

The Guardian roundtable in association with Anglian Water and the CPSL

Why water matters for business

With an unpredictable climate of dry weather often followed by large amounts of rainfall, it's time to consider whether collective action is the best way to address water management, reports **Mark Hillsdon**

The figures speak for themselves. In 2011 England and Wales baked and the Met Office recorded the driest year for almost a century. Yet just a few months later, Britain was under water as the rain gauge went through the roof and we suffered the wettest autumn since records began.

The UK's water infrastructure was simply not designed for fluctuating weather patterns like this. To cope with the risks posed by floods and droughts, as well as the drain on the system caused by a growing population, there is a general consensus in the industry that a more robust, innovative and resilient water network is needed.

Over recent years businesses have done much to get their houses in order, tackling water audits and leaking pipes with a new zeal, mindful of the economic benefits of smaller water bills too. But now these easy wins have been achieved and businesses need to start looking beyond the factory gates, take stock of the bigger picture and consider whether collective action is the best way to address water management.

These and other issues were discussed at a recent Guardian workshop in association with Anglian Water and the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership, which featured a panel discussion followed by breakout roundtables among the audience. Panelist Peter Simpson, managing director at Anglian Water, set the scene for the event by claiming the scale and diversity of the risks posed by water management means that they cannot be addressed in isolation. "We need a new era of collaboration and joined-up thinking," he said.

It is an idea that is central to the work of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership (CPSL), where staff are working with leading businesses on a series of joint ventures across East Anglia.

According to CPSL's Gemma Cranston, water companies can no longer tackle water management alone; she suggests there needs to be a new focus on multi-sector partnerships that bring together different stakeholders, including regulators, government, businesses, NGOs and community groups, to deal with water risk at regional and national level.

In this way, she believes, a new raft of projects from reservoirs to improved rain water harvesting could help us re-address the way we manage water.

Collective action

Yet collaborations that cross so many boundaries can be notoriously hard to set up, with a range of obstacles including entrenched and vested interests, financing, ownership and even public liability.

Some of these difficulties were summed up in a "retail conundrum" set out by Ed Dixon, a sustainability manager at Marks & Spencer, and one of the event's key speakers. He warned of how a flood could be costly by damaging stock and in some cases causing a disruption of business. "The big threat for retail is flooding, with many out-of-town developments now sited on floodplains," he said.

Developers include flood defences as added extras rather than an integral part of their blueprints. This means that if they are to be constructed, and the costs shared between all the retailers in an area, agreement needs to be reached once building work has begun, which is often impossible, so the defences are never built. It's a state of affairs where it's hard to see a winner.

One delegate suggested developers should offer flood defences as standard, and that early agreement by competing retailers on the same site to share the costs would help to drive the price down, too. Another added that there was also a role for insurance companies within any collaboration, perhaps offering to pay for part of the work to protect their own long-term interests and to avoid paying out on flood damage.

Olympic success

It was a scenario that gave delegates an insight into the issues that collaboration around water management was likely to throw up. However, another key speaker, LDA Design director David Thompson, recalled a completely different experience working as landscape architects on London's Olympic Park.

His company was dealing with a stretch of the river Lea, which was prone to flooding, so a sustainable drainage system, including attenuation areas and



Should developers in places such as Cockermouth, top, offer flood defences as standard? Delegates at a recent workshop discussed the viability of such proposals PA; Anna Gordon

wet woodlands, was a crucial part of the final design.

From the outset, explained Thompson, there was a strong collaborative element to the project that helped overcome the potential pitfalls of several different contractors working together on the same job.

But what also helped, he added, was the vision and the leadership of the Games' organising committee. "It's great if you

have a client with a broad vision. They help to bring people together round the table to solve differences," he said.

Thompson's words hit a chord with the audience and following a series of brainstorming sessions, which looked at scenarios around forming partnerships to deal with rural drought and urban flooding, delegates turned their thoughts to what actually makes a good collaboration.

Key speakers

Jo Confino
(Chair)
Executive editor,
the Guardian



David Thompson
Director,
LDA Design



Ed Dixon
Sustainability
manager,
Marks & Spencer



Gemma Cranston
Programme
manager,
Cambridge
Programme for
Sustainability
Leadership (CPSL)



Ken Caplan
Director, Building
Partnerships for
Development in
Water & Sanitation



Peter Simpson
Managing
director,
Anglian Water



Robin Limb
Central
agricultural
manager,
British Sugar



'It's great if you have a client with a broad vision. They help to bring people together'

Safe collaboration

In East Anglia, Anglian Water and other stakeholders are working with the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership (CPSL) to develop two different pilot projects that epitomise the type of water management issues facing the country.

Near the Wissey river in north Norfolk, water demand for agricultural and domestic use will soon exceed supply, and this pilot will explore new collective approaches to planning, funding and the ownership of developments such as new reservoirs.

A second project is looking at sustainable urban drainage (Suds) in Peterborough and how this can bring additional benefits to a wide range of stakeholders, beyond the primary purpose of reducing flooding. It is also investigating ways to give incentives to the private sector to contribute to the scheme.

The pilot is particularly pertinent given that, while the Environment Agency is re-designating many areas as a flood risk, an agreement between government and the insurance industry, which made flood cover obligatory, has now expired, and flood defence budgets continue to be cut.

"We provide a space and a safe environment for collaboration to take shape," says CPSL's Gemma Cranston, who is confident these are just the first of many projects that will begin to look at new, innovative ways of dealing with water, and help put an end to the fragmentary way in which water is managed in the UK.



A scheme in Peterborough is looking into sustainable urban drainage

economic agencies and the insurance industry could also play meaningful roles.

Delegates were also asked to come up with a list of incentives, ideas that would encourage different groups to come together.

As well as issues about water quality and both the resilience and security of supply, employment was also mentioned, along with reduced bills, new amenity value, eco-systems, and health and environmental benefits.

The reverse of this saw a series of disincentives for potential partnerships, including the threat of a public inquiry and the loss of farmland and even ecosystems, too.

It was also noted that it's crucial to remember what is needed to ensure partnerships work, and trust was mentioned as being vital in any lasting collaboration.

"You need complete honesty at the start of the process, and a move away from adversarial relationships to collaborative ones," said one delegate, adding that at the same time someone within the group needs to be upfront and firmly establish what you are trying to achieve.

Sustainable solution

Echoing the Olympic spirit, another delegate agreed that strong leadership was crucial, and at all times someone needs to drive things, determine priorities and make final decisions.

Another added that to maximise the success of the collaboration, all parties had to feel they had the potential to make an impact and that there was something "in it for them".

Take the food supply chain, said one attendee. If a crop fails, to keep the shelves stocked retailers have to look abroad for supplies with all the additional costs of freighting in produce, not to mention the extra food miles.

Instead, and as part of a collaboration, that money could be used to help finance a long-term, sustainable solution such as underground rainwater storage or a new reservoir. This in turn could serve local agriculture and safeguard food supplies.

The sheer number of possible collaborators also opened many eyes. Water companies, farmers, developers, local authorities, retailers, distributors and manufacturers were mentioned as possible partners. Housing associations, eco-

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Report commissioned by Seven Plus and controlled by the Guardian. Discussion hosted to a brief agreed with Anglian Water and the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership. Funded by Anglian Water and the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership. Contact Chris Howells on 020 3353 4870 (chris.howells@guardian.co.uk) For information on roundtables visit: guardian.co.uk/sponsored-content