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What Social Factors Influence the Durability and Functionality of Community Flood Groups?

Sophie Laidlaw | Neil Simcock | Patrick Byrne | Michael Landry | Sarah Percival

Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Correspondence: Sophie Laidlaw (s.m.laidlaw@2017.ljmu.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

With flood risk increasing in many places worldwide, it is vital to develop solutions to mitigate flooding impacts and increase local flood resilience. The creation of Community Flood Groups (CFGs—grassroot community groups who provide representation for previously flooded communities) is one such avenue. Whilst these grassroot groups can coordinate local mutual aid and support in response to flooding events and provide a political voice to reduce flood impacts for some of the most current flood-prone communities, they can be precarious in their longevity and functionality. The aim of this paper is to provide an initial analysis of the social and institutional factors that influence the durability and functionality of CFGs. A questionnaire was distributed to all CFG members in England and Wales to gather first-hand opinions on the operation of CFGs. Data analysis identified 50 factors felt to influence the durability and functionality of CFGs. These were split into 6 main groupings (Collaboration and wider outreach, Relationships with Key Flood Actors, Group management and working, Membership dynamics, Knowledge and education, and External Factors). Results highlight that clear communication and collaboration are vital to the success of CFGs; however, these activities are complex, with CFGs having to manage relationships with many different actors including community members, independent facilitators and institutional representatives. The dynamics of group membership can also cause continuity and longevity issues.

1 | Introduction

Flooding is widely recognised as one of the most detrimental and costly natural hazards worldwide, accounting for around 40% of all weather-related disaster occurrences (Ohl and Tapsell 2000). The number of flood-related catastrophes has increased by 134% since 2000, compared to the two decades prior (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2025). A combination of climatic factors (intensifying storms and rainfall events) and human-driven factors (such as land-use change and urbanisation) is resulting in increasing numbers of people being exposed to flooding (Agonafir et al. 2023). Finding ways to reduce the impacts of flooding in communities is of critical importance.

Community involvement is considered important in many aspects of Flood Risk Management (FRM). This has been implemented in the European Flood Directive 2007/60/EC, with requirements to establish public participation mechanisms to ensure citizen involvement (Wehn et al. 2015), as well as being a central element of the Water Framework Directive (WFD), included in Article 14 (Newig et al. 2014). In England and Wales, Community Flood Groups (CFGs) were established by the

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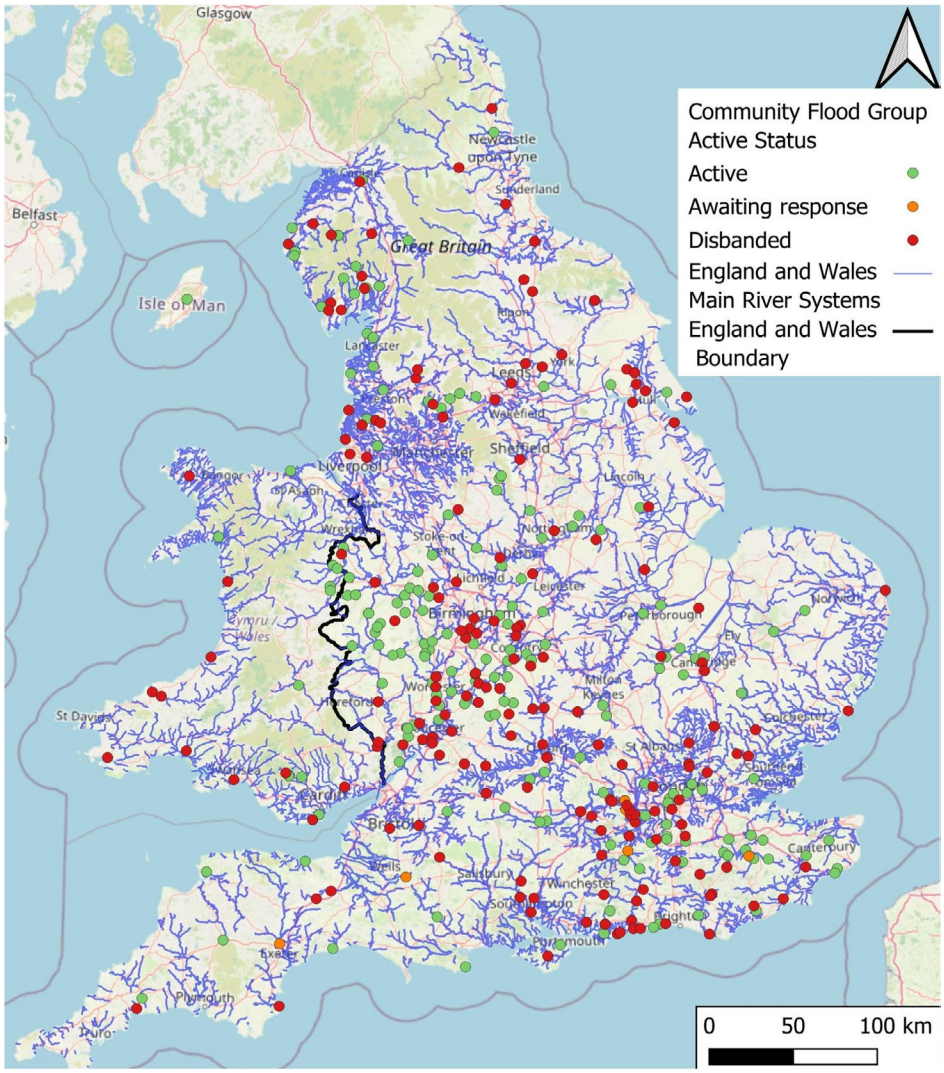


FIGURE 1 | Geographical representation and active status of known CFGs in England and Wales.

National Flood Forum (NFF) in 2002 (Kitagawa 2025) to help support local communities and their resilience to the impacts of flooding.

CFGs (also known as Flood Action Groups) are local, volunteer-run organisations whose primary purpose is to assist communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from flooding. Actions undertaken by CFGs can include improving local flood awareness, assisting in the communication of flood risk warnings, offering aid and support following flood events, and providing a political voice for flood-prone communities. There are over 400 recorded CFGs within England and Wales (Figure 1). Many of these were initially established by the NFF (the oldest and main flood charity in England and Wales), local authorities or concerned residents, although once established they operate relatively autonomously from formal institutions and have no official reporting requirements or channels.

However, over time the primary source of external support for CFGs is the NFF who act as an independent facilitator and work with both the CFGs and other Key Flood Actors (KFAs). Their stated role is to support CFGs through any issues they may face and seek to ensure the CFGs are prepared and knowledgeable before, during, and after floods (National Flood Forum 2020).

CFGs play an important role in advocating for their local area with national government or regulators and providing mutual aid and community support following flood events (Forrest et al. 2017; National Flood Forum 2020; Environmental Audit committee 2025b). They can assist KFAs such as local government and utility companies, by providing crucial lay knowledge about local flood risk; this can entail, for example, limitations within national flood risk maps for their local area i.e., identifying where and what is flooded/impacted in reality during a flood event.

When CFGs function effectively they can also have a substantial positive impact on the local community. After the town of Churchtown in Lancashire, England, experienced severe flooding in 2015 and 2016, causing enforced evacuation of many homes within the town (Churchtown Flood Defence Group 2016), the local CFG advocated for a permanent flood defence. The CFG acquired £30,000 of funding for the project that was completed in March 2018 (Newground 2022), with no major flooding recorded since completion. However, this is not the case for all CFGs.

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Yet despite CFGs playing an important role in improving community flood resilience and reducing flood impacts and viewed by national government as a vital part of England's flood resilience system (Environmental Audit Committee 2025a), the most recent flood resilience review acknowledges that they are often overlooked and poorly supported by KFAs. Even though support for such groups was a recommendation from the review Pitt (2007), CFGs are required to be largely self-sufficient, self-governing and self-driven. Over time these crucial groups may face many challenges, including lack of formal funding, no legislation surrounding the groups' roles and reduced community support. These can affect CFG functionality and longevity (McEwen et al. 2018), resulting in many becoming dormant or disbanding over time. At the time of writing, 46% of CFGs are known to have disbanded (Figure 1). A dormant or disbanded CFG can reduce flood resilience in areas that need assistance, increasing the potential impacts (including costs and damages) of flooding and leading to higher levels of flood vulnerability throughout England and Wales.

Therefore, it is vital that a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the long-term durability of these CFGs is developed. This study begins to address this need. As phase one of a wider research study, this paper utilises results from a questionnaire with CFG members; its aim is to identify contributing social and institutional factors that shape the operation, functionality and longevity of CFGs. The results from this paper will inform further research, ultimately leading to the development of an innovative theoretical framework for CFG durability and functionality. This will outline and connect the key determinants of CFG functionality, developing a deeper understanding of these key groups, their current roles and their future possibilities in FRM policy and practice.

2 | Methodology

This article covers phase one of a multi-phased project (outlined in Figure 2). This phase included a preliminary desk study, a review of the Flood Action Group Resilience Pilot Study, and initial Community Flood Group questionnaires to form a base understanding of potential factors that can impact the longevity and functionality of Community Flood Groups.

2.1 | Pilot and Desk Studies

In order to develop the CFG questionnaire, results from a pilot workshop conducted in Cumbria, Lake District in 2022. This was a single day workshop with 19 participants from 14 different CFGs across Cumbria. This included 4 exercises that visited CFG practices, resilience, functionality and their relationships with KFAs. The data collected was primarily qualitative in nature, with activities encouraging participants to write down their thoughts and experiences of their CFGs. Key results from these activities were used to highlight the current knowledge held by the PI and research team regarding the functionality and practices of CFGs. This was then used to inform the initial design of the CFG questionnaire.

An in-depth desk study was then conducted in order to assess any existing literature not only on CFGs, but also on mix-methodological approaches, qualitative approaches, and social community research. This was conducted using Scopus and Google Scholar using key word searches (including 'Flood Action Groups', 'Community Flood Groups', 'Voluntary Group Functionality', etc.). Results were screened for applicability for the project considering functionality, leadership, communication, collaboration, and long-term continuity. This was used to finalise the questionnaire design, including the distribution and analysis of results.

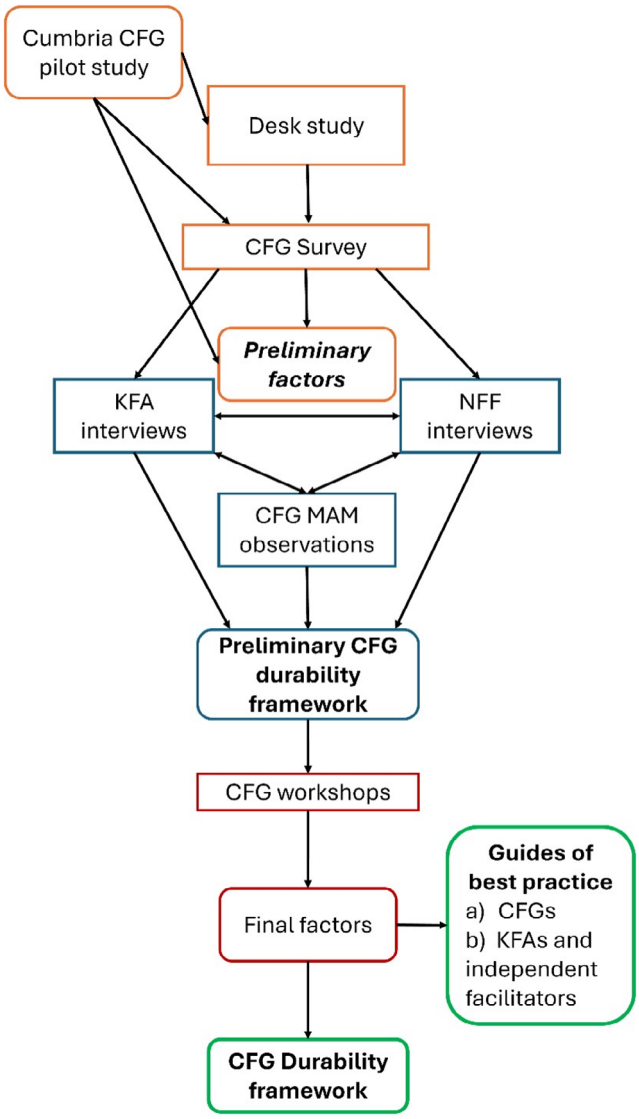


FIGURE 2 | Research phase diagram. Phase 1 covered in this study is in orange.

2.2 | CFG Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was designed to collect CFG members' opinions on the current functionality and practices of their groups. Topics covered the demographic profile of groups (their age, gender, location), strengths/weaknesses of the groups, and relationships with KFAs. As this was an exploratory study, survey questions were predominantly open-ended to allow respondents to provide rich detail and, by

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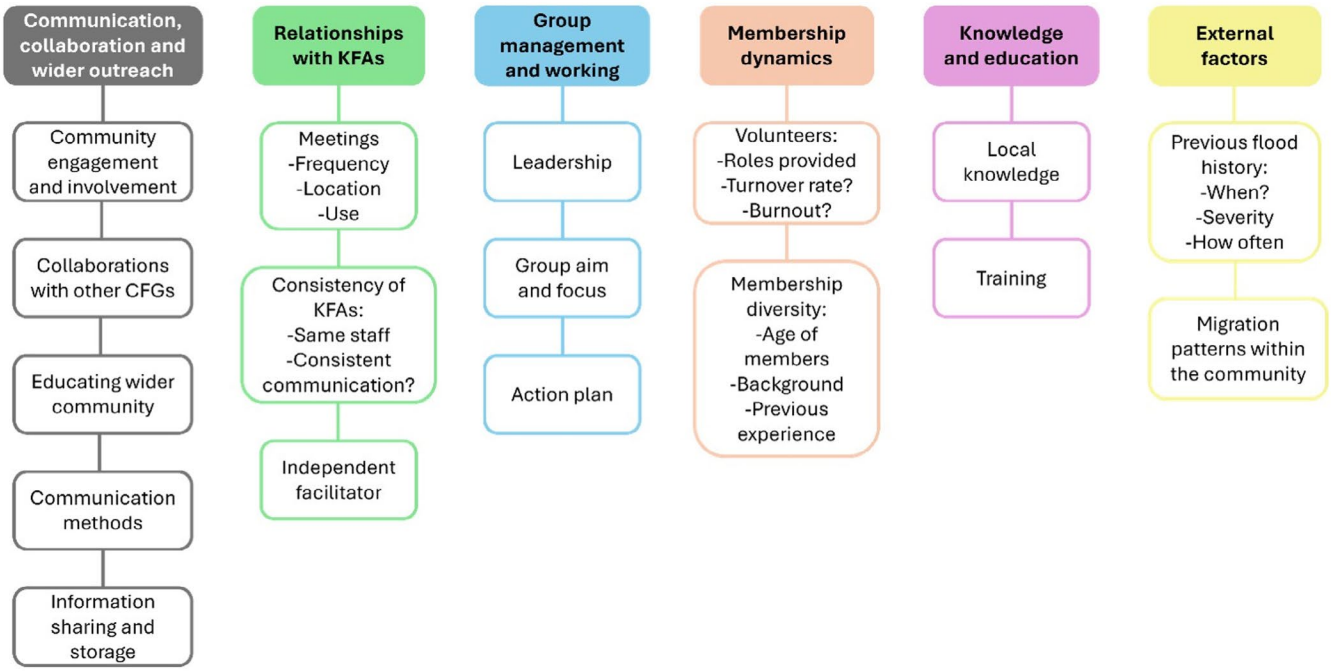


FIGURE 3 | Diagram outlining each theme with associated factors.

answering in their own words, reveal unexpected findings or ideas (Neuert et al. 2021).

The questionnaire was distributed to all known CFG members through emails sent via the NFF and Environment Agency and further advertised on social media (LinkedIn and Facebook) and the NFF website. This was open from 01/08/2024 to 21/06/2025, using JISC Online Surveys, taking each participant around 10–15 min to complete. Surveys were also provided to NFF officers who could provide CFG members with printed versions if required. A total of 132 responses were received.

As with many qualitative data methods, there were difficulties with participant recruitment. Even though questionnaires are one way to collect a large amount of data, many CFG members can experience survey fatigue, generally due to over surveying (Ghafourifard 2024). Therefore, considerations were required to be made to collect the data required. The use of an independent facilitator (i.e., NFF) was used to assist in this, as they have developed relationships with the CFGs, building trust which is essential for facilitating civic engagement (Lansing et al. 2024).

2.3 | Factor Identification and Consolidation

A reflective thematic analysis approach (see Braun and Clarke 2019) was conducted on all open questions. NVivo software was used to help organise codes, which were identified inductively through a close reading of the questionnaire responses. Following the first round of coding, several codes were consolidated to remove repetition and ensure consistency. This resulted in an initial 69 factors (i.e., social and institutional variables that shaped the functionality or longevity of CFGs), which were then placed through a 2-stage sifting process. Stage 1 identified further similarities between individual factors and combined them into a single code (e.g., 'Drive of the group' and 'Group focus') to ensure brevity and avoid repetition. Stage 2 removed factors that were mentioned but considered barriers to groups achieving results, rather than factors that impacted their durability or functionality (the aim of this study). This process also removed factors that were mentioned (such as Tenancy) that can affect the flood risk of the area but are unlikely to affect the CFG durability. This sifting process resulted in 50 remaining factors.

Individual factors were consolidated into 6 overarching themes that each represent a dimension of CFG durability: Communication, Collaboration and wider outreach, Relationships with KFAs, Group management and working, Membership dynamics, Knowledge and education and External factors (Figure 3). Considerations were also made for how each potential factor could be measured, further indicating their potential suitability for inclusion. These will be taken forward to Phase 2 of the project for further consideration.

3 | Results and Discussion

There were many common themes that were identified within the desk study, CFG survey and pilot study results that indicated potential CFG sustainability factors (see Laidlaw, Simcock, et al. 2026), discussed in the aforementioned 6 overarching themes (Figure 4).

3.1 | Group Location

134 questionnaire responses were received from 108 different CFGs across England and Wales (Figure 5). 42% of these groups were based in the Midlands of England, many of which are along the River Severn. This area is also where the most active groups are located. The Severn catchment area, which many of the

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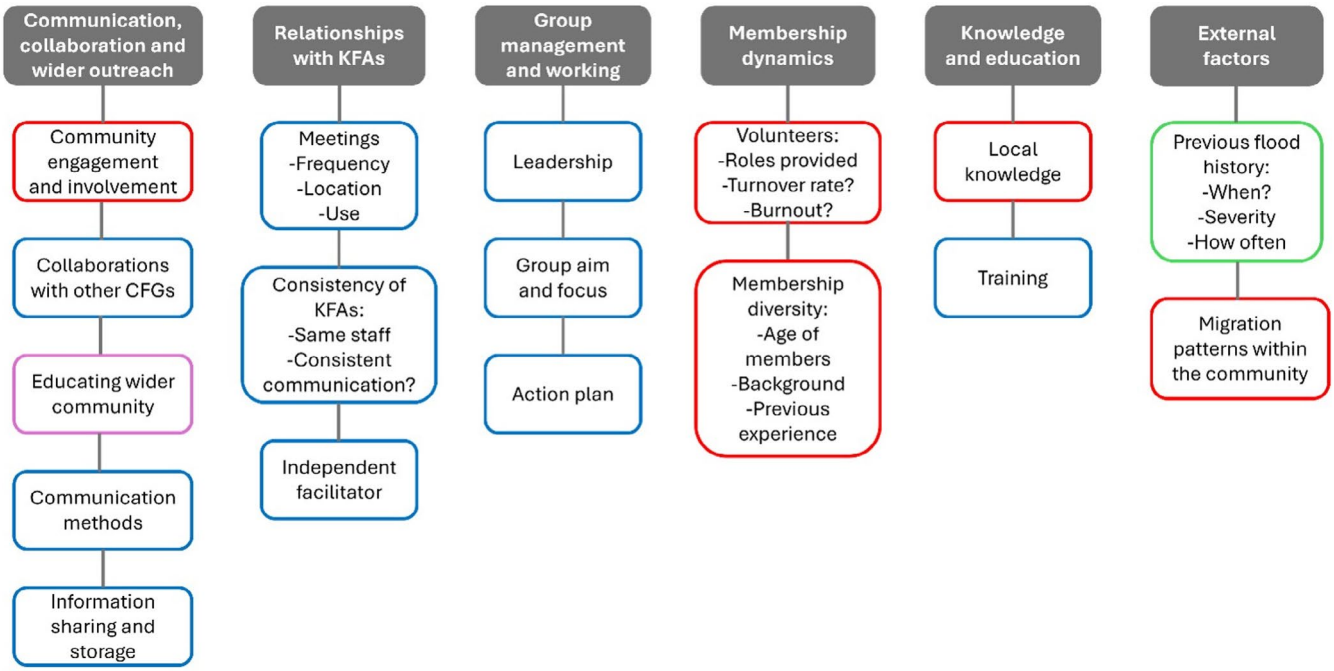


FIGURE 4 | Visual representation of each overarching theme and factors considered within each, colour coded into Social (Red), institutional (Blue), hybrid (Purple) or contextual (Green).

groups are in, experiences yearly flooding, with the most recent notable flooding in 2020, with around 1600 properties being flooded (UK Parliament 2020). There are also numerous FRM initiatives and schemes within the area in which CFGs are involved in, INCLUDING THE Severn Valley Water Management Scheme, NFM schemes and Property Flood Resilience Schemes. This could be an indicator as to why there were many responses from this area. There was also a notable lack of responses from CFGs in Wales; however, when the questionnaire was conducted, there had been recent major flooding in South Wales, in the areas that have active CFGs, which may have dissuaded participation from these groups.

3.2 | Communication, Collaborations and Wider Outreach

One of the main themes identified was 'Communication', which was mentioned as both a strength (*15% of responses*) and a weakness (*13% of responses*) of CFGs (See Laidlaw, Simcock, et al. 2026). This theme further divides into more specific subthemes: (i) Communication within CFGs, (ii) Communication with the wider community, (iii) Communication with KFAs.

As with many other sectors, communication is crucial in being able to deliver collaborative and effective decision-making (Politi and Street 2011). As task complexity increases, more interdependence is required to improve team performance which requires effective communication strategies (Cheng 1983; Johnson 2014; Butchibabu et al. 2016). Additionally, effective communication within a volunteer group can help create certainty within the group (Kramer et al. 2013), which can be key in volunteer retention, giving members a sense of purpose, reducing possible burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013). Therefore, ensuring open communication within CFGs, especially in times of difficulty, is crucial for the groups to be effective.

However, of those respondents who identified communication as a weakness of their CFG, 27% stated that communication *within* their group was problematic. Whilst this is only a minority of respondents, given the aforementioned importance of effective communication such issues are likely to raise substantial challenges. Communication issues reported included "Having the time for better communication with each other" (Participant 72) and "Lack of response within group when there's a trick peace of work" (Participant 105). Such responses suggest that time constraints, owing to the multiple commitments faced by volunteers, can be a cause of communication challenges (Sextus et al. 2024). Furthermore, open and honest communication with the wider communities is vital. Transparent communication can serve several purposes for CFGs, including providing vital flood risk information to communities (Rollason et al. 2018), whilst also accounting for past community experiences, differences of opinions and perceptions of the validity of information that can help with future communications (DeBree et al. 2024). However, many CFGs experience challenges with reaching and communicating with them (personal correspondence with National Flood Forum). The use of social media is viewed as a strength by the groups, with 30% of those who mentioned communication as a strength when referring to social media (such as Facebook, WhatsApp or social media in general). Participants referred to the use of "*a WhatsApp group for the flood group members, and also a much larger village support group chat that, if there is an alert for others' benefits, can be very helpful to share*." (Participant 110), as well as "*Useful communications with the community via the '... Flood News' Facebook page*." (Participant 35).

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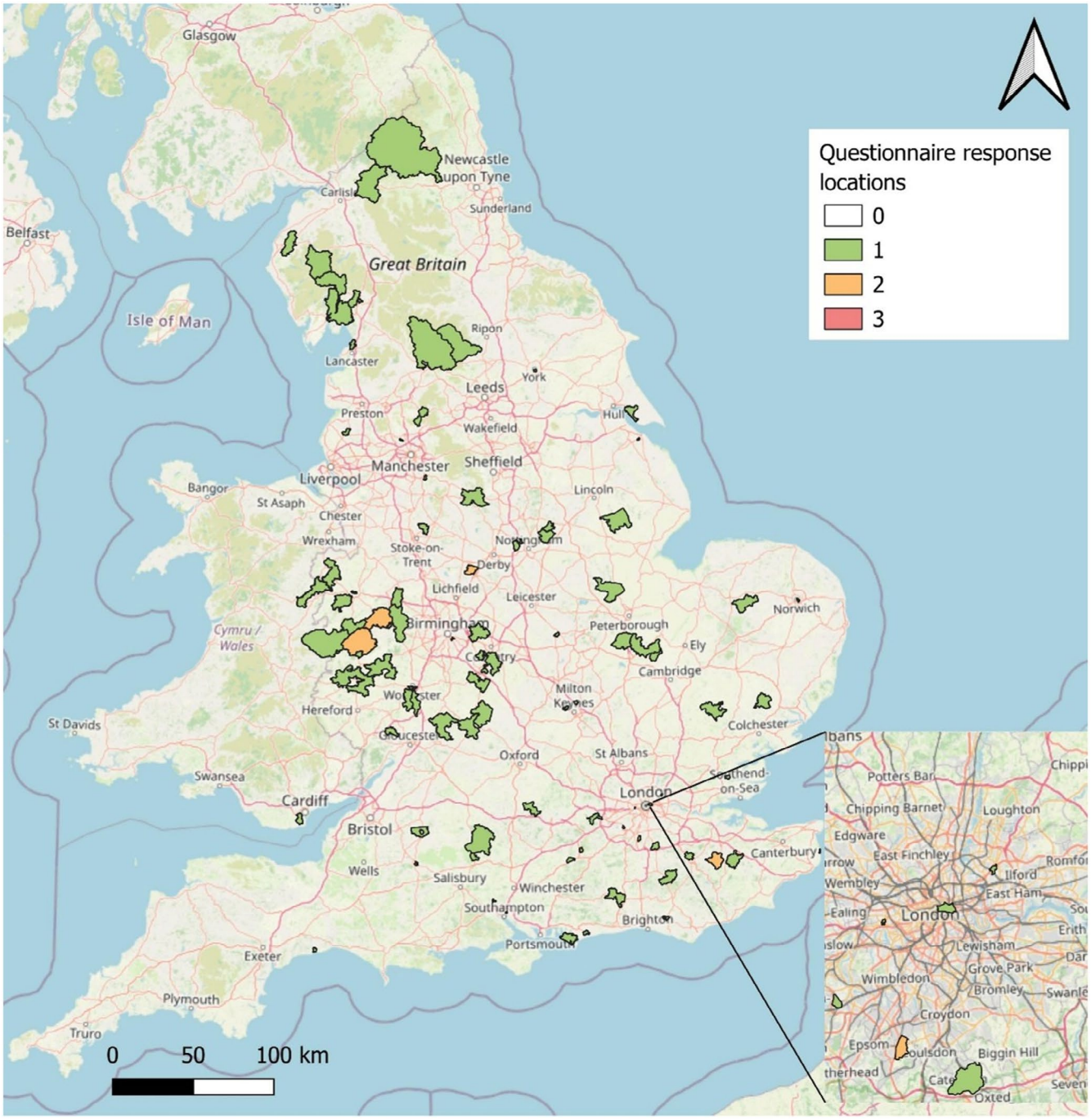


FIGURE 5 | Map indicating group locations of questionnaire responses at Local Authority level.

Although social media can be effective during disasters, such as flooding, by allowing communication between friends and family, facilitating the creation of online communities and enabling collective coordination (Velev and Zlateva 2012; Mauroner and Heudorfer 2016), it can cause difficulties if it is the sole method of communication with the wider community. One of the main limitations is reaching community members that do not have a social media presence. If a group is solely relying on the use of social media, it can marginalise certain demographics (such as older community members or those without internet access (Talsi 2014)); this was noted by Participant 10 as a limitation of their CFG: "Trying to reach vulnerable residents who are not online, on Facebook". Ensuring that the entire community is quickly informed during flood events, is key to increasing the resilience of an area in a fair and equitable way (Nicholls 2012). As such, diversifying communication is necessary for some CFGs to ensure that the whole community is informed.

Communication with KFAs is also vital for the longevity and impact of CFGs, and for ensuring that knowledge is shared and utilised to its full potential. Currently, this communication is viewed as a limitation by 46% of respondents who mentioned communication as a weakness of their CFG. Responses focused on poor communication by the KFAs, and how this impacts the groups, including references to a "lack of information from involved authorities" (Participant 68), as well as "*Certain*

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agencies seem to not communicate well with each other, and planning issues seem to be unreachable" (participant 124). However, if there is a high staff or volunteer turnover, having consistent ties and communication with KFAs can be difficult, with the possibility of vital knowledge being lost. This was identified by Participant 94: "Lack of information sharing via Flood forum after changes in staff roles". Previous research has shown that staff turnover is considered a challenging issue within the nonprofit and professional sectors (Edeigba and Singh 2022; Irabor and Okolie 2019), with the potential of knowledge and skill loss. Open communication can be used to minimise the impact of staffing changes and maximise knowledge retention, which in turn will assist CFGs.

Ensuring that communication is open and effective with the three groups mentioned above can help improve the sustainability of the CFGs, improving their reach and impact. This may also have an impact on the collaborations available to the group members.

Furthermore, considerations of the wider collaborations CFGs obtain are vital for group longevity. 29% of responses regarding strengths of CFGs were in relation to these collaborations. Ranging from "Support of each affected resident" (Participant 51) to having "...discussions with local developers about building 900 new houses in the flood plain" (Participant 80); these wider collaborations can provide the outreach and support required for CFGs to continue long term.

Wider collaborations with external agencies were considered both a strength and weakness of CFGs. These collaborations offer CFGs opportunities that may not be obtainable without wider collaborations; with examples such as "... *an opportunity to invite speakers from those from within the flood alleviation industry to put forward alternative solutions*." (Participant 19). However, there are difficulties faced with the engagement of such agencies, with evidence suggesting a "lack of support at times by agencies/individuals" (Participant 98) as well as "reluctant stake holders of sheltered and affordable housing becoming involved in the flood plan or taking simple flood prevention measures" (Participant 20).

The CFGs' relationships with KFAs are vital in ensuring the community flood resilience is improved through co-production of potential resilience schemes. This engagement between lay community members and KFAs can help result in outcomes that are not only technically successful, but also socially acceptable to the wider community (Fitton and Moncaster 2019). However, as with many other sectors, each KFA has its own focus and agenda, each with different expectations of the CFG (Balser and McClusky 2005). This can add additional stress to the CFG members, which independent facilitators such as the National Flood Forum (NFF) assist with. It is known that KFA engagement and best practice can be precarious (Reed 2008), especially for nonprofits or community volunteer groups like CFGs, who have to work with multiple stakeholders, with many different expectations (Balser and McClusky 2005). Therefore, ensuring collaborative relationships is vital for CFG longevity and impact.

Collaborative partnerships can help facilitate capacity building between KFAs and communities (Söderholm et al. 2018), increasing the shared knowledge of the local flooding issues and possible solutions. Previously, research has mainly focused on the collaborations between 'stakeholder' groups (e.g., Almoradie et al. 2015; Evers et al. 2012; Green and Penning-Rowsell 2010), therefore a deeper understanding of how CFGs and the wider community are involved is required in order to assess how this can affect the sustainability of the groups. It has been noted by Daddoust et al. (2021) that whilst volunteers (such as CFG members) can provide skills and expertise throughout a flood event, if these volunteers are not deemed to be affiliated with a known group, KFA personnel may be reluctant to engage with them due to the perceived challenges, such as poor previous encounters with community members or lack of knowledge of CFG roles. Therefore, to reduce this risk, and ensure that the most is made from having a CFG present in a community, it is important that the group members collaborate with wider KFAs, to provide assistance when required.

3.3 | Relationships With KFAs

Agency and community engagement challenges were identified as one of the main difficulties facing CFGs (19% of responses mentioning this). In particular, difficult relationships with KFAs have been highlighted throughout the results, ranging from communication issues, with Participant 68 highlighting "sometimes a lack of information from involved authorities" to issues with "getting Regulators to listen to local knowledge and observations" (Participant 114). Improving these relationships can be vital in the longevity and most importantly impact of the CFGs, as KFAs can assist in creating a much-required cohesive network to implement flood risk management (FRM) strategies (Blázquez et al. 2021).

One reason for challenging relationships is the sheer number of KFAs that community groups must engage with (Figure 6), the relationships and collaborations between CFGs and KFAs can be difficult to manage. Research across the voluntary sector highlights this is a well-known constraint, with many voluntary organisations operating within complex stakeholder environments, with each stakeholder holding competing expectations that often require precise management (Van Puyvelde and Brown 2016). This has been observed in other studies, with Kouamé et al. (2022) highlighting that a proliferation of stakeholders complicates coordination through the creation of bottlenecks, due to the management required between several institutional stakeholders that have competing priorities.

However, examples of successful collaborations between CFGs and KFAs have occurred, including in Cockermouth, Cumbria, and Morpeth, Northumberland. These collaborations resulted in effective FRM strategies (Thaler and Levin-Keitel 2016) and suggest that strong relationships between KFAs and CFGs can be vital to ensuring the longevity and sustainability of CFGs and the effectiveness of the local FRM plans/strategies.

3.4 | Membership Dynamics

Another key factor deemed both a strength (22% of responses) and a limitation (34% of responses) of CFGs by survey respondents was

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the internal dynamics and workings of the groups themselves. A key part of group sustainability is the recruitment and retention of members, which is known to be a major challenge for volunteer groups (Reamon 2016; Warburton et al. 2018; Woolford et al. 2022).

One major factor in this is the age of the volunteers. As shown in Figure 7, 97% of CFG members who partook in the survey were over the age of 40, with 41% being between the ages of 61–70. This suggests that many of the CFG members are retired, therefore having an increased amount of free time to meet and discuss these issues. This can initially appear advantageous for community groups, as older adults typically contribute more volunteer hours on average (over 65 s have been found to have the highest median annual hours of volunteering (Han et al. 2023)). However, this creates a self-perpetuating cycle of age homogeneity. As groups become predominantly retirement-aged, working-age adults perceive a cultural mismatch and are less likely to join, particularly when they encounter leadership structures that prioritise meeting frequency over skill-based engagement. Younger volunteers require validation of their expertise and flexible communication methods—factors often absent in older-dominated organisations (Hopkins and Dowell 2022). Consequently, the demographic skews further older as natural attrition removes retired members without replacement, while skills gaps emerge that the remaining cohort cannot address.

Although previous research has found a positive correlation between volunteering and psychological wellbeing in 18–22 year olds (Cuddy et al. 2025), there is generally a lack of active engagement from young people within the volunteering sector (Aquino et al. 2025). This is surprising given the increased climate, environmental and societal awareness and concerns among the younger generation (Prayag et al. 2022; Seeler et al. 2023). This raises the question of why younger age groups are rarely involved as volunteers for CFGs and what can be done to encourage their participation.

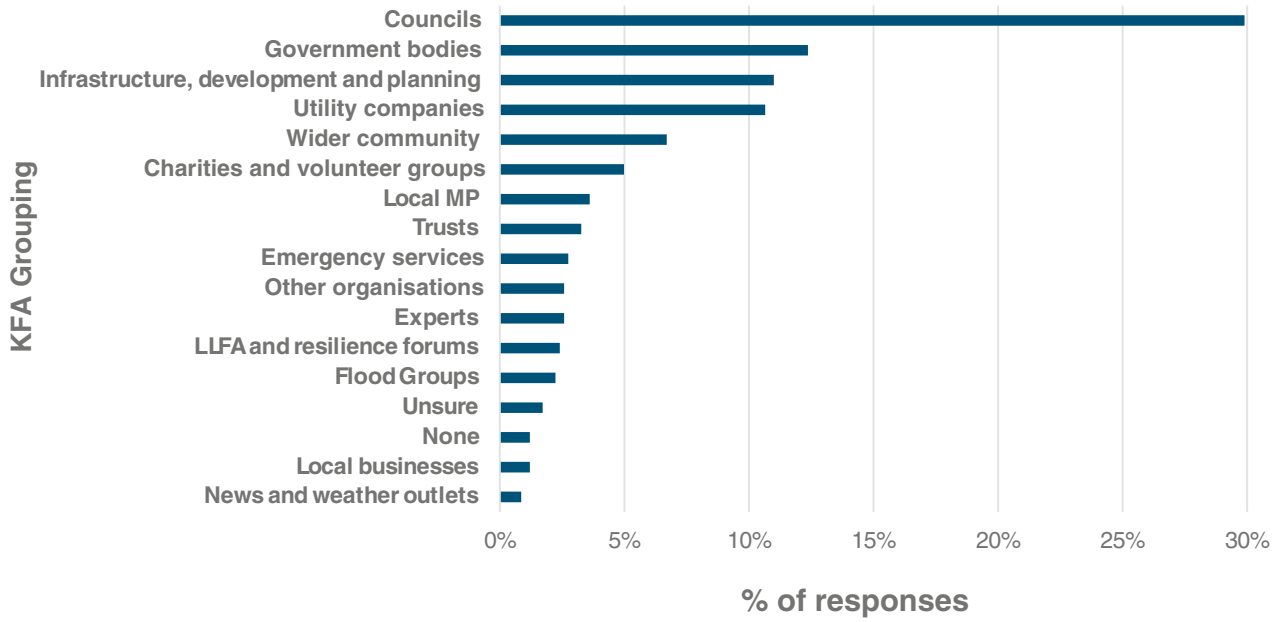


FIGURE 6 | KFA groups in response to Question 14 'What stakeholders do your flood action group contact?'.

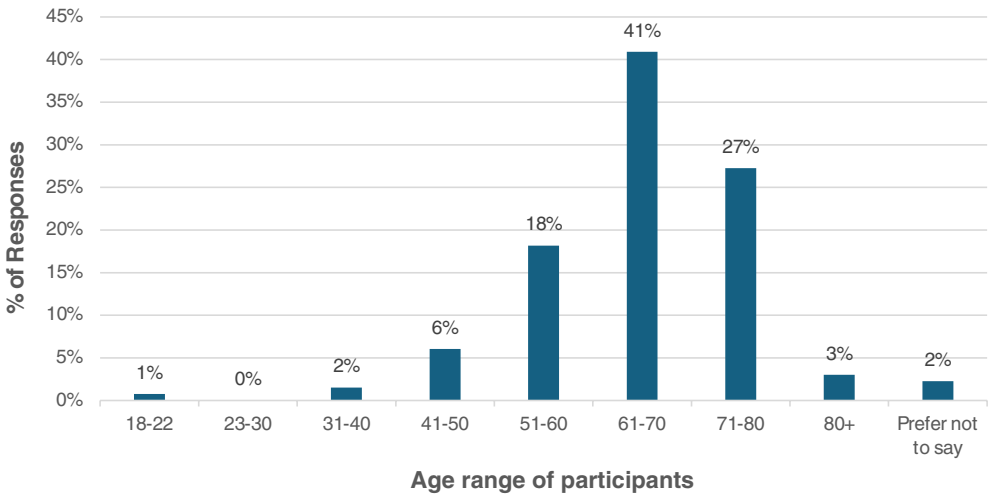


FIGURE 7 | Age range of participants.

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Whilst age is understood to affect priorities and how and where people invest their time (Yamashita et al. 2019), there are other factors that could possibly influence age of members, including the demographic of the local area (i.e., a higher percentage of older generations in a town will result in a higher proportion of older people in the local CFG) or the flood experience of the residents (i.e., younger residents may not have prior experience of a flood, and so lack the emotional motivation to volunteer for a CFG).

The disparity in the age of members can cause further issues regarding the future of the groups. Even if they are considered active at the time of the study, there still needs to be plans in place for future leadership or membership changes, as members leave due to age or health factors, particularly in rural settings, where 27% of the population are over the age of 65 (DEFRA 2026).

Furthermore, ensuring members continue to feel involved and useful within the group is vital for fostering productive group dynamics. Ensuring a balance of previous experience, suitability for job roles, and differing personality traits can be essential for the longevity of CFGs. Previous research has highlighted that the effectiveness of volunteer groups can depend on the diversity of personality traits, rather than the uniformity of them (Feinberg et al. 2008). Since CFGs appear to be increasingly age-homogenous, this can risk personality clustering around similar traits, potentially limiting the functional capacity of CFGs. For example, a group dominated by high-conscientiousness retired members may excel at procedural tasks such as maintaining minutes, scheduling meetings, and adhering to action plans, but may simultaneously exhibit resistance to innovative flood mitigation approaches or digital communication methods (Feinberg et al. 2008). Therefore, ensuring that recruitment strategies for new CFG members target diversity in terms of demographic profiles is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and long-term durability of CFGs.

3.5 | Group Management and Working

Leadership and governance are one key aspect identified by participants as a weakness of the group's dynamics (identified by 4% of responses to question 12) yet were not identified as a strength. Leadership is vital in the success of any group or organisation, especially in times that require rapid responses to dynamic changes (such as during or post-flood event) (Buryk et al. 2025).

It is important that volunteers have a defined role within the group, as role ambiguity can be negatively associated with the performance of volunteers (Allen and Mueller 2013). Therefore, having effective leadership can assist in providing roles for members, enhancing the longevity of their assistance. However, if this leadership is ineffective, it can be a contributing factor to reduced volunteer retention (Joseph and Carolissen 2022). However, providing roles that are too rigid can negatively affect volunteers' commitment (Studer and Von Schnurbein 2013). This can be a challenge faced by CFGs, as the focus of leadership can affect the retention of volunteers and ultimately the longevity of the group.

Issues were also raised by participants about planning future leadership changes. As the general demographic of group members is of older generations, participants mentioned "*Continuity planning. Who will take over when key members step down/retire/move away*" (Participant 103). If there is no one willing to take over, or a change in leadership behaviours, it can be detrimental in encouraging volunteer motivation, therefore leading to a reduction of volunteer workforces (Tsai et al. 2024), which is likely to lead to CFGs becoming dormant or disbanding completely.

3.6 | Knowledge and Education

CFG members can hold vital lay knowledge that can be critical in the success of reducing flood impacts in a community. As many of the members have experienced flooding in the past, they can build 'flood memories', which when built on and shared in a community setting can assist in the creation of lay knowledge (McEwen et al. 2017; Laidlaw, Percival, et al. 2026). Furthermore, whilst KFAs can model and predict flooding, CFG members are the ones who experience it. They hold a wealth of knowledge regarding the locations likely to flood, what level they will flood to, and possible causes (e.g., blocked drains or culverts). Participants identified this as a crucial factor in the survey results (in response to Q11 *What works well in your Flood action group? Please explain*), quoting "Identifying and exploiting the professional expertise of residents" and "community knowledge to understand cause and effect as we flash flood". This knowledge sharing can produce results for the groups, which can keep them motivated, increase collaboration and engage the wider community (23% of responses identified these factors in response to Q13 'What could be better in your flood action group?'). Increased collaborations can ensure that lay knowledge is utilised through the involvement of CFGs in decision making such as: "Ensuring that the local voluntary sector is actively involved with the decision making process for flood safety, Emergency Rest Centre school evacuations etc." (Participant 68). UK policy guidance explicitly recognises community knowledge as complementary to technical expertise, with Cabinet Office reviews following major flood events emphasising the need to integrate resident insights into statutory flood-risk governance frameworks (Cabinet Office 2019).

Community-led approaches have been widely acclaimed as essential to disaster risk management (Johnston et al. 2022); therefore, it is questioned why it is not seen as vital in reducing flood impacts and improving flood resilience, through the alterations of FRM practices. Although the UK government has highlighted the value of community insight yet stops short of mandating formal representation for CFGs in local flood-risk management plans, leaving involvement dependent on discretionary relationships between volunteers and key functional authorities rather than codified rights (Environment Agency 2022). This ambiguity risks marginalising valuable community perspectives during critical planning phases, particularly when decisions about infrastructure investment or emergency protocol development occur without local consultation.

However, even though members hold a wide range of lay knowledge, they require training and education in how to put this to the best use. Whilst lack of suitable training was only identified

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by 1 participant, it is considered a vital factor for ensuring the sustainability of the group. Providing training and roles to CFG members can reduce the possibility of volunteer burnout through reducing role ambiguity (Studer and Von Schnurbein 2013). This can help improve the longevity of the groups by reducing volunteer turnover. Training provided does not always need to be specific to flooding and reducing flood risk. This can also be an opportunity to assist group members with vital communication skills, including dissemination to wider communities and communication with KFAs.

4 | Further Research Stages and Research Applications

The results from this research will be taken forward to phases 2 and 3 of the project, to address possible gaps within the data. Phase 2 will consist of interviews with NFF staff and KFAs, as well as observations of CFG meetings, to identify any repetition of the predetermined factors, or potential new factors. This will also encompass the views of professionals, many of whom work closely with the CFGs, to identify any issues that group members themselves do not. This will increase the validity of the results, through addressing potential downfalls identified from the questionnaire data. Furthermore, considerations of how each factor can be quantified is also required to allow the creation of a functional framework. Whilst questionnaires and interviews are used to collect demographic information (Shackleton et al. 2021), it can be difficult to keep up to date. Therefore, consideration of alternative methods may be required to access the required information. Whilst some general demographic data may be accessible through Census results, these only occur every 10 years (Office for National Statistics 2026), therefore the data can become unreliable. There is also potentially the requirement for specific demographics (i.e., disabilities, location of vulnerable people etc.) to be at a very localised (property) level, which is not available through the Census or allowed due to data protection. Therefore, engagement activities, such as community meetings and in-person meetings with CFG members may be vital in collecting the data required. This is something that needs to be considered in future phases of the project to measure and model CFG durability and functionality at the level of detail necessary to help establish effective functionality and practices of these key groups.

Phase two results will be used to create a pilot CFG Durability Framework, with further consideration of factors and how to measure these. This will then be taken forward into Phase 3, where the pilot framework will be presented to CFG members, in areas of differing flood risk and group active status, allowing them to consult on the framework and present their thoughts on any improvements or additions. These opinions will be considered when creating the final CFG Durability framework, co-created with members of CFGs, ensuring it is applicable and meets their needs and criteria. The ultimate aim of this CFG Durability framework is to provide CFG members with assistance in identifying where the group needs to develop to ensure their longevity, functionality, and relationships with KFAs.

This will also provide policy makers and KFAs with further information about CFGs, their functionality and how their skill sets and knowledge can be used in future FRM strategies and policy. This will provide the opportunity to embed CFGs in policy, where previously they have been mentioned as indispensable (Environmental Audit Committee 2025a; 2025b) yet currently have no official role.

5 | Conclusion

CFGs are vital in ensuring the reduction of flood risk and impacts in communities. However, at the time of writing 46% of all known CFGs in England are disbanded, but the reasons for this are poorly understood. Based on a questionnaire with over 100 CFG members, this paper sought to understand the key social and institutional factors that influence the durability, functionality and longevity of CFGs. The analysis identifies a number of key themes:

- *Communication, collaborations and wider outreach* can act as both a strength (improving the functionality and durability of CFGs) or a weakness (hindering CFGs' functionality and durability), depending on their specific configuration. Clear communication within CFGs, with their wider community, and with other CFGs and external agencies was considered to be vital for the 'success' of any flood group. However, it was highlighted that communication with 'Key Flood Actors' (KFAs) and other external agencies was often problematic and challenging. Although CFGs utilise many forms of communication, the current reliance on social media, although valued for sharing information quickly, risks causing marginalisation of certain community members who lack internet access or digital literacy.
- *Relationships with KFAs* highlight the potential issues faced by CFG members when balancing the differing agendas, practices and expectations of multiple KFAs. This can potentially create a negative and strained relationship between CFGs and KFAs, and limited formal governance or assistance for CFGs. However, there is evidence of examples of successful and harmonious relationships between CFGs and KFAs, which merits further research.
- *Membership dynamics* are another key factor identified when considering durability of CFGs. Age homogeneity, with CFGs being dominated by older people, can threaten the long-term viability of the groups—a focus on succession planning is therefore suggested to ensure the longevity of these groups. A homogenous group composition may also limit the ideas and perspectives considered and proposed by CFGs, potentially leading to a relatively narrow set of activities and interventions utilised. Alongside this, further group dynamics such as personality, previous experience, and ensuring targeted recruitment are key in CFG durability.
- *Group management and working* indicates that clear leadership and transparent governance remain underdeveloped in many CFGs—despite being identified as critical for their functionality. For example, role ambiguity increases the risk of volunteer turnover, although having too rigid a structure can also diminish commitment.
- *Knowledge and education* identified the importance of lay knowledge that is held by the CFG members, which can be

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key for future flood risk management strategies. CFG members hold a wealth of knowledge about their experiences with previous flood events, all of which is recognised by UK policy discourse but is not formally drawn upon in policy design. However, prior to this, CFGs require formal training on several issues, including KFA engagement, digital literacy and communication skills.

The six themes identified within this study show that CFG durability requires an integrated approach that considers multiple factors. Although CFGs operate in between volunteer motivations and institutional expectations, they require policy reform to acknowledge the importance of communities and their insights to embed their formal representation in future FRM practices and legislation.

Throughout Phases 2 and 3, this research seeks to transform these findings into actionable tools: a theoretical CFG Durability Framework enabling CFGs to understand their strengths and potential vulnerabilities, coupled with policy recommendations promoting institutional recognition. The ultimate objective extends beyond preserving existing CFGs to strengthening England and Wales's broader flood resilience environment through empowered, supported, and enduring community voices.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Liverpool John Moores Open Data at https://doi.org/10.24377/LJMU.d.00000271.

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