

Report from Watton & Saham Flood Action Group to the Annual Meeting of Watton Town Council on 20 April 2021

Introduction

The Group last reported to the Annual Meeting in April 2019 when we were known as the Watton Neighbourhood Plan Drainage Working Group. In November 2020, we became independent of the Town Council and began working even more closely with Saham Toney who suffer from the same flooding and foul sewer problems as Watton. We now have three new members in Saham, all of whom are Parish Councillors. The names of the group are listed at the end of this report.

We changed our name to the Watton & Saham Flood Action Group to emphasise that we are working for action with all the relevant agencies and to align ourselves more closely with other Flood Action Groups who are affiliated, like us, to the National Flood Forum.

The National Flood Forum (NFF) is a charity working to help flooded communities across England. During lockdown they have held fortnightly Zoom meetings which I as Chairman have attended on behalf of the Group. About 40 representatives have attended these from across England. The meetings have been a source of information and expertise about how to address flooding in local communities.

We now have our own website which was set up by Todd Pitcher of Semibold, a local Watton-based business, and the costs were met by a donation from Watton Town Council. The website is a source of information and help for those at risk of flooding in both Saham Toney and Watton. There is a link to the site on both the Watton Town Council website and the Saham Toney Parish Council website.

We now do have action in both communities as a result of our relentless pursuit of the various agencies to do something about the flooding and foul sewer problems.

Actions achieved for Watton

Anglian Water is committed to investing in projects to reduce the amount of surface water entering their foul sewers, working in partnership with the Water Management Team and the Highways Team at Norfolk County Council. They are actively working with our Group as all now understand that the local community know a great deal about the causes of flooding in their area. Anglian Water have told us that a number of areas have been identified in the catchment and will be undergoing a series of changes, upgrades and increased maintenance. These include:

- the Neaton Business park Pumping Station
- the pumping station by the prison at Griston
- Swaffham Road Terminal Pumping Station (the one that takes flows directly to the Water Recycling Works at Threxton)

There are a number of ditches which they are working with the Lead Local Flood Authority (the Water Management Team at the County Council) to have cleaned and re-dredged. This should significantly reduce surface water flooding as well as removing surface water from the foul sewers and hopefully stopping them from spewing sewerage on to roads and gardens.

All this work will take place over a number of years and one outcome will be to stop toilets backing up in Brandon Road and the estates off it as well as elsewhere in the town.

The Water Management Team have also been successful in gaining access to more funds from the Environment Agency. They joined with Suffolk County Council and they are one of only 25 regions across England to be given £3m over 6 years. The Norfolk project is "to work with rural settlements in Norfolk to capture and re-use flood water." Watton and Saham are likely to benefit from this funding. It may only amount to £250k per annum but once some funding is achieved, other applications for grants etc have more chance of succeeding. The Team are currently working on their business strategy and we will know more by September.

Actions achieved for Saham Toney

To deal with foul sewers spilling sewerage on to roads and gardens in Saham Toney because they are full of surface water from the roads, requires getting ditches and watercourses cleared and running effectively and we have worked with the County Council Highways and the Water Management Team to get action on this. Several ditches have now been cleared, some by landowners and some by Highways. The Water Management Team obtained funding from the Environment Agency and are working with the Parish Council and local landowners to create holding ponds in the upper reaches of the two streams that flow to the village and contribute to the flooding. If all is agreed with the landowners, work will start in August this year.

Actions relating to both communities

On behalf of the Group, I wrote to the Leader of Breckland District Council to ask for their practical and financial help. Cllr Gilbert also tabled a question at their full council meeting in March. As a result, Cllr Gilbert and I have a virtual meeting with Mr Rob Walker, Director for Place, on 13 April as a follow up. I will be able to report back on that at this meeting.

As appropriate, the Group make representations on Planning applications where there is a risk of flooding. We are unable to stop such applications if the Lead Local Flood Authority approves the applicants' drainage strategy. But we follow up with the developers when they present their drainage plans for the relevant planning condition to be discharged and we now follow up to see if what was planned is actually what is put in place. So for the Barrett's site on Thetford Road we have seen

the size of the culverts to take both the Highway water and the property surface water to the ditch system on the west of Thetford Road.

In future we plan to monitor all the Sustainable Drainage Systems to make sure they are appropriately maintained which is critical to reducing flood risk.

Future Plans

The Group also talked about the need to become more active when floods threaten. We think we need to have volunteers to act as flood wardens who will visit vulnerable properties with residents who do not access social media or the internet. There are alternatives to sandbags (which the Environment Agency no longer consider OK) which are called floodsacs and I think we need a store of these. For all of this we need our volunteers trained and appropriate insurance in place which the NFF have advised us about.

We should be clear that if we have other storms like those of the past, no-one can guarantee that there will not be flooding. What we hope to do is create more resilient communities with more resources to reduce the risk.

We also need eyes and ears around the streets of the village and the town. We have some volunteers already in place in Watton in Jubilee Road, Brandon Road, Langmere Road and Monkham's Drive but we need more. We need people to alert us when Highways drains are flooding in moderate to heavy rain and when foul sewers spew their sewerage on to the roads and gardens. We also need people to let us know when any of the agencies turn up and do work. So, if you have time, think you have skills to offer and are interested to join us please get in touch via our website or by phoning the town or parish council.

Other initiatives taking place across the County

As Chairman I attended a virtual meeting on 29 January organised by our MP George Freeman with district and county councillors to share information about the flooding of December 2020. This was called the Mid-Norfolk Flood Partnership and the minutes of the meeting which included staff from the Lead Local Flood Authority, NCC Highways, Anglian Water and the Environment Agency were sent to the Task Force set up by Cllr Andy Grant, cabinet member for Environment and Waste at the County Council. The Task Force is chaired by Lord Dannatt.

When I saw the news in the EDP on 14th January, I emailed Cllr Grant, in my capacity as Chair of WASFAG, with a plea that local flood groups and local residents even where there were no formal groups be involved as they have first-hand knowledge of the problems. I did receive a reply the same day, thanking me for my email and its contents and that he hoped to be in contact in the future. This has not happened as yet and may never happen.

Following the meeting with George Freeman, I also attended a Zoom meeting on 24 March hosted by the Wellbeing section of the Norfolk Association of Local Councils who work with Town and Parish Councils across the County. They are represented on Lord Dannatt's Task Force and we have sent them an account of the flooding in our two communities in the hope that that will be passed on to the Task Force.

There is an organisation called Water Resources East that is tasked by the Environment Agency with conserving water in the region and then distributing it to areas that need water during a drought. They are also part of the Task Force. As a Group we have alerted them to the new Effluent Treatment Plant at Cranswick which plans to put 3,500m³ of treated effluent into the Watton Brook. Currently this is stored on two farms in Threxton and Saham Toney who have used the treated effluent to irrigate their fields in the summer droughts. While we understand this is no longer considered environmentally friendly, we cannot understand how putting the effluent into a rare chalk stream is. This was surely an opportunity for the EA to store water for the purposes that they set up this organisation for. We wait to see what will come of this initiative.

Liz Whitcher

Chairman and resident of Watton since 2010

On behalf of

Cllr Kathy Avery, Saham Toney Parish Council

Cllr Trevor Bunce, Saham Toney Parish Council

Cllr Nick Creek, Chairman, Saham Toney Parish Council

Cllr Keith Gilbert, Watton Town Council and Breckland District Council

Alan Nichols, resident of Watton who has lived in Watton and Saham all his life