Friends of Lewes Civic Society

Policy on Development in the Floodplain

1. Introduction

The Friends of Lewes Civic Society seeks to protect and enhance the distinctive character and environmental quality of Lewes. This policy sets out the Society's position on development proposals within the floodplain areas of Lewes and its surroundings, ensuring that growth occurs sustainably, safely, without risk of flooding and in harmony with the town's heritage and natural environment.

2. Background

Lewes has a long history of flooding. In October 2000 the River Ouse and Winterbourne Stream burst their banks inundating large parts of the town causing devastating flooding to 613 homes, over 200 businesses and many hundreds of hectares of low-lying land. Lewes was cut in half for 3 days with traffic unable to pass over the Phoenix Causeway or Cliffe Bridge. Electricity and gas supplies were cut to large areas of the town and sewers were blocked with sewage flooding, internally, into over 100 properties. 186 people spent several nights sleeping in emergency accommodation in Lewes Town Hall, the Lewes Leisure Centre and Malling Community Centre. Damages for the Ouse Valley exceed £130 million, nearly £250 million at 2026 costs.

Severe flooding also impacted Lewes in 1960, 1938, 1911,1909, 1878 and every 30 - 40 years back until records began in the late 17th century.

While flood defences have since been strengthened at Malling Brooks, South Street and River Lodge, the risk of flooding remains due to climate change, increased rainfall intensity, and rising sea levels. In other parts of the Lewes only minor repairs have been made to the flood defences at North Street and no new works have taken place at Eastgate Wharf, The Railway Land, Pelham Terrace, The Course or Tanners Brook. These areas remain vulnerable to flooding from the River Ouse and connected sources.

In October 2025, Lewes Town Council held a two-day Flood Conference and public meeting to review the 2000 flooding and the responses to it. The meeting concluded that building additional homes in the floodplain is unsustainable. A clear majority, by a show of hands, supported stopping new residential development in the floodplain.

3. Types of Flooding Relevant to Lewes

Development within Lewes must consider multiple forms of flood risk, including: -

- **Fluvial flooding** – when the River Ouse or its tributaries exceed capacity.
- **Surface water (pluvial) flooding** - caused by intense rainfall overwhelming local drainage.
- **Groundwater flooding** - when water levels rise through permeable soils, particularly near chalk aquifers.
- **Tidal influence** - when tidal surges exacerbate flooding along the lower River Ouse. Long-term sea-level rise will also increase flood risk.
- **Sewer flooding** - when sewers back up into property due to blockages or lack of capacity.

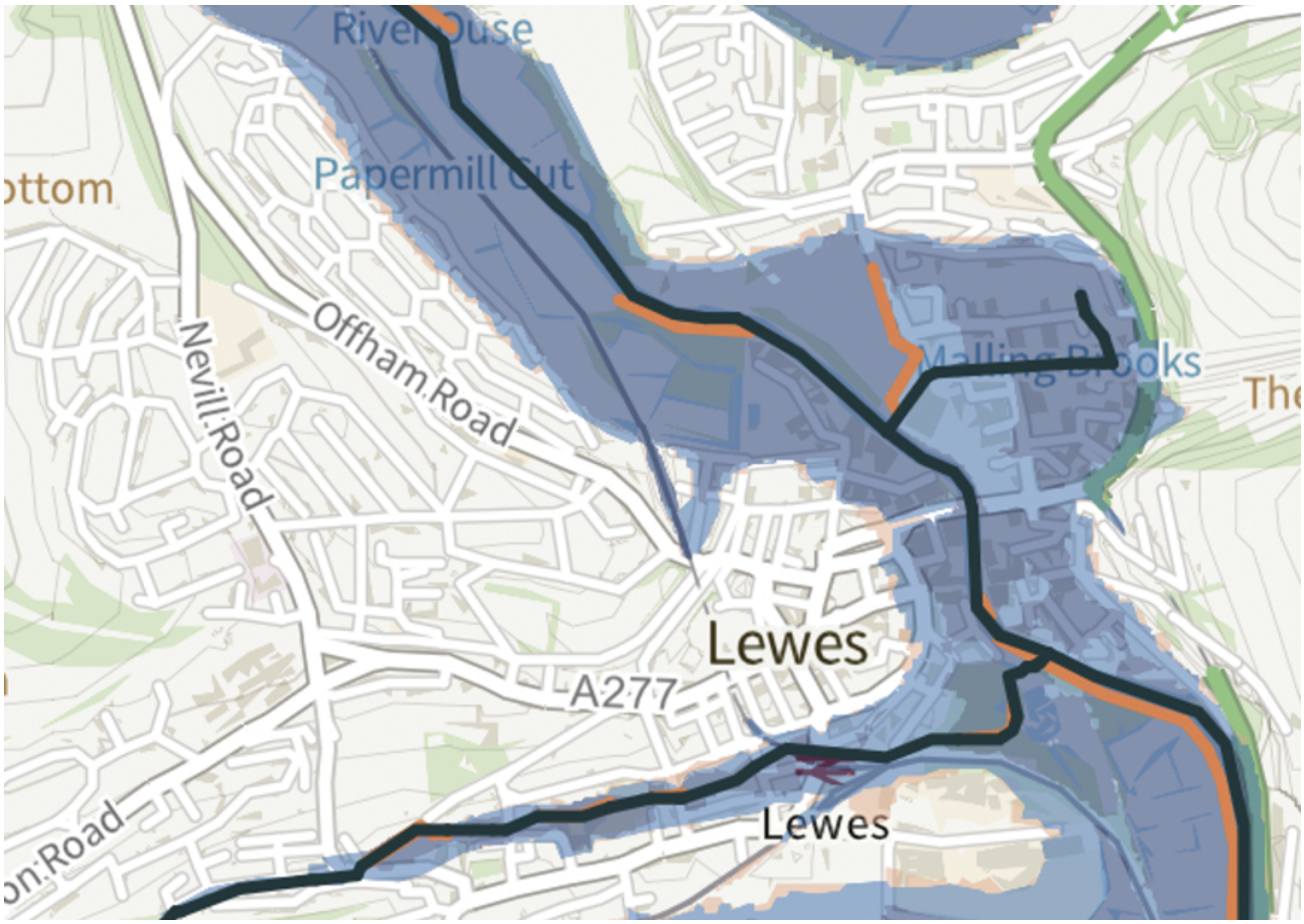
4. Flood Risk Maps

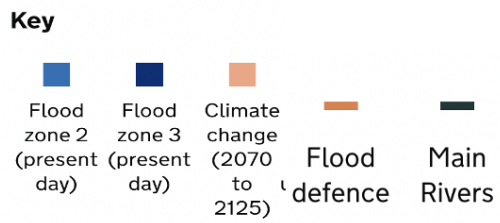
The Environment Agency publishes planning flood risk maps for fluvial, tidal and groundwater flooding. Local Authorities (Lewes DC/ ESCC for Lewes) publish maps for surface water flooding. The British Geological Service also publish information on groundwater flooding. These maps typically use the following risk criteria for the annual probability of flooding.

- **Zone 1 (Low Risk):** Less than 1 in 1,000 annual probability (<0.1%).
- **Zone 2 (Medium Risk)**: 1 in 100 to 1 in 1000 (river) and/ or 1 in 200 to 1 in 1000 sea (0.1/ 0.5 - 0.1%)
- **Zone 3 (High Risk)** > 1 in 100 river and > 1 in 200 sea (>1%/ >0.5%)
- **Flood Zone 3b (Functional Floodplain)**: Land where water has to flow or be stored in times of flood.

A large area of central Lewes is at risk of flooding and is within zones 2, 3, 3b i.e. in the floodplain. The flood risk map for fluvial and tidal flooding for Lewes is shown below and also attached as appendix 1, and the surface water flood risk is at appendix 2.

Fluvial Flood Risk map for Lewes. See appendices for Surface Water and links to more detailed online maps





5. Climate Change

Climate change is warming the atmosphere, allowing it to hold more moisture and leading to more intense and frequent rainfall. In both the UK and globally there have been an increasing number of intense rainfall deluges that have overwhelmed existing flood defences. The October 2024 Valencia floods killed 250 people, and whilst deaths from UK flooding are thankfully much rarer, drownings still do occur with 13 deaths in 2007, 2 in 2019, 10 in 2020 and 7 in 2023.

The latest climate modelling must be used for future flood risk assessments and all development planning. The Friends of Lewes consider that all housing and

infrastructure development must be free from the risk of flooding throughout its life span, which should be a minimum of 100 years. Flood forecasting and risk models should consider projected climate change impacts to the year 2150 so that when homes are built their long-term protection from flood risk can be guaranteed. It is unsustainable to build homes that will require demolishing in the future because their safety from flooding cannot be guaranteed.

The UK Committee on Climate Change publishes future climate risk assessments, including Higher Upper End Allowance (95th percentile) scenarios. The Friends of Lewes consider these high-impact scenarios must be used in development planning.

For critical infrastructure such as doctors' surgeries, health centres, police, fire and ambulance stations and supermarkets, the higher, H++, Extreme Scenarios must be used.

Climate change is causing rising sea levels, which raises the base flow height of the tidal River Ouse. On top of this, isostatic recovery adds a small but steady rise in sea level along the south coast as Scotland rises back up after the melting of the last ice age glaciers, and the see saw action lowers Southern England by 1.5 mm every year. This rebalancing of the Earth's crust will continue for many centuries to come.

Sea levels are predicted to rise by between 0.27m and 1.12m by the year 2100, with the extreme H++ scenario predicting up to 1.9m. It is essential these future rises are taken into consideration when strategically planning for development, especially housing. Given the increase in extreme rainfall events and prevalence of flooding, the Friends of Lewes are very concerned about the impacts of future climate change and believe these should be central in deciding where to build. Appropriate allowances for long-term climate change must be included in the plans to keep all new development safe from flooding.

6. Building behind flood defences

Flood defences have reduced flood risk in Lewes, including river walls at Tesco, the embankment at Malling Playing Fields, South Street and by River Lodge. These were built after the 2000 floods and they protect land and property behind them, lowering the flood risk. However, land behind such defences remains within the floodplain and their risk of flood damage is still high. If defences are overtopped, or fail, flooding will occur to similar depths as in 2000 or worse. The Environment Agency recognises this and requires defences are disregarded for planning purposes and that where alternative sites are available, these are built on first.

It should also be noted that in 2024 and 2025 there have been increasing cases in other parts of England (Derbyshire/ Monmouth etc.) where flood waters have overwhelmed recently built flood defences/ flood water storage areas and caused

devastating flooding of property thought to be protected. The Friends of Lewes consider it unsafe to continue building residential homes and infrastructure behind flood defences.

7. New Build and Flood Defences - Insurance and Maintenance

Government policy does not automatically provide funding for new or maintenance to existing flood defences that protect properties built after 1 January 2012. Homes built after 2009 are not eligible for the subsidised Flood Re insurance scheme which aims to provide affordable insurance to properties in the floodplain. Insurance was a big problem after the 2000 floods, with flooded householders not being able to get insurance, often at any cost, until the Flood Re scheme was introduced. Flood Re expires in 2039, posing a risk that flood prone properties will no longer be able to get affordable insurance. Nationwide Building Society has stopped providing mortgages to properties in the floodplain. Other banks are requiring stricter risk assessments, which is driving up the costs of mortgage rates for properties in the floodplain.

New developments in Lewes must not worsen insurance problems and lead to more expensive and potentially unaffordable home owner future mortgage costs.

8. Policy Position

Given the long history of Lewes experiencing devastating flooding and the ever-rising risks from climate change, The Friends of Lewes Civic Society strongly opposes inappropriate development within the floodplain or any area at significant risk from flooding, both now and in the future. The Society supports a precautionary approach and has adopted the following position: -

The Friends of Lewes Policy on Development in the Floodplain

- ***No development will take place if it makes flood risk worse elsewhere****.*
- ***Flood zone 3b*** *– No development will take place.*
- ***Flood zone 3****: -*
  - *No new residential development will be built unless it is floating or built on stilts with safe access and evacuation routes designed above the height of flood water, including climate change H++ scenarios for 120 years.*
  - *Industrial or commercial development, other than critical infrastructure (such as doctor's surgeries/ health centres/ police ambulance and fire stations, food and drink suppliers such as supermarkets) can be permitted, if it has safe emergency flood refuge areas (i.e. upper floors well above flood waters) and safe evacuation routes.*

- ***Flood zone 2****: -*

  - *Residential, use may be permitted if it has: -*

- *been designed and adapted to have all accommodation well above the height of all flood waters (including climate change for H++ scenarios for a minimum of 120 years);*
- *emergency refuge areas;*
- *safe access and entry points constructed to link it permanently to safe high land above the floodplain;*
- *been built on stilts with permanent safe access paths, or*
  been designed to float on water,
- *have services able to withstand the modelled height and flows of flood waters.*

- *Industrial and Commercial use may be permitted if it has safe access and entry points constructed to link it permanently to safe high land above the floodplain.*

Additionally : -

- *The Friends of Lewes consider it unsafe to continue building residential homes behind flood defences so these will be disregarded for new development purposes.*

- *Under no circumstances will the excavation of new, or extension of existing basements be permitted within flood zones 2, 3 and 3b.*

- **Greening and removing properties from the floodplain**
  - *Schemes to enhance biodiversity and improve water retention and flood resilience in the floodplain will be supported, especially where they replace hard-surfaced areas with permeable naturally planted places to increase natural shading and water absorption/ retention, i.e. tree planting, wetland creation and riverbank rewilding.*
  - *Existing green spaces will be maintained and where possible new riparian buffers (such as riverbank rewilding) that absorb floodwaters and support wildlife will be installed.*
  - *New hard surfacing that prevents infiltration will not be permitted in the floodplain or in areas that drain to areas at risk of surface water flooding.*
  - *All development within Lewes should also have sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and natural flood management measures (NFM) to minimise the impacts of roof and surface water runoffs. These will be designed to standards published by the lead local flood authority (currently East Sussex County Council) and have provision for maintenance throughout their life span, subject to the water table being sufficiently low.*
  - *Conversion and extensions of existing residential premises within flood zones 2,3 and 3b shall not increase flood risk, and will not be permitted to have bedrooms on ground floors*
  - *Infill and conversion of Industrial and Commercial premises will be treated as 'new build' and be subject to this policy.*
  - *Opportunities will be taken, as they arise, to remove properties from flood zones 2,3 and 3b. This, where it can be achieved, will permanently reduce the risk of flooding to the Lewes housing and business stock.*
  - *Lewes' historic layout and architectural heritage are integral to its identity. Development must respect the heritage setting of the floodplain, ensuring that protective measures do not detract from the town's visual or cultural character. This is especially important for future flood defences that could be required in decades to come.*

Note – Drainage on flood plains requires specialist design and maintenance. Water can become trapped behind flood defences and have nowhere to naturally drain too. High water tables, such as seen in the North Street and the Pells areas can cause problems with spring and artesian waters and groundwater flooding. This will preclude the use of swales and natural flood management techniques that might be suitable on higher ground.

9. Implications of this Policy

Large areas of Lewes are in Flood Zones 2, 3 and 3b, including all of the North Street, Eastgate Wharf and former Bus Station sites. This policy would prevent traditional housing being built, as currently proposed for these sites. The Friends of Lewes recognise this problem but believe the devastation, costs and damages from major flooding, as experienced at all these sites in 2000 and 1960 is sufficient to require a major rethink for these proposals, in order that we do not build push the catastrophic consequences of flooding onto future generations.

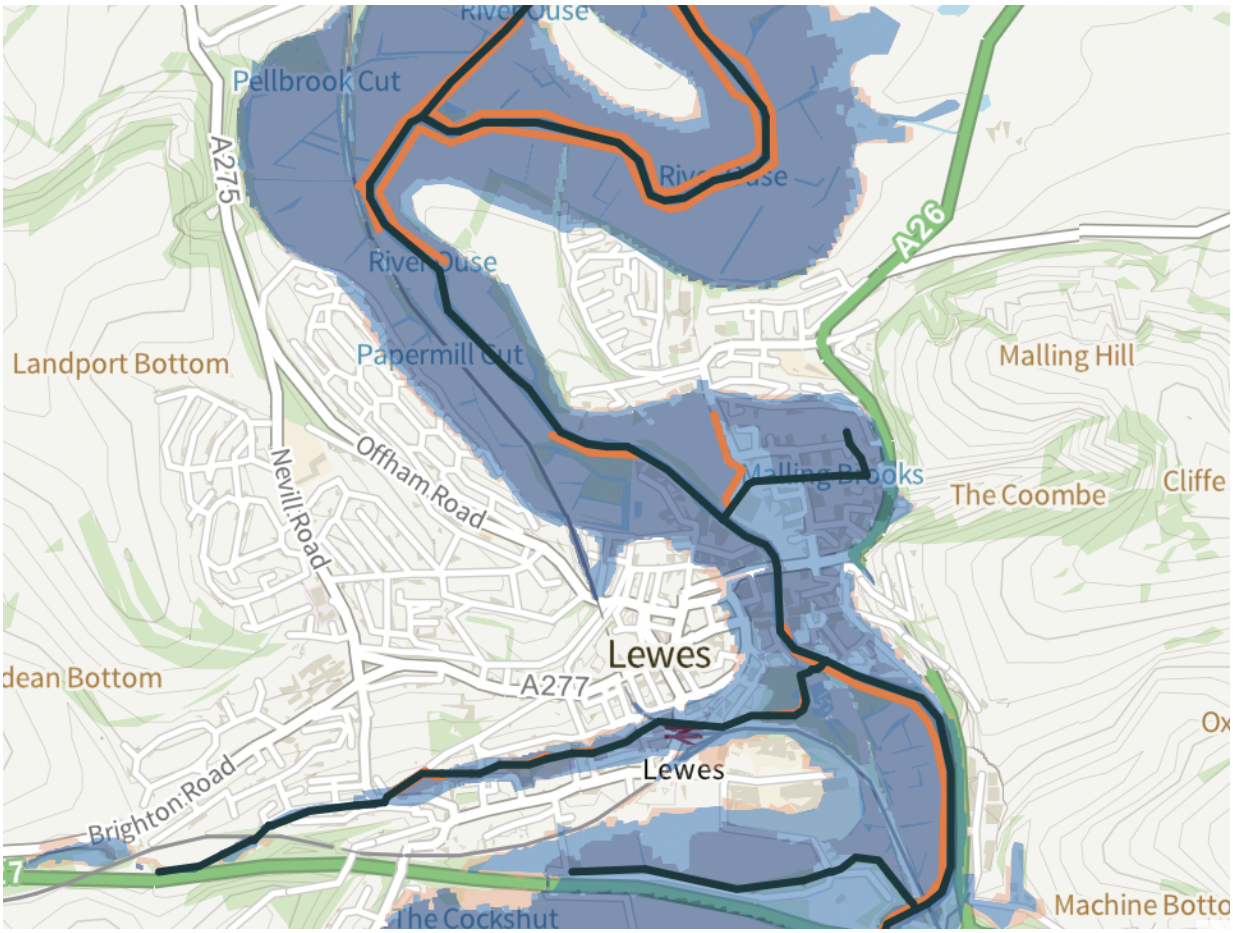
10. Implementation

The Friends of Lewes Civic Society will:

- Review all relevant planning applications through the lens of this policy.
- Engage with the South Downs National Park Authority, Environment Agency, Lewes District and East Sussex County Councils and future unitary/mayoral authorities to advocate for better flood-sensitive planning.
- Support public awareness initiatives to build community resilience to flooding.

John Gower Flood Lead, Friends of Lewes 17 June 2026

Appendix 1 *Fluvial and Tidal flood risk map for Lewes. Click here for an online version that can be enlarged to show more detail.*



Key

Flood zone 2 (present day)

Flood zone 3 (present day)

Climate change (2070 to 2125)

Flood defence

Main Rivers

Appendix 2 - *Surface Water Flooding map.* Click here for an online version that can be enlarged to show more detail.