

Summer floods 2007

Alan Walters, Lowdham, Nottingham, Midlands Region

Alan Walters' children saw their dad only briefly on Father's Day 2007. His job at the Environment Agency and the recent floods took him away from them, and he spent most of the day at work. Alan lives in Lowdham, a village just outside Nottingham. He also found himself working the next weekend, the last one in June.

'I'd had a busy time because I work in flood defence,' says Alan. 'We were completely stretched. It was a game of chance as to where the cloud was going to dump its water.'

On Sunday night he knew that heavy showers were forecast through that evening and into the small hours of Monday. Heavy rain fell around 5am. Alan's wife, Helen, made a brave attempt to get to work around 7am, but she was thwarted by the flooded roads. Seeing this, Alan donned waterproofs to go on a village patrol, reporting back what he saw to his incident room. While wading through the floods, he found an elderly couple in their bungalow, which by now was surrounded by water.



Alan's home was uninhabitable during and after the summer 2007 floods

'The husband was trying to get the furniture out and I thought poor old chap – he was struggling a bit,' Alan recalls. 'I thought he might do himself an injury so I shifted their furniture into the lounge. Then I got a phone call from my wife saying that water was starting to appear at our neighbours at the back.'

Alan waded home to find a houseful of children and water approaching from the rear. Helen had taken in temporary 'flood orphans' from the neighbours. As well as trying to keep the children out of the water they had to start moving their furniture upstairs.

'We saw water seeping in from the edges of carpets, our kitchen units and laminate flooring'

'We saw water starting to seep in from the edges of the carpets, from underneath the kitchen units and laminate flooring in the office. My wife took the "orphans" back to their parents and we took our three to a friend's house. We locked the door and left the water to it.'

The Walters stayed with Helen's parents while they searched for accommodation, but there were many other families in the same situation. When Helen did find a place she dropped everything and drove over to put a deposit down without even having seen it.

Alan thinks his surveyor is being optimistic when he says they will be back in their house for Christmas. The whole of the ground floor needs plastering, new skirting boards, doors, door frames and redecorating. But Alan is still looking on the bright side – now, at least, they can make alterations to the family home that will give Helen the bigger kitchen she always wanted.

For more information and high resolution images contact Mark Funnell at mark.funnell@environment-agency.gov.uk or on 01454 205707.

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Residents of Barbourne Brook, Worcestershire, Midlands Region

Having seen their homes devastated by the floods in 1998, many of the residents of Shelley Close, Worcester, are only too glad to see the Environment Agency staff who regularly come to check the water level of nearby Barbourne Brook. However, the torrential rain of Friday 20 July 2007 meant extra staff needed to be drafted in to work round the clock in order to save the 96 homes from flooding.

Workers had to make their homes in their vans and could only leave when the next shift managed to make it through the roads that were now running as rivers. The Environment Agency's Dave Shaw co-ordinates the gangs of workers and had seen the forecast.

'We knew that something big was coming,' he recalls. 'We sent the gangs out every morning and evening, checking water levels and clearing debris from the river. When the downpour hit us, it hit us quite hard, but because of the preparation it made it a lot easier.'

Steven Edwards lives in the close and was nervously watching to see if his home would be ruined yet again.

'If it wasn't for the Environment Agency team, we would have been flooded'

'When the first team came they couldn't seem to get the water level right. When the regular guy Paul Collins got here he saw the problem and sorted it,' says Steven. 'Over the years we must have spent thousands on coffee and tea for the gangs, but we don't mind – if it wasn't for them we would have been flooded.'

Karen and Frank Chafer have lived in the close for 17 years. In the crisis, they kept staff going by making them bacon sandwiches. They know the misery of flooding first hand as it took six

months for them to get back to normal after the last flood. They now have a seven-point plan that involves moving their most treasured possessions upstairs. The prize-winning rabbits from the garden as well as Frank's Rupert Bear annuals are top of the list. What did they think about the staff that week?

'They have done such a brilliant job,' says Frank. 'We had faith in them even with that amount of rain. But, although we were well informed, a megaphone system might be quite good.'



Dave Shaw sent out gangs of Environment Agency staff morning and night to monitor local rivers

Workers were based at Shelley Close from 1pm on the Friday for nearly a week. The four original men who came at lunchtime were stuck till the next day as the roads were flooded and no-one could come or go.

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Residents of Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire, Midlands Region

During the summer of 2007, the small town of Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire, was flooded twice by a local river. Naturally, residents wanted to know what the Environment Agency was going to do about the situation and so we organised a drop-in session to talk through the issues that mattered most.

'The sky was very black over the old wood and I thought it was going to be really bad,' says Frances Symonds, describing the arrival of the thunderstorm that brought chaos in mid-July. Although she started to move her things to a safe place she was overtaken by the pace of the flash flood. The house was soon surrounded by water and its force took her side gate off its hinges.

'I have never been so scared in all my life. The water was about two-feet high. I tried to ring my son, but the phone was under water'

'It came so quickly, I didn't really have time to do much,' says Frances. 'I have never been so scared in all my life. Outside the house it was about two feet high. I could see it creeping up the glass and then it was seeping through the door. I lost my table and chairs and a nice oak cupboard of my Mum's. I tried to ring my son but the phone had gone, it was under water.'

Barbara Ogilvie was also flooded that day. She lives near the appropriately named Bog Lane. Taking a break from the ironing, Barbara looked out of the window and saw her neighbour's collection of gnomes bobbing about in her courtyard garden. They swirled round a few times and went off again down the road. She went to the landing to investigate the extent of the flooding and saw, to her horror, that the water was up to her third stair.



Tenbury Wells resident Barbara Ogilvie escaped the floods by boat

Although Barbara was trapped in her home, help was at hand. 'The fire service organised a boat for us. I felt so silly trying to get in this rubber boat. I mean, you see other people in boats, but you never think it will be you.'

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Summer floods 2007

Residents of Kidlington, Oxfordshire, Thames Region

When residents of Queen's Avenue in Kidlington, Oxfordshire, watched the River Cherwell rising just yards from their homes in late July 2007, there was only one question on their minds. Would the defences, put up after every house in the street was flooded back in 1998, do the job they were built for?

Born and bred in the town, Ken Belcher, 80, and his wife Barbara, who have lived in the avenue for 51 years, braced themselves for the worst. No way did they want to experience a repetition of the Good Friday floods nearly a decade earlier: the ground floor of their semi-detached house had been knee-deep in mucky water that reached the third stair up to their bedrooms.

'We were all wondering whether the defences would hold up'

'It took three months to get the place dried out, with the help of de-humidifiers, and to get cleaned up,' says Ken. 'It was awful, but luckily we were insured. So back in July we were all wondering whether the defences would hold up this time, and we kept going out every few hours to see what the river was doing.'

What they and their neighbours pinned their hopes on to protect the 1950s built housing estate were two main flood defences. These were a red brick wall less than two feet high and a huge mound of earth fashioned into a pleasant open green space by the river path, both installed by the Environment Agency in 2001. The initial plans for the Kidlington flood alleviation scheme had not been popular in the village – whose residents include Sir Richard Branson.

'Some people further along the river, around Mill End, didn't want the flood defences because they didn't want their gardens to be affected,' Ken recalls. 'So they weren't built there, further along the river. As a result, some of them were

flooded this summer – because there was nothing to hold back the water.'

Ken and Barbara are thanking their lucky stars that they supported the flood scheme at the time. 'Anything that helps stop that water coming in and flooding us again has got to be worth doing, hasn't it?' he smiles. 'It's done the job, and we're grateful. We would have been flooded here again, had it not been there.'



Resident Ken Belcher's home was saved by flood defences

The Environment Agency's Simon Somerscales, who helps to maintain the river, points out the depth gauge by the road bridge over the Cherwell – near the Belchers' home. 'The river is still high and running fast, compared to normal summer levels,' says Simon. 'The Cherwell flows down here from Banbury in Northamptonshire. Fortunately it didn't get quite the same high volumes of rainfall as the areas around the Thames and the Windrush. But this summer's rainfall presented the first real test of the flood defences in Kidlington, and it's satisfying for us all to know that they worked.'

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Residents of Botley Road, Oxford, Thames Region

When the floodwaters were swilling around the entrance to his pharmacy in Botley Road, Oxford, Pupinder Ghatora realised he was in a tight spot. He and his colleagues had drugs to deliver to old peoples' homes and patients with life-threatening illnesses all over the city and its suburbs, but no way of getting their vehicles alongside the shop to load up.

The police had closed the road to normal traffic that late July morning. Only 4x4 vehicles and pedestrians with rolled-up trousers or waders could cope with the depth of water. Pupinder's assistant and 'right-hand woman' at the shop Kate McKenzie took nearly two hours to get into work that morning from her home in Didcot. 'It was quite scary,' Pupinder tells us. 'We deliver to people with a wide range of chronic medical conditions – diabetes, heart conditions and blood pressure problems. Many of them are elderly. If people don't get their medication, their lives are at risk.'



Pharmacist Pupinder Ghatora relied on Environment Agency staff to get medicine to vulnerable people during the floods

By sheer luck, the pharmacist recognised an Environment Agency worker – Tony Bates – outside in the street, and flagged him down. 'I explained the situation to Tony, asked if he could help us and he got on the phone straight away.' Richard Dale, Operations Delivery Team Leader for the Cherwell catchment, got a

message via the fire brigade alerting him to the problem. He dispatched Mick Eldridge and his 4x4 Mercedes van to the rescue.

'I met Pupinder and a colleague of his by one of their vehicles about half way along Botley Road,' recalls Mick, who has worked in river maintenance for nearly 40 years. 'Then I drove them back to the shop, so they could collect their supplies, and returned them to their vehicles. They seemed very grateful, and I was happy that I was able to help.'

The mission not only ensured people received essential drugs, but also enabled the Woodlands Pharmacy to minimise the loss of business in a week of flood chaos. It is one of the few pharmacies in the area that offers free home delivery because of the high volume of prescription business it does.

'By coming to our aid, the Environment Agency helped to save lives, and it helped us keep the business going,' says Pupinder. 'Some GP surgeries were closed by the bad weather, and we were doing no over-the-counter trade whatsoever because so few people could get out to the shops. The floods really hit us hard – we are only just getting back on our feet now.'

Richard Dale abandoned a holiday with his wife in Bournemouth to work around the clock shifts with colleagues based at the Osney depot, not far from the Woodlands Pharmacy, supplying sandbags and pumps to local residents. He has nothing but praise for his team: 'I can ring up these guys any time of day, and they'll drop what they're doing and cover a job, whether they're on stand-by or not. You can't ask for more than that.'

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Summer floods 2007

Ray Riches, lock keeper at Osney Island, Thames Region

He's been described in print as the saviour of Osney Island, a community of 300 homes encircled by the Thames at Oxford. But lock keeper, ex-television actor and local hero Ray Riches is keeping his feet firmly on the ground, and getting on with the job.

Ray's quick-thinking actions and diligent monitoring of people, boats and river levels – night and day – helped prevent the island from being overwhelmed by water. He counts himself among the lucky ones too, as a result of what he calls the 'Dunkirk spirit' that quickly spread through the streets and riverside. 'Friendships developed with people I hadn't really got to know before,' Ray recalls. 'So one of the upsides was developing a closer relationship with the community that I live and work in. By the end I simply felt relief, knowing the water was coming down and that everyone was safe.'



Lock keeper Ray Riches put in around the clock hard work to save Osney Island

Throughout the three-day drama, Ray barely slept as he helped to sandbag the island's banks, took hourly water-level readings, kept residents updated and checked on boaters who declined offers of evacuation their moorings. He even fished out a garden shed, complete with tools, that had got washed into the lock.

'I opened the head gates of the lock and pulled up the sluices on the tail gates'

But the real turning point came just as the water level had reached the lip of the bank at the top of East Street. 'All the weirs were pulled in time,' Ray recalls. 'What I did was to open the head gates of the lock and pull up the sluices on the tail gates. This meant the river was going through the lock and out the other side, creating an extra weir. I think that helped to keep the river off East Street.'

Following the floods, many residents sent Ray cards or called round in person to thank him, and they clubbed together to present him with some vouchers. 'It was nice to feel appreciated.'

Team leader Paul Smith, who helped co-ordinate events over the period, points out that lock keepers, other Environment Agency staff and the emergency services were working together to keep people safe right across the Upper Thames. So, what lessons should be learned? 'I think the citizens of this country need to think very carefully about how much it costs to get the right resources in place to cope with extraordinary events,' Paul replies. 'In the end we get the public services we are prepared to pay for.'

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Summer floods 2007

Paul Howard, Wakefield, North East Region

What Paul Howard doesn't know about waterproof flooring isn't worth knowing. The 34-year-old transport engineer from Knottingley in Wakefield is in the midst of renovating his home after the summer downpours, and top of the list is something dry underfoot.

'We've been flooded three times in the last four years,' says Paul, as he leans against the peeling plasterwork of his kitchen. 'And each time we make more improvements to the house.'



Transport worker Paul Howard went door to door warning people of the flooding

As the only flood warden for the whole of Knottingley, Ferrybridge and Pontefract, Paul has helped hundreds of people prepare for the worst. When the Met Office predicted weeks of extreme weather this summer, he went door-to-door warning people.

And to pinpoint exactly when the water would come, he set up a series of homemade markers on the field that lies between the local stream and his back door. 'There have been times when I've been out from seven at night till two in the morning, checking on the water levels', he says. 'It's hard, it's time consuming, but you've just got to carry on.'

When the water reaches a certain point, Paul can alert neighbours to move as much as they

can upstairs, out of the reach of the incoming water. 'In our house, we've devised a 10-minute plan', says Paul. 'If we know the water's coming, we can stack everything in boxes and take it upstairs. It's an exhausting 10 minutes, 10 minutes of hard graft, but it means we can keep everything dry.'

Life immediately after a flood is stressful, often meaning months of reorganisation, refurbishment and reflection. This year, as well as replacing flooring and furnishings, Paul is taking the opportunity to protect his home further – raising the electrical sockets, kitchen units and appliances to a level where future floods won't damage them.

'They've got to do things for themselves, because no-one will do it for them'

His wife Michelle mentions that their neighbours are finally starting to think the same way. 'I think people are starting to sit up now', she says. 'They're realising that they've got to do things for themselves, because no one else is going to do it for them.'

Luckily for Paul and his family, two of their neighbours have now volunteered to be flood wardens, a move that should provide him with some much-needed support.

But Paul is still keen for the community to do more. 'If the council hasn't got the capacity to resolve our situation, there are plenty of people in the community that are very skilled,' he says. 'They can use us, our knowledge and our capacity to help us help ourselves.'

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Lizzi Brown, Ridings, North East Region

As a member of the Withernsea Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Lizzi Brown has spent the last eight years helping struggling swimmers and floundering fishermen. Growing up in the seaside resort meant that Lizzi learnt to surf before she could swim – at just seven years old – tackling waves that can reach 15 feet in winter. It's no surprise then that this summer's floods didn't faze the 25-year-old Operations Delivery Team Member.

Lizzi had worked with the Environment Agency for just 18 months, after joining as part of the new trainee scheme. She spends most of her days maintaining the Ridings Area's flood defenses – work that proved essential for protecting Hull from this summer's storms.

'Although a lot of homes were flooded, it could have been a lot worse. We worked 12-hour shifts to get rid of as much water as possible'

'Although a lot of homes were flooded, it could have been a lot worse,' she explains. 'We worked 12-hour shifts manning the pump house trying to get rid of as much water as possible.'

Lizzi works in a team of just two – her co-worker is Malcolm Roydhouse, who's been with the Environment Agency for 43 years. That meant late nights and early morning call-outs as the pumps were put on manual and the constant weed build-up needed raking off.

But what makes Lizzi's story so amazing is the fact that throughout all of this her own home was under threat.

'My house was one of the first flooded in Hull,' says Lizzi. 'Although inside there was only

about two inches of water, I couldn't even get to it because of waist-deep water in the surrounding streets. I couldn't walk or drive through, so I had no idea what sort of damage I was dealing with.'

In the end, Lizzi made the decision to head back to work – helping prevent other homes from being flooded like hers had been.



Lizzi Brown left her home under water to help others through the worst of the floods

'It was worrying, not knowing what it was like at home. But the damage had already been done and there was little I could do about it.'

Lizzi wasn't the only Environment Agency employee who went that extra mile during the disaster – there are numerous tales of long hours and tiring, physical work. But for someone who only joined just a year and a half ago, Lizzi's story is particularly heartening.

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Patricia Spenceley, Earby, North East Region

This summer's floods took 71-year-old Patricia Spenceley back to the Second World War.

'It was just like the blitz,' she says. 'The water was all around and everyone was out – even those who hadn't been flooded themselves. People came with pick-up trucks and started carting sandbags around. The Salvation Army was even here, handing out hot drinks.'

Sitting in front of Pat's picturesque cottage in the small village of Earby, close to the Lancashire and Yorkshire border, it's difficult to envision her lavender-strewn garden swamped in sewage. But the small mound of sandbags still sat by the front door are a reminder of a more worrying time.



Resident Patricia Spenceley set up a village meeting to plan for future flooding

Pat talks about the first time the village was flooded: the catalyst for the community coming together to create their own flood plan. 'It was 10 August, 2004, and it was just like a tsunami. There was an absolute roar. You could hear the water as it rushed down the street,' she explains. 'We didn't know what to do. It was unexpected and we had no back-up, so we decided that something had to be done. That's when we called a public meeting.'

Now the residents hold monthly regularly meetings, and have appointed flood wardens in

strategic parts of the village. 'It took us a year or two to get independent and work on our own,' says Pat, 'but now it's a damn good group.'

This year, their planning has paid off, with the majority of Earby's residents escaping the floods. Their own water gauge allowed them to monitor water levels, and their links with Pendlebury Council meant sandbags were made available before the weather turned bad.

'Use every avenue that you can get and take advantage of the Environment Agency'

Pat explains why she thinks such a small group has been so successful in creating a flood plan that works, and what other people can take from that. 'We try to emphasise to people who are preparing for what we went through that you've got to use every avenue that you can. Contact your local council, get a reliable contact and hold local meetings. But above all take advantage of the Environment Agency.'

Pat also advises using the local media to raise awareness within the community, and she's got interviews with both local newspapers and the local radio station under her belt.

Despite being something of a media mogul, Pat insists she's not in it for the glory. 'We don't have a committee, we don't have a chair and no-one's more important than anyone else. We're just a crowd of people who've got together to try and help our village.'

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