

# Closing the floodgates

If local authorities want to avoid the pain, cost and embarrassment of yet another flood disaster, they'd better be sure they've got their drainage infrastructure mapped, says **Rod Beardshall**

As the Derwent waters recede and Cumbria counts the gargantuan cost of restoring its bridges, homes and businesses, the finger-pointing will already be well underway. Just how could this happen – again – after all of the recommendations made in the *DEFRA/Pitt Report*, following the similarly devastating floods across Gloucestershire in 2007? Wasn't Britain supposed to be on alert now, proactively ready with pre-emptive defences?

Apparently not. But we shouldn't be surprised. The sheer work that this demands is colossal, and not something that can be achieved overnight.

## The blind leading the blind

The floods that have caused such damage and heartache in the past year across the North West of England and beyond, as well as the comparable scenarios in Tewkesbury and surrounding areas in 2007, are the result of inadequate and damaged water drainage systems. And the reason such disasters keep happening (the UK has now had three 'once in a lifetime' events in less than five years) is because the complex underground infrastructure that makes up this vital system is a poorly managed mess.

Much of the country's drainage system is around 150 years old, and is poorly mapped, so that no one really knows what lies where, how it's connected together, and where problems may lurk. This



Double trouble: Two major flooding events in three years have shifted the focus over to underground (inset, Rod Beardshall)

is why, when an emergency situation presents itself, it so often catches the infrastructure authorities off guard. When the Environment Agency posts up flood warnings, the best they can do is rally the emergency services to be on standby, and begin stockpiling the sandbags.

The issue of who's responsible has undoubtedly been a significant part of the problem, though *Pitt Report* recommendations and subsequent bills that are going through Parliament are now providing greater clarity, specifically ensuring that local authorities and local

highways departments are made directly accountable for the upkeep of the infrastructure in their own areas.

Avoiding the brunt of future incidents (of which there are likely to be many, if we assume that three major events in five years is no coincidence, as the Copenhagen summit reinforced), relies on decisive action being taken now – even if this will take a lot of time and investment.

## Mapping the problem

The first priority must be to build up a detailed map of local drainage

networks, showing how these intersect and interact with other key infrastructure components, such as highway embankments. Only by knowing what's there, and where vulnerable/problematic assets are, will the local authorities be in a position to focus investment and proactively avert future problems.

This is a huge task but, if it is never started, it will never be completed, and this is the only way councils will be able to effectively manage and reduce risk.

Gloucestershire and Wiltshire are among the counties that have now heeded the warnings and be-