

Information

for County Councillors

Sheet Number:
2013-17/88

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| Date: | 20 June 2014 |
| To: | All County Councillors |

Summary of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2013-14 Winter Floods

On 17 June 2014 the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published their report into the significant winter floods experienced across the UK. The report focuses on maintenance responsibilities and maintenance funding, [and can be read here](#).

Key themes in the report

“...the avoidance of flood events that devastate communities should, as far as is possible, take priority over cost-cutting.”¹

- The Committee commended the winter flood relief effort.
- The report notes that as a nation we have lessons to learn about the capability of the country's flood defences, the suitability of the Government's flood risk management priorities, and whether sufficient funding is available in the face of increasingly frequent extreme weather events.
- Flood prevention has greater social and economic benefit than clear-up, so the Government should improve long term resilience through regular maintenance of flood defences.
- Funding must reflect local needs and be allocated transparently.
- Funding mechanisms for Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs), and how much is available, are unclear.
- Current funding for maintenance is at “a bare minimum”, and that at times of financial hardship it is likely to be cut.² Maintenance is often neglected until the only remedy is capital investment.
- Limited budgets mean low-priority areas such as farmland were sacrificed in favour of urban, highly populated areas. Farmland must be seen as a major industry and important rural employer.

¹ Final Report, p22

² Final Report, p3

- Dredging can be beneficial in certain circumstances and as part of a portfolio of measures, but it is not an all-purpose solution. Where dredging is carried out it must be maintained.
- Riparian owners' have responsibilities and must undertake the work they are responsible for. The regulatory framework should be relaxed to allow work to take place more easily.
- People do not tend to know where responsibility for flood defence lies: generally they assume that the Environment Agency (EA) is solely responsible.

The Somerset perspective

There is little reference in the report to Somerset's specific experience of the flooding. The value placed on agriculture and agricultural land, investment in maintenance, and proposed extension of IDBs maintenance responsibilities is relevant and welcomed, particularly given current thinking on the proposed Somerset Rivers Board.

Increasing awareness amongst Riparian owners of their responsibilities may create additional enforcement and education work for the Council, but overall it should improve the maintenance of the water system.

Summary of the Committee's Recommendations

Winter floods relief effort

1. Repairing and replacing damaged flood defence assets is an immediate concern, but longer-term issues such as improving resilience must not be overlooked.

Riparian owners

2. Defra and the EA must work together to improve public awareness and understanding of maintenance powers and responsibilities, particularly in relation to landowners' responsibility over watercourses. They must also improve the regulatory regime to remove barriers to landowners carrying out maintenance work.

Internal Drainage Boards

3. If an independent evaluation supports deregulation following completion of the river maintenance pilots, we urge Defra and the EA to relax the regulatory position and implement the piloted system across the country as soon as practicable.
4. Introduce public sector co-operation agreements between the EA and IDBs to facilitate IDBs to maintain watercourses. Provide the funding to support their activities.
5. Defra and the EA should make clear how often Section 57 of the Land Drainage Act 1991 is utilised and to publish the aggregate amount of payments made to IDBs under the Act in 2013/14.

Agricultural Land

6. The Committee remains concerned that the current method for allocating flood defence funding fails to recognise the importance and value of agricultural land.

7. Defra should revise its flood and coastal management funding policies so they recognise the economic and social value of agricultural land.

Dredging

8. Land drainage is important. Local solutions and the history of local drainage in catchment areas should inform measures to prevent flood risk. Where dredging is appropriate, benefits must be sustained through routine maintenance: at the moment work is often neglected until a need is created for costly one-off capital investment.
9. When dredging is beneficial as part of a portfolio of measures, Defra must give a long-term commitment to fund regular maintenance.

Allocation of funding

10. Where responsibility for maintenance work is devolved, the allocation of Defra funding should reflect this to support the organisation undertaking the work.

Additional funding

11. The Committee welcomed the additional funding announced by the Government in 2014, however a large proportion of what was referred to as "additional" would more be accurately described as "reallocated".
12. If funding is reallocated from within an existing budget, Defra must ensure that the process is completely transparent and explain clearly and in detail which other activities are receiving reduced funding.

Capital versus revenue

13. The Committee agreed with Owen Paterson that the distinction between capital and revenue funding "is a bit of a grey area in practical terms."³ Separate budgets can also create a perverse incentive to defer maintenance work until it creates a need for capital expenditure.
14. The Government should consider moving to a total expenditure classification for flood and coastal risk management funding. This would allow funding to be targeted according to local priorities.

Maintenance funding

15. Funding for maintenance is at a bare minimum. It ought to increase in line with funding for new capital schemes and reflect increased flood risk due to rising frequency of extreme weather.
16. Defra should increase revenue funding so that sufficient investment is made in maintenance work, including conveyance and dredging. Defra should immediately draw up fully funded plans to:
 - Address the backlog of appropriate and necessary maintenance work, and;
 - Accommodate increased requirements caused by the growth in numbers of capital assets.

Environment Agency funding cuts

17. Frontline services in flood and coastal risk management must not be reduced, nor must redirection of funding from one area to another cause unintended negative consequences.

³ Final Report p3

18. The Committee asked Defra to formally respond to this Inquiry report and offer reassurance that there will be no cuts to frontline flood and coastal risk management jobs at the EA.

Conclusion

The sustained and serious flooding over the winter underlined the serious need for coherent policies and sufficient funding to protect communities, homes, businesses and farmland. The Committee were pleased with the additional funding that Government released in response to the flood, but remain concerned that overall funding does not reflect increased flood risk.

The Committee were very forceful about the need to maintain flood defences, not just build new ones.

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