

**Erosion of confidence and mountains : Environment Agency called to account
Cumbrian flooded communities left bereft of hope and levers by lack of transparency and dialogue**

Based on a detailed critique of evidence drawn from communities throughout England's second largest county, Flood Action Groups and others in Cumbria feel let down by the Environment Agency and its approach to water management. Triggered in part by publication in late 2020 of a report into flood management by the National Audit Office, CRAGG (Cumbria River Authority Governance Group) points to a number of serious shortcomings in the way matters have been handled in recent years. Using evidence from a wide range of occupations, locations and sectors in urban and rural areas alike, a catalogue of errors has left them in no doubt that many serious problems have lain unresolved for years.

CRAGG, which provides a wholly independent voice for communities in the county, accepts that flooding in Cumbria is a complex matter. But it has been salutary to contrast what has (or hasn't) happened on the ground (or in the water) with the policies and approaches proclaimed by the agency board in its recent strategy documents and in the assurances given to ministers, parliament and the Cumbrian citizenry.

As required by legislation stretching back over many years, communities are supposed to be actively involved in addressing actual and potential flood hazards. Maintenance has been found to be often perfunctory and inadequately resourced. This is compounded by failure to comprehend that erosion of mountains is as inevitable as erosion of coastlines, and that the moment a river was bridged (typically in Roman or mediaeval times), a river ceased to be wholly 'natural'. Due to the age and complex structure of the North Pennine and Lake District fells, the surface rock is being repeatedly dislodged and washed out. While in earlier centuries the boulders, gravel and other sediment were sensitively dredged and recycled sustainably in water management or transport infrastructure, or the county's iconic stone walls (in perfect accord with UN SDGs), this century has seen a not-so-gradual accumulation that restricts the flow of water and the safety of those in its path. Such procedures were routine under the former National Rivers Authority, but in 25 years since EA emerged they have all but ceased, except under relentless pressure from communities

Erosion of confidence at an even faster pace has resulted from the way communities and others have been treated by the agency when new water or building projects are planned in Cumbria. Consultation has only rarely been undertaken in a wholly satisfactory way in recent years, with proper notice, technical and economic explanation and sufficient time for in-depth dialogue. Failure to observe the normal courtesies when surveying or publicly discussing

other people's land or property is not infrequent. Too often, attempts at serious examination of the historical record, based not only on written and photographic accounts, but also on the lived experience of those who have spent a lifetime observing the water, are simply brushed aside by EA. The same is true of offers of help from independent professionals and those associated with local businesses. There appears no willingness to tease out the variables and arrive at solutions transparent for all concerned to see, support or challenge. And too often only either relying on very small-scale 'natural flood management' interventions or building higher and higher walls (justified, perhaps, by being cheaper than watercourse maintenance) are the only solutions that seem to have been considered -- a false dichotomy.

Given the importance of the food, natural resources, transport and education sectors in the Cumbrian economy, such security issues also extend to tourists and all others who value or depend on the magnificent landscapes and heritage. Only the most determined citizens have the fortitude to keep raising matters that often seem obvious to objective onlookers. To ensure that the lives and livelihoods of their children and grandchildren can be lived out free from fear of the next storm, Flood Action Groups have painstakingly assembled and analysed a wide range of information.

Many complaints centre on unconscionable delays in providing information or in responding to questions. Apparently uncritical reliance on modelling was highlighted frequently. More generally, there was widespread concern about unsatisfactory governance arrangements, and an unwillingness to support initiatives that take an holistic and systematic approach to the behaviour of water systems and those who understand and use them.

EA told the National Audit Office that they were always willing to learn lessons from the past, but that is not borne out by Cumbria experience. There was particular concern about the way Cumbria Strategic Flood Partnership, set up by former Minister Rory Stewart, had been marginalised and rendered effectively inoperative. Based on successes in some other parts of the world, the group feels only a root and branch reform will meet legitimate expectations of legislators, citizens and central government.

Architect John Kelsall, a spokesperson for CRAGG, says:

'CRAGG stands ready to work with DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) to engage in the sort of thoroughgoing examination and review we believe is needed. A recasting of the institutional framework could allow proper standards of scientific and governance rigour, tempered by the experience of those intimately familiar with the behaviour of water and water management in this most geomorphologically and meteorologically complex corner of Europe. Only then will the people of Cumbria feel safe in their beds and the coming generations secure in their prospects.'

To download a copy of the full report click on :

<https://cragg921507004.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/cragg-no-confidence-in-ea-feb-2021.pdf>

Note to Editors:

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2 <http://www.craggcumbria.org.uk>

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