

Report from Watton & Saham Flood Action Group (WASFAG) to the Annual Town Meeting on 16th April 2024

Introduction

This report will focus on progress on projects being taken to lessen flooding in Watton, on good news from Anglian Water and on the need to have a Community Emergency Plan.

Actions to mitigate flooding:

Reclaim the Rain (RtR) There will be a table at the meeting with information about this and the other projects.

The main news is that in July 2022, we learned that Watton was one of four communities in Norfolk to be chosen as part of Reclaim the Rain (RtR) alongside three communities in Suffolk. The others in Norfolk are Merton, Thompson and Boxford.

There is £6.4m of funding already allocated from the government's Flooding and Coastal Resilience and Innovation Programme (FCRIP). The project will run until 2027 and the Senior Officer reports regularly to the Environment Agency who programme manage the 25 projects all over England.

Reclaim the Rain is designed to persuade the Environment Agency, local authorities and the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) that saving rain and flood water for reuse during times of drought while at the same time lessening flood risk will work in small rural communities that suffer from surface water flooding and that do not receive funding currently.

There is a Local Working Group consisting of a Town Councillor, myself as Chairman of the Flood Action Group, three residents who have been flooded, a representative of the Rotary Club, two local farmers and the Head of the Infant and Junior Schools. Two other residents have expressed a wish to join us.

The project managers decided to use virtual contacts to work with the communities but this did not work out. I am on the Board of the project to represent the communities from Norfolk and there is someone representing those in Suffolk. We made it clear that engaging directly with the Local Working Group and with residents and businesses is the way forward. This is now happening.

Those of you with children or grandchildren at the Infant and Junior Schools will know that there is a lot going on there. The RtR team have managed to obtain extra funding (£70k in total) for Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) in all the schools in the project. The amounts to each school will be allocated on the basis of the flood risk, ages and number of children, ease of access and egress etc. There are also educational programmes for the children.

EDI Surveys from Ipswich were contracted to look at the watercourses, sewers etc to map their depth and the Finished Floor Levels (FFLs) of properties adjacent to them. That work happened in May last year. This year drones have also been used to show the watercourses and ditches before the installations are in and then there will be drone footage to show the outcome.

JBA consultants did a walkabout and placed monitoring equipment in various watery places to get data on soil types, groundwater levels etc to help the project determine what sort of attenuation features make sense and where these attenuation features will be best placed. Now we have all this data, we have selected what areas to focus on and what to put in. These are:

- A reservoir on land south of Watton which will take water from the watercourse on the land and store it for use in dry summers. This is hoped to help the risk of flooding in the Bridle Way. Defra also provide grants for this, and these are being applied for.
- The watercourse at the Bridle Road play area causes flooding downstream and the project will explore ways of holding back the water, perhaps making a water feature in the play area that is safe for children.
- We would like to do something about the flooding at the bridge over the Watton Brook and that is complicated. This is at a very early stage and more investigation is needed before we can be sure what is viable to do.
- The land at the Junior and Infant School has a watercourse that runs through the grounds and there are plans to use this to grow fruit trees and vegetables and teach the children about the importance of water conservation and flood protection.
- There are also plans for an attenuation pond at the Academy.

Anglian Water

Anglian Water are investing almost £2.3 million into laying a new 3.8km sewer pipe from the Thetford Road roundabout to the Recycling Works at Threxton and upgrading the existing pumping station at the roundabout to serve new properties being built in Watton eg those at Wayland Fields and the proposed development off Mallard Road. This will also relieve pressures on the system for much of the east and south of Watton. They will use a technique called directional drilling to install 40% of the new pipes. This will allow for pipes to be inserted underneath the ground without having to dig up large sections. It causes less disruption, while reducing carbon footprint.

The project will start in May and is expected to be finished by the end of the year, but as with any engineering scheme there is always the potential for unforeseen delays. I believe there will be some road closure in the area, these are planned for July.

Anglian Water are committed to removing surface water from their foul sewers as this causes problems at the pumping stations and then residents' toilets and showers back up.

An initial scoping exercise on the shop fronts on Watton High Street ascertained that water from the frontage does not go into the combined sewer as originally thought. It

goes into the road gulleys managed by Highways and then into an AW surface water sewer that runs parallel to the combined sewer.

The company are still interested in SuDS interventions in the area but at the rear of the shops (as opposed to the front) which put surface water into the foul sewer that runs down Harvey Street– which is not part of the scheme originally planned by Reclaim the Rain. An area of concern with all planter and water butt schemes is the on-going maintenance and up-keep of these interventions – apprehension was noted when the company had initial discussions with traders in the area (many of which rent their business premises). Anglian Water are currently exploring the on-going feasibility of these types of schemes and how they can secure optimum buy-in from traders to make them viable. They want to ensure that this type of investment is managed in a way that provides longevity and to fulfill their purpose for years to come.

As a statutory water undertaker, when they make investment decisions, they need to carefully balance all the social, environmental, and financial considerations to ensure they select options that minimise the impact on customers and their bills. Earlier this year, they completed their home interventions scheme in Watton, where they installed both water butts and planters to residential addresses whose roof water discharges into the foul sewer. The uptake and desire for these interventions by residents in the area was low. I have seen these on a property in Norwich Road.

So, the original joint project between RtR and Anglian Water in the High Street has been discontinued and a new potential project is being explored.

RtR has contacted another company recommended by Anglian Water to see whether it might be possible to save the rainwater from the roofs in the High Street for reuse and to prevent the flooding that occurs when the surface water sewer becomes overloaded and soaks the High Street. A representative of the company, GreenBlue Urban, gave a presentation to the Town Council in March to gauge their support. The Town Council have given their support and it is now a question of seeing whether GreenBlue Urban can design something suitable at a cost that can be afforded.

WSP Project

Watton and Saham were chosen in February 2021 as one of the first 16 areas in Norfolk affected by flooding to receive support from the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance (NSFA). The County has put aside a sum each year to support works in these areas.

One of these is in Watton where Norfolk County Council have commissioned WSP Engineering Consultants to undertake a study looking at potential options to reduce flood risk. Through collaboration with the Flood Action Group and other partners they have identified 6 flood zones or hotspots where the highest number of properties at risk are located and where potential investment will have most effect. These are Lovell Gardens, Watton Green, Brandon Road with Langmere Road etc., Jubilee Road, Aircraft Drive with Saham Road and as far east as Nelson Court and the High

Street. WSP have completed their investigations and are working on the cost/benefit analysis of any works ie will the number of properties protected outweigh the cost of any installation. For any such works, the LLFA will have to find funding partners so work will not begin immediately.

Community Emergency Plan

While these projects will lessen flood risk, they are going to take time to be put in place and working. So, we will still get flooding. When that happens, it would be desirable to have an Emergency Plan in place. WASFAG has been working with Town Councillor Tony Bridges on equipment we would need and where to store it. He has been very busy recently with the Lovell Gardens play area revamp and so we have not done much on the Emergency Plan in the last few months.

We would welcome interest from residents who might be able to help by signing up as volunteers when there is a flooding emergency. However, the plan should cover any kind of emergency. There is an information leaflet and a form to fill in on the table if you can offer your skills or equipment as a volunteer. It would also be helpful to know if you consider yourself to be vulnerable and needing help when there is an emergency. We all remember how fast everything happened with the fire in Ashill in 2022 and many local people helped as they could. They now have an Emergency Plan in place. Having a firm plan and known volunteers would facilitate quick action in any future emergency. If we don't have volunteers, there won't be a Plan. And it is unlikely to happen even every year so not a lot to commit yourself to.

Website

We 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 in 2021. The website is a source of information and help for those at risk of flooding in both Saham Toney and Watton. When we are alerted by the Flood Forecasting Centre that there is a risk of flooding, we will post the information there as well as on social media. These warnings are more accurate than those provided by the Environment Agency. There is a link to the site on both the Watton Town Council website and the Saham Toney Parish Council website. We are very grateful to the Town Council (and Saham Toney Parish Council) for their donations in April 2023 so that we can keep it updated and provide links to the RtR project and other relevant sites. We are also planning to put our Facebook page on the website page.

Representation on Planning Applications

As appropriate, the Group make representations on Planning applications where there is a risk of flooding, and we also speak at the Planning Committee. In recent

months we have influenced the Planning Officer with regard to single developments and those with less than 10 dwellings such that drainage plans have been altered.

Future Plans

1. 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.
2. Breckland District Council is updating their Local Plan which forms the basis of where future housing and business developments will be allocated. WASFAG and both councils are busy making representation on behalf of our communities by answering questions in the various consultation documents put forward by BDC. WASFAG has successfully lobbied BDC so that we are assured that there will be a new Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Map with all the areas which have been flooded by surface water in the past located on it. This will be a huge improvement when it comes to planning applications of whatever size.

Liz Whitcher

Chairman and resident of Watton since 2010

On behalf of

Cllr Kathy Avery, Vice Chair, Saham Toney Parish Council

Cllr Trevor Bunce, former Saham Toney Parish Councillor

Cllr Nick Creek, Saham Toney Parish Council

Cllr Daniel Freeman, 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.

Amanda Reeves, resident of Saham Toney who has been internally flooded.

Andy Turner, resident of Watton who has been flooded in his garden and nearly his house.

John Whitehouse, resident of Watton whose home has been internally flooded.