

Dear Editor [25-11-2020]

With Covid rampaging the country surely everyone should be doing their utmost to avoid ANY community being at greater risk of flooding? From a public health point of view the displacement of a considerable number of people (Storm Desmond affected 515 properties in Keswick alone) from their homes, moved temporarily for safety to a school hall or hotel, would do wonders for virus transmission. We know that our local emergency volunteers are prepared for this scenario but it will certainly complicate providing assistance. Beyond the initial impacts of evacuation and clear-up, the months of reinstatement of people's lives and homes would be extended and the compounding effect on mental health for those involved would be horrific. A flooding emergency is bad enough at the best of times but during a pandemic.

This year, above all others, it might have been prudent to ensure that flood risk was minimised - and yet our community is in a more vulnerable situation for the time of year than is normally the case.

Thirlmere began to overflow at 11.30am on Tuesday, 24th November. This, in itself, does not mean that Keswick is at risk of flooding – but it does mean that the additional safety space the reservoir provides is gone. Thirlmere's level went up by over 1.6m in the first wet weekend of this November. That is the sort of space we need to hold back just one storm - never mind a series of Atlantic fronts which are a regular feature of a Cumbrian autumn and winter.

Thirlmere is about 28% of the Greta's catchment. It can offer us the chance to hold back a vast amount of water. To put it into context over the last 4 years the reservoir has given us between 1.83m and 3.58m of space around this week of the year. Indeed in 2015 there was still 1.7m of space, reduced to nothing by 30 November and 30cms of overflow before Storm Desmond ... and we all know how that panned out. The numbers speak for themselves.

The "agreement" for the current trigger releases of additional flows were/are seen by us, if not United Utilities (UU), as a starting point, not a tablet of stone never to be re-addressed. Back in 2010, recognising that the releases could not keep pace with inflows, UU were looking at increasing the volumes but had problems with their outlet infrastructure which made that intention stall. The new West Coast pipeline connections now allow greater reservoir releases. Such flows (and more) are often experienced when the reservoir overflows but are surely far better achieved in a planned way between storm events when other rivers in the catchment are not peaking.

KFAG have repeatedly pointed out that Keswick never floods from the River Greta if there is storm space in Thirlmere. We have demonstrated the positive impact storm space in Thirlmere can have, even for extreme events like Storm Desmond.

Both Thirlmere and Haweswater are now overflowing. UU has 100% water stocks which is much more than the average of 78.6% for this time of year (last year was 73.9%). The water overflowing from the reservoir has no value to UU. Frankly we would prefer that UU were able to use the water. It is not our fault that UU still rely on Victorian engineering and can't divert more south because of the restrictions in the aqueduct.

It is time the Environment Agency acted as a Flood Risk Management Authority. It seems that the water companies are out of their control and those at the top, in DEFRA and in Government, have so far refused to consider legislation for reservoirs to be part of the basket of measures to manage floods.

UU have other options in drought conditions. Thirlmere contributes only a small proportion of the water supply that UU needs (albeit the best quality). It is time they recognised a duty of care to the communities below their reservoir. Does UU REALLY want to tell the community they aren't prepared to put any effort into giving us 3m of space in winter because we might not be able to use a hose in July?

In the long term we believe that it is still possible through UU/EA working with us for a significant reduction in flood risk to be achieved, and we are up for that challenge. Our attempts to work with them are not to alter the concept of trigger releases, but to get to a more effective management regime by using increased and varied flow rates originally envisaged by both parties back in 2010.

For now, we are asking for a measured practical response in an exceptional year where the community risks would be heavily compounded if flooding happened alongside Covid 19.

Yours sincerely
Lynne Jones
Chair
Keswick Flood Action Group