.45pm** – Spence's Lane and Malling Street flood
  - **6pm** – Night emergency shift begins
- **14 October** – Helped by extensive pumping, flood waters recede from central Lewes
- **15 October** – Power returned to centre of town.

Lewes 2000 Floods: in numbers

613 homes flooded

More than **200** businesses flooded

Over **1,000** people displaced

186 people housed in emergency accommodation[1]

50% of flooded businesses never returned

10,071 livestock lost[3]

More than **500** cars written off

£118 million response and clean-up bill[2]

More than **500** skips deployed

100+ properties flooded with sewage from the inside

Source: Friends of Lewes and Sussex Ouse 12 October 2000 Flood Report - Environment Agency

1 Lewes Town Hall and Malling Community Centre
2 Over £250 million at today's monetary value
3 10,000 chicks plus cattle and sheep – livestock losses reported to local NFU office

Coordinating a flood response

Lindsay Frost, Former Director of Planning & Environmental Services, Lewes District Council, on what he learned from coordinating response to the floods of 2000.

Recovery is as hard as emergency response

The hardest day after a flood [for local authorities] is typically Day Five. People are getting back to their businesses or homes and then the requests for assistance start coming in. That process goes on for weeks, months and years so good systems are needed to manage it.

Locate your rest centres carefully

Lewes had two allocated emergency rest centres – the Town Hall and the sports centre on Mountfield Road – but they are on the same side of the river, which became impassable, so another rest centre quickly had to be found on the other side in Malling.

Keep some staff back

Even during a flood there is an expectation that local services will continue. For example, in Peacehaven, some residents were wondering why their recycling hadn't been picked up. Plan how you use your staff resources and – in the emergency phases – ensure you have 24-hour cover.

Be ready for a very unlikely shopping list

The emergency phase needs ready meals and snacks to feed a lot of people in a short period of time. Rubbish skips are hard to obtain because so many other places need them. Dehumidifiers are at a premium.

Don't be overly bureaucratic

For example, some flooded residents in Lewes wanted to live in caravans next to their homes to oversee recovery. A simple system was implemented for people to register that they were doing that, rather than the extra stress of filling in lots of standard planning forms.

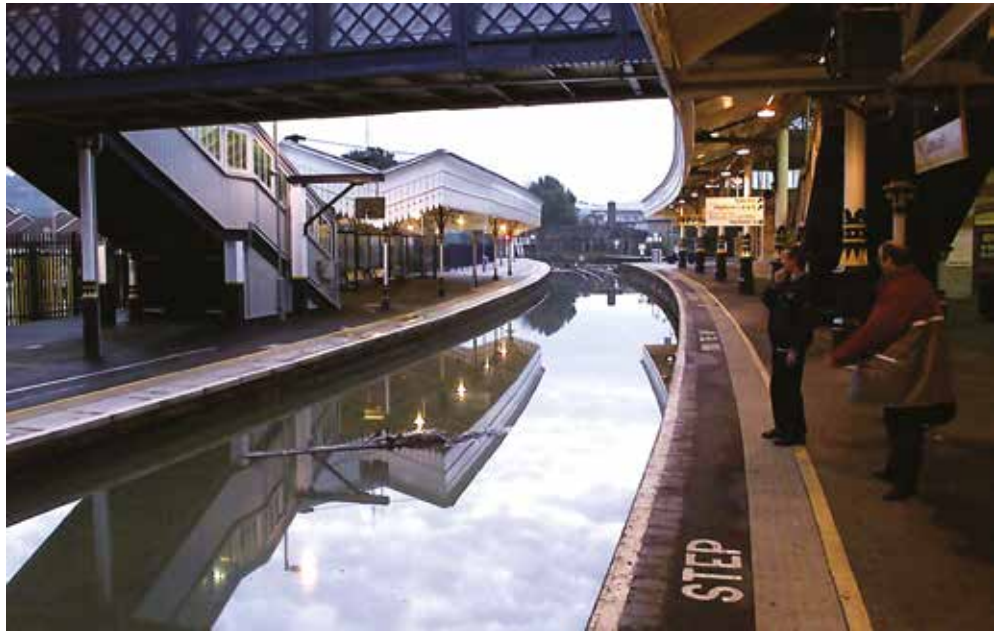
Flood jitters remain for quite some time

There were bouts of heavy rain for weeks and further flood warnings. That had a big impact on mental health, which had previously been little understood but is now much better appreciated (see 'Legacy of the Lewes Floods' on page 53).

Lindsay Frost. Image: Abbie Stanton

RNLI rescuing people in 2000. Image: Friends of Lewes

Harvey's Yard, 2000. Image: Friends of Lewes



Lewes Railway Station, 2000. Image: Friends of Lewes

Clearing up, 2000. Image: Friends of Lewes

What's the risk of flooding for Lewes now?

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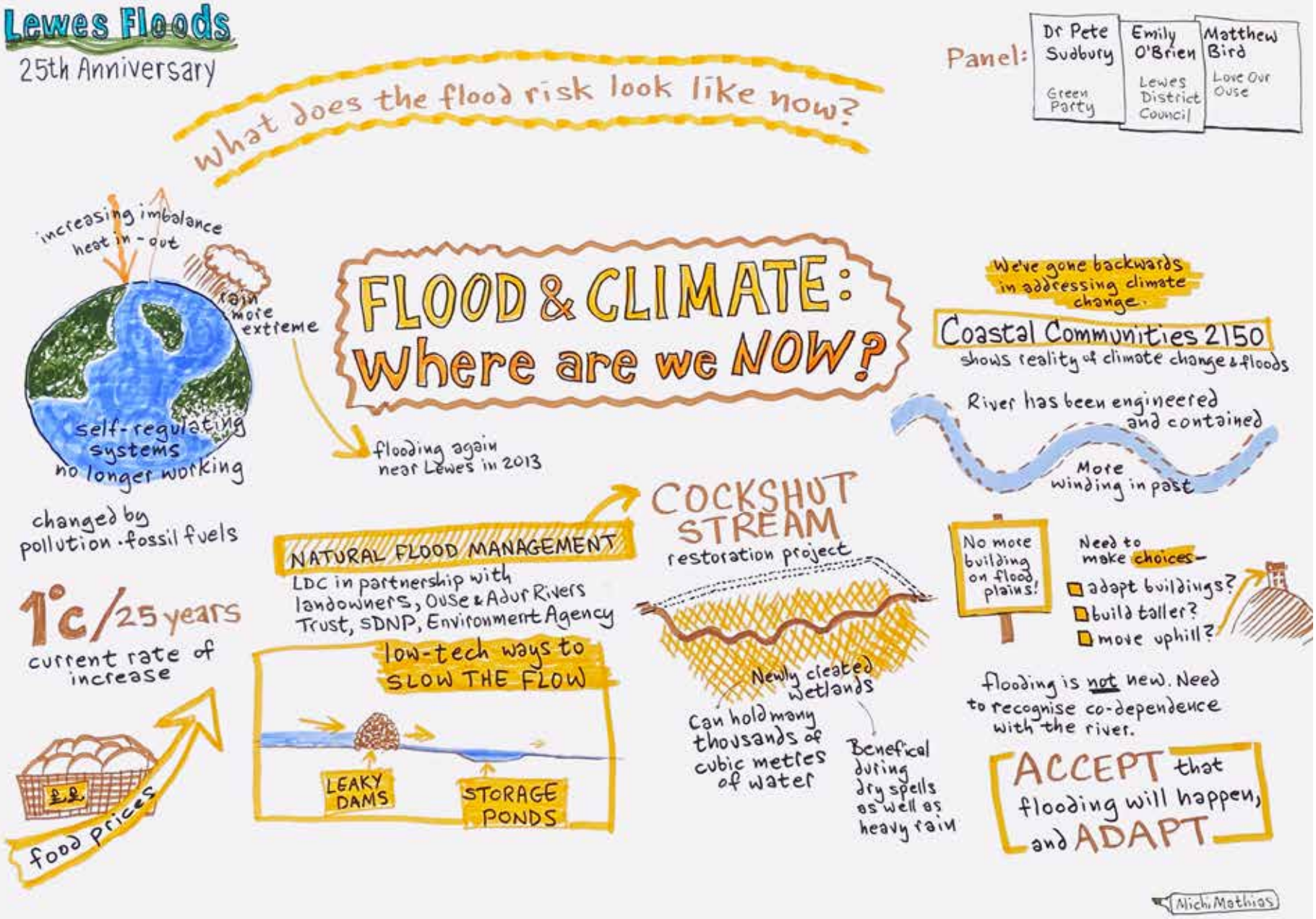


What's the risk of flooding for Lewes now?

What's contributing to future flood risk?

Coastal Communities 2150: forecasting the impacts of climate change on our coasts

What's the risk of flooding for Lewes now?

Key points

- Some defence and flood management interventions have been introduced since 2000
- These have significantly reduced flood risk to many areas affected in 2000 – but flood risk in Lewes remains medium to high in some areas
- Intensive rainfall, rising sea levels, and development are contributing to flood risk, with climate change likely to increase risks year on year.

After 2000, in response to an extensive report produced for the Environment Agency about the floods[4], a range of interventions have taken place in some places both to defend Lewes against fluvial (river) and tidal flooding and to slow water flow across the Ouse catchment.

In and around Lewes town these have included:

i Physical and technical improvements, such as:

- New flood walls and higher flood embankments at Malling, on the riverside by Tesco, Harvey's Way and South Street, and some repairs at North Street
- New flood alleviation scheme for the Cliffe area of Lewes featuring flood walls, gates and demountable barriers
- Improved flood bund at Landport
- Repairs to river embankments to the south of Lewes
- Improvements to Malling Pumping Station
- 24/7 camera monitoring of and regular clearing of grilles along the Winterbourne stream.

ii. Natural flood management by Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, the Wilder Ouse Project and others (see more on this in Section 3 of Part 4) including:

- Upstream changes to soil and land management to slow river flows (ongoing)
- The 'Heart of Reeds' reed bed created by land artist Chris Drury on the Railway Land Nature Reserve to slow the flow of overspills from the Winterbourne stream (2005)
- The Cockshut Stream Restoration Project – a new wetland south of Lewes, which is helping to slow flows into the Ouse from the stream (2019-2023)
- Multiple smaller urban natural flood management measures within town, such as rain gardens and planters.

Assessing flood risk now

The measures above have had positive impacts. However, many areas that were flooded in 2000 have seen no new works, including the Pells, much of North Street, Eastgate Wharf, The Railway Land and Court Road. Rising sea levels, the greater intensity of rainfall as a result of climate change, and urban development mean that serious flood risk remains for Lewes, as well as other settlements along the Ouse. This risk can come from river flooding, sea level rises raising base fluvial flows, and surface-water flooding – each of which can potentially affect different areas of the town (and these risks are likely to intensify each year as the impacts of climate change increase).

4 Sussex Ouse: 12th October 2000 Flood Report (Binnie Black & Veatch: Environment Agency 2001). See a summary of the report's recommendations in Appendix 2

For every 1°C rise in temperature, the air can generally hold 7% more moisture

The Environment Agency's Rivers and Sea Map – see Graphic 4 – shows that:

- Flood walls built after 2000 have substantially reduced flood risk in Cliffe, Malling and South Street (coloured pale blue on the map)
- Yet flood risk remains high in the town centre to the west of the Ouse, including the shopping precinct, and the Eastgate Street/North Street area, which is allocated for development of 780 homes[5]
- Regular maintenance of grilles along the Winterbourne have helped to reduce the risk of the stream breaching its banks – yet Environment Agency data indicate that a medium risk of flooding (increasing to high risk in some stretches) remains
- The risk of the railway being inundated by flood water also remains high – threatening to cut off transport connectivity both north and south.

In short, more needs to be done to address flood risk in Lewes, whether in terms of mitigation, defence, adaptation and flood preparedness, all of which we will explore in the next sections of this report.

5 685 homes are planned for North Street; 35 homes at the former bus station and 60 at Eastgate Wharf

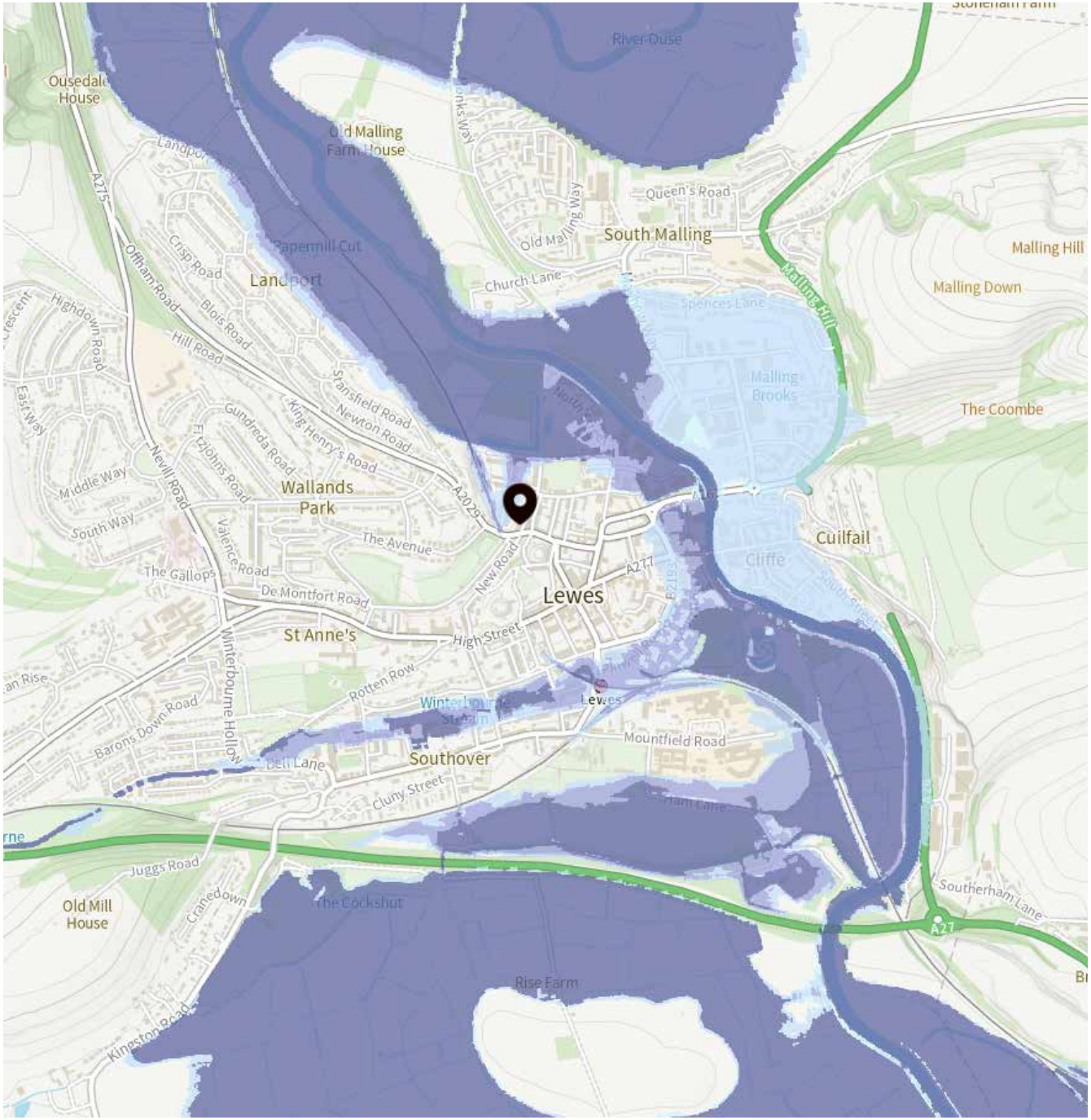
Comment

The past two decades have seen extensive activity to protect Lewes from flooding, guided by the recommendations in the comprehensive Environment Agency report written after the 2000 floods (see Appendix 2).

However, weighed against this action are the growing flood risks created by climate change, the pressure to build on the floodplain to meet government-imposed housing quotas, and changes in land-use that are making it harder for both urban and rural areas to cope with greater volumes of water.

The hard engineering and natural flood management measurements taken to date in and around Lewes to mitigate and defend against flooding are welcome. However, much more is needed – at scale and in a strategically co-ordinated way – to address current and future flood risks.

See the basis for calculating river and sea risk at www.gov.uk. Residents can check their risk for river & sea and surface-water flood risk at https://www.gov.uk/check-long-term-flood-risk



Graphic 4: Future flood risk in Lewes from rivers and seas
Yearly chance of flooding between 2036 and 2069: ***Dark Blue: High*** *(>3.3% chance of a flood each year);* ***Mid-Blue: Medium*** *(1%-3.3% chance of a flood each year);* ***Pale Blue: Low*** *(0.1-1% chance of a flood each year). Source: Environment Agency/Gov.UK (See Graphic 8 on page 28 for surface-water flood risk in Lewes).*

What's contributing to future flood risk in Lewes?

Five natural and man-made factors are now influencing flood risk for south-eastern towns like Lewes.

More intense rainfall
Attributable largely to global warming (which increases the amount of moisture held in the air), rainfall has intensified in the south of England. In East Sussex, winter 2026 ranked among the 10 wettest winters of the past 190 years – see Graphic 5.

LEWES FLOODS SURVEY – Future concerns
Local people's greatest concerns about future flooding:

- Flooding will recur and be worse than 2000
- Continued development and hard-paving over gardens/driveways increasing flood risk
- Condition of drains and sewers
- Lack of urgency, funding or coordination
- Personal risk to specific homes, areas and transport infrastructure
- Climate change increasing the frequency and intensity of flood events
- Future availability and affordability of insurance
- Wider impact on businesses, property values, and human/animal welfare.

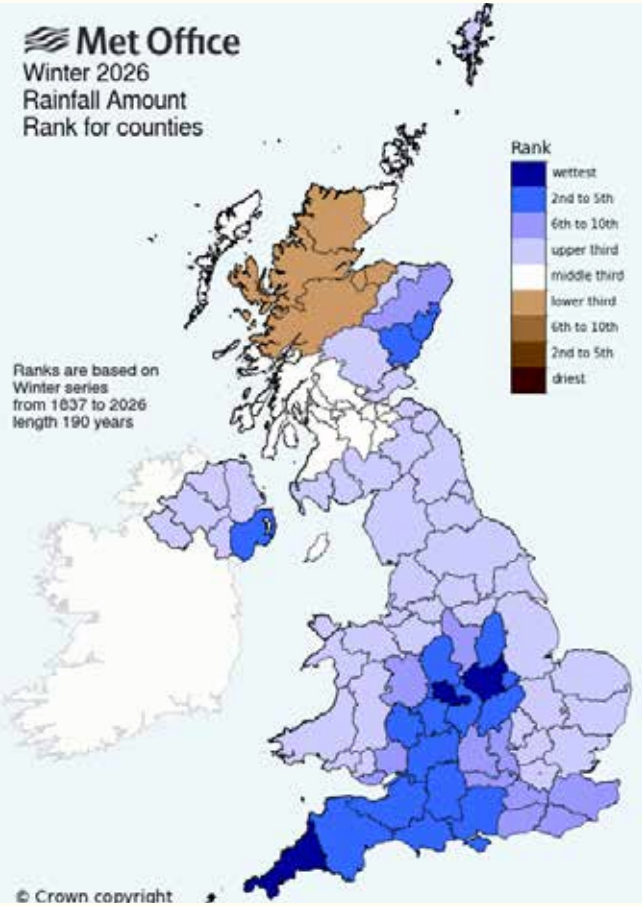
6 Naish, N., Hanna, E., and Lovecroft, A., World Meteorological Organization, 15 October 2025
7 Integrated effects of climate change on coastal extreme sea levels (Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory: MAFF 2001)

Rising sea levels
Sea levels have been rising by an average of 4.7mm a year since 2015, and this is accelerating due to climate change[6]. For a tidal river like the Sussex Ouse, this is significant, increasing the base height of the river flow – see Coastal Communities 2150, page 21.

Tilting land mass (isostatic rebound)
The thawing of the mile-thick ice sheets that covered the UK in the last Ice Age is still having an impact on our geology. A tilting of the land mass is causing Scotland to rise gradually while the south of England is falling by an estimated 1.5mm every year[7].

Changing land use
The amount of properly permeable ground that's available to absorb intense rainfall is being reduced by urban development and intensive agriculture, leading to more run-off into rivers, streams and also into sewers and drains – see next point.

Surface-water flooding risk
Incidents of surface-water flooding – where drains and sewers can't cope with the volumes of water being forced down them – are increasing. Intense rainfall, growing populations and the loss of permeable ground to development are putting more pressure on (often ageing) drains and sewage systems, leading to flash floods and even backed-up drains flooding properties internally (see more on pages 28-33).



Graphic 5: Where winter 2026 ranks in the wettest winters over 190 years *Source: Met Office*

> *"The River Ouse is tidal. Sea levels have been rising for a couple of hundred years and will continue to rise, which is reducing the capacity of the river."*
> **John Gower**, Flood Lead, Friends of Lewes

Coastal Communities 2150: forecasting the impacts of climate change on our coasts

Coastal Communities 2150 was a €2.9 million project running 2011-2014 that brought together coastal communities across the south-east of England, including East Sussex, and northern Europe. Its aim was to understand and prepare for the potential long-term impacts of climate change such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion and heat stress, up to the year 2150.

One Coastal Communities initiative showcased at the Lewes Floods Anniversary was an animated aerial visualisation showed the potential impact of rising sea levels throughout the lower Ouse Valley from Seaford to Lewes – see Graphic 6.

This showed that if sea levels were to rise by 2 metres, Lewes would flood on the highest tides of every year, even with the flood defences built after the 2000 floods. But how likely is a 2-metre rise in sea levels?

Recent analysis shows that mean sea levels around England could be up to 30-35cm higher by 2050. This could see up to 200,000 homes and businesses in England completely submerged by 2050, including 1,000-2,000 properties in East Sussex[8]. When considering worst-case, low-probability scenarios, some projections indicate a sea level rise of up to 1.9 metres within the next 100 years[9].

Graphic 6: Coastal Communities 2150 sea level rise visualisation

Explore the Coastal Communities 2150 sea-level rise visualisation at www.FusionGFX.com/EA

The Coastal Communities 2150 project was supported by the EU Cross Border Co-operation Programme of 2007-2013 and part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

8 East Sussex County Council Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Summary Report Reference: Final Report, June 2024. Assuming a global temperature rise of 2°C by 2100

9 Flood risk assessments: climate change allowances – Sea-level allowances (Environment Agency, last updated May 2022)

Interactive mapping activity. Image: Abbie Stanton

Lewes Railway Land Wildlife Trust. Image: Abbie Stanton

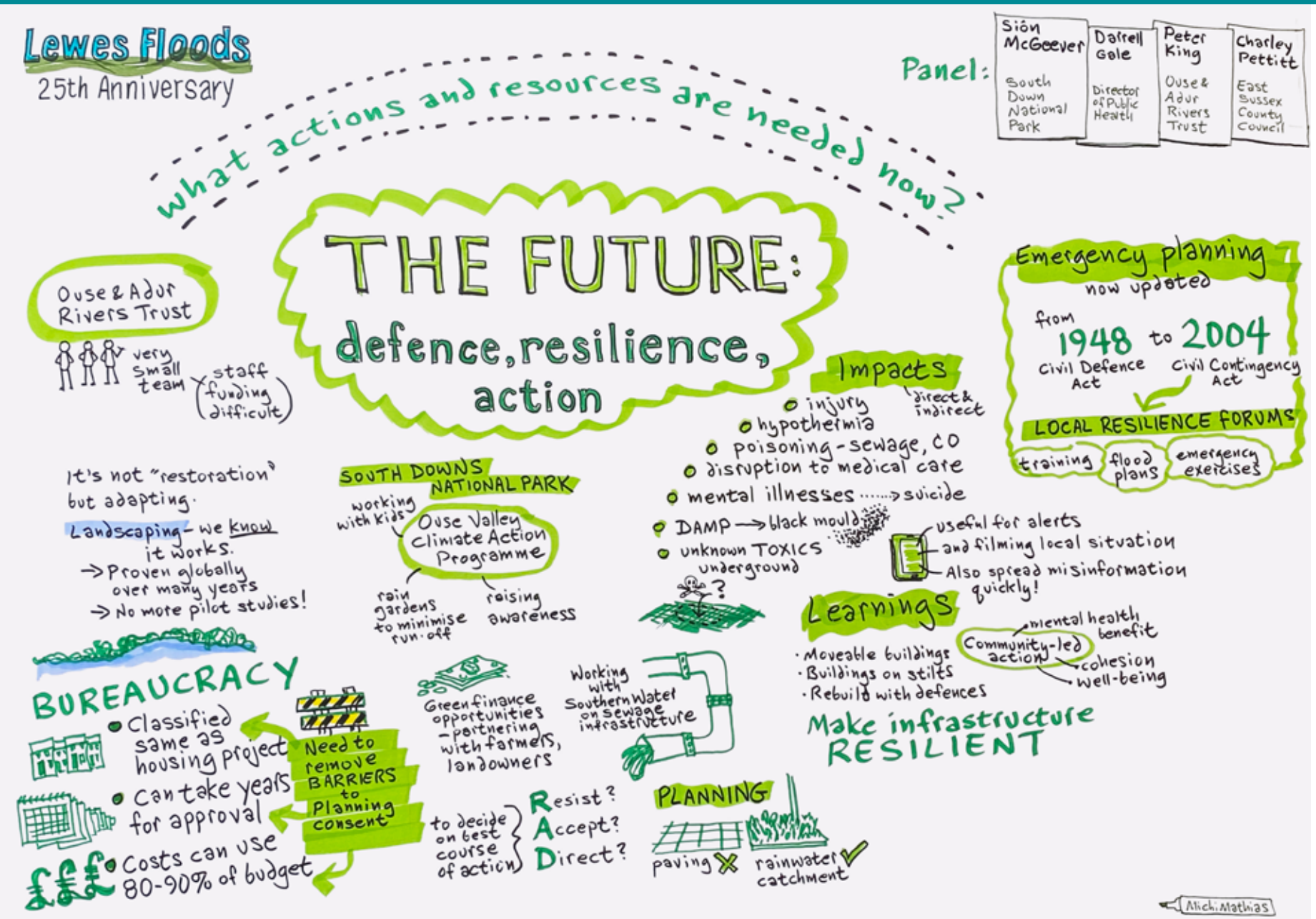
Lewes Climate Hub activity. Image: Abbie Stanton

Lewes Urban Arboretum. Image: Abbie Stanton

Friends of Sutton Downs. Image: Abbie Stanton

Five themes for flood action

4



1
Reassess development on the floodplain

2
Address surface-water flooding risk

3
Enable natural flood management at scale

4
Strengthen flood preparedness and the community response

5
Rethink our relationship with water

1. Reassess development on the floodplain

Key points

- Building on the floodplain exposes new homes to flooding or pushes flood risk elsewhere
- There are widespread calls for stronger curbs on development on the floodplain
- Bold thinking is needed on where and how new housing quotas should be met.

"Write the [South Downs] Local Plan so you don't build on floodplains. You have to be stark-staring mad to build on a floodplain. Also make sure when new homes are sold on floodplains people are told that it's built on a floodplain and that it won't be covered by Flood Re [insurance]. We just need to stop pretending and start saying the right thing right now."

Dr Pete Sudbury, Former Cabinet Member for Climate, Oxfordshire County Council

As one of the largest towns in the South Downs National Park, Lewes is a favoured site for development to meet housing needs. A major concern in terms of flood risk is the number of developments that have been built, or are approved to be built on the floodplain, including at locations that experienced extensive flooding in 2000.

These include 685 homes on the redevelopment of the old North Street industrial estate area (aka 'The Phoenix')[10] around 60 residences in the central riverside Eastgate Wharf [11] and 35 residences on the location of the former bus station on Eastgate Street[12] – see Graphic 7. Totalling around 780 residences, these add to the 600 new homes estimated to have already been built on the floodplain since the 2000 floods[13].

(A further 226 homes are planned for the Old Malling Farm development close to the north-eastern banks of the river[14]. Following local campaigning by individuals and groups such as Friends of Lewes, all planned properties on this site are located above the floodplain, although concerns remain about provision of sewage pumping stations and other essential infrastructure.)

1,380+ homes built or approved to be built on the floodplain in Lewes since the 2000 floods

Time to stop building on the floodplain?

Flood mitigation and defence is a stipulation for all these developments. But the Lewes Floods Anniversary events saw repeated calls from panellists and residents to reconsider building on the floodplain at all – both to reduce the risk of flood to householders and to allow the floodplain to fulfil its role of holding water to stop it being driven elsewhere.

The South Downs Local Plan (the key planning and development framework for Lewes, which is under review in 2025/26) is the principal tool available to limit floodplain development or stipulate better ways of building on the floodplain. The latest iteration of the Local Plan at the time of writing acknowledges the increasing risk of flooding due to climate change. In its strategic policy for flood risk management (and in line with the national planning policy framework), the Plan calls for "[f]ollowing a sequential approach to flood risk management, directing development to areas of lower flood risk wherever possible"[15]. The question is, does the South Downs National Park Authority need to be more specific and directive in halting inappropriate development on the floodplain?

10 The Phoenix - https://www.phoenixlewes.com/homes
11 Eastgate Wharf – South Downs National Park planning application: SDNP/25/01671/FUL
12 Former Bus Station Eastgate Street – South Downs National Park planning application: SDNP/23/02973/FUL
13 Lewes Flood Action Group estimate
14 Old Malling Farm - https://www.lukenbeck.com/projects/old-malling-farm
15 South Downs Local Plan – Proposed Submission (Regulation 19) Strategic Policy SDW2: Flood Risk Management (South Downs National Park Authority, May 2026)

Reassess development on the floodplain

Bold new thinking needed

Some residents and delegates also called for bold and innovative approaches to building homes in Lewes to help reclaim the floodplain and safeguard properties on it, including:

- Explore flood-adaptive ways to build on the floodplain to allow it to continue to function, such as elevating buildings on stilts or pillars above the forecast flood line to allow water to flow underneath[16]
- Provide support to ensure that homes already built on the floodplain are as flood-resilient as they can be – see Part 4
- Rethink where we're allowed to build: is it time to relax planning so it is possible to build homes (with strong sustainability credentials) higher up on the South Downs?

Friends of Lewes, the town's civic society, published a new policy on development on the floodplain in summer 2026. This opposes any residential development on the areas of highest flood risk, unless it is floating or on stilts, with safe access and evacuation routes designed to be above the level of future flood waters. It also considers it unsafe to continue building homes behind flood defences[17]. Read the full policy at friends-of-lewes.org.uk.

Long-term contingencies

As Councillor Emily O'Brien referenced in her presentation, authorities in North Norfolk are having to address relocation of residents in response to rapid coastal erosion. In March 2026, it was reported that a row of 16 riverside properties in Ynysybwl in south Wales were to be purchased and demolished by the local authority as it was no longer possible to protect them against flooding[18]. This is believed to be the first time a local authority in the UK has bought such a large number of inland homes to protect householders from flooding. Do similar medium- and long-term contingencies need to be made for residents and businesses on the Ouse floodplain?

16 The Environment Agency observes that voids under elevated properties need to have a function (e.g. providing parking space) otherwise they get infilled over time
17 The Friends of Lewes policy on development in the floodplain (June 2026)
18 South Wales council to buy and demolish homes prone to flooding (Steven Morris: The Guardian February 2026)

Comment

There is strong feeling among both Lewes residents and environmental, climate and flood professionals that conventional residential development on the Ouse floodplain should stop. Key planning policy for Lewes (in the shape of the South Downs Local Plan) doesn't (yet) go as far as prohibiting building on the floodplain[19]. The Environment Agency is looking to review its national flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy, but the only power of veto it has against building on floodplains is to ask the Secretary of State to call in any application approved against its advice.

Residents can make their voice heard through the South Downs Local Plan consultation, the Lewes Neighbourhood Plan (which is being updated in 2026) and now through the nascent Lewes Planning Group – an association of community bodies seeking to develop a long-term masterplan for the town. Friends of Lewes' new policy to oppose any new housing in high-risk areas that's not designed to be fully flood adaptable is likely to provide a further brake on standard development on the floodplain.

But limiting development on the floodplain opens up other challenges. With the government pushing to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of this parliament, it's estimated that 100,000 new properties could be built on the highest-risk flood zones in England by 2030[20].

As well as quotas for the South Downs National Park Authority that directly affect Lewes town, additional, government-set housing quotas for the wider Lewes District will likely necessitate further housing development on other parts of the Ouse catchment. If developments are not to be built on areas of flood risk, other sites need to be found. Bold new solutions are urgently needed to reconcile these competing pressures.

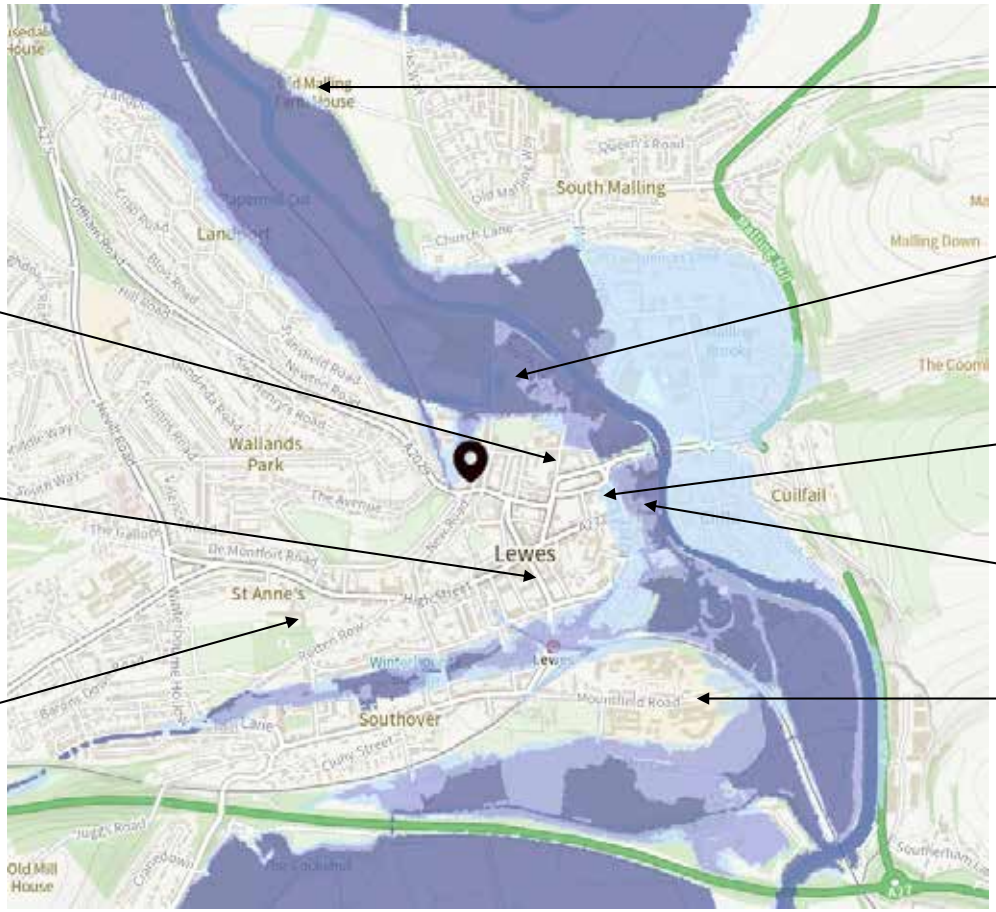
19 There are also the problems of lesser planning requirements for redeveloping brownfield sites, such as The Phoenix, which are not subject to the same (greenfield) strict sequential exception tests requiring first consideration of sites at lower flood risk
20 More than 100,000 homes in England could be built in highest-risk flood zones (Sandra Laville: The Guardian 2025)

Reassess development on the floodplain

LOW/NO FLOOD RISK
Springman House
13 dwellings

LOW/NO FLOOD RISK
Behind White Hart
5 dwellings

LOW/NO FLOOD RISK
County Hall
Up to 200 dwellings



BORDERLINE FLOOD RISK
Old Malling Farm
226 dwellings

HIGH FLOOD RISK
North Street Quarter
685 dwellings

HIGH FLOOD RISK
Former Bus Station
35 dwellings

HIGH FLOOD RISK
Eastgate Wharf
50-60 dwellings

BORDERLINE FLOOD RISK
East Sussex College
200 dwellings

Graphic 7: Sites allocated for development in Lewes mapped against future flood risk from rivers and seas

Site allocations taken from South Downs Local Plan - Proposed Submission (Regulation 19), May 2026 and developer planning applications. See Graphic 4 for sources and explanation of flood risk

"We have huge developments coming up in Lewes and they're all happening on the floodplain. We have to ask: "Do we have absolute faith in our hard measures or would it be simpler to build somewhere else that isn't prone to flooding?'"

Matthew Bird, Director, Love Our Ouse

Building in flood zones

Plans for Pells Pool facilities, Lewes. Image: Studio Octopi

Lewes' first amphibious building?

A programme of proposed improvements to the facilities at Pells Pool, Lewes' outdoor freshwater swimming pool, highlights a range of flood-resilient features, acknowledging the site's location in a high-risk flood zone.

Features include an **'amphibious' building** to house the reception, plant room and WCs, which is designed to rise and fall with any flood water. A new changing-room block is designed to allow flood waters to flow through both changing spaces, while the first-floor pavilion above it is set above a level of a one in 100-year flood event.

Durable, water-resistant and easily recoverable materials are proposed in areas susceptible to flooding to allow the building to withstand periodic inundation and be efficiently cleaned and reinstated.

Flood-adaptive homes

With more than 50% of its land below sea level, the Netherlands has constantly had to look for innovative solutions to incorporate flood risk into urban design.

While banning conventional development (or redevelopment) in its most flood-prone areas, concepts such as **floating homes** are being widely embraced, with whole 'floating communities' being established over the past decade. Unlike a houseboat, a floating home is fixed to the land and usually connected to municipal power and sewer systems. A concrete hull and steel poles driven into the ground keep the property stable in the water, while allowing it to rise and fall steadily with water levels.

Floating houses at the Ijburg neighbourhood in Amsterdam. Image: istockphoto.com

LEWES FLOODS SURVEY – Building innovation

Building and urban design innovations that Lewes residents would like to see to improve flood resilience of new homes include:

- Floating, modular and moveable homes
- Homes on stilts
- Houseboats
- Dutch and south-east Asian flood-adaptive construction principles

Houses on stilts, Kampong Ayer, Brunei. Image: istockphoto.com

Houses on stilts are prevalent across south-east Asia. Kampong Ayer in Brunei is the world's largest water village, featuring thousands of traditional, brightly painted wooden houses built on stilts over the Brunei River. The 1,000-year-old settlement of around 30,000 residents includes essential services such as schools, mosques and clinics – all connected by 38km of boardwalks – as well as electricity, water supply, telephone lines and internet access.

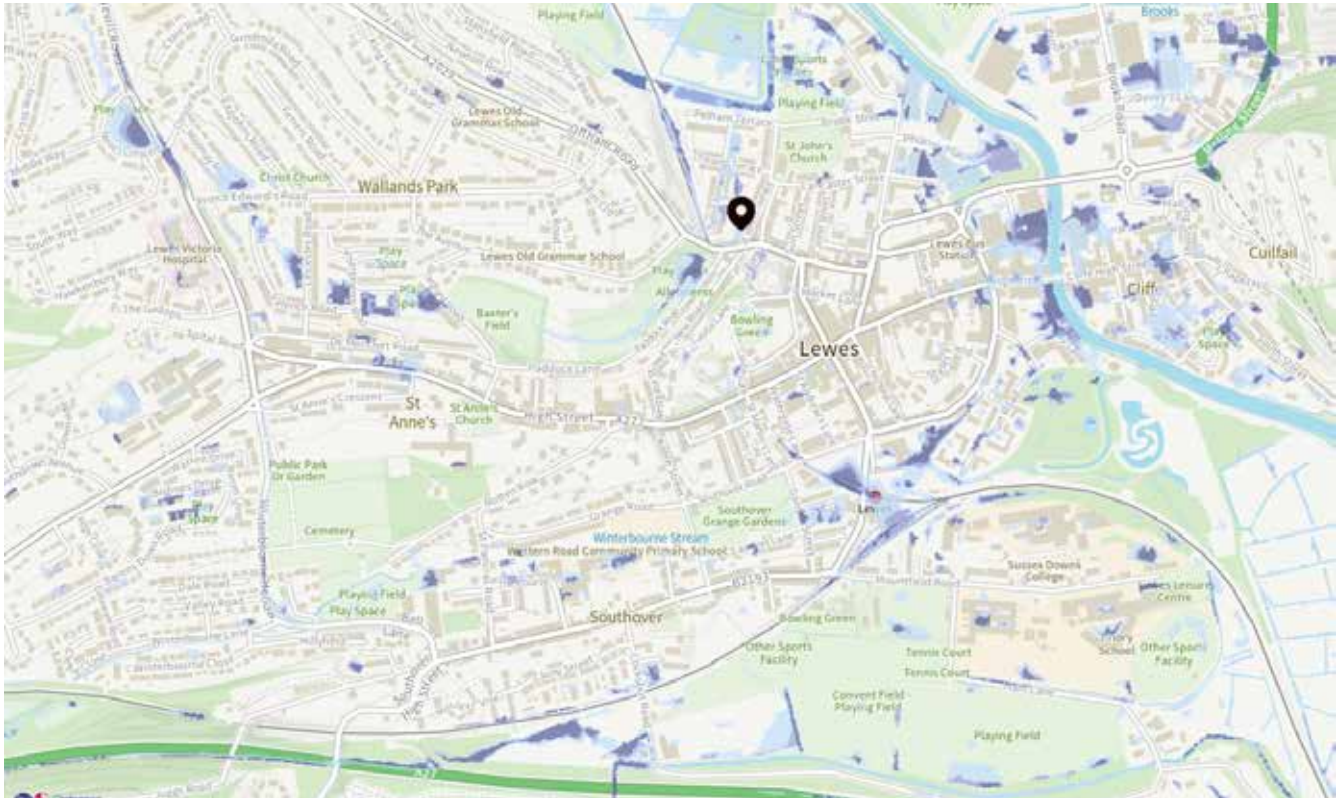
2. Address surface-water flooding risk

"If everyone could catch and hold a bit of water in a storm, it would stop that water going into drainage systems that are already bursting at the seams. They're just not designed to cope with the volume of water we're seeing."

Emma Holroyde, Market Engagement Manager, Flood Re Insurance

KEY POINTS

- Surface-water flooding occurs when intense rainfall overwhelms drainage systems
- Urban development, less permeable ground to absorb water, sewer blockages and poor drain maintenance increase the risk
- Local authorities, developers, water companies and residents all need to act.



The Lewes 2000 floods were primarily caused by river flooding. But as in other parts of the country, surface-water flooding has become a growing risk. This is due both to more intense rainfall resulting from climate change and to urban development reducing ground permeability and putting greater pressure on drainage systems.

Surface-water flooding, or flash flooding, occurs when the volume and intensity of rainfall overwhelm local drainage systems and there is nowhere for the rainwater to go. Unlike flooding from rivers, surface-water flooding can happen far from a river, often in places that people wouldn't expect, including backing up through their own domestic drainage systems and flooding properties from the inside.

Around 4.6 million properties in England are in areas at risk of surface-water flooding, with over 1 million of these deemed to be at high risk of surface-water flooding[21]. The Environment Agency has said there are now three times as many properties at high risk of flooding from surface water as there are from flooding from rivers and the sea.

21 National assessment of flood and coastal erosion risk in England 2024 - GOV.UK

Graphic 8: Flood risk in Lewes from surface water
Yearly chance of flooding between 2036 and 2069: Dark Blue: High; Mid-Blue: Medium; Pale Blue: Low. Source: Environment Agency/Gov.UK

Address surface-water flooding risk

Lewes – like many towns and cities – faces the triple surface-water threat of more frequent and intense rainfall, continued development (with a further 1,370+ homes allocated to be built within the town under the South Downs Local Plan[22]), and a sewage system largely constructed in the 1960s-1980s, but with many elements between 90 and 150 years old[23] whose gullies and soakaways are not designed to cope with increasingly extreme rainfall.

An average gully is designed to accommodate rainfall of 5mm per hour. But recent storms in Sussex have seen rainfall of 30mm per hour[24]. Blockages created by using drains inappropriately (the combination of cooking fats and wetwipes leading to fatbergs, for example) exacerbate the situation. Common practices such as paving over front gardens to create car-parking or misconnecting roof downpipes to the main combined sewer also lead to heavy rainfall inundating sewage systems unnecessarily.

Mitigating the risk

In Lewes, residential areas at risk of surface-water flooding – see Graphic 8 – are characteristically in low-lying areas where water, often flowing down from higher land, can pool and inundate gullies and drains. While some of these areas are close to waterways like the Ouse and the Winterbourne, many are a long way from it, putting at risk those who may assume their vulnerability to flooding is very low.

Lewes Floods Anniversary discussions made clear that tackling surface-water flooding risk requires concerted action by a range of bodies including local authorities, planning authorities, water companies, developers, residents and businesses. Priorities identified by residents and professionals were:

i. Greater collaboration between local authorities and water companies to clear and upgrade gullies
Residents were keen to see annual or seasonal draining clearing schedules – including publication of maintenance responsibilities so residents know who to contact if a gully becomes blocked in the meantime. A positive step in this regard is Lewes District and East Sussex County Councils agreeing that the issue of cars being parked over blocked drains needs to be resolved. ESCC and contractors Balfour Beatty have agreed for highways stewards to be able to request temporary parking restrictions to enable drain inspection and, where required, 'jetting' to unblock drains. It's hoped these temporary restrictions can be extended to also enable LDC street sweeper access, which will further help to keep drains clear.

ii. Expansion of sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) in streets and public spaces where pooling water is a frequent occurrence
In line with the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) introduced in 2025, the latest version of the South Downs Local Plan has an unprecedented focus on the importance of sustainable drainage systems to address the increasing risk of flooding, including the role that ground-level natural flood management and nature-based solution measures can play. However, this can only influence new development, and even then developers are likely to appeal any planning requirements for SuDS.

Three times as many properties in the UK are at high risk of surface-water flooding as from river and sea flooding

Equal focus needs to be placed on retrofitting effective solutions for existing residential areas too. This should include dissuading residents from paving over front gardens for car parking and introducing SuDs solutions such as rain planters to mitigate impermeable features such as paving or extensions. Long-term maintenance and management planning also need to be built into SuDS to ensure they remain effective.

iii. Enforcement of planned permeable paving and other SuDS features in new developments
While the South Downs Local Plan does stipulate use of SuDS, planning law in England still does not make it mandatory. Therefore, there is a strong sense that even where SuDS features are included in planning applications, they are not necessarily enforced when developments are being built.

The NPPF has been welcomed for introducing new, higher standards for SuDS in housing developments. However, plans to require mandatory implementary of

22 South Downs Local Plan Review - First Public Consultation (Regulation 18). Proposed New Allocations (South Downs National Park Authority 2025)
23 Report of the Lewes District Council Southern Water Panel (Lewes District Council 2024)
24 Tackling surface-water flooding in Brighton & Hove (Brighton & Hove City Council 2024)

SuDS for developments over 100m^2 under Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 had not progressed at the time of writing.

iv. Ensuring that new developments include sufficient water and sewage infrastructure to accommodate additional residents

The role and responsibilities of water companies in addressing sewage system capacity (especially when new housing developments are being considered) was one of the most heated topics of the Lewes Floods Anniversary public meeting. While it's agreed that any sewage infrastructure should be to a certain standard and resilience in order for a planning application to be approved, examples are given of planned developments in Lewes (such as the Old Malling Farm development) where this isn't the case.

v. Greater education and public awareness of personal responsibility to reduce surface-water flood risk, including:

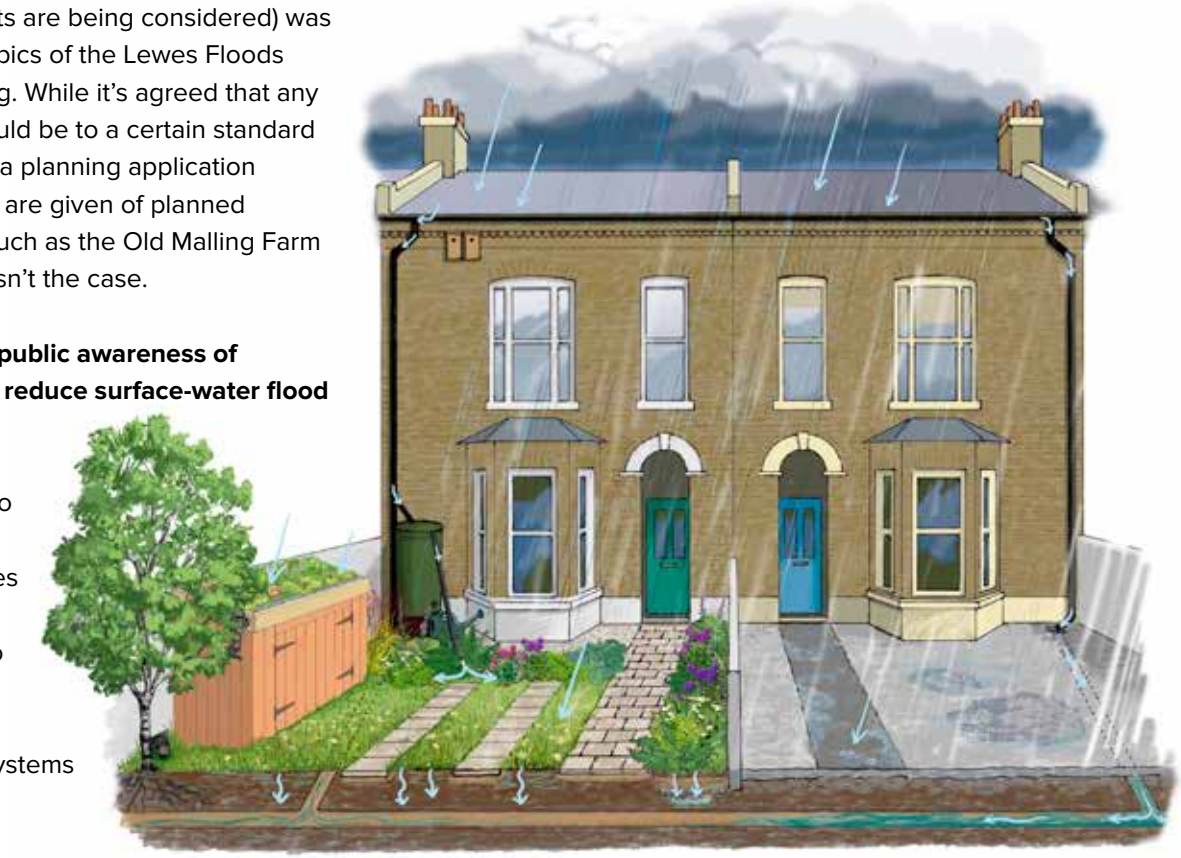
- Not using fully impermeable surfaces to pave driveways
- Diverting roof downpipes to water butts, planters, and garden irrigation, to reduce the amount of intense rainfall putting pressure on drainage systems
- Clear information on what not to put down sinks and toilets to reduce risk of blockages.

Flooding is everyone's business

Addressing surface-water flooding demands action by water companies and local authorities, especially to upgrade systems to be able to accommodate current and future capacity requirements. But there also needs to be encouragement for every household to play their part in easing the pressure on drainage systems, especially as rainfall intensifies. This includes all householders helping to 'store the storm' as Emma Holroyde at Flood Re Insurance points out (see quote on page 28).

It also means recognising, as Jonathan Hunter, Manager for Flood and Coastal Risk Management at the Environment Agency, observes, that 80 per cent of sewer flooding isn't caused by heavy rain but by what people put down the drains or toilet. Blockages could be substantially reduced if householders and businesses can be dissuaded from, for example, pouring fat and oil down the drain, and flushing wet wipes and sanitary items which clump together to block pipes.

Positive news is the strength of support among Lewes residents for measures to tackle surface-water flooding risk (see Lewes Floods Survey, page 31), including getting the community involved in rain garden creation and silt clearance, and sharing knowledge on the risk of impermeable surfaces on drives, gardens and other neighbourhood areas.



Permeable vs impermeable front gardens. Image: Lynda Durrant

Sustainable drainage initiatives in Lewes District

Wallands Primary School. Image: The Aquifer Partnership

Wallands Primary School Rainscape

The playground at Wallands Primary School in Lewes was a typical large flat area of hard, impermeable surfacing. During moderate rainfall large puddles sat on the surface, increasing volumes of run-off flowing down roads into residential areas. The Aquifer Partnership (TAP) partnered with the school and designers Robert Bray Associates to create an inspirational rainscape (pictured). Rainwater is directed from a large area of the school's roof space through a winding route of rain planters, permeable paving, a 'dry river' meandering through the playground, swales and ending in meadow basins seeded with locally-sourced wildflower mix. The planters and rain garden are filled with wildlife-attracting perennials. Plants have also been chosen for their sensory features.

Residents attest to the positive impact the scheme has had. Playground rainfall runoff that used to flow from the school grounds down Hill Road and Offham Road to the bottom of The Avenue has now greatly reduced, to the benefit of affected residents and those walking and driving in the area after intense rainfall.

Friends of Sutton Downs (FoSD) The Rain Garden Project

FoSD are a volunteer group restoring and enhancing the natural habitats around the grounds of the Downs Leisure Centre in Seaford. As part of their Growing Project, they developed a Rain Garden as a sustainable water strategy, which also contributes as a 'model' for sustainable water management adaptation of a public building. The Rain Garden captures rain from two very large roof sections of the Downs Leisure Centre into rain planters with overflow to a rain garden (a natural soakaway) and into water storage. It functions successfully by also enhancing the biodiversity, and the setting of its surrounding area, next to the Leisure Centre Café outdoor seating area. An experimental live rainwater monitoring system tracks the amount of water collected over time and demonstrates the real-world benefits of nature-based drainage, helping to reduce pressure on local sewers, cut flood risk, and support biodiversity.

www.friendsofsuttondowns.co.uk

LEWES FLOODS SURVEY – Surface-water flooding

Measures to manage surface-water flooding that local people would most like to see:

- Rain gardens and soakaways
- Green roofs and walls
- More permeable surfaces – and resident education about risks of hard surfacing
- Enforcement against 'sealed surfaces' – e.g. paving over gardens to create car parking
- Regular drain and gully clearance – with published clearing schedule
- Sewer backflow prevention (e.g. non-return toilet valves)
- Community/school involvement in silt removal/ rain garden creation.

Rainwater garden. Image: FoSD

Sustainable drainage initiatives in Lewes District

Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

To help manage surface-water flooding, OART has delivered more than 50 ‘rain gardens’ in Lewes across the Nevill Estate and public buildings. It has also worked with residents on the private road on the Cuilfail Estate to build rain gardens, remove kerb stones and re-camber the road to prevent water rushing down into the town (pictured). Retention ponds on the Winterbourne course at Ashcombe House are also helping to slow water entering the town.

Dropped kerbs to manage surface water on the Cuilfail Estate, Lewes. Image: OART

Legacy of the floods

Flood Re: Making flood insurance affordable

Flood Re is a joint initiative between the UK insurance industry and government to provide affordable home insurance for high-flood-risk homes, in response to the devastating floods that hit the UK in both 2000 and 2007.

Insurers, who pay an annual levy into the scheme, can choose which homes they reinsure via the Flood Re scheme (and which ones they choose to insure themselves). Since the scheme was launched in 2016, the percentage of homes at high flood risk that can get insurance has leapt from 9% to 98%.

Flood Re also enables insured homes that have been flooded to be reimbursed up to £10,000 for installing features to make the property more flood-resilient in the future.

However, Flood Re isn’t intended as a forever solution. The scheme is scheduled to end in 2039 in order to push insurers to develop a functioning flood-risk market. Also, the scheme will only underwrite homes built before 1 January 2009 – the logic being that building regulations after this date mean new homes should be reasonably flood-resilient or not sited in a place of high flood risk.

This means that very few of the 600 new homes built in Lewes since 2000 and none of the 780 new homes planned to be built on the floodplain can be underwritten by Flood Re. This leaves insurers themselves to decide whether or not to take on the risk, leading to substantially higher insurance premiums for homes on the floodplain compared to homes sited outside it..
floodre.co.uk

Address surface-water flooding risk

Flood risk map of Lewes. Image: Abbie Stanton

Comment

As pressure grows on Lewes to house an ever-denser population and extreme rainfall becomes more common, surface-water flooding will be a growing risk for residents. To address this, funding for infrastructure and public education needs to be a priority. New development should only be permitted where it entails adequate investment in drainage and sewer systems to accommodate additional population.

A number of laudable sustainable drainage initiatives have been implemented in Lewes and other parts of Sussex. But these are mostly grant-funded, with work often carried out by volunteers. Large-scale strategic funding is needed for joined-up and comprehensive interventions, including to research and deliver solutions to specific issues, such as the persistent surface water flooding at Nevill Green.

Since 2021, the government's Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme has allocated £150 million to 25 local areas in England to research, test and implement actions to improve their resilience to flooding and coastal erosion[25]. One beneficiary has been the Blue Heart project in Eastbourne and Wealden which includes a programme to install SuDS in more than 20 schools alongside intensive, data-led local flood modelling[26]. We hope this type of funding can be scaled up to support many more communities.

Another issue is just how many roles and responsibilities relating to surface-water flooding fall between different agencies. A joined-up approach involving the highways and planning authorities, water companies, and, where relevant, the Environment Agency is needed. Hopefully this can be addressed as part of local government reorganisation in Sussex, as well as large-scale strategic funding to tackle surface-water flooding risk.

25 Flood and coastal innovation programmes - GOV.UK
26 SuDS for Schools - Blue Heart: https://www.blueheart.org.uk/suds-for-schools

3. Enable natural flood management at scale

KEY POINTS

- The role of nature interventions to slow and store water in the landscape is increasingly recognised
- Pioneering programmes across the Ouse catchment are estimated to help store an extra 130 million litres of water during intense rainfall events
- Systemic barriers need to be dismantled to scale up natural flood management.

"We have delivered a load of projects on the Ouse over the past 15 years to make it more resilient. There's a lot of good stuff going on but we need more of it... It's not a lack of trying – it's about smoothing out the system."

Peter King, Director, Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

Sussex has been a pioneer in natural flood management (NFM). Starting in 2012, Sussex Wildlife Trust and other local bodies initiated the Sussex Flow Initiative to create features such as leaky dams, hedgerows, and floodplain scrapes to slow and store water while also benefiting wildlife and sequestering carbon.

In 2023, this was superseded by the Wilder Ouse Project which includes natural flood management and river restoration as part of a wider nature recovery strategy. The Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust (OART) has also been highly active in NFM initiatives both within NFM focused programmes (Ouse Natural Flood Management Initiative) and their wider work to restore natural river processes – see Graphics 9 and 10.

Once radical as flood risk mitigation, natural flood management is entering the mainstream. The latest Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) funding policy issued by DEFRA acknowledges NFM's "strong role" in reducing flood risk while also delivering multiple benefits to the environment, people and communities through improving biodiversity[27].

This includes the role of land and soil management. As well as storing carbon effectively, healthy soils comprising a high level of organic matter act as a natural sponge, absorbing, storing and slowing surface run-off, directly decreasing the risk of flooding downstream.

LEWES FLOODS SURVEY – Natural flood management

Nature-based flood management measures that local people would most like to see:

- Upstream tree and vegetation planting to absorb water
- Restoration of floodplains and water meadows, ditches and other measures to hold water
- Restoration of river meanders ("wiggles") to slow river flow
- Introducing beavers to the Ouse catchment for dam-building.

Greater government funding

The new FCERM policy has established a strategic objective for at least 4 per cent of investment over the next 10 years to be directed to natural flood management, which equates to at least £300 million over the period. This is an unprecedented level of funding for NFM – but it is a fraction of the £4.2 billion that the new UK Government Resilience Action Plan has allocated to 'flood and coastal erosion resilience' over 2026-29[28]. That highlights one of the challenges that natural flood management practitioners face: how to deliver the scale of intervention needed to have the greatest impact at times of extreme flood risk?

27 Flood and coastal erosion risk management funding policy (DEFRA 2025), p18
28 Policy paper: UK Government Resilience Action Plan (HTML) (Cabinet Office, UK Government: Gov.UK 2025)

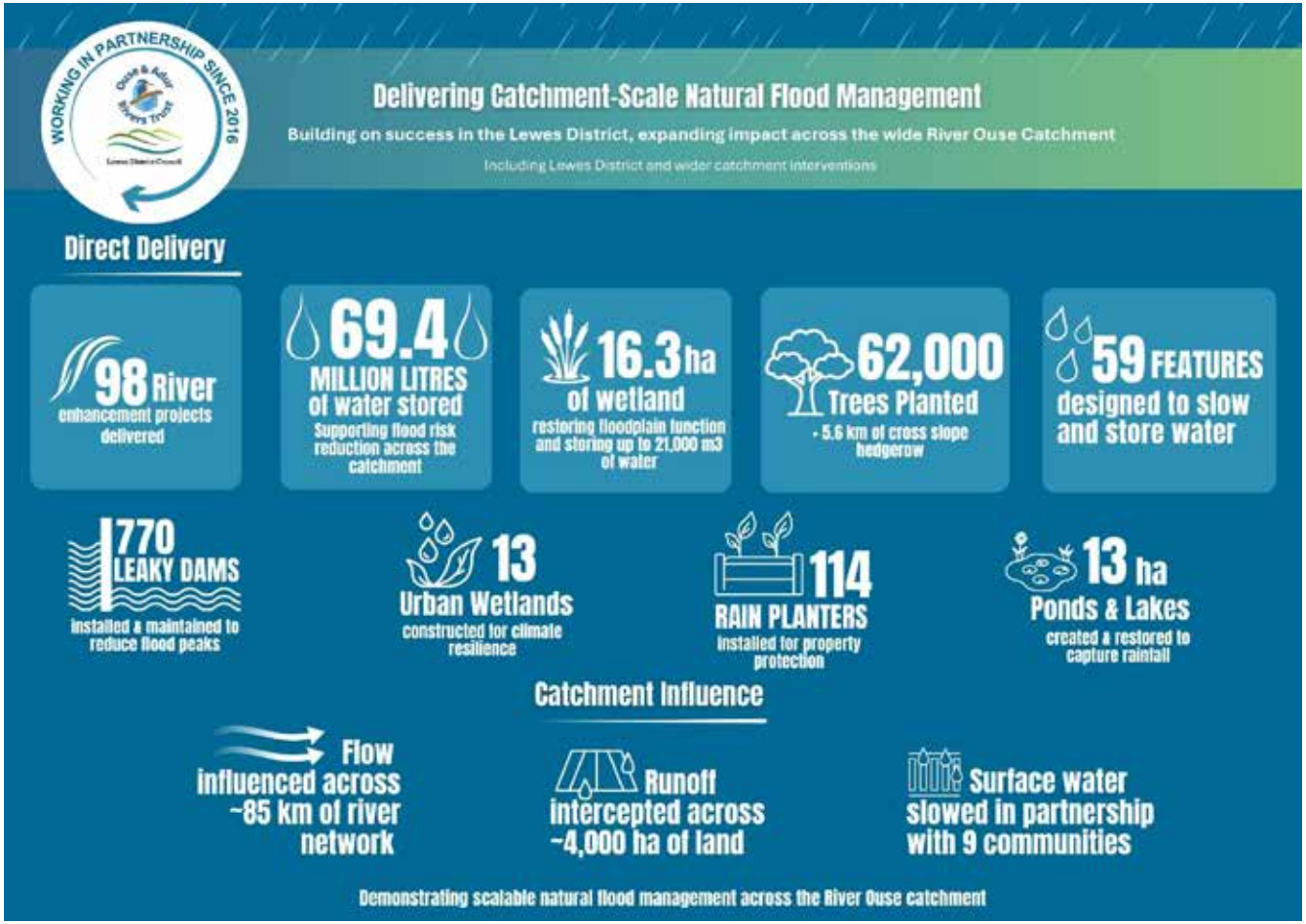
Enable natural flood management at scale

Impact of natural flood management in and around Lewes

It's estimated that the nature-based solutions delivered by Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust across the Ouse catchment are storing 69.4 million litres of water, with those delivered in partnership with Lewes District Council through the Lower Ouse Natural Flood Management Project accounting for close to 22 million litres of this. Meanwhile the Wilder Ouse Project led by Sussex Wildlife Trust estimates its interventions are storing 59 million litres of water per rainfall event[29].

So through projects in partnership, around 130 million litres of additional water storage to help manage heavy rainfall events have been created across the Ouse catchment. To put that in context, the Lewes floods of 2000 saw peak flows of more than 200,000 litres per second[30] through the centre of Lewes (against the river's normal capacity of 170,000 litres per second) In other words, 1 million litres of excess water were flowing under Cliffe Bridge every 30 seconds.

Had all these NFM measures been in place across the Ouse catchment in 2000, they certainly would have had an impact on the level of excess water that the river had to contend with. However, they wouldn't have prevented Lewes from flooding. It can be argued



Graphic 9: Impact of OART's Lower Ouse Natural Flood Management Project since 2016

Source: Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust/Lewes District Counci

29 Wilder Ouse 7 Years Delivery, April 2017-March 2025 – Sussex Wildlife Trust
30 Sussex Ouse: 12th October 2000 Flood Report (Binnie Black & Veatch: Environment Agency 2001), Section 7.2.8: "In Lewes, we believe that the peak flows were 'well in excess of 200m3/s' – compared to the river channel's design capacity of 170m3/s" [1 cubic metre (m3) = 1,000 litres]

that far more of this activity is needed to mitigate future – potentially far more extreme – weather events created by climate change. This especially needs to include work modelled by OART to reduce heavy flows from the River Uck catchment and the River Ouse catchment converging in Lewes at the same time – see Graphic 11 on page 39.

Dismantling barriers

There are many more actions that organisations involved in natural flood management would like to take across the River Ouse and its catchment. At the Lewes Floods Anniversary event, Peter King, Director at Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust (OART), identified systemic barriers that need to be dismantled to enable natural flood management and other landscape resilience measures to be implemented at the scale and pace that OART and others would like to see (and that the threat of extreme weather now requires):

Funding people – The teams allocated to deliver NFM projects are often tiny. OART is able to allocate just three people to work on the River Ouse, for example. “We have delivered 80 projects across Lewes District in the past eight years. Imagine what we could do if we had twice as many staff?” says King.

Consents and permissions – Currently nature restoration and landscape resilience projects have to go through the same planning process as housing development, which can severely impede progress.

For example, the award-winning Cockshut Stream Restoration programme to the south of Lewes took 4.5 years to complete – of which two years was taken up securing planning approval, according to King. More efficient approval processes are needed.

Graphic 10: How the Wilder Ouse project is helping to store 59 million litres of water per rainfall event
Source: Wilder Ouse – Sussex Wildlife Trust, based on delivery April 2017-March 2025

Burden of proof – Another brake on progress is the pressure to demonstrate that an intervention will work, says King. “We need to get away from saying ‘Let’s do a pilot study and monitor it for 10 years before we make any decisions’. It’s been proven globally that landscape resilience works – we just need to get on and deliver it.”

Locally, action is being taken to address these barriers. The South Downs National Park is engaging with central government to update national park legislation to take specific account of climate change in planning policy. It has also kicked off a workstream called ‘Planning for Nature’ to allow NFM features to be implemented more easily.

Nationally, Flood Re (see page 32) says it is working with the Environment Agency to promote far greater use of natural flood management by homeowners, including sponsoring a ‘flood-resilient garden’ at the Chelsea Flower Show. The potential for natural flood management to improve insurance premiums could be the incentive homeowners need.

Natural flood management initiatives along the Ouse

Sussex Flow Initiative (2012-2023)

A pioneering partnership between the Woodland Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Environment Agency, supported by Lewes District Council (the first district council in the country to support natural flood management).

Working with landowners, local people and others, the Sussex Flow Initiative looked to introduce natural features to slow and store water in the landscape and to help reduce flood peaks, as well as providing multiple other benefits such as improving biodiversity and storing carbon.

Cat Fuller, Environment Agency. Image: Abbie Stanton

Environment Agency. Image: Abbie Stanton

Wilder Ouse (2023 onwards)

A collaborative project by the same partnership groups as the Sussex Flow Initiative, Wilder Ouse aims not only to slow and store water but also to create a robust nature recovery network across the whole Ouse catchment. Working with landowners, farmers, communities, parish councils and other organisations, its goals are to restore ecological connectivity, ecosystem function and climate resilience through nature-based solutions.
sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk

Lower Ouse Natural Flood Management Project

A partnership between Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust and Lewes District Council since 2016 has been involved in a wide range of activities from creating swales and leaky dams to rain gardens and whole wetlands. Major projects around Lewes include:

Landport Brooks Restoration Project

This aims to restore the Landport Brooks area of Lewes to a floodplain meadow and grazing habitat. Planned work includes restoring historical ditches and enhancing the marsh landscape by creating shallow scrapes that can hold water, benefiting a variety of wildlife and restoring habitats for amphibians[31].

The Landport Brooks site. Image: Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

The new Cockshut wetland habitat. Image: Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

Cockshut Stream Restoration Project

The Cockshut is a 3km-long chalk stream that flows from springs at the foot of the South Downs near Kingston before joining the River Ouse and flowing out to sea. The project[32] realigned the stream by removing man-made static channels and diverting what had become largely stagnant water into a new channel flowing through 6.8 hectares of floodplain. This has recreated a wetland habitat that has attracted swans and geese, but also rarer species, such as kingfishers, snipe, egrets and herons, and also toads, sticklebacks, eels, grass snakes and varied species of dragonfly.

The reserve helps with flood management and carbon storage, but also allows the stream to flow naturally, with its native plants and wildlife protected. With an additional 16,000m^3 of water storage available within the footprint of the site, it is estimated to reduce peak flows reaching Lewes by up to 90 minutes.
Cockshutstream.org

31 Project partners are Lewes District Council and the Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, with funding from LDC and South Downs National Park's Community Infrastructure Levy
32 Project partners were Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, Lewes District Council, Lewes Railway Land Wildlife Trust, Veolia Environmental Trust and the South Downs National Park Authority

Enable natural flood management at scale

Comment

Thanks to organisations such as Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust and Sussex Wildlife Trust, together with the pioneering support of Lewes District Council, the Ouse catchment has benefited from the work of some of the most experienced and pioneering practitioners in natural flood management. We are confident there is strong local political will to expand these initiatives further.

But there is also perhaps a need to quantify the impact of such measures. Around 130 million litres of additional water storage have been created to date by natural flood management interventions across the Ouse catchment. Is it time to determine, with data-led evidence, the full scale of natural flood management needed to mitigate extreme rainfall events that (as in the floods of October 2000) can see 1 million litres of excess water flowing under Cliffe Bridge in Lewes every 30 seconds?

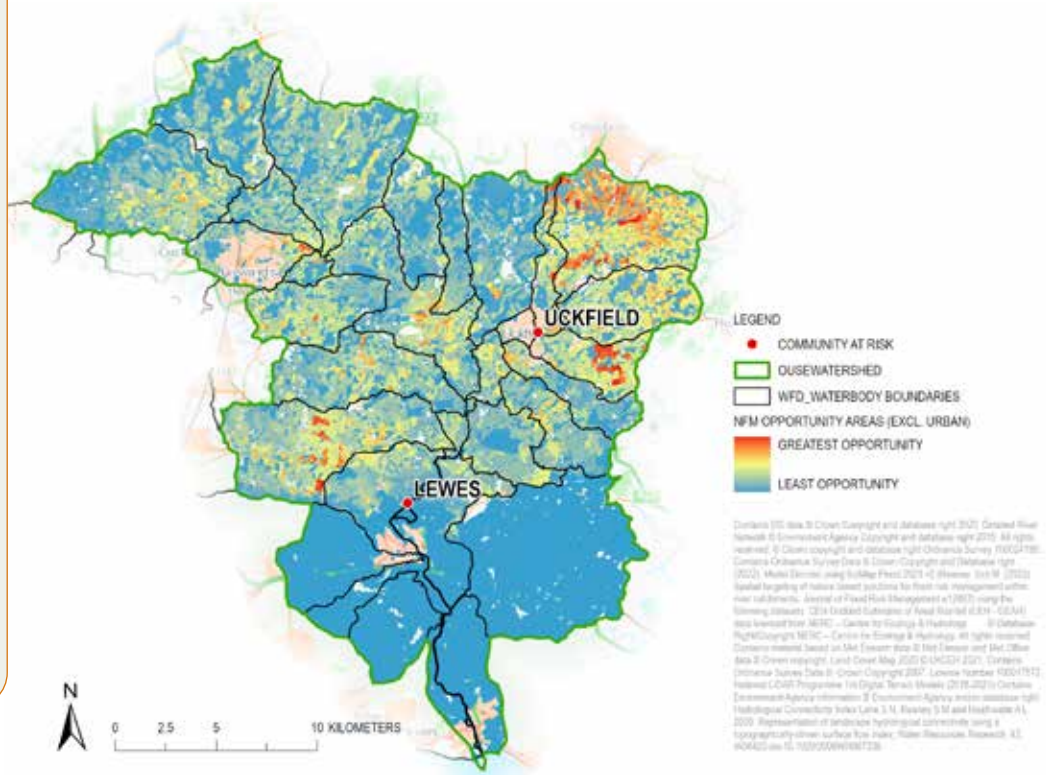
At a time of climate change, it is also vital to remember that actions taken for natural flood management also support natural drought management, as well as providing many other co-benefits for nature and people, and often at lower cost than traditional hard flood-defence engineering.

The additional £30 million a year allocated nationally to natural flood management by DEFRA's Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management funding policy is very welcome. But with 100 river catchments in England and Wales, that equates to £300,000 a year per river. OART estimate £250,000 a year is needed on an ongoing basis to implement their current NFM project pipeline in Lewes District alone.

We hope a much more sizeable proportion of central funding can be allocated to allow nature-based measures to realise the full scale and breadth of impact they can deliver.

Graphic 11: Where is natural flood management most effective for Lewes?
Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust has used catchment data and its own information to model where natural flood management is most effective to protect Uckfield and Lewes. As the parts of the map shaded red to yellow show below, a lot of the work to protect Lewes primarily has to take place in the upper areas of the River Uck catchment.

Implementing natural flood management measures above Uckfield can slow fast-moving water coming off the High Weald so it doesn't converge with slower-moving flows in lowland areas at the same time. In this way, say OART, it becomes more possible to separate flood peaks in Lewes into two to three smaller and more manageable ones.



Source: Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust

4. Strengthen flood preparedness and the community response

KEY POINTS

- The national and regional emergency response framework for flooding has been transformed since 2000 but local residents' focus has understandably waned
- A programme of flood-risk awareness, preparedness and response is needed, especially to support Lewes' most at-risk residents and businesses
- But flood preparedness planning must avoid becoming too onerous for local residents to maintain.

"We have traditionally focused our approach to flooding in England on the construction of barriers, walls and flood reservoirs...But we cannot eliminate all risk. We all have a role to play in making ourselves and our homes and businesses more resilient to the current and growing threat from flooding."

Cat Fuller, Area Director for Solent & the South Downs, Environment Agency

Given that it's been over 25 years since the last major flood incident in Lewes, it's understandable that the issue isn't a major concern for a lot of residents. But community-wide preparedness is an essential element of flood resilience. So how can local people be effectively engaged when they have so many other priorities in their lives?

At the Lewes Floods Anniversary events, we learned how the national emergency response to flooding and other major incidents has been transformed over the past two decades (see Appendix 1 – Legacy of the Lewes Floods).

Maintaining open communication with residents was one of the key recommendations of the report created after the 2000 Lewes Floods – see Appendix 2. But the focus on flood response and defence among local residents has inevitably lost momentum. The Lewes Flood Action Group was disbanded around 2017. A community Lewes flood warden scheme also failed to gain traction.

Resilience policy

Collectively, the residents of a town have ultra-local knowledge, connectedness and resources that are invaluable in emergency situations. The UK government has made action by individuals, businesses and civil society central to its new national Resilience Action Plan[33]. As part of this it seeks better integration with voluntary, community and faith services (VCFS) to support resilience and emergency planning. In its draft Local Flood Risk Management Strategy for 2027-37, East Sussex County Council has made support for residents to engage with and manage their own flood risk one of its four core objectives[34].

Lewes is fortunate in having an extensive and thriving VCFS sector, including church groups, community food projects, environmental groups, neighbourhood associations, Bonfire societies and civic groups. Yet there is concern that the government is thrusting the burden of flood resilience onto private individuals at the same time as exposing more residents to direct flood risk through actions such as permitting conventional housing development on floodplains.

As the Lewes Floods Anniversary events have helped to bring the issue of flood risk to the front of the town's collective mind, there is a valuable opportunity for authorities and the local community to work together – both to see how households' vulnerability to flooding and other extreme weather events can be further reduced, and support the response and recovery process if the worst does occur. Flood and other climate change preparedness need to be high on the list of statutory duties of the new Sussex Mayor and the new unitary authorities created by local government reorganisation.

Specific questions also need to be asked about

33 The UK Government Resilience Action Plan: The UK's strategic approach to resilience (HM Government, July 2025)
34 Draft East Sussex Local Flood Risk Management Strategy 2027-2037 (July 2026)

logistical preparedness as they relate to the town now. For example, both fire stations serving Lewes still sit in the floodplain, and haven't found anywhere adequate to relocate to. During the 2000 floods, 186 people slept in emergency accommodation. The number of properties on the floodplain has grown substantially since then: has the number of beds and capacity for emergency accommodation also grown commensurately?

However, it's also important to acknowledge that, for many residents, flooding won't feel like a real danger until it is happening. With people facing so many other pressing priorities and concerns in their lives, any initiatives to improve flood preparedness need to be engaging, supportive and avoid becoming too onerous for local residents to maintain.

LEWES FLOODS SURVEY – Actions for homeowners

Flood preparedness support that local people would like to see:

- Information on tides, rainfall and real-time flood likelihood
- Support for people in making their homes flood resilient
- Linked-up community support points during floods
- List of trusted builders to use post-flood
- Help with insurance for vulnerable residents.

Comment

As we detailed earlier in this report, 600 more homes have been built on the floodplain in Lewes since the 2000 floods and a further 780 homes are allocated to sites on the floodplain. A structured and networked programme of flood-risk awareness, preparedness and response for local people is needed. This should involve councils, emergency services and the Environment Agency engaging directly with vulnerable residents and businesses, alongside relevant voluntary groups, providing frank and honest assessments of what has been done, what can be done and what the risks are for business as usual.

Drawing on the flood preparedness actions that local people have said they would like to see (left), this programme could include:

- **A flood risk awareness campaign** to actively encourage homeowners and businesses to check their river and surface water flood risk at the Environment Agency/Gov.UK site and sign up to Floodline alerts
- **Active provision of guidance for at-risk properties** on improving their flood resilience – for example the excellent 'Making your Home Flood Ready' directory (pictured right) produced by Flood Mary
- **Clear planning guidance on incorporating flood-resilient features** (such as flood doors and gates) into listed properties or those in conservation areas
- **The reformation of the Lewes Flood Action Group**, with a diversified body of representatives from councils, community groups, emergency and health services
- **Public awareness of protocols for response to flood events** – e.g. where designated rest/support centres would be, how affected residents would be able to access food and other essential items, what other support services would be activated.

The Environment Agency commissioned an independent review in 2025 into how the UK can accelerate practical and affordable flood resilience measures for homes and recover fast when floods do occur[35]. We look forward to seeing how that report's recommendations will translate into support and guidance for towns like Lewes.

Image: Flood Mary

35 Review published setting new course for mainstreaming property flood resilience (Environment Agency, DEFRA and Emma Hardy MP: Gov.UK 2025)

5. Rethink our relationship with water

KEY POINTS

- Reframing our relationship with water can provide resilience against both flood and drought
- Landowner collaboration, regenerative farming, connected biodiversity and using the townscape differently are all key
- New thinking can only be adopted if flood waters aren't contaminated by sewage and other pollutants.

"If we start to think more of a long-term landscape approach, we can start to think about different and exciting solutions that allow water to be part of things in a positive way. Rights of Rivers is a great way to start thinking about that."

Siôn McGeever, Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park

A lot of the focus of the Lewes Floods Anniversary discussions was on actions to reduce and defend against the risk of flooding in the town. But is it time to be even more radical in how we co-exist with rising sea levels and the impact of more extreme rainfall?

Dr Pete Sudbury suggested that it's time that we fundamentally change our relationship with water. "When a month's rain can fall in an hour or three to six months' rain in a weekend, you've got as much hope of controlling it as Canute," he says. "When enough water falls, anywhere can flood, so we need to work out how to allow water to permeate through our settlements as harmlessly as possible."

Designing in permeability

That could mean, says Sudbury, extending water management seamlessly across the boundaries from countryside to settlement and back out again. This follows the Chinese concept of 'sponge cities', which combine sustainable drainage and natural flood management on an ambitious scale – see panel on page 44.

However, as Dr Sudbury points out, this level of permeability isn't compatible with water that's full of sewage. Adopting such ambitious urban planning would require extensive collaboration with water companies to manage discharges better at times of intense rainfall. In this respect, it was welcome to hear from Siôn McGeever, Chief Executive of the South Downs National Park, about new legislation that requires water companies to work to further the purposes of the Park. It is intended that this will lead to closer partnerships between the Park and water companies to repair infrastructure, with a greater focus on investing in nature-based not just hard-engineered solutions.

Outside of urban areas, close collaboration is needed with landowners for agricultural land to be involved in this process. To this end, the Environment Agency has set up a rural resilience partnership with the National Farmers Union – both to help the farming community to be more resilient to flooding and to see how agricultural land can be deployed more effectively to help manage flood risk[36].

Regenerative farming – which aims to restore ecosystem health by focusing on soil regeneration, biodiversity, and water cycle improvement – is being practised in pockets across the Ouse catchment. This includes at Tablehurst Farm at Forest Row, Lovebrook in Kingston and across the Iford Estate (comprising Iford Farm, Swanborough Farm, Rise Farm and Houndean Farm). Expanding on these practices in a connected way (by adopting the same collaborative principles as initiatives like Weald to Waves – see next page) will be essential in delivering the network of resilience our region needs in times of both flood and drought.

36 Rural flood resilience partnership: 2024 to 2026 work plan (Environment Agency, UK Government: Gov.UK 2024)

Weald to Waves: Connecting nature across Sussex

Weald to Waves is a ground-breaking project working to establish a 100-mile wildlife corridor from the High Weald to the Sussex Coast. It encompasses over 20,000 hectares of contiguous habitat across East and West Sussex to boost biodiversity, capture carbon, enhance food production, and enrich the rural economy.

To do this work, Weald to Waves has attracted a growing network of farmers, land managers, councils, researchers, wildlife charities, schools, gardeners and community groups, pledging land and green space to reconnect habitats and create a resilient ecosystem for wildlife. The project also includes a strong natural flood management focus, where appropriate, to slow, store and filter water.

The Weald to Waves corridor is growing all the time as more people and organisations get involved, and the gaps between pledged land get smaller. While the project necessarily has to focus its finite resources on its defined 100-mile corridor, are there ways that its highly-collaborative approach could be more widely adopted to deliver benefits, including flood management, right across the Ouse catchment?
wealdtowaves.co.uk

Graphic 12: Route of the Weald to Waves 100-mile wildlife corridor *Image: Weald to Waves*

Sponge Cities – a new urban planning model

China's 'Sponge City' initiative is an urban planning model proposed by landscape architect and urban planner Kongjian Yu. Based on longstanding Chinese irrigation practices, it uses hydro-ecological 'green' infrastructure, such as rain gardens, permeable pavements, wetlands, and parks, to absorb, store, purify, and reuse rainwater.

By mimicking natural water cycles and allowing water to linger, rather than relying solely on centralised concrete drainage systems to take water away, sponge cities help to tackle urban flooding and water pollution, but also drought and extreme heat.

More than 70 cities across China are estimated to have implemented sponge city initiatives since the country incorporated the idea into national urban planning policy in 2015[37]. Centres beyond China adopting or exploring a sponge city approach include Auckland, Singapore, Berlin and Copenhagen (pictured).

37 Why turning cities into 'sponges' could help fight flooding (Christy Choi: CNN 2024)

Karen Blixens Square at the University of Copenhagen. Bicycle shelters and plant beds are built to retain water. Image credit: Cobe

Using the townscape differently

For Jonathan Hunter at the Environment Agency, there are very practical ways the townscape of Lewes could be used to co-exist better with water. Using public spaces for dual purposes and managing rainwater where it lands needs to be explored more. Malling Field is a recreation pitch but also acts as a pond when needed, for example. "We need to be more creative in the future about how we imagine our town so it's a better place to live and more resilient in future years," Hunter says.

Learning to live with water

A fundamental question posed by Matthew Bird, a director of Love Our Ouse, is the extent to which we have a right to determine the flow of the river. This is one of the issues that the pioneering Rights of Rivers charter (see page 45) looks to address.

"We can't just see the river as something we need to contain and constrain, because we are interdependent with and co-dependent on it," says Bird. "The health of our communities relies on us realising that. If we ignore the river, pollute it, build on its floodplains and contain it – then with the growing challenges of climate change, it's not going to go well.

"We are going to have to learn to live with water to some extent and accept that flooding will happen and learn how to adapt."

Rethink our relationship with water

Rights of Rivers

The pioneering Charter of Rights for the River Ouse, championed by local community environmental group Love Our Ouse, came out of the concept of Rights of Nature. The concept posits that nature should be recognised as existing on its own terms and have the same kind of legal rights that Human Rights give to people (and even to corporations).

Working with local people up and down the Ouse catchment, ecologists, environmental lawyers and others, Love Our Ouse drafted a charter laying out the river's fundamental rights and people's duties and responsibilities to uphold them. Eight rights are set out in the Charter. These include 'The Right to flow', including the right to follow natural flow patterns, and 'The Right to perform essential natural functions within the river catchment', such as flooding.

In early 2023, Lewes District Council was the first council in England to pass a motion seeking to declare a Rights of River Charter for the Ouse, putting it on course to be one of the very first rivers in England to be granted legal rights. Since the motion to LDC in 2023, other river rights initiatives have started across the UK and a national River Rights Network has been established.

The Charter of Rights for the River Ouse is still on its journey to becoming legally binding. However, it could have significant influence on flood management in the future – directing strategy towards solutions that work with, rather than constrain, the river's natural processes.
loveourouse.org/rights-of-rivers

View of River Ouse from Chapel Hill, Lewes. Image: Love Our Ouse

Zane Gbangbola. Image: Nicole Lawler

Zane's Law: flood and contamination

Sewage and chemicals from industrial sites aren't the only contaminant threats at times of flooding. In February 2024, Lewes District Council became the first local authority in England to formally support 'Zane's Law', a campaign calling for stricter regulations on and auditing of contaminated land, such as former landfills.

The campaign is named after seven-year-old Zane Gbangbola, who died in 2014 from toxic hydrogen cyanide gas released from a flooded landfill site into his home in Chertsey, Surrey, following severe flooding on the River Thames. The law recognises the urgent need for action on old landfill sites, especially as flood risks increase. Lewes Town Council has commissioned an Initial Site Risk and Responsibility Audit to identify and assess the potential impacts of historic landfill sites within the town boundary. A public inquiry into Zane's death was announced in July 2026.
zaneslaw.co.uk

Comment

Making space for water while also addressing demands for more housing and economic infrastructure is a challenge. This is especially true in a town as geographically constrained as Lewes and which also has a large stock of historic and listed buildings. But as other places around the world have shown, with bold thinking that works with nature, solutions are possible.

This needs to include far greater efforts at enforcement of and by water companies to ensure waters aren't polluted by sewage (and efforts by relevant authorities to address the potentially fatal risks created when contaminated land floods – see 'Zane's Law', left). The Ham Lane sewage pumping station in Lewes has the second-worst record for discharging untreated sewage in the whole of the Southern Water operational area[38]. In March 2025 it discharged untreated sewage into the River Ouse continuously for 80% of the whole month, despite being the driest March for 60 years. While the SDNPA's initiative to work more closely with the water companies to restore and improve infrastructure is welcome, it is understandable that cynicism over the water companies' commitment to change remains.

Hard questions about the true extent of potential flooding in and around Lewes over coming decades need to be asked now to ensure timely response and sufficiently ambitious adaptation.

38 Source: Environment Agency – Event Duration Monitoring Storm Overflows 2023

Conclusions and recommendations

5

Conclusion: An action plan for the future

Appendix 1: Legacy of the Lewes floods

i. Transforming the emergency response

ii. A new mental health protocol

Appendix 2: Recommendations of the 'Sussex Ouse: 12th October 2000 Flood Report'

Appendix 3: Summary findings from the 'Operation Harvey' Emergency Exercise

Appendix 4: Findings of the Lewes Floods Survey 2025

Conclusion: An action plan for the future

"Responsibility for climate adaptation is going to sit with a Sussex-wide Mayor, so retaining local knowledge is going to be really important. Funding is much more stretched. But there is also an opportunity to have a better framework for how we do this work."
Emily O'Brien – Cabinet Lead for Climate, Nature and Food Systems, Lewes District Council

Immediate recommended actions

- Reinstate the Lewes Flood Action Group to deliver a town-wide programme of flood preparedness
- Launch a Surface Water Flooding Awareness & Action Campaign
- Lobby the South Downs National Park to allow only fully flood-adaptable new development on the floodplain.

More than 25 years have elapsed since Lewes' last severe flood. Given the historic frequency of river flooding on the Ouse every 30-40 years, the potential for future flood events cannot be ignored.

Many efforts to address flood risk have taken place in Lewes and across the catchment of the River Ouse over the past two decades. Tens of millions of litres of rainfall are being stored and slowed by natural flood management interventions. Improved river defences have reduced flood risk in in certain areas that were inundated in the 2000 floods. But weighed against these positive actions are the lack of new flood defences in certain high-risk parts of town, the increased flood risks and sea level rise created by climate change, the planning pressures to keep siting new homes in areas of flood risk, and the impact of development and a denser population on our ageing drain and sewer systems.

In this report we've explored five thematic areas for flood action that arose at the Lewes Floods Anniversary events. Processing all the ideas, concerns and insights that have come out of this process, recommended priorities for action are:

1. Engage the town on community preparedness

If flooding in Lewes follows its historic 30-40 year pattern, then it's essential to improve preparedness and resilience as a matter of urgency. This is especially the case as many residents living in places of high flood risk weren't living in the town in 2000 and may be completely unaware of the seriousness of the risk it can cause. We have detailed in Section 4 what specific action this could involve. In the first instance, the Lewes Flood Action Group needs to be resurrected to ensure that a diverse and inclusive cross-section of the town – including those residents and businesses at greatest risk – can determine how a programme of action might be delivered. This can draw on the support and training that East Sussex County Council had said it intends to provide to at-risk communities setting up their own flood action groups[39]. Further periodic 'Flood Public Meetings' should also be arranged so that lessons learnt from the 2025 Flood Anniversary events are carried forward.

2. Only allow fully flood-adaptable development on the floodplain

As a town situated on a floodplain, how land is used within Lewes (and across the Ouse catchment) is critical both to the level of flood risk we face and to being able to withstand the impacts of flooding when it does happen. We believe it is time to ask whether we should continue to build on the floodplain at all. If we do, then – as Friends of Lewes have stipulated in their new policy – development should be fully adaptable to flooding and not simply rely on physical defences to push flooding elsewhere.

This needs to be addressed in key planning documents such as the South Downs Local Plan and through the accompanying Lewes Masterplan being developed through the newly established Lewes

39 Draft East Sussex Local Flood Risk Management Strategy 2027-2037 (July 2026)

Planning Group. The new plans for facilities at Pells Pool profiled in Part 1 incorporate – albeit on a modest scale – a level of flood consideration unprecedented in the town: should other developments in areas of high flood risk follow suit?

3. Launch a coordinated campaign to address surface-water flooding

Many residents may still only associate flood risk with river flooding and may not appreciate the risk that surface flooding poses, including to homes well away from the river. A coordinated town-wide campaign on actions that homeowners can take to reduce pressures on sewers and drains as detailed in Part 2 can be integrated with initiatives to increase nature-based solutions such as rain gardens and rain planters throughout the town.

But it needs to be acknowledged that residents may only feel compelled to act if councils and water companies play their part too. A clearly publicised programme of gully clearance, and ongoing pressure on Southern Water and others to upgrade and maintain sewer systems, have to be part of the mix. This should include a 'task and finish' group, convened by Lewes District Council, East Sussex County Council and Southern Water, to resolve the ongoing problems of surface water and sewer flooding at Nevill Green. Technical studies are needed to assess the current sewer capacities and the impact of run-off from new hard surfaces and misconnections; a plan of action then needs to be put into place to resolve persistent flooding.

The Lego flood house, Blue Heart. Image: Abbie Stanton

4. Put nature at the centre of flood strategy and quantify the scale of natural water storage needed

A recurring theme throughout this report is the fundamental role that nature plays in mitigating and managing flood risk – from intentional natural flood management (NFM) interventions to the rise of regenerative farming and biodiversity networking across the Ouse catchment. Awareness, acknowledgement and support for all of these activities and their critical role in flood management strategy need to be strengthened. This includes addressing the barriers to adopting NFM at scale that Peter King of OART identified in Part 3. There is also a need to work with Ouse & Adur Rivers Trust, Sussex Wildlife Trust and agencies to quantify the true scale of water storage required by NFM and other measures across the Ouse catchment, in order to have as much impact as possible during future extreme rainfall events.

Equally, there needs to be a perception shift about the river itself: not seeing it purely as something we need to be defended from (or a resource to extract from) but a living entity that we exist alongside. The pioneering Rights of Rivers charter for the Ouse is helping to drive this dialogue. At a time of climate change, when we cannot be sure what the impact of rising sea levels and more extreme weather will be on our town over the next 50 or 100 years, we need new and bold thinking in order to co-exist with our changing landscape and put nature at the heart of decision-making.

5. Lobby to make flood management a statutory duty for the incoming Sussex Mayor

Devolution and the creation of a mayoral authority for the whole of Sussex presents an opportunity for truly ambitious and coordinated action on flood risk mitigation and resilience across the region. At the time of writing, however, environment and climate sit within the defined 'areas of competence' for Mayoral Strategic Authorities, but there is no specific statutory duty to act on flood risk or climate resilience.

Concerted effort is needed by all stakeholders (residents, councillors, environmental organisations etc) to ensure the new Mayor commits to make flood action a priority. With the absorption of Lewes District Council into a new larger unitary authority, mechanisms will need to be in place to ensure any strategy for flood action continues to be informed by ultra-local knowledge such as a commitment to regular convening of local flood/climate action groups.

6. Integrate flood management into a wider climate change adaptation programme

At a time of climate change, the threats of flood and drought are two sides of the same coin. As we have observed in this report, the nature-based measures that are beneficial for mitigating excess water in the landscape also play a key role in retaining water when it is scarce. Likewise, time and effort spent preparing Lewes for flood can be most efficiently used by also preparing the town for extreme heat, water scarcity and drought. An analysis of Lewes's state of climate change adaptation and preparedness has been instigated by Matthew Bird in his capacity as a climate action consultant, with support from Lewes District Council and the South Downs National Park. Future flood actions need to integrate with that work. It is also vital to remember that, alongside concerns about the impact of flood on housing and development, there are far wider potential impacts on businesses, arable farms and livestock and on wildlife. Downstream impacts of agrarian, fossil fuel and other chemical pollutants on marine ecosystems also need to be addressed

Any attempts at mitigation and adaptation to extreme weather events – from flooding to heatwaves – must take this wider perspective, or we risk making decisions with many unforeseen consequences.

7. Make flood action collaborative, catchment-wide and multi-generational

One of the biggest takeaways from the Lewes Flood Anniversary events and discussions is that flood risk management in Lewes is a shared responsibility.

Moreover, managing flood risk in Lewes can only happen by managing it right across the Ouse catchment. The recommendations in this report demand collaborative action between communities, councils, statutory agencies and partners at all levels in Sussex with investment in a robust evidence-based process to inform the best solutions.

Finally, it is vital to remember who is going to be most affected by flooding and other impacts of climate change in the future. If plans for action are to get long-term traction, our town's younger generations need to play a central role in their creation.

An exemplar town

The Environment Agency's most recent National Flood Risk Assessment shows that 6.3 million properties in England are in areas at risk of flooding, from rivers, the sea or surface water. With climate change, the total number could increase to 8 million by mid-century – or around one in four properties[40].

Lewes has an opportunity to be an exemplar of how towns can respond to these threats, while still addressing the need for more housing and other infrastructure to support a growing population, jobs and tourism. We hope that the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary events together with this report mark the start of that journey.

40 National assessment of flood and coastal erosion risk in England 2024 (Environment Agency, UK Government: Gov.UK 2025)

1 in 4 properties in England will be in areas at risk of flooding from rivers and the sea or surface water by mid-century.

Source: Environment Agency

Love Our Ouse. Image: Abbie Stanton

Flood Re. Image: Abbie Stanton

Appendix 1: Legacy of the Lewes floods

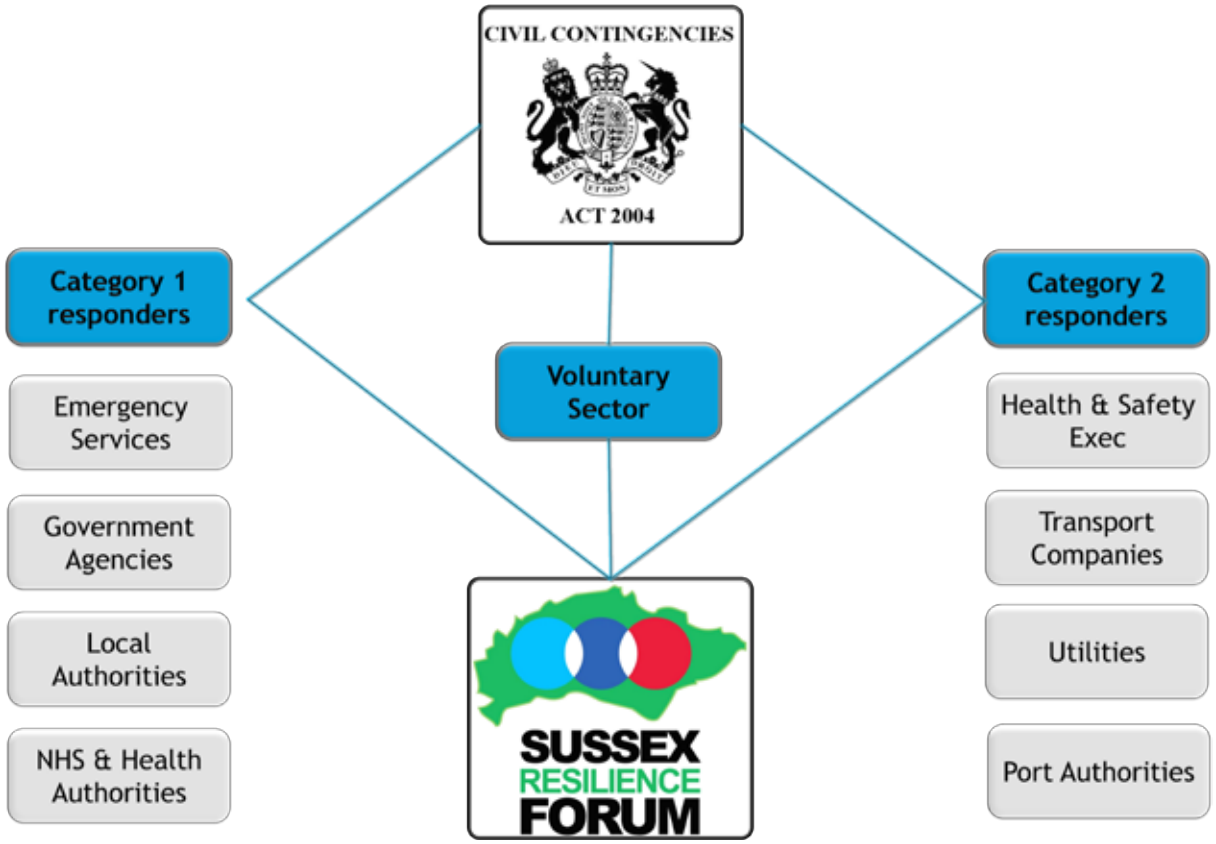
i. Transforming the emergency response

A positive development that was frequently mentioned in the Lewes Floods 25th Anniversary discussions is the extent to which the emergency response has evolved, directly in response to the events of 2000, to help ensure a nationally coordinated and supported approach.

In 2000, the emergency response to the Lewes Floods (while being widely praised for being robust and timely) was still modelled on the 1948 Civil Defence Act. No nationally agreed approach for local authorities to plan, train and co-ordinate for emergencies was in place, and there was a strong reliance on voluntary arrangements.

However, national crises such as the floods in 2000 and also 2007, the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, and the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks triggered a series of legislation and initiatives to transform how agencies work together during and after a major incident. Key legislation and initiatives highlighted by our panellists that have specifically improved flood response include:

Civil Contingencies Act
Introduced in 2004, the CCA for the first time ever provided a national legislative multi-agency framework for responding to emergencies. This included creating two categories of responder in the event of flood or other emergency – see Graphic 13 – and the creation of Local Resilience Forums (see below) around the country to plan and train for and respond to incidents.



Graphic 13: The emergency response framework for Sussex *Source: East Sussex County Council*

Flood Rescue Concept of Operations (FRCO)
Originated after floods in England in summer 2007 and updated in 2012 and 2019, DEFRA's FRCO sets out the processes for managing and maintaining flood rescue capability. As well as providing guidance on how emergency and voluntary sectors should train and respond to flood rescue, it details the national coordination of flood rescue assets in England to help ensure that resources can be directed swiftly to affected areas.

Local Resilience Forums
The creation of Local Resilience Forums was a requirement of the Civil Contingencies Act. Formed in police force areas across the UK, LRFs are responsible for coordinating multi-agency activity, drawing on both Category 1 and 2 responders and supporting partners such as military and voluntary organisations.

Sussex Resilience Forum is a partnership of responders in East and West Sussex hosted by Sussex Police. It is responsible for maintaining a range of Sussex Resilience Plans including an overarching Sussex Flood Plan, plus site-specific flood plans, including one for Lewes. The Forum has various sub-groups including a Sussex Warning & Informing Group to coordinate warning of potential major incidents such as imminent flooding. Also, a SRF Recovery Plan ensures that support and action continue well after the immediate emergency response.

In spring 2025, Lewes was chosen to host Operation Harvey, a major one-day training exercise led by Sussex Resilience Forum specifically to test systems and protocols for flood response, involving Category 1 and 2 responders – see Appendix 3.

Impact on responsiveness
Panellists at the Lewes Floods Anniversary talks agreed that these and other initiatives have been transformative. "Now, if we know flooding is imminent, we can push a button and draw resources towards us. There are 149 national teams we can call on. Within an hour we can have colleagues from Kent, Surrey and West Sussex with us," says David Washington, Station Manager at Lewes Fire Station during the 2000 floods. "Within 48 hours, we can have teams responding from Manchester and North Wales. All teams work to exactly the same procedures, and the national system kicks in to support the local response."

East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service. Image: Abbie Stanton

A future focus on flood resilience
The next review of the Civil Contingencies Act, which is to be completed in 2027, is expected to take extensive account of climate change and extreme weather events. Summer 2025 also saw the publication of the first UK Government Resilience Action Plan which, alongside pandemics, cyber-attacks and civil emergencies, specifically addresses resilience against flooding, with £4.2 billion allocated to flood and coastal erosion over the next three years (2026-2029)[41].

This ongoing focus on emergency preparedness and resilience can be seen as a direct legacy of the Lewes Floods.

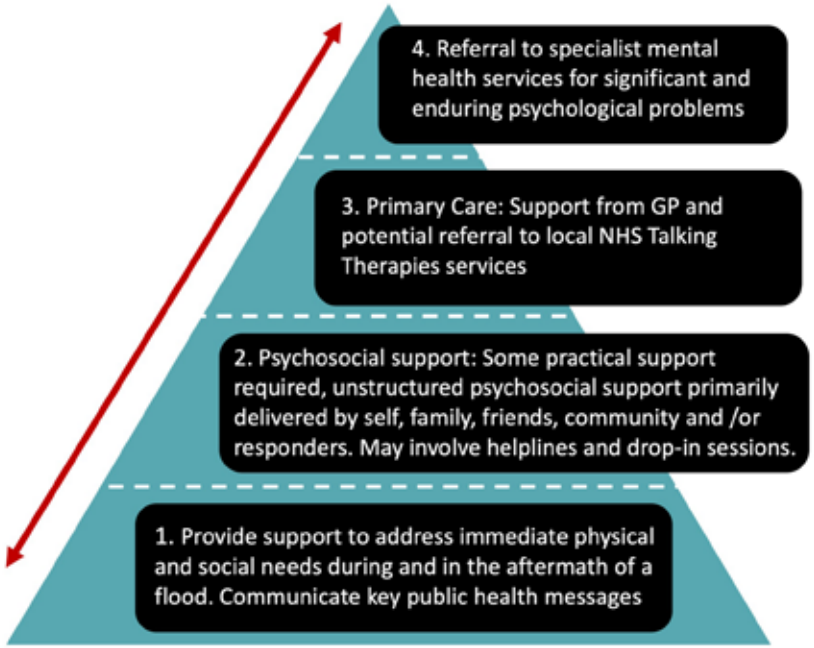
41 Policy paper: UK Government Resilience Action Plan (HTML) (Cabinet Office, UK Government: Gov.UK 2025)

Appendix 1: Legacy of the Lewes floods

ii. A new mental health protocol

At the time of the Lewes Floods, there was no national guidance on the impact of flooding on long-term health, as Graham Bickler, former Director of Public Health for the East Sussex, Brighton & Hove Health Authority, pointed out. Instead, the public health focus was solely on immediate containment of communicable disease and infection.

However, it was in response to the Lewes Floods, especially the extensive and unexpected call on psychological support services, that a psychiatrist came forward wanting to explore the long-term health impacts of flooding, especially on mental health. A collaboration between academics, the East Sussex, Brighton & Hove Health Authority, the NHS, and Lewes District Council was therefore set up to conduct the first-ever UK longitudinal study into flooding and mental health.



Graphic 14: The Four-Tiered Pyramid for Mental Health Flood Response
Source: 'How to recover from flooding' – UK Health Security Agency

Using a new screening tool for psychological well-being – the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) – the team drew on a database detailing which households in Lewes had and hadn't been flooded to ask people about their physical and mental health. This was published in 2004 as "Health impacts of flooding in Lewes: A comparison of reported gastrointestinal and other illness and mental health in flooded and non-flooded households".

Although there were some physical health implications, the biggest issue the report indicated was psychological distress, which 50 per cent of flooded households were still experiencing 10 months later – the first time this had been documented in the UK. Following major floods in 2012/13 and building on the findings from the Lewes analysis, the Department of Health funded a much larger study. This looked at effects three years later, and showed that mental impacts came not only from being flooded but from being displaced, with signs of PTSD, anxiety and depression.

As a result of these findings, detailed guidance on how to support flood victims' mental well-being is now laid out in "How to recover from flooding", published by the UK Health Security Agency, including a four-tier response pyramid – see Graphic 14.

Now viewed as mainstream practice, including by the World Health Organisation, this essential guidance results directly from the experiences of Lewes in 2000 and participation in research by the local population.

With thanks to Graham Bickler

Appendix 2: Recommendations of the 'Sussex Ouse: 12th October 2000 Flood Report'

Compiled by Binnie Black & Veatch on behalf of the Environment Agency, March 2001. Status on actions provided by this report's authors and reviewers.

The authors recommend that the Environment Agency:	**Status on action as at Q1 2026**
1. Undertakes a detailed review of flood forecasting/warning over the period 9th-12th October to ensure that any possible lessons are learned.	Done
2. Measures or calculates high flows at key locations such as Buxted, Uckfield, Isfield, Gold Bridge, Barcombe, and Lewes.	Now in place
3. Replaces and upgrades the key existing level-recorders damaged or lost in the flood.	Done
4. Undertakes a topographic survey of: (a) the flood defences and river banks in Lewes and Uckfield, (b) the remote, secondary defences in Lewes, and (c) property thresholds across the catchment.	Done
5. Incorporates the results of the topographic surveys into the flood forecasting and warning manuals.	Done
6. Reviews flood warning trigger levels for low-lying properties.	Done
7. Addresses the practical problem of maintaining public awareness of flood warnings over a long period, particularly when river levels fluctuate.	Consistent national improvements in the Environment Agency flood warning scheme, new and updated online flood risk maps and addition of flood warnings to Met Office and BBC weather forecasting pages
8. Considers alternative means of warning local residents of imminent flooding in addition to automatic voice messaging (AVM).	Flood warning electronic notice board was installed by the Environment Agency in Cliffe Precinct but decommissioned at same time as the Lewes Flood Action Group
9. Installs telemetry on the Winterbourne Stream's culvert weed screens ('grilles').	Done
10. Fills in low spots in the Lewes embankments (short term) and raises the settled embankments back to their design levels (medium term).	Done
11. Carries out a detailed condition survey and structural review of the river walls in Lewes.	Ongoing by Environment Agency
12. Ensures that the issues raised by local residents are investigated: (a) abandoned culvert under South Street, (b) seepage beneath the wall at end of Timberyard Lane, also check wall level, (c) inadequate stoplogs on the old slipway by Island Cottage, Lewes, (d) inoperable drainage flap valves.	The Lewes Internal Urban Drainage group 2006-2011 was set up to look at issues like this. Refer to its 2008 report held by LDC
13. Improves post-flood drainage in Lewes, by: (a) Installing Malling Drain Pumping Station controls above flood level, (b) Including additional pumping stations/ flood gates/etc in any future improvement schemes.	a) Done b) Flood gates have been installed in the Cliffe scheme but no additional pumping stations
14. Reviews the information and comments in the Post Flood Questionnaires, and continues open communication with local residents.	Resident communication needs to be reinstated

Appendix 3: Summary findings from the 'Operation Harvey' Emergency Exercise

In Spring 2025, Lewes was chosen to host Operation Harvey, a major one-day training exercise led by Sussex Resilience Forum. It specifically aimed to test systems and protocols for flood response, involving Category 1 and 2 responders, and identify any gaps or opportunities for improvement in knowledge, resources or capabilities.

Key learnings

- East Sussex Fire & Rescue along with partners need to identify strategic holding areas in the County of East Sussex capable of facilitating local, regional and national resources in case of widescale flooding
- An improvement in knowledge and understanding is required by commanders of flood and water rescue resource types and availability locally, regionally and nationally when responding to flood and water rescue from both government and non-government agencies
- All partners lacked knowledge and understanding in the use of ResilienceDirect[42] and its capability to support their effective response to widescale flooding
- Flood rescue requires different capability, training and exercising from that of water rescue for responders
- An improvement in knowledge and understanding is required amongst commanders in the coordination and management of national resources within East Sussex, Brighton and Hove
- A lack of ability among East Sussex Fire & Rescue commanders to work with hand-held airwave radios hampered them, and led to reliance on partners and non-government agencies or East Sussex commanders working remotely from scenes of operation, reducing ability for situational awareness.

Positives

- Tests and exercises at local level demonstrate that East Sussex emergency services have good awareness of flood risks, indicating ability to support on-the-ground response at known local risk locations
- East Sussex Fire & Rescue has trained and competent operators for working in flood and water rescue incidents
- Maritime and coastguard agency knowledge and understanding, for supporting response to support coastal and inland flooding, is of a high standard
- Regional and national advice enables support to East Sussex Fire & Rescue commanders remotely and on scene.

With thanks to David Washington, Former Station Manager of Lewes Fire Station

42 ResilienceDirect is a web-based digital platform used in the United Kingdom to coordinate emergency planning, crisis response, and disaster recovery

Appendix 4: Findings of the Lewes Floods Survey 2025

Below is a summary of feedback from attendees of the Lewes Floods Anniversary events in autumn 2025. More than 170 respondents answered four open-ended questions covering their concerns, information needs, desired actions, resilience ideas, and general feedback. Responses have been grouped into recurring themes, with the two most substantial questions (concerns and resilience suggestions) also charted below.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Flooding is expected to recur,** and be worse. Feedback was overwhelmingly shaped by the lived experience of the 2000 flood, with most respondents treating a repeat event as a near-certainty, worsened by climate change
- **Floodplain development is the top concern** and the top ask. Continued building and hard-paving on floodplains was the single most repeated concern and the single most repeated request for action
- **Drainage and sewage infrastructure** needs regular attention. Many respondents reported blocked drains, groundwater ingress, and low confidence in Southern Water – seen as an immediate, practical issue distinct from long-term capital works
- **Insurance security is a real worry.** Several respondents raised concerns about the future cost and availability of flood insurance, particularly once the Flood Re scheme ends in 2039
- **Residents want combined engineered and nature-based solutions.** There was broad support for pairing traditional defences (walls, gates, dredging, barriers) with nature-based approaches (floodplain restoration, upstream retention, planting) rather than relying on either alone
- **The event itself landed well.** Feedback on the conference and exhibition was strongly positive, though several attendees described it as an emotional reminder of past trauma and called for sustained action, not one-off engagement.

1. What are your concerns about future flooding in Lewes?

Most responses expressed near-certainty that Lewes will flood again – often "worse than 2000": driven by climate change. Key concern themes:

- **Flooding will recur and be worse than 2000** – General worry about the power of nature – "not if but when"
- **Continued development and hard-paving over gardens/driveways, and new housing built directly on floodplains** (e.g. Phoenix estate, North Street)
- Condition of drains and sewers – Several residents reported recurring groundwater or drain-water ingress, concern about water 'backing up' through sewers and toilets, and a lack of confidence in Southern Water's handling of sewage
- **Lack of urgency, funding or coordination** – From central government and local authorities, and overreliance on existing defences (reactive rather than proactive)
- **Personal risk to specific homes, areas and transport infrastructure** – Morris Road, Court Road, Pinwell Road, Depot Cinema, Friars Walk, Spence's Lane, the Pells, and the train station and general rail infrastructure were named as poorly protected
- **Climate change** increasing the frequency and intensity of flood events, contributing to sea-level rise, and making some parts of Lewes uninhabitable
- **Future availability and affordability of insurance**, especially once the government-backed Flood Re reinsurance scheme ends in 2039
- **Wider impact** on businesses, property values, and human/animal welfare.

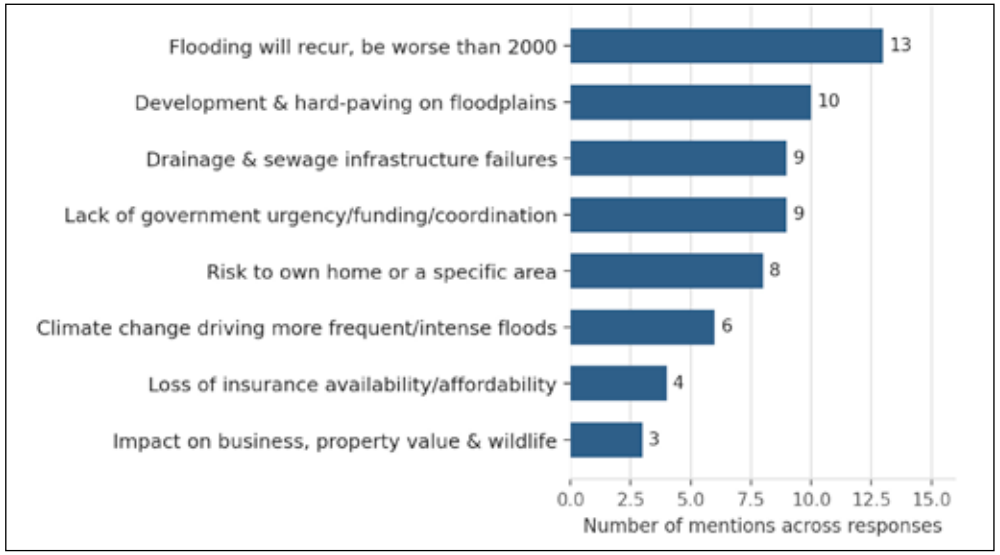
2. What aspects of flood risk would you like to know more about?

- Practical steps individual homeowners can take to protect property and reduce runoff
- Detailed flood risk maps showing current defences and at-risk zones
- How early warning systems and communication (including mobile/internet reliability) work
- Transparency on planning decisions and how new developments affect flood risk
- Funding sources and support available to residents.
- Community groups and shared learning opportunities (e.g. a "flood school")
- Nature-based and catchment-scale approaches, including impacts on wildlife and ecosystems
- Conventional topics: flood defences, insurance, and resilience products for the home
- Details of trusted builders.

Questions from the audience. Image: Abbie Stanton

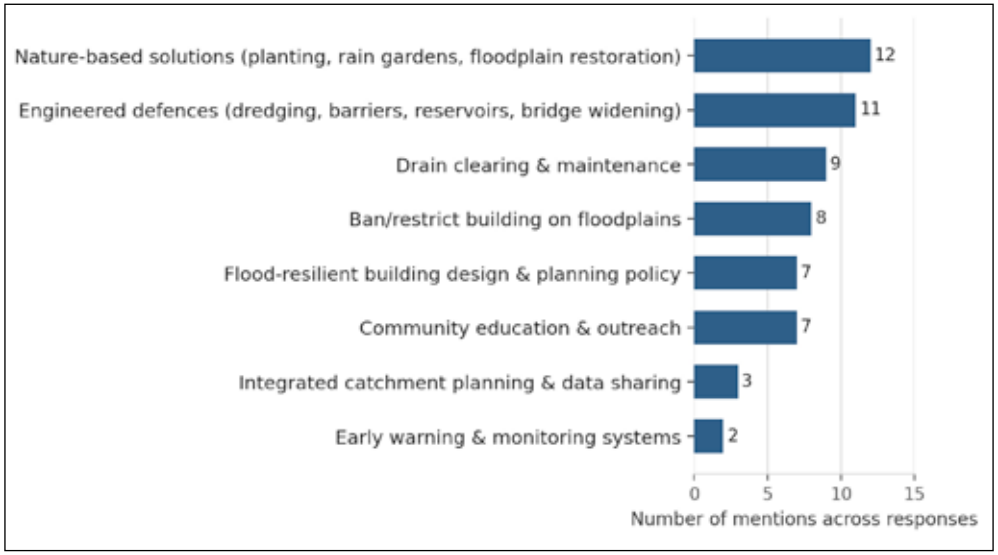
Panel at the public meeting. Image: Abbie Stanton

Biggest flood concerns for Lewes people



Graphic 15. Most common concerns raised in response to Question 1, by number of mentions across responses

Most requested actions for future flood resilience



Graphic 16. Most common resilience suggestions raised in response to Question 4, by number of mentions across responses

3. What actions would you like to see (e.g. from councils, volunteer groups and emergency services)?

- **Stop development and hard-paving on floodplains,** backed by stricter planning enforcement (e.g. permeable driveways) and faster, more transparent review of planning applications
- **Regular, proactive drain and sewer maintenance** and clearance
- **Better coordination** between councils, agencies and utility companies
- **Clearer public communication** – a flood outreach officer, home visits, helplines, and community networks (e.g. a WhatsApp flood group) and help with insurance – especially for vulnerable residents
- **Regular public exhibitions and education,** including in schools, to keep flood risk visible and give guidance on making homes flood-resilient – particularly for newer residents unfamiliar with 2000
- **Nature-based management** – allowing the Ouse to flood safely north and south of the town and actions to slow and spread the flow into Lewes, also more rain gardens, green walls/roofs and permeable surfaces in town.

4. Your suggestions for future flood resilience

- **Nature-based solutions** – restoring and reconnecting floodplains, water meadows and ditches, planting willows/hedgerows/trees, rain gardens, rain-harvesting, permeable surfaces, holding water further up the catchment, introducing beavers for dam-building, restoring the Ouse's meanders ('rewiggling' the river)
- **Engineered defences,** including dredging the river, clearing silt, more/better drains, wider capacity at Cliffe Bridge, a barrier at Newhaven, upstream reservoirs
- **Drain and gully clearing and maintenance,** raised repeatedly as a distinct, immediate need
- **Flood-resilient building design, planning policy and guidance** – wastewater reuse systems, flood doors, sewer backflow prevention (e.g. non-return toilet valves)
- **Flood-adaptable building** – floating housing, modular housing houseboats, housing on stilts – learn from places like the Netherlands and Bangladesh
- **Community education and outreach** – including involving schools, outreach officers, and continued public events
- **Integrated catchment planning** and better data-sharing between stakeholders
- **An early-warning system** – based on continuous monitoring and linked-up community support during floods.

KEY THEMES ACROSS ALL RESPONSES

- **Floodplain development:** The single most repeated concern and the single most repeated request for action – residents want a firm, consistently enforced stop to building (and hard-paving) on floodplains
- **Climate change as the driver:** Respondents largely see future flooding as a matter of when, not if, and expect events more frequent and severe than 2000
- **Infrastructure maintenance:** Drain and sewer clearance was raised repeatedly as an immediate, practical need to help the town's infrastructure deal with more intense rainfall and waterflows
- **Insurance and long-term security:** Anxiety about future insurability, especially post-2039 when the Flood Re government-backed reinsurance scheme ends, was a recurring and specific worry tied to residents' sense of security in their homes
- **Combined engineered and nature-based solutions:** Broad support for pairing traditional defences with nature-based approaches rather than relying on either alone
- **Communication and community engagement:** Consistent requests for clearer maps, early warning systems, outreach to individual homes, and regular public events to sustain awareness.

Public meeting in the Assembly Rooms, 1st November 2025. Image: Abbie Stanton

Top left: Norman Baker, former MP for Lewes. Top centre: Wishworks puppet show. Top right: Cllrs Wendy Maples and Adrian Ross with the sponsors' display. Left: Friends of Lewes Floods Exhibition. Centre top: Lewes Climate Hub activity. Centre bottom: John Gower, Friends of Lewes. Right: Zane's Law stall. All images: Abbie Stanton