



Starting a Flood Group

The following Q&A is adapted from the UK's National Flood Forum.

How do we get our community interested?

The purpose of a Flood Group is to represent a community affected by flooding. The easiest way to start is to contact neighbors (who will contact other neighbors) and convene a local meeting at a home, school, place of worship or community center. At the meeting you can discuss shared concerns, and ask for a show of hand of those who would like to be actively involved in the core group. You probably need no more than 10 people for the core group (larger groups can be unwieldy), but this is just a guide. The size of will depend on the number of people affected by flooding and the scale of their concern.

Those who are disinclined to join a group may be glad to help by delivering newsletters, putting up posters, photocopying, or becoming flood watchers (more on these later). But even those who don't volunteer for any particular duties need to have their concerns addressed. Be sure to collect their contact information before the first meeting is adjourned.

How do we set up our new core group?

There are many ways the group can be structured: you may like to keep things informal in order to keep paperwork to a minimum. You should elect a Chairperson or Spokesperson and a Secretary to keep a record of the discussions. If you are planning on raising funding, please review any applicable local or state regulation. (This information can easily be found online. Some groups may wish to set up formally as nonprofits. They can find guidance on this from Idealist.org.

A Flood Group can benefit from having some 'flood watchers.' These may be the runners or walkers (including dog walkers) in the community who can keep an eye out for blocked drains/culverts, tree branches in rivers, and anything else that may cause a flood risk.

How do we approach tackling the issues we have?

It's a good idea to collate all the concerns of the community. At a meeting, your Chairperson can collect issues of concern on post-it notes, stick them on a poster-board and then organize them into coherent groups. At that point, an action plan can be discussed and put in place.

How do we get known?

The more people who know about your group, the more likely requests for action will be taken seriously. Photos, videos, maps, and incident records are useful ways of communicating with agencies and politicians. Photos and videos are both informative and emotionally resonant, even when they are just taken on a mobile phone. These media should be consolidated in a visible place. A Facebook page can be useful as a tool for gathering up-to-the-minute information about flooding and can help communications between members. Local newspapers and radio are usually keen to hear from people. Posters can be placed in public areas such as the library or sports facilities.

How should we prepare for meetings with government officials?

We strongly advise a non-confrontational approach (see our factsheet '*How to Get Politicians to do Things for You*' for exceptions to the rule): describe the issues on your action plan in a positive way; ask the official for their advice; allow flexibility in possible solutions; understand the restraints under which government operates (usually money); work together to find diverse sources of funds, so-called "partnership funding."

You will find that government officials generally appreciate any historic information or data you can provide. It gives a more informed picture of the area. They will quickly realize that you are the experts on what happens in your neighborhood.

How do we set up our first multi-partner meeting?

The more people you have around the table, the more people you'll have to help you identify solutions. You will need to invite people from your local city or municipality, your sewer district, the county, local forest preserve, your state department of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the local district office of the US Army Corps of Engineers and your state department responsible for floodplain management. Others groups may be helpful such as the watershed groups, local businesses, educational institutions, transit providers, and environmental protection groups.

When setting up your meeting, bear in mind that the staff attending are giving up their time to come and help you. Their needs at the end of a busy day are the same as ours: food, rest and family. They in turn need to appreciate that due to working commitments, communities tend to be tied to out-of-office hours.

All things considered, late afternoon or early evening meetings are generally best. When sending invitations to meetings, give plenty of advance notice, perhaps as much as 6 weeks. Give an option of several dates in a couple of different weeks, or use an electronic meeting-maker.

It's important to meet government officials and agencies collectively, so if one drops out of a confirmed meeting, it is wise to cancel the whole meeting and re-arrange. When confirming the date, attach your action plan and agenda.

Where should we meet?

A relaxed or informal setting is generally best, for example someone's home. If this isn't possible or the group is too large, then a community hall, school or place of worship is best. Try not to seat people in an 'us and them' arrangement.

How do we manage the meeting and how often should we meet?

Remember to be polite, listen, contribute positively, consider everyone's view, ask for advice and do not assign blame. Remember, you may be working with the people you are meeting for a long time in the future.

Discuss your action plan and the roles of government and residents. Before the meeting closes make a date for the next multi-agency meeting. This may be as soon as a few weeks away or as long as a few months, depending upon the gravity of the issues. But be sure the Flood Group continues to meet regularly until your problem is resolved.

What about our wider community?

It is important to ensure that the community at large is kept apprised of all information/plans and results of core meetings. This could either be through a newsletter, public meetings or any of the options mentioned in step 4.

Good luck, and do please reach out to us for help or guidance.