

WATER CHIEFS REBUT RESERVOIR CRITICISM AFTER FLOOD THREAT WARNING

People's homes and lives in Keswick are being put at risk because of the "persistent mismanagement" of Thirlmere reservoir. That is the claim being made by the chairwoman of Keswick Flood Action Group (KFAG), who says businesses in the town are also being endangered by continued delays in controlling the possible flow of water from the reservoir.

Lynne Jones, who was awarded the MBE for her work with KFAG, spoke out after Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis caused local flooding and raised local concerns on successive weekends this month. "The situation is absurd. This is not a story of flora, fauna, and fish. It is a story of homes, health and heart attacks," said Lynne Jones' Mrs Jones, whose own house and B&B business in Crosthwaite Road has flooded in the past. She says KFAG has identified that the risk of local flooding is being made worse by the "persistent mis-management by United Utilities and the Environment Agency's handling of Thirlmere reservoir." Natural England was also criticised by Mrs Jones, who said the three organisations were "putting Cumbrian lives and businesses in danger whilst they play the blame game over an outdated water-release strategy at Thirlmere Reservoir."

She added: "All we are asking for here is a common sense approach and a commitment to the duty of care these organisations have to the local community, not just passing the buck and denying responsibility. Our action group has demonstrated the benefits to flood risk reduction by better management at Thirlmere, yet we're still waiting. "The current strategy means insufficient volumes of water are released at certain trigger levels, thus the reservoir can be at, or close to, capacity before a storm event. The latest KFAG report, commissioned after Storm Ciara, suggests that had United Utilities used two already in situ valves to pre-emptively lower water levels, Thirlmere Reservoir would have provided enough storm space to withstand a major rainfall incident and further prevent the risk downstream from flooding the town of Keswick and surrounding areas. "Yet instead of flood protection taking precedence over all other considerations, KFAG can reveal that United Utilities are prohibited from releasing increased volumes of water until they receive permission by their regulators, the Environment Agency and Natural England, who propose conducting trials over the next two years to determine what the impact a proposed new flow regime may have on the area's river habitats."

She said infrastructure upgrades to Thirlmere reservoir had been slow, adding: "It is nothing short of a disgrace after all the assurances we've had from United Utilities over the past nine years of the valve work supposedly being prioritised, it has not yet come to pass.

We have been patient far too long and the recent weather helps to concentrate minds. Someone has to be accountable for the way the years have gone by and our situation has not improved.” ‘

The River Greta which flows through Keswick has two main tributaries: the Glenderamakin and St John's Beck. The discharge from Thirlmere into St John's Beck represents nearly 30 per cent of the River Greta's catchment area. As far as K FAG is aware, Keswick has never flooded from the river when Thirlmere is not overflowing. A spokeswoman for United Utilities said: "There is no mis-management at Thirlmere, in fact we go above and beyond our regulatory obligations to provide some flood storage. We are working together with the Environment Agency on the most sensible approach for operating the reservoir. "There is a very real risk that pre-emptive water releases at the volumes being suggested ahead of a storm would themselves cause flooding, environmental harm and a risk to the safety of people living and working downstream. That is precisely why detailed studies have to be carried out before there are any changes to the operating regime at the reservoir. "The fact remains that Thirlmere exists for the purposes of drinking water supply, and 75 per cent of the water that contributes to the flood risk at Keswick does not come from Thirlmere, it comes from land that is outside of our control."