

Summary

Severe winds and storms affected the United Kingdom throughout last winter. The extreme weather, in combination with high spring tides, led to widespread flooding and devastated communities. The sudden and sustained nature of the winter floods underlined the serious need for coherent policies and sufficient funding to protect homes, businesses and farmland.

Investment in flood prevention is preferable to spending on clean up, both from an economic and a social perspective. The recent winter flood relief effort was commendable, but the Government must not neglect long-term issues such as improving resilience through regular and sustained maintenance of flood defence assets and watercourses.

Funding for maintenance is at a bare minimum. Furthermore, when budgets are tight, maintenance—in particular, watercourse conveyance and dredging—is the first thing to be cut. In the face of limited budgets, low-priority areas such as farmland are sacrificed in favour of urban, highly populated areas. The evidence we received demonstrates that dredging can be beneficial in certain circumstances, and as part of a portfolio of measures, but it should not be seen as an all-purpose solution. Where dredging is appropriate, the benefits need to be sustained through routine maintenance. Too often maintenance is neglected until a need is created for costly one-off capital investment. We recommend that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) immediately draws up fully funded plans to address the current backlog of maintenance work (including routine dredging) and to accommodate the increased maintenance requirement caused by the growth in numbers of flood defence assets. We urge Defra to revisit its policy for funding allocation to recognise the economic and social value of agricultural land.

Each catchment area has different flood risk management requirements and, consequently, different funding needs. To be effective, priorities must reflect local knowledge and local circumstances. We agree with the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, that the distinction between capital and revenue funding “is a bit of a grey area in practical terms”¹ and we urge the Government to assess the possibility of a future transition to a total expenditure classification for flood and coastal risk management. This would allow greater flexibility to target funding according to local priorities.

Maintenance responsibilities and powers are split between a variety of entities, including the Environment Agency, local councils, internal drainage boards and landowners. We support the introduction of public sector co-operation agreements between the Environment Agency and internal drainage boards to facilitate internal drainage boards undertaking maintenance of watercourses in their districts with the requisite funding to support their activities. However, there is an underlying confusion relating to the division of responsibilities, with a commonly held, but incorrect, assumption that maintenance is solely the responsibility of the Environment Agency. Defra and the Environment Agency

must work together to improve public awareness and understanding of maintenance powers and responsibilities, particularly in relation to landowners' maintenance responsibility for watercourses on or next to their land. Alongside this education campaign, Defra and the Environment Agency must improve the regulatory regime so that it does not create a barrier to landowners carrying out maintenance work.

Frontline services in flood and coastal risk management must not be reduced. It is essential that funding cuts do not lead to unintended consequences where funding is redirected to one operational area to the detriment of another.

Overall, Defra needs to recognise the importance of regular and sustained maintenance work in the prevention and management of flood risk and take steps to reflect the equal importance of maintenance alongside capital. The avoidance of flood events that devastate communities should, as far as is possible, take priority over cost-cutting.