

The Colin Wiles blog

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Before the flood

As we enjoy a sultry heat wave, the catastrophic [flooding](#) in Germany and the low countries seems a million miles away – but, rest assured, it will be happening here before too long.

The overwhelming cause of the devastation in Germany and the low countries – some of the images show whole streets ripped up and huge sewage pipes exposed – has been the unprecedented levels of rainfall. In parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia they had 148 litres of rain for every square metre within 48 hours, in an area that would normally have about 80 litres for the whole of July.

Hundreds of people have died and there are [indications](#) that the early warning system failed, with warnings from meteorologists not being passed on or issued to or by local authorities to the population at large. Germany's decentralised federal system of government might also be at fault, a factor that has also been responsible for the poor vaccination response.

The German floods are on a larger and more devastating scale than any past events. The Rhine and Meuse flooded badly in 1995, but England and Wales have had major flooding events in 1998, 2000, and 2007, and more recently in the winter of 2109/20. When so much water falls on hills and upland areas it has to find a way to the sea.

Some commentators have blamed the straightening and canalisation of rivers, allowing water to move downstream more rapidly. Building on floodplains, changing farming methods, and deforestation are also likely culprits, as all of these factors allow water to hit the valleys more quickly and prevent natural floodplains doing their job. Solutions include tree planting, rewilding, building more [water storage systems](#) to provide for times of drought, and re-introducing beavers.

There is a great deal of academic research on the psychology of flooding and its impact upon mental health and wellbeing. If you issue warnings too soon, people will tend to lose interest and carry on as normal. Too late, and people prefer to see what others around them are doing rather than rely on official voices. But it is clear that those affected by flooding will bear mental scars for a very long time.

I cannot imagine what it must be like to find knee-deep water in your living room. The government's own research found that flood damage can increase the chance of facing mental health problems, such as stress and depression, by 50%, while a quarter of people who have been flooded still live with these issues at least two years after the event. Flooding also hits the poor hardest. The government's own figures state that low-income households

are eight times more likely to live on floodplains, and 61% of low-income renters do not have home contents insurance.

As I said, floods will be happening here soon, but the question is, will housing providers be ready for it? Probably not. The main cause of these accelerating flooding events is climate change. I first wrote about this in 2007 in a publication for the CIH called [The Future is Unwritten](#) and I have written numerous [articles](#) and [blogs](#) since then.

HQN has also taken a strong stance on climate change and urged providers to put in place strong strategic plans to ensure that newbuilds are adaptable to a changing climate and that existing stock is retrofitted.

Flooding is only one aspect of this, of course, but HQN's [members' survey](#) in 2019 found that many providers had a deficit of leadership on climate change. Almost three quarters felt their employer was not doing enough to cut emissions, and only half had an up-to-date strategy. For many, it was a case of 'business as normal', and I doubt that this has changed.

There is simply too much complacency about the issue, either it is a case of *"nothing I do as an individual can make a difference"* or *"nothing the UK does will have an impact when other countries, such as China and India, are responsible for so much of the world's carbon emissions"*.

At a local level, my own town of Sandwich in Kent is a case in point. We have just hosted the Open Golf championship – for the past three months heavy juggernauts have been up and down my road building the golf city that was required for the week of the championship. Helicopters have been flying back and forth. Over the week of the event itself my road was clogged with thousands of buses, trucks, and cars. "Normal" life is back with a vengeance.

In the town more generally, drivers seem hell bent on leaving their engines running when they are stationary. I frequently ask these people (politely) if they would mind turning off their engine – it is illegal according to the [Highway Code](#) – and the responses are always the same: *"I am just going"* (they're not) or *"I don't want to drain my battery"*. For these people, climate change is simply not on their minds. We cannot go on like this.

This is the challenge we face as a sector. We need to work from the individual upwards, so that behaviours change at every level: organisational, residents, public bodies, and within governments. Above all, we need strong leaders to step forwards who can cajole, lead by example, and set a clear strategic direction. Are you out there?

About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

