

CASE STUDY PROVIDING A REFUGE AGAINST FLOODING



N.B. This case study considers only one possible approach, which will not be suitable for every church. Always seek professional advice.

Key Points

- St Cuthberts Church in Fishlake acted as a refuge for a significant part of the village that flooded in late 2019.
- The church was in continued use by the community and emergency services for five months following the flood providing space, warm drinks and access to food and clothes.
- The church remains a pivotal part of future flood resilience in Fishlake, reliant on church volunteers to open and coordinate the churches response.



1 St Cuthberts stands in an elevated position, just high enough to escape the flood level in 2019.



2 The flood water remained for a long time, as can be seen in this image from early 2020.



3 The church collected donations for those who could not access their own possessions.

In November 2019 Fishlake was flooded in a way not seen since the 1930s. The flooding was fluvial in origin (from the river), but it didn't come straight from the river as many expected, rather up through the ground straight into gardens, and impacted the vast majority of the village including houses and amenities, aside from one pub which worked with the church assisting with food provision.

The flood waters did not recede for a significant period, leaving many people without access to their belongings and food, and without a dry place to be. Therefore, the church remained open and serving the community for the next 5 months continuously as well as providing a base for the emergency services to work from.

For more information, see the [church's website](#) or its entry on the [Church Heritage Record](#).

Previous Level of Preparation

- St Cuthberts is a medieval church that was built slightly elevated from the rest of the village in a position that meant when the flooding began the church was raised above the water level and remained so throughout the flooding period.
- The church had a reasonable volunteer base including very active church wardens, although has been in a period of interregnum for some time, so was without a clergy member. It was well known in the community that the church would be dry if there were to be a flood, but there was no plan in place for required actions in a flood situation.

What was the role of the church during and after the event?

St Cuthberts was in a period of interregnum so the responsibility for managing the church's response to the floods fell largely to the two church wardens. As the flooding began to become obvious throughout the village, rescue teams and the emergency services were called and boats used to evacuate residents.

The day after the flooding began the church warden began receiving phone calls from neighbouring villages who had begun organising collections of useful items (blankets, food, clothes etc.) eventually receiving items from as wide afield as Wales. They immediately reacted and opened the church to the donations and to the village as the church represented the only building physically large enough to cope with the sheer number of items and people who might need to access them.

After the flood the church:

- Acted as a dispensary for useful items as well as a collection point for donations
- Provided a warm and dry space for the community and emergency services to shelter in (and in some cases stay)
- Had a key role in spiritual and emotional support for many community members
- Acted as a base for emergency responders including the Fire Brigade and the British Red Cross

How was this response work funded?

The heating was kept on throughout this time period (of 5 months), but, like other churches in this situation, the costs were covered through emergency grants from a number of sources, including:

- The local council
- The diocese
- Financial donations from around the country

All items distributed were provided for free and there were minimal costs beyond the heating bill.

How is the church helping the community to become more resilient in the future?

Fishlake will likely be flooded again in the future as a result of climate change. Those involved in St Cuthberts at the time of the flood and now recognise the important role the church will play in any future flood events, as well as the important, cohesive role of the church in regular village life. As a result of this St Cuthberts has created a community meeting space in their building and now holds regular coffee mornings and events that are strengthening the link of the church with the community and their volunteer base. They have a number of materials for use in a similar situation including life jackets and duvets, as well as contact details ready for important emergency contacts in the church.

What could others learn from this case study?

1. Create a contact list with details of relevant emergency services, accessible within the church.
2. If a church is in danger of becoming isolated following a flood event, consider creating a emergency food store as donations may take time to reach more inaccessible flooded areas.
3. Be aware of the risk factors associated with local rivers and other watercourses, and how to understand warning signs for imminent flood events.

“If we’ve had a good bit of rain, people get nervous. Last year we had a really close event... we’d do what we had to again”

Church Warden, St Cuthberts