

# After the floods in Calderdale

Can neighbourhood planning help support areas that are at risk of flooding?

## About Calderdale

Calderdale is a metropolitan borough located in West Yorkshire, in the Leeds-Manchester corridor. It has a population of approximately 200,000. Most of the area is semi-rural, with a number of small former industrial towns, two of which - Elland and Sowerby Bridge - have significant pockets of deprivation. Both areas are changing however, with increasing numbers of people who work in Manchester and Leeds moving into the area, attracted by cheaper house prices. This is perceived to be putting pressure on local people who need access to affordable housing. The area's hilly terrain means there is limited land for new development, and to compound matters, communities were badly affected by the 2015/16 winter floods with many homes, businesses and voluntary organisations badly affected.

Despite these challenges Rob Billson, grants manager at the Community Foundation for Calderdale, (CFFC) remains optimistic. CFFC received a small grant and some support from central government in January 2016 to help local people take advantage of new powers provided by Neighbourhood Planning, to control what happens in their local area, such as where new homes, shops and offices are built or what buildings look like.

"Were these areas badly affected by the floods? Yes", Rob says.

"However residents, charities and businesses united to deal with the aftermath. This has left a culture of self-help in Sowerby Bridge and Elland Park with people wanting to know how they can be more resilient in the future"

"Neighbourhood planning presents an ideal opportunity to look at whether they can guard against the worst effects of neighbourhood flooding in the area, as well as tackle wider issues in the area, such as lack of affordable housing"

"And it's all about land," Rob says. "Local people have become very passionate about the use of land and are pointing to developments up and down the valley impacting on their areas in a way that flooding hasn't before".

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@Tony4Place



A converted former industrial building in Calderdale

"We have a lot of converted mills that are now 'luxury flats,' but a lot of them are empty because the rents are just too high for local people. A lot of the people who do live here are doing so because the homes are affordable compared to Leeds and Manchester, but they're taking their money out of the area"

**NATALIE RATNER, RESIDENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANISER, SOWERBY BRIDGE**

## Getting started

To help introduce the idea of neighbourhood planning to local people, CFFC organised a number of community workshops. At the time, the community were still reeling from the floods and so the workshops were focussed on demonstrating how communities could have real influence over development and planning in their area. This included a series of 'walkabouts' to help local people engage with the use of land. The workshops sparked a lot of interest in the power that neighbourhood planning affords local communities. As Natalie Ratner, local resident and Community Organiser, says:

"Neighbourhood planning really appeals to me because it gives local people a lot more control over what goes on locally. I think traditionally people just looked to the council (to solve local challenges) and I think that needs to change.

Communities need to stick together and help each other a little bit more, and neighbourhood planning is an ideal process to help them".

Neighbourhood planning makes sense CFFC also approached all six primary schools in Elland and Sowerby Bridge to try and engage local children in shaping where they live. A workshop was run in one of the schools and some children used disposable cameras to take photos of the things they like and don't like about where they live. CFFC also promoted the opportunity to their extensive network of local voluntary and community groups. As Rob, says:

"Encouraging neighbourhood planning makes extremely good sense for the local community but it also makes sense from a strategic point of view for grant-funding organisations, like CFFC. If we can help build the capacity of local organisations to do neighbourhood planning and better understand their own local areas and needs, then they'll be able to put better applications into us and maybe we'll be able to fund some of the development work"

"Understanding places, what's happening in terms of planning and use of available land will add more depth and dimension to our work. We are in a unique position to link communities' concerns with a more strategic agenda, for instance, managing flood risk and make communities more resilient to these risks".

**ROB BILLSON, GRANTS MANAGER, COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR CALDERDALE**

## What next?

It is early days but the groups that have been involved through the neighbourhood planning workshops so far (which includes a mix of local residents, ward councillors, local service providers as well as CFFC staff) are keen to continue. Over the next few months they intend to



On walkabout in Calderdale

engage more widely to assess whether there is enough community support for the idea of developing a neighbourhood plan. This will include much more engagement with local residents as well as businesses. They also want to start recruiting to a 'Neighbourhood Forum', which is effectively a steering group of 21 local people that would take the Plan forward, including agreeing the boundary for the Neighbourhood Area. In Sowerby Bridge they are planning to carry out a skills audit of the group involved to date, so they know what skills they have, what they need and what level of resource they require in order for them to co-ordinate the work.

## Top tips

**Engage your council early on** – they can be very helpful in providing important information, such as current development plans and what support they are able to offer you. In Sowerby Bridge the planning officers attended the workshops and provided lots of useful data and maps.

**Tap into local networks and groups** – it's easier to raise awareness and spread the word if you harness local networks and community groups. One idea is to contact your local library or community centre and see if you can get a list of community groups that use their space.

**Engage young people** – not only is it important to collect the views and ideas of young people – but if you excite and engage them, then it may be easier to get local parents involved.

**Organise a walkabout** – almost everyone that attended the walkabout in Sowerby Bridge was interested in joining a Neighbourhood Forum. It's a really good way to connect people to the local area and understand land-use issues.

**Recruit volunteers** – from the local community but also beyond (e.g. planning and other students from the local university could help do some of the research and consultation) to support the work of the Neighbourhood Forum

**Get FREE help** – there is funding available of up to £15,000 to help communities develop a Neighbourhood Plan. Draft an application to Locality to help resource any capacity or gaps you have identified (e.g. someone to write planning policies, or advise on technical planning issues, or just to project manage the next few stages)

**Don't force it** – a Neighbourhood Plan might not be the right tool for every community! And even when it is, it may not be the right time. In Elland it was agreed that there are other issues that need resolving before a decision on a Neighbourhood Plan, and a Forum, can be made.