



HOUSE OF LORDS

Environment and Climate Change Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Drought preparedness

Wednesday 14 January 2026

10.50 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Sheehan (The Chair); Lord Jay of Ewelme; Lord Krebs; Lord Layard; The Earl of Leicester; Lord Lennie; Lord Mancroft; Lord Rooker; Earl Russell; Lord Trees; Baroness Whitaker.

Evidence Session No. 8

Heard in Public

Questions 122 - 133

Witnesses

[I](#): Matthew Robinson, Head of Resilience and Emergencies, North Yorkshire Council; Doug Hill, Assistant Director for Place, Commissioning and Engagement, Surrey County Council; Dr Adam Comerford, National Hydrology Manager, Canal and River Trust.

Examination of witnesses

Matthew Robinson, Doug Hill and Dr Adam Comerford.

Q122 **The Chair:** This will be our second panel looking at local responses to drought. Before we start the questioning with Lord Mancroft, may I ask each of our witnesses to take a minute to introduce themselves?

Doug Hill: I am the assistant director for place and commissioning at Surrey County Council. I also chair the flood and water management group for ADEPT, which is an organisation that represents local authority directors in environment, place and transport. It is that voice of directors in place and environment commissioning at local authority level, so I will be representing more than just Surrey; I will be representing other members as well.

Dr Adam Comerford: I am the national hydrology manager for the Canal and River Trust, and I head up our water management function.

Matthew Robinson: Good morning. I am head of resilience and emergencies across North Yorkshire Council, but I am here in my capacity as the North Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum secretariat, which is a space where we bring partners together to talk about a number of risks, including drought.

Q123 **Lord Mancroft:** Good morning. Thank you all for coming. Can I jump right in at the deep end, as it were? How concerned are you about future drought risk? What is the role of your three organisations—or four organisations—in preparing for and responding to this risk? Shall we start with you, Doug, please?

Doug Hill: Am I concerned about drought? Yes, with my interest in climate resilience and future climate resilience. In my work in terms of managing water, I am perpetually concerned about either too much or too little water in that flood and drought cycle. Where local authorities are in terms of their general concern depends on where they are in the country.

Some colleagues in the east of the country are much more concerned than others about droughts, since they can see the impacts. The impacts are much more acute for them and, therefore, their planning is a lot more focused. Other authorities in the country see this more in the climate adaptation strategy space, so as a part of the mixture of impacts of climate change and where that sits, drought being one of those impacts.

There is a mixed bag of concern across the country, which is not necessarily helpful in terms of how we are trying to manage droughts strategically. There are some great examples across the country of how they are doing, particularly in the east of the country. In the Greater Cambridge area, they are looking more at integrated water management in terms of the growth agenda and seeing how they need to manage water—too much water and, therefore, too little water—and the drought impacts alongside their growth, and putting together quite a lot of

integrated water management plans and aspects like that. In areas such as Norfolk and Suffolk, which get a lot less rain than elsewhere in the country, drought usually impacts on rural communities and agriculture in particular.

Where do local authorities sit in our preparation for that? As my colleague in North Yorkshire will tell you, it is, at the moment, mainly around emergency planning for that time when the droughts will come, but also in that planning space. Strategic planning in terms of the growth and place agenda is probably what we are most focused on at the moment as local authorities, particularly in those areas that already have devolved authorities, looking at spatial delivery strategies. That is a key part of where we need to be in terms of our future planning for water security and drought.

Going back to what I said at the start, it is a mixed bag across the country, but most authorities are concerned. It depends on where it sits in their risk register.

Dr Adam Comerford: The Canal and River Trust is the largest navigation authority in the UK. Our canals span about 2,000 miles across England and Wales. We have about 74 large reservoirs that supply canals with water. Water is the lifeblood of the system, so droughts have a very significant impact on us and we are extremely concerned about the prospect of future droughts.

Recent experience has shown just how impactful those drought events can be. In 2025, about 20% of our waterway network was closed to navigation, but it is much more than just the navigation impact. It is the ecological and environmental impact of running short of water. Those reservoirs were built 200 to 250 years ago to supply the network with water. We abstract water from many other sources, but we have to balance the needs of the canals, their ecosystems and biodiversity, and navigation, with the impact potentially on the environment if we are abstracting water.

We already do our own drought planning. In terms of preparedness, we have drought plans in place and continually review those. One of the challenges is what basis those are on. At the moment, they are informal. They are our own internal drought plans and they help us prepare within the organisation for the impacts of future droughts.

It is also perhaps worth saying that the preparedness that we are undertaking links closely with other major infrastructure providers. The Canal and River Trust network is a significant national infrastructure in its own right, and the recognition of how we interface with many other organisations is really important.

Lord Mancroft: The canals are not blocked at either end, so the water does go out, like a river, at the other end. Do you keep topping them up?

Dr Adam Comerford: Trying to keep it as simple as possible, given that canals are pretty complicated, in some of our canal network there will be a terminal point where the water goes back to a river or an estuary. There will be other locations where we pump water back uphill to recirculate and recycle that water. Our canals span across natural river catchments, uphill and downhill, through the presence of canal locks.

The management of water across the canal network is somewhat unique and very different from that of the water industry and many other organisations that are managing water. We have the ability to move water across catchments as well, and already do that for our own purposes to maintain levels for navigation and the ecology of the canals, but also for other purposes such as water sales and transfers.

Matthew Robinson: I will just follow on from what Doug was talking about. I work for a local authority, but I am here in my capacity as a local resilience forum secretariat, and I have professional concerns around this. The local resilience forum, of which there are 38 across England—or 42 when you include Wales, and Scotland has its own—falls under the Civil Contingencies Act. There are a number of organisations that have statutory duties to look at a plethora of risks, drought being one. We look at it as far as the acute impacts are concerned, because there is going to be high temperature and likely heatwaves that go alongside it.

We also look at the drought risk itself, and then some of the concurrency that can occur, such as poor air quality that may come out of that as well. There is a process at a national level, where we have a national risk register, which is a dynamic review that will give us insight into the national worries around capacity and capability for things such as drought. We then take that into the local level, as Doug was explaining, so there would be one for each of the 38 local resilience forums in England, or 42 when you include Wales. That happens on a review period and, depending on where we assess that risk, we very much enter into a preparation stage for response to recovery, rather than the prevention side of it.

I do have concerns. I am more than happy to go through any of that in more detail, but my role in this is co-ordinating the various organisations involved in the response to and recovery from incidents, including drought.

Q124 **Lord Layard:** You have a remit. Is it clear enough? Are there issues as to how you should operate? What are the problems that you discuss among yourselves about the functioning of these forums?

Matthew Robinson: Local resilience forums do not exist themselves as an organisation. It is for each area to define how best to bring the governance arrangements in place. In North Yorkshire, the chair of the local resilience forum is the chief exec of North Yorkshire Council, and then I fulfil the secretariat function. I have a small amount of capacity and capability to provide the whole governance structure to make sure that we can anticipate these incidents, do an assessment of them, and

make sure that the prevention conversation is linked in. If there is preparation work that can be undertaken, we endeavour to do that so that we are in a better position to respond, recover and then learn lessons from this.

The local resilience forum does not exist as an organisation. Within the resilience action plan, which the new Government are pushing forward, it talks potentially around some of the accountability roles over local resilience forums. It is done differently in each area, but it relies heavily on what we call core category 1 organisations, so police, fire, ambulance and, in this circumstance, the Environment Agency, and category 2 organisations, which include the water industry. I hope that that answers your question.

Q125 Lord Mancroft: My original question to you asked whether you are concerned. You have told us what your various organisations and you do, but could I just repeat the question? Are you concerned? Are you satisfied that you have an answer to the difficulty of drought, or are you really worried that we do not have one and that we are going to get into trouble? As a mark out of 10, are we in trouble or not?

Dr Adam Comerford: From a navigation perspective, for the Canal and River Trust, last year showed just how impactful droughts can be, and how much more work we could be doing in terms of investment in our infrastructure, but also working with partners to help be part of the solution to drought for others, such as through water transfers and, increasingly, repurposing our network.

Fundamentally, as I said, canals need that viable water supply at all times to maintain navigation. That is our core function as a navigation authority, but there is a lot more that we could be doing with the right policy landscape and perhaps with more joined-up planning.

Doug Hill: My professional judgment is that we could be doing a lot more to prepare for drought in particular areas. As I said, in some areas where it is much more acute, they are much more ahead of the curve. There is not that consistency across the country in local authorities and how they are dealing with it. That might be fine, because it is in the north of the country where they are less water-scarce, so it is not at the top of their risk rating. Particularly in areas such as the one where I live, in Surrey, and in the east of the country, it should probably be a lot further up the risk register.

Matthew Robinson: Yorkshire entered a drought last year on 12 June, and stayed in drought conditions until 10 December. We were living it, as far as private water supply and the impact to individuals and communities was concerned, alongside some of the temporary bans. On the agricultural side, others would be better placed to talk through that.

I do have concerns, because the capacity that we have within our responders to mitigate some of those acute risks is trying. Alongside that, you will get concurrency of incidents. We were in drought conditions and

then had a large-scale moorland fire at the same time. For the acute emergency response, we need to make sure that we overlay drought with other impacts from high-temperature heatwaves and things such as moorland wildfires. I do have concerns.

- Q126 **Baroness Whitaker:** Following up on Dr Comerford's points about the interface and the importance of working with partners, we have had quite a lot of evidence about gaps in the relationship with the Environment Agency, with different accountabilities. How effective is your engagement with the Environment Agency and the water companies in preparing for and responding to drought? I am a great fan of the canal system. It is so much better to move things by water than on the roads, so your role is particularly important here.

Dr Adam Comerford: Our relationship with the Environment Agency—in Wales, it is Natural Resources Wales, because we span both countries—is, overall, a strong one at various levels. We are very well engaged with the National Drought Group, and the subgroups that operate within its umbrella, chaired by the Environment Agency.

Baroness Whitaker: Is it ad hoc or do you have formal meetings?

Dr Adam Comerford: It is formal. The National Drought Group is convened and managed by the Environment Agency, and we have a role in that, along with many other organisations. That is a regular event that happens much more intensively during drought events. When there are not droughts, it is stood down or relaxed somewhat, but our dialogue with the agency cuts across so many different levels, from what we would call abstraction licensing, which is the pure regulatory context of the amount of water we are allowed to take from rivers and streams into the canal network, right through to operational management in the event of droughts, where we may exercise emergency powers to take water in order to keep the canals viable.

Baroness Whitaker: Does it work well with the water companies?

Dr Adam Comerford: We have a really strong relationship with the water companies. We are a large player. If we were ranked against the water companies, the Canal and River Trust would come out about fifth behind the major water companies such as Yorkshire Water, United Utilities, Severn Trent and Thames Water. That is how much water we are managing day in, day out, as a charity, so we inevitably have a really strong relationship.

Some of our water transfers are purely for the benefit of the water industry. We transfer water along the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal down in the south-west, and that provides up to 240 million litres of water a day to the city of Bristol. About 600,000 people rely on that canal to get water to them, so the relationship with Bristol Water and the other water companies has to be really strong.

Doug Hill: My experience of that relationship is a bit hit and miss, particularly with water companies. It is a symptom of the fractured state

of it. In Surrey, we have five water companies that serve our customers, and that is reflected across the country, the issue being that the water catchments do not necessarily appreciate political and administrative boundaries. That makes life quite hard if you are talking to Thames Water one day and Southern Water the next. They are very different places in terms of the companies themselves.

As local authorities, we generally have a good relationship with the Environment Agency. It is mainly associated with flooding and planning developments. If we are talking with them about drought and water scarcity, it is probably a bit hit and miss. It almost requires something to have happened to encourage that relationship.

Baroness Whitaker: Whose onus is it? Is it the Environment Agency's responsibility to be proactive when something is going to happen?

Doug Hill: It is incumbent on local authorities and the Environment Agency. Nationally, there is that focus on managing water holistically rather than flooding and drought. For example, the Essex water strategy has been driven by the local authority, which formed a partnership with the Environment Agency, the water companies and farmers, bringing that together. It works really well. Local authorities probably have a convening role in encouraging that co-ordination and co-operation between those organisations, but it can be quite tricky due to the fractured nature of how water is managed.

Baroness Whitaker: The water companies being so disparate is perhaps a problem.

Doug Hill: Yes, particularly in my area, in Surrey. Anglian Water, for example, over in the east, covers a vast area and is a key player. That area is in severe water stress as well, so it is a lot more proactive in that. Getting the water companies around the table to have those conversations sometimes takes a bit of effort, in my experience.

Matthew Robinson: If I can split this into two, there was a question around preparing and a question around the response. For a local resilience forum, it is about subsidiarity. It is for each local resilience forum to decide how best to manage its own business. The category 1 organisations have specific duties under the Civil Contingencies Act, including risk assessing and emergency plans—the Environment Agency comes under that—as well as warning and informing.

As water companies, we have a similar situation to Doug's. We have Yorkshire Water, but our boundaries are not coterminous, so we also have Northumbrian Water. At a strategic level, they will convene and come together to talk around the most likely impactful risks. As Doug talked about, that will differ from location to location, and drought will appear at a different level within the community risk register for each local resilience forum. There is value in regional work, because drought does not necessarily follow boundaries in that way.

Once the local resilience forum has come together, it will set out its work at a tactical and operational level. A lot of that around drought is about warning and informing in order to support and enhance the behaviours, knowledge and, potentially, skills of individuals and communities for the drought conditions. That is what we do in the preparation stage.

In the response stage, local resilience forums will come together quite often to try to horizon-scan risks. What is likely to happen in the next three or six months? Within North Yorkshire, we were very clear that we were going to go into drought conditions this year. That then acts as a support, with organisations briefing one another and making sure that there are joint communications. If one organisation is missing a capability, it can, in essence, come and request support for it. In the examples that we have had more recently, we then move into acute emergency response for other issues, and drought is running in parallel with that.

Baroness Whitaker: That sounds like quite an effective system. Are there other partners that you all engage with, where co-operation and co-ordination might be improved?

Matthew Robinson: We are sat with colleagues from the Canal and River Trust. Voluntary and charity organisations out there do not have the same duties, so it is for the local resilience forum to decide on the appropriate partnerships that it would like to form. There are some organisations that do not have category status, which then leads to the risk of local resilience forums missing out on some of the key knowledge, key regulatory responsibilities and key actions that are carried out with drought. Not all local resilience forums may have all organisations sat around the table discussing drought.

Baroness Whitaker: Are there instances, then, where there have been problems especially in droughts, or floods, previously?

Matthew Robinson: I will answer that with a yes, because the wealth that we have in skills from the voluntary, community and faith partnerships out there is vital in a number of response incidents. You mentioned flooding. I could probably give you more examples around better partnership working there.

Baroness Whitaker: If you could write to us, that would be really helpful.

Matthew Robinson: If I take the example of the recent wildfire that we have just had, there are a number of organisations that do not have the same statutory status, such as national parks and forestry commissions, alongside the Canal and River Trust, which do not necessarily sit during the preparation stage to talk around these incidents. It then leans on local resilience forums to decide which the right organisations are to sit around. There is the example of wildfires, and there are others within flooding, where there are local community, voluntary and faith partnerships, as well as national.

Baroness Whitaker: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Dr Adam Comerford: You asked a question about other organisations and how we interact with them. One of the big things that we are doing a lot of at the moment is working with the water resource regional groups. There are five regional groups set up. They are not statutory. They were, basically, derived from the Environment Agency's national framework for water resources that was published in 2020, and a revision was published last year. Those regional groups are drawn from a wide range of water users and abstractors, from industry and agriculture to us as navigation and public water supply.

Those groups are trying to look more holistically at water resource management, particularly at times of drought, but also just all year round in any year. The difficulty is how they interface with the water industry's statutory planning for water resource management and drought planning. The partial disconnect that we see at the Canal and River Trust is that you have different planning happening on different scales. As colleagues said, the challenge is the cross-border implications of geopolitical boundaries between water companies, local authorities and other organisations.

As the Canal and River Trust, we are spread across many water companies' boundaries, but others in those regional groups will have a much more local flavour to their concerns about water resources reliability, resilience and drought planning.

Baroness Whitaker: How could it be better organised?

Dr Adam Comerford: There has been a lot of discussion about how it could be better organised. Funding is a challenge for these regional groups, because a lot of it is born of each sector and each organisation putting its time, effort and resource into this planning. It is quite difficult to ensure that everybody is working at the same pace and delivering the same quality of work when it comes to developing these regional plans.

For the first cycle of regional plans, the water industry has somewhat bankrolled a lot of the work that has gone on, even though the wider benefit comes to all water users, and the water industry is already delivering its own statutory planning.

Q127 **Lord Jay of Ewelme:** I wanted to follow up on some of the things that Matthew Robinson was saying just now. Could you say a little bit about what opportunities exist to increase local resilience to drought? I mention that partly because we have seen what the UK Green Building Council's climate resilience roadmap is and the elements of that. We have also seen that the Cunliffe review has talked about increasing the use of non-potable water instead of potable water for certain things. How does each local organisation or local authority respond to these various ideas? Who should be in charge? Perhaps I could ask Doug Hill from Surrey to answer that first, and then we will come to Matthew Robinson.

Doug Hill: Of course, there is a list. Within that, to answer Baroness Whitaker's question, the groups that we often forget are the community groups. The community and the residents themselves have a massive part to play in this. I would challenge a resident anywhere in the country to tell me who their water supplier is, where their water comes from and, therefore, what issues are associated with that. There is a lot of messaging that can be done about that, in particular around reducing consumption.

A lot of water resources management plans hinge on that first element of it, which is about reducing consumption in the first place, ahead of all the investment that they would need to make in terms of adding capacity to that. We do this with flooding and with other risks, where we work with those community groups to help them understand what the risk is and, therefore, what they can do to improve their own community resilience to that.

More widely than that, in my menu of things that we should be doing more locally, there are some great examples from colleagues across the country of where they are going at the moment with regard to how we can manage water much more holistically. An example in Norfolk and Suffolk is a project called Reclaim the Rain where they are working with landowners in particular. It is driven by reducing flood risk and encouraging landowners to hold water back. They are using that as a way of saying, "Why would a landowner use land to hold water back for somebody else? The incentive is that the water is available to use for irrigation. If you do it appropriately, there is that benefit from irrigation to you as a landowner".

The Essex water strategy, again, with farmers, is about how we can capture and reuse water on land for use in irrigation and farmland, and really encouraging that. A great example that I was chatting about with one of my colleagues was around coastal water treatment works, where a lot of the effluent just goes out to sea. Is there an option to reuse that water—which might need additional treatment for something—for irrigation of close-by farmland?

Where local authorities then play a major part is in the planning regime for this, really encouraging, in strategic development as well as the planning applications that come in, what a colleague described as water-secure development. At the moment, there is a lot of focus on local area energy plans, but why not have a local area water plan?

Milton Keynes, which is going through its city plan consultation at the moment, is looking at developers having to restrict, or do what they can to restrict, consumption of water. It encourages an increase in capturing rainwater—"rainwater harvesting" is the term—within its local plan. Developers have to apply that first, and that is incumbent on local authorities and how we—"enforce" is the wrong word—encourage that through planning to make sure that large-scale development is water-secure. It is almost that they are managing their own water supply through that.

It could be small-scale stuff. We talk about the 1% rule. In some areas, water companies are doing this. Southern Water is encouraging this in terms of water butt provision. We are talking about a proverbial drop in the ocean, but it all makes a difference.

In my own world in flooding and sustainable drainage systems, we have the new SUDS standards that came out last year. Rainwater harvesting being the preferable way of managing water is up there as the first priority. There very much are options to do those local-level things.

The Chair: We do need to pick up the pace a bit, please.

Doug Hill: Just to close on that, doing that in partnership and co-ordination with strategic plans such as the water resources management plans is where we, as local authorities, need to be.

Lord Jay of Ewelme: Matthew Robinson, can I ask you the same question? Perhaps you would also take up the point about messaging. It does seem to me that that is rather an important point, but who should be doing the messaging and to whom? We can all say that there should be more messaging, but we need to do it.

Matthew Robinson: I will not repeat what Doug said, because he picked up a lot of the points that I would and I appreciate what the Chair said about moving on with time.

Let us just pick up this whole idea of a whole society approach to resilience. This has to be a whole-UK approach to these more chronic issues, which are starting to become acute. How do we work with individuals and communities so that they have the knowledge, behaviours and skills in order to prepare themselves for drought conditions? Within North Yorkshire, we have a number of residents who are on private water supplies. When I look at the resilience of those individuals against those who are reliant on the water industry, there is a marked difference between the two, because they are living and breathing it. How can we increase resilience when the incidents are not happening? I just wanted to make you aware of that point.

Going back to the duties, each local resilience forum has to produce a community risk register, and drought may appear on that. If drought is on that, then we will talk around the warning and informing that needs to go out in order to support individuals, communities, families and businesses to prepare themselves and anticipate the drought before it comes, and to put the prevention and preparation work in.

Some of the preparing and response can end up going towards local resilience forums with their community risk register, but only if they have seen it as a significant or catastrophic risk. I hope that that answers the question.

Lord Jay of Ewelme: Is there anything about messaging? Whose job is it to tell us all that we have to do more? We will not comment on whether we should put the price up, but anyway.

Matthew Robinson: It is a shared responsibility between a number of organisations. At the national level, you have the National Drought Group within the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, so there is a responsibility across those. There is a responsibility within local resilience forums. There is a responsibility within the water industry, because it is sometimes the infrastructure that we are faced with as we go into drought conditions that can mean that there is a longevity to some of this. There is not a single answer to your question. It is a shared responsibility at the moment.

Q128 **Lord Trees:** We are inquiring about drought, of course, but we have quite often heard in this inquiry that flooding is related. They are two sides of the same coin, really. As a simple question, really, should the management of both drought and floods be better integrated and, if so, how? To some extent, you touched on it, Doug, but would you like to continue?

Doug Hill: It absolutely should be integrated. It has happened in some areas, such as Greater Manchester, with its integrated water management plan, and the Essex water strategies that I have been talking about. Cambridgeshire has an integrated water strategy as well. It works and that is the way that we have to manage it.

Residents will always ask, "How can we have a drought when it is still raining?" People flood and then it is suddenly a flood-drought cycle. How do we manage that? It absolutely should be integrated. It is complex. As the committee will know, there are water resources management plans, river basin management plans, and drainage and wastewater management plans. There are all these plans about water, and the trick is how you then combine them into a more integrated thing.

It can be done and, where it has happened, it has worked well. Local authorities in regional areas, and regional water resources companies, need to be encouraged to better co-ordinate and look at integrated water management across the board.

Lord Trees: Are they siloed, though, or does the same person or group have responsibility for both issues?

Doug Hill: The Environment Agency is a big organisation, so you will have water resources colleagues and then flood colleagues. At a strategic level, they work closely together, but, at a more local level, it is a bit harder. The perception is that it is very siloed, even for local authorities. I am a flood risk specialist who dabbles in climate resilience, so it depends on what is happening at the time. It is siloed, but there are great examples of where better integration and co-ordination really works for areas.

Dr Adam Comerford: From our perspective as a navigation authority, we feel like we are either in feast or famine. There is either too much water or too little, and the periods in between seem to be very short-lived for me. The role that I have within the trust and what we deliver in

terms of our water management is covering the whole range, from floods through to drought. Thankfully, I wear one hat, but it covers everything in terms of water management.

As we heard, our interfaces with organisations, regulators and policy are still somewhat quite siloed, so you will speak to different teams and different specialists. It is intrinsically very hard to pull those together in order to get that integrated water management. We are working with the Greater Manchester integrated water management partnership to see where the canals can be part of that solution. Sometimes they are presented as the problem. They can bring floodwaters into the wrong part of a community, or they can take floodwaters away at times. They are not designed for that, but that is their inherent nature and presence. As a water-conveying conduit, they sometimes do that, and that can present some real challenges for local communities.

The canal is often not the primary source of that floodwater. It has come from nearby, from another fluvial or other source of water, but managing that interface with all the different organisations and players within both the drought and the flood sector is very complicated.

Lord Trees: You have colossal capital resources, centuries old but still working. For example, you have an awful lot of reservoirs, 74 or 84 now. Are they connected to the public water supply reservoirs in any way?

Dr Adam Comerford: With the exception of about two of them, the rest were built for navigation. That is their primary function. Some of them are no longer used for navigation, and we are trying to engage with particularly public water supply to see whether those reservoirs can be repurposed. If navigation use is no longer viable, and there is not a realistic prospect of them being used for that purpose, can we work more closely with the water industry for it to access that water? There will be constraints, particularly if we have not used that source of water for 50 or 100 years, because those reservoirs may have taken on other functions, whether that be recreation, amenity, fisheries, ecology or biodiversity. They could have designated status. Using an existing reservoir more effectively is typically going to be cheaper and easier, with fewer hurdles, than building brand new.

Q129 Lord Mancroft: Putting together the answers to the last two questions, in particular when Lord Jay asked about messaging and who was going to send the message, what you have told us is very interesting. You talk about a lot of organisations and how they work together. In response to Lord Trees, there is clearly a problem with siloing. I have one overarching but very important and simple question. Who is in charge? Who has ultimate responsibility? Who presses the button?

Dr Adam Comerford: From our perspective and what we have seen in the past year with the drought event that took place, it was clear that the Environment Agency in England was doing a really good job of co-ordinating all the players and organisations during the event. In terms of that long-term planning, there is a statutory framework for some

organisations, but not for others. I am not saying that that is necessarily what we would want, but it is about understanding what things are the most important.

In terms of that hierarchy of particularly water needs, is it agriculture? Is it industry? Is it power generation? Is it public water supply? How do you balance and blend those? It is really difficult to categorically say who is in charge, because every organisation will have different functions, duties and responsibilities.

Doug Hill: If I may, thinking a bit more medium to long term, devolution and strategic development strategies bring a real opportunity to co-ordinate and convene better management about drought and water generally.

Matthew Robinson: My point was similar to Doug's. The mayoral combined authorities' role and accountability in convening is important in this. It is clear that there are Environment Agency and water company regulations. There is no one organisation, but regulatory restrictions have been put in place on the amount of water that farmers and businesses are allowed to extract from rivers. Then there are temporary usage bans, but who is that one organisation that hits the button? There is a shared responsibility on that at the moment.

Q130 **Earl Russell:** I have the last question, gentlemen. Thank you very much for your really interesting evidence. I want to take a slightly different tack, really. In your opinion, is there sufficient consideration of drought risks and planning at the national level? Do we need a more integrated approach to all of this stuff? If so, how should that come about? We have heard about the problems that you have, operating in your different ways at the local level, but what more would you like to see at a national level to help you achieve your objectives?

Doug Hill: There probably needs to be more direction at the national level to do that. There is the appetite to do it. In conversations with the Environment Agency and Defra, there is absolutely the appetite to do integrated water management. They just need to make that a thing and give that direction. As I said, through strategic development strategies and devolution, there may be the opportunity to do that.

Dr Adam Comerford: The national framework for water resources really starts to pull things together much more than it had done in the entire length of my 25-year career working for the Canal and River Trust and its predecessor body, British Waterways. These last five years have seen more action and more concerted effort to bring that planning together to be more co-ordinated. Yes, there is still work to be done, but it has got a lot better. The national framework and understanding the challenges that different organisations face when it comes to their own drought resilience agenda is the key point. Not all organisations will be treated as a one-size-fits-all.

Matthew Robinson: My takeaway point is prevention rather than cure. I live in the world of response and recovery, which is more the cure part. There is work that can be done in the prevention side of it. The legislation is appropriate. We have the Civil Contingencies Act, which allows us to identify risks and then talk around about having the mechanisms, response plans, and warning and informing strategies in place. We have picked up that there are some organisations that do not necessarily have a seat at the table when those go on, and how the local resilience forum works alongside some of these other partnerships. Is there sufficient consideration around it? We very much point towards, "When it happens, let us deal with it. Where are we with the prevention side of it?"

Q131 **The Chair:** As a quick follow-up on that, Matthew Robinson, do the local resilience forums have a seat or voice, or any form of representation, in the National Drought Group?

Matthew Robinson: I do not think so. To my knowledge, North Yorkshire is not invited, but we are aware, through the national risk register, that EA and Defra are leading with the National Drought Group. To the best of my knowledge, the local resilience forum does not have a seat at the table, but the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government can bring information into local resilience forums if it is appropriate.

The Chair: Could I ask the same question to Dr Comerford? I think you do have representation. Do you have a strong enough voice?

Dr Adam Comerford: Yes, we are represented at the National Drought Group. Even though we are one of many navigation authorities, we are the only one that is formally invited to it. In a way, when I present at the National Drought Group, I am talking on behalf of the other navigation authorities across England and Wales, but, given our size, most of the challenges are faced by us as the Canal and River Trust.

Q132 **Earl Russell:** We have heard that drought and flood are two sides of the same coin, but we have also heard, particularly in relation to the Environment Agency, that flood seems to take priority. Is there more that could be done in that area and that relationship with national policy?

Dr Adam Comerford: From our perspective, what we see is that floods can be hugely impactful, with a real risk to life, property and communities, and so the response is inevitably very dialled up, and very significant effort goes into flood risk management by the agency and many other partners. That is not to say that droughts do not harm people or businesses. They can lead to increased health issues and fatalities, particularly associated with heatwaves. It is not to downplay the impact of droughts, but they are typically not as impactful. Getting that support and buy-in to the activity around drought seems, inevitably, to be a bit harder.

Doug Hill: I would agree with that comment. Flooding is there. It is much more obvious, whereas drought is much more creeping. As a plug for EA colleagues who work in water resources, as massively professional

and absolutely focused on this as they are, it probably goes back to who has a convening role to make that link between flooding, water security and water quality, and to bring those together. I know that there is an absolute appetite at the EA to do that.

Q133 Lord Krebs: Just very briefly, we note that, in the national risk register, drought risk does not feature very highly. It is a 2 out of 5 likelihood, which means that it is not very likely to happen. Even if it does happen, it is only a 3 out of 5, or moderate, impact. If I were looking at it from the national scale, I would say, "Drought is not something that I need to worry about too much". Is that an optimistic view?

Doug Hill: With my climate resilience hat on, it is an overly optimistic view. We can look not too far ahead and see that combining a severe drought with a heatwave and other impacts is when the cumulative impacts really do start to hit home. As colleagues have said, that is where deaths or impacts on infrastructure start to occur. As a risk, it is up there when you combine it with the other climate risks that may go along with it.

Lord Krebs: Your point would be—and I do not know whether this is true—that the national risk register should look at interactions between individual risks, so, in your case, heat and drought.

Dr Adam Comerford: If that national risk register judgment on the impact is based on public water supply, we have, since privatisation, seen a huge amount of investment in the water industry and a lot more resilience. The targets and challenges for the water companies are getting higher and higher in terms of levels of resilience for public water supply, but there are many other sectors that are affected by droughts quite severely, whether it is agriculture and the impact on food security, or navigation and other industry that relies on the supply of water. It depends on how you judge where impacts of a drought are felt. There is a lot more resilience in public water supply than there was previously, and that certainly helps.

Lord Krebs: The residents of Tunbridge Wells may not agree with you.

Dr Adam Comerford: Yes.

Matthew Robinson: I started doing this back in 2004. When we had things such as heatwaves on the right-hand side of the community risk register, it always made me smile, because we were not living it at that time. I think 2022 and 2025 have given us a real shock in terms of where the curve of these conditions is going. You are absolutely right about the national risk register, and we need to be mindful that there is concurrency of risks. When drought occurs, there are other concurrent risks that may be higher up in the national risk register, but it does not remove the subsidiarity role of a local resilience forum. They should all have their own assessment of drought, proportionate to where they think the likelihood and impact is against risk and capabilities at a local level.

Some of the local community risk registers may have a different risk score to that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The importance of local resilience forums has been highlighted very clearly, and the fact that this is voluntarily co-ordinated at the local level is something that the committee will have to consider as an important omission at the moment in our response.

Before I let you go, we have heard reinforced today the need for an integrated approach to water management. There are opportunities coming up in the water reform Bill. May I ask each of you to write to the committee with your asks for what should be in that Bill and, before that, the White Paper that precedes it? It would be very useful to know how you think the system could be improved at a statutory level. With that, thank you very much for your time.