HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Oral evidence: Future Flood Prevention, HC 115

Wednesday 20 July 2016

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Jim Fitzpatrick; Simon Hart; Dr Paul Monaghan; Rebecca Pow; Ms Margaret Ritchie; David Simpson; Valerie Vaz

Questions 595 - 709

Witnesses

I: Matt Wrack, General Secretary, Fire Brigades Union.

II: Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and Neil Hornby, Deputy Director, Flood Risk Management, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs..

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Matt Wrack, Fire Brigades Union

- Dr Thérèse Coffey MP and Neil Hornby, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Examination of witness

Matt Wrack.

Q595 **Chair:** Good afternoon. Are you in splendid isolation?

Matt Wrack: Yes.

Chair: You are a very brave man to come here all on your own. Seriously, thank you very much for coming. It is a great pleasure to have the fire service here, because I know from experience locally in Devon that the fire brigade does an awful lot of work with flooding. We are trying this afternoon to drill down into how you fit into the picture, how you work with the Environment Agency and everything else. We will go into some detailed questions there but, first of all, would you just tell us who you are and your claim to fame, please?

Matt Wrack: First of all, thank you very much for the invitation to speak to the Committee. It is very welcome. I am Matt Wrack; I am the General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union. We represent the vast majority of firefighters all across the UK, in terms of whole-time firefighters, retained firefighters, people who work in our emergency control rooms and people in very senior managerial/officer positions involved in planning for flooding incidents. We have been discussing, in quite a lot of detail, the issue of floods, the fire service's response to floods and planning for it, particularly since the 2007 floods. It has been a theme of a lot of our work since then.

If I can perhaps give a bit of my experience to set the scene, I was a London firefighter for 22 years before my election to this position. I did attend floodings quite regularly, mainly domestic premises and industrial premises. In my career, I think I only attended one major flooding where a whole area of streets and houses were flooded. The thing that struck me, looking back on that, was that we were totally ill-prepared for it. We had no adequate equipment, no personal protective equipment and no boats. Things have changed massively, but the biggest thing that strikes us is how much more it is part of a core function of what the fire and rescue service is doing today, compared with 15 or 20 years ago.

There is a big debate within the fire and rescue service. There is a big debate among our members. It is debated each year at our annual conference. Yes, it is very much a part of the discussion that we want to have with our employers, with governments and so on.

Chair: We also thank you and the firefighters for the work that you did through the floods and the extra hours that everybody put in to help.

Matt Wrack: I have always tried to visit the scenes of major floodings. I did not get to this winter's ones, but I have attended a number of them. I pay tribute to our members who, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, have worked well beyond their contracted hours, many of them away from their homes. In terms of local authority services, the

English fire and rescue services are unique in being sent away sometimes for four, five, eight days at a time, with little or no notice. There are some quite remarkable rescue stories that our members were involved in as well.

That starts right at the start in terms of mobilisation. The emergency calls that came in over the last winter really inundated our emergency fire controls. A sometimes much-neglected part of the workforce did a fantastic job, in terms of mobilising to those various incidents.

Q596 **Chair:** Thank you. My first formal question is that you talked about right back to 2007, but also leading up to last winter's floods. What has the fire and rescue service learned from the winter floods that may benefit their response to future events? How do you fit in with the Environment Agency as well? That would be quite useful.

Matt Wrack: Our primary role is about emergency response but, as I will come on to, it is wider than that as well. In terms of the emergency response, it is rescuing people, evacuating people and making premises and streets safe. The fire and rescue service and firefighters were the primary responders over the December floods. We had some 34 fire and rescue services providing mutual assistance. This is the point that floods in Cumbria do not just affect the Cumbria fire and rescue service; teams from London, from West Yorkshire and from all over the country are attending those floods in Cumbria. Likewise for the same events in York, there were teams from all over the UK again.

There were some 2,000 flood incidents. There is a point we would want to make about the recording of data in terms of the fire and rescue service. In one of our discussions with central government about the fire and rescue service, there was an issue about how you record incidents. To take one example, a fire might be in a rubbish bin in the street, which requires one fire engine with four or five people on it. It might take 10 minutes. A flood incident might be a flooded street or a number of streets requiring 20, 30 or 40 firefighters with a number of fire engines, and might last several days. The question of how we measure incidents is an important factor for us.

Just some of the key figures there: in Greater Manchester, 1,000 people were reported rescued on 26 December; in Scotland, 1,000 people were evacuated. There were 360 rescues in Cumbria, 80 in Northern Ireland and 42 in Wales. In terms of the public debate on planning for and response to flooding, that data was obtained by means of freedom of information requests by us to fire services. That information is not being gathered centrally, which we think should be done.

At least 10 fire control rooms have experienced spate conditions. We now have a single fire control room dealing with most of the North West, for example. It received 1,000 calls over 5 and 6 December, and then again on 26 and 27 December. This is about integration; it had to rely on passing calls on to the West Midlands and to London.

Q597 **Chair:** We will come on to resources in a minute. I just wanted to say, linked to resources, that when we went to see the Environment Agency, they naturally have some very large pumps, which can move water probably quite a short distance. I think what you provide is the pumps that will pump people's houses out and perhaps pump for a long distance. We are trying to drill down on making sure that the Environment Agency and you are working together, so that you can share those different types of pumps.

Matt Wrack: On that level, there is a lot of co-ordination. Pumps that are on fire engines are probably not a lot of use in most of these cases. We have high-volume pumps, which were provided under the New Dimension project under the last Labour Government. They are getting quite old now, so one question for us would be about making sure they are renewed at some point. They are situated strategically around fire services, but the understanding when they were provided was that they would move to where they are required. High-volume pump teams will travel from whatever fire service they are based in to where they are required. There is a team of chief fire officers who co-ordinate how resources are planned, so that might be boat teams and the large pumps.

They are demountable units, so they are driven on a vehicle and then put on the ground where they are needed. They can be situated in quite strategic points. I have seen them, in Somerset for example, used to protect a pub from being flooded, moving floodwater into a canal. I think the Environment Agency has some very similar or the same units as well, and there is clearly co-ordination between the fire service and Defra on the siting and use of those pumps.

Q598 **Chair:** We are all very aware that, whatever facilities, pumps and equipment we have, it is the way that we pool it all together, and then the chain of command and everything else. That is what I also wanted to ask you about: are you certain that the fire brigade is part of that command?

Matt Wrack: There are different roles that people have. The Environment Agency's role is about managing the water. I suppose our role is about managing the water on a smaller scale, lifesaving, property saving and so on.

Q599 **Chair:** When you are asked to move in, who decides whether you move into certain areas? Is that decided by the Environment Agency, the local authority or you? How does that work?

Matt Wrack: There is local co-ordination. Local committees are established, whereby chief fire officers will meet with the Environment Agency and local authorities to determine what the challenges are in different areas of the flooding and which agency is best placed to deal with them. Ours is particularly focused on rescue and removal of people and so on, and then on to a slightly wider role.

Q600 **Chair:** Coming back to last winter's floods, in hindsight is there anything you think could have been done better?

Matt Wrack: On the question of what could be done better, our views are about a longer term approach, because people are taking very quick decisions and it is difficult to criticise particular decisions. We have a view, for example, on the function of the fire and rescue service. We have made a longstanding case for a clear statutory duty, for example for the fire and rescue service to be given a statutory duty to respond to incidents of major flooding. That is the position in Scotland and we think it has assisted in Scotland. That is the position in Northern Ireland and we are very clear it has assisted there.

Chair: We will ask you something about the statutory response position in a minute. I will leave it there and pass on to Margaret on resources.

Q601 **Ms Ritchie:** Do firefighters need more resources to respond to flooding effectively?

Matt Wrack: In short, yes; we believe they do. The biggest change in the fire service has been the reduction in the numbers of firefighters available. Between 2011 and 2015, some 6,700 firefighter posts have gone. Interestingly, if you take the question of floods, since 2007, when this debate really hit public policy, we have seen a reduction of some 10,000 firefighter jobs. That means that there are fewer fire stations and fewer fire engines. We may have the large high-volume pumps still, although there is a question about the future of those, but we have fewer resources on the ground.

One argument that a chief fire officer made in those debates was that the fire service could, at the time, get 10,000 pairs of boots on the ground very quickly, in some cases in a matter of minutes locally, but in a matter of hours in terms of mutual aid support. Over time, that facility is reduced. That has an impact. We praise our members who have gone above and beyond the call of duty, but there comes a point when asking people to work for 13 hours at a time in floodwater becomes a hazard in itself. We have lots of stories of people who were put in that position and came away absolutely exhausted. Resources, yes, is a big issue for us.

Q602 **Ms Ritchie:** In that respect, has the fire service, as a consequence of the reduction in the number of staff resources, for want of a better word, been reliant on retained firefighters to handle flooding events? If that is the case, are there any disadvantages to this?

Matt Wrack: The areas that experienced floods over the winter all have both whole-time and retained firefighters. Northern Ireland does. Scotland does. The North and North West do. We would normally expect both whole-time and retained firefighters to respond.

Difficulties start to arise if you think about the example I gave of the mutual aid. We had 34 fire services that send people across border, sometimes for days at a time. In many cases, it is a lot more difficult for retained firefighters, who have other jobs, to simply say to their employer, "I now need to go to Cumbria for four days." Those crews that have tended to be camped out in other fire services have tended to be whole-time. Yes, there is an issue, because the job cuts have disproportionally hit whole-time firefighters, because that is where the cost savings are made, and that clearly has an impact.

Q603 **Ms Ritchie:** Are there enough resources to provide firefighters with adequate levels of training on how to handle flooding?

Matt Wrack: Training is clearly a huge issue. Firstly, we do need to acknowledge that there have been great improvements in training over the past decade, and we welcome that. If you think about the hazards that people are facing, both members of the public caught up in this and our members, the water is not clean water; it is linked to sewage, drainage and so on. There is a whole host of hazards in there—manhole covers that may have lifted and underwater hazards—so people do need to be trained. They need the right equipment. For example, we have had to represent members who have become infected by contaminated water on a training exercise.

This is about planning for us, making sure that the fire service is planning ahead for the hazards that people might be expected to face. If you are going to put people into that situation, they need the resources, the training and the proper protection. Training has improved but, coming back to resources, there is a slight reduction in the number of boat teams. In terms of our requests to Defra, there is a slight reduction in the number of boat teams available for responding to these incidents of major floods.

Q604 **Ms Ritchie:** During the flood last Christmas, did a lack of resources require the prioritising of different flooding situations?

Matt Wrack: That probably happens in all of those cases, in reality. Some of this is in the media. I sat with members of ours from Cumbria who gave an absolutely astonishing story of a rescue that they were asked to undertake, which required a very long journey, because of how stretched the resources were, to rescue a woman from a vehicle. Then on the way back they were asked to rescue two police officers who had been stranded in a van. They made a huge and fantastic improvisation, but it was not an ideal situation. Their concern was the distance they were asked to travel and the fact that they were picking up other work on the way, as it were. Inevitably, the fire services are then having to prioritise, one, where they can get people to and, two, their priorities in terms of lifesaving and then other priorities.

There was one other point I wanted to make, coming back to resources—apologies. We have seen significant improvements in the kit available, such as drysuits. I have mentioned one incident I attended. We attended in fire gear designed for going into burning buildings, but we were sent into floods. It was completely inappropriate. Thankfully, we have improved from that in many cases, but we still have reports of firefighters who do not have individual drysuits, who are swapping drysuits between shifts and who have drysuits that do not fit. The drysuit may come back wet, because it has been used, and they are asked to put it on again, and there are damaged drysuits. Even in these last December floods, some members were sent out in fire gear to respond to flooding incidents.

Q605 **Ms Ritchie:** Finally, do you think Government should be rethinking its refusal to commission a specific review on emergency services, with particular reference to resources?

Matt Wrack: Yes, there should be a thorough review of this. Since 2007, we have engaged in every opportunity to put our case. We think we have a strong professional case about the role of the fire service in relation to major floodings. We are just one voice. There are lots of other opinions out there.

The concern we have is a particularly English concern, because it is being addressed differently in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. We are now being consulted on statutory duty in Wales. It is the balance between local demands and determination and, if you like, a more strategic national approach to that, which is about national resilience and so on. There needs to be a wider discussion on that.

Q606 **Rebecca Pow:** I have a few points that I am picking up as we go along. I gather that, in Somerset, when we had the terrible flooding, the fire service's response was quicker than the EA's. Are lessons to be learned there that you would like to share with the Environment Agency?

Matt Wrack: That is probably not surprising, in terms of where you have local fire stations. As you will know from your area, in lots of small local communities and rural areas we will have a retained fire station, where there might be availability problems but we can mobilise people very quickly, who will have some ability to respond. That is different from bringing in the big high-volume pumps. It will depend where the flooding is as to whether the fire service high-volume pump is nearest or an Environment Agency resource, and how quickly we can get each of those to that incident.

In terms of public reassurance, for members of the public who are concerned and whose premises are being flooded, they want to see people in authority with some training and understanding. The fire service is uniquely placed to provide that reassurance. They will have some ability, some understanding of the risks and some training, even if they do not necessarily have the best equipment immediately. That provides that immediate reassurance, while we can bring in specialist teams, high-volume pumps and so on.

Q607 **Rebecca Pow:** Also, what is the process? In Somerset, we have this gold command system, don't we—this tiered level? That seemed to work very well. How does it work for the fire brigade? How do you slot into this overall emergency picture? Who is calling you? Who is saying, "You have got to come here," or "You have got to go there," or are you, the fire service, in charge of deciding when you think you ought to attend?

Matt Wrack: The fire services will be attending gold command meetings. All the key agencies are involved. That would be local authorities, police, ambulance and the fire and rescue service. The local chief fire officer or a designated officer will be attending those meetings. Also, nationally there are specially designated chief fire officers who take particular leads on particular issues like flooding. They will send people from their team down to assist in a local gold command discussion. Within that, there will be a risk assessment of the different demands and what the different agencies can do. The fire service is fully part of that process.

Q608 **Rebecca Pow:** Do you think that works well? Would you like to do any more?

Matt Wrack: If we are coming on to it, the issue for us is our statutory duty.

Chair: Yes, we are going to come on to that.

Matt Wrack: In terms of that, we do not have particular concerns about the way the gold command structure works.

Q609 **Valerie Vaz:** This is almost on the same point, and possibly we can raise it under the issue of putting you on a statutory basis. You sit under gold command, but are you able to say what it is like in other parts of the country? What would you expect to be the best-responding service? Obviously people are going to ring you first when there is an emergency, or are they not?

Matt Wrack: In terms of calls, yes, the first calls in a flooding incident are likely to be to the fire and rescue service, but there is some confusion. For us, this comes back to statutory duty, to be honest. If you watched the press coverage, for example of the December 2015 floods, references are made to emergency service workers. Of the boats that responded, 75% are fire service boats, so 75% to 80% of the people you see in drysuits will be firefighters, and yet the coverage and sometimes the reporting, even by politicians, does not clarify the central role of the fire and rescue service within that.

Chair: We will move on to the statutory responsibility now, because I am conscious of time.

Q610 **David Simpson:** We are hitting on the statutory stuff so, rather than repeat a lot of it, in relation to the need to be given statutory responsibility, from your point of view, is the need to create a statutory responsibility really about the need for government to take the flooding issue and rescue more seriously?

Matt Wrack: That is the central point to it, yes. It is about taking flooding more seriously, more strategically and not dealing with it as though it were simply a local issue. It is not a local issue; it is a resilience issue for the whole country. Even in Northern Ireland, we have had cases of the use of other controls in relation to passing calls on. In reality, it is a UK-wide issue and we need to plan as much as we can on a UK-wide basis, in our view, whether that is sharing good practice, training, standards etc. Statutory duty brings all that together and clarifies it.

We are very clear, by the way: we have spoken to colleagues in Northern Ireland and in Scotland, who are absolutely clear. You will hear from some fire authorities in England and some chief fire officers, although there are mixed views, that it will not make much of a difference. The experience of Northern Ireland and Scotland is very different from that. They are very clear that it has assisted clarifying roles, making clear to the public and to other agencies a role, and is therefore part of the strategic thinking.

I met with the Chief Fire Officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Chair of their board in January. Interestingly, they had different experiences from the English floods. For example, there was no military mobilisation in Scotland. It was very much treated as a matter for the fire and rescue service, local authorities, the Environment Agency and so on.

Chair: You think there are certain lessons we can learn from what they are doing in Scotland.

Matt Wrack: I think there are. It is certainly useful to have a dialogue with what is happening in Scotland and Northern Ireland, in my view.

Q611 **Chair:** How could the fire and rescue service play a role in helping communities be more prepared for floods, perhaps in protecting property? How feasible is it to protect individual properties?

Matt Wrack: This is a discussion about where the fire service might be heading in the future. As part of that discussion, we are currently involved in a long detailed discussion with our employers about where the fire service might be in two, three, five or ten years' time. That is mapping out areas, and one of those areas is about the environment, climate, extreme weather events and so on.

Q612 **Chair:** You give advice on smoke detectors and anything to do with fire. You would be giving all those types of advice, wouldn't you? Do you see yourselves giving advice on flooding as well?

Matt Wrack: That is entirely feasible. We have initiatives now about water safety generally: not going into ponds to cool off in the summer and so on, because of water safety issues. There are various training public awareness activities that fire services are already involved in. That clearly could be a discussion about what role fire and rescue services could play in terms of flood awareness.

As part of their day-to-day work now, firefighters are already in people's homes giving fire safety advice on, as you say, smoke alarms. In many areas that has broadened beyond a very narrow fire and rescue focus into a much wider public safety focus, so clearly we would be keen to have a discussion about what role that could take in terms of flooding.

In terms of protection of property, in the South West firefighters were involved in protecting the Exeter railway line in 2012. There have been examples where firefighters have not simply done rescue work but protected particular bits of infrastructure.

Q613 **Chair:** Particularly regarding resilience in communities, do you feel that you are feeding in enough of that information and people are taking notice of it?

Matt Wrack: There are lots of good examples. More could be done if it was more joined-up. In the aftermath of the floods in Somerset, for example, we had people going in to help communities with their shopping, for example. How do you assist with that? There was safety advice, leaflets and so on. People with boats can go into communities that perhaps cannot get out, so you can assist with that process. There is probably more joined-up thinking needed.

Q614 **Rebecca Pow:** I have been told I can only have one, but I am going to squeeze in two very quickly. I know that you do great work in advising on fire safety, but you could do water safety measures like: "Put your plugs up higher. Keep valuable things upstairs." You could do that as part of your other role, your safety role. Would that work?

Matt Wrack: That is exactly the sort of stuff we should be discussing. As I say, it needs a bit more of a joined-up approach than we currently have.

Q615 **Rebecca Pow:** My final question would be: I know that the fire brigade is having to do lots of rethinking about its future, sharing with the police and all sorts; you have had lots of talks about it. How about a complete rename and calling yourself the fire and water service?

Matt Wrack: We do more than that as well.

Chair: We had better not start renaming the fire brigade today, but can I thank you very much for some great evidence? We were very keen to hear from the fire brigade exactly where you felt your position was within flooding, flooding resilience and managing floods, and also how you fit in with the Environment Agency and the general strategic planning. Thank you very much, Mr Wrack, for giving us some great evidence that we will make part of our report when it comes out.

Matt Wrack: We can always answer further questions if the Committee has any.

Chair: That would be lovely. Thank you very much. Thank you for attending this afternoon.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Thérèse Coffey MP and Neil Hornby.

Q616 **Chair:** Good afternoon. You are very much welcome, Minister. I am sorry we kept you waiting a little while, but we wanted to hear the rest of the evidence from the fire service. It is great to have you here. You have been in post for a great many hours now, so we are expecting you to know everything about everything. Seriously, it is great that you have come along. We will ask you to speak in a minute. Do you want to introduce Neil Hornby or will he introduce himself?

Dr Coffey: Neil will introduce himself.

Neil Hornby: Good afternoon. My name is Neil Hornby. I am the deputy director with responsibility for flood risk and coastal erosion at Defra.

Q617 **Chair:** First of all, naturally you have come into the role very quickly now. Oliver Letwin was doing a lot of work on this, but I imagine you are building on that work. What has the National Flood Resilience Review discovered about the public's attitudes to flood risk and also one-in-100-year floods and this type of thing?

Dr Coffey: Mr Chairman, first of all, it is a huge pleasure to be here. As you know, Parliament is very important to me and it is lovely to be in front of the Select Committee quite so quickly on day three. Of course, at one point I used to sit on your side of the table, so it is a great pleasure to be here.

In terms of the Resilience Review, I will be open. I saw a draft of it, not a final draft, just on Monday night. I did not even see all of it. It is still being worked on and certainly is still to be finalised. We hope to publish it during the summer. As you will be aware, it looked at a variety of issues. The communication point that you raise is a really valid one. Trying to use the same language to communicate risk to, if you like, domestic consumers, as opposed to the market and insurers, is a challenge. I cannot tell you right now exactly what is going to happen, but certainly that has been part of the consideration.

Q618 **Chair:** I do not think the public necessarily know the risk they are in. At the moment, if the Environment Agency says, "You have a one-in-100-year risk of being flooded," some people take that as, "Right, we were flooded last year. We are not going to be flooded for another 99 years," and it does not work like that. How are we going to get that across? We are interested in flood-risk areas, especially with flash flooding and a lot of rain in a very short space of time, as happened in Cumbria. Perhaps you have not had a chance to see what is in the resilience report on that.

Dr Coffey: I have literally just seen part of a draft so far, so I do not think it would be right for me to try to articulate that on something that I have just had a brief read of. It is fair to say that the Environment Agency is very clear that the communication challenge is part of it. They have done quite a lot in the past with digital; about 1.3 million people are on their alerts and there are new pilots in order to try to alert people to flood warnings. You are right; some of the language does need to change, so that risk is readily understandable in the different areas. I am sure that there are actions ready to rock and roll, as and when the plan is finalised.

Q619 **Chair:** I do not know if what was on Radio 4 this morning was fair. They were saying that, in the resilience report that has been leaked—I do not know quite what was leaked—there is not enough about flash flooding and how we deal with that in the future. It may or may not be in the report, but it is probably something that you, as a Minister, would be interested to see in there.

Dr Coffey: The Committee will be fully aware that there are different types of flooding and therefore different responsibilities. We should all remember that the biggest risk is coastal flooding. A lot of the focus, especially in the media, has been on fluvial flooding. In my constituency, I go past a memorial where people died in 1953. Touch wood, it has not happened on that scale ever since but, nevertheless, understandably fluvial flooding is what captures the attention. Let's be open about it; it seems to have triggered this review.

As you are aware, surface flooding is largely the responsibility of local councils. It is right and you will be aware that local infrastructure is part of the consideration of that. I am fairly confident that aspects of the review will have touched on it, with central government and the central agencies there.

Chair: You and I in a way share the same views on the coastal side of it, because I farm where we were flooded badly by the sea in 1981. If you get a tidal surge, these things happen. In Somerset, it is how we keep the tide from pushing the fresh water back out of the Parrett when you have high tide. Lots of the eastern counties have a certain amount of protection against the sea from some of the rivers. In parts of the country we may need to do more of that as well. It is a combination of all these things. Neil, did you want to comment?

Neil Hornby: I was going to say that the focus of the National Flood Resilience Review has deliberately been on the coastal risk and the risk from rivers, as they have biggest risk of economic damage and risk to life. That does not mean that surface water is not also an important issue and something that Government continue to look at, but it has not been the focus of the national review.

Q620 **Ms Ritchie:** How can national governance be improved to ensure long-term consistency in plans to reduce flood risk?

Dr Coffey: Some of the benefits we are already starting to see, in that we now have a long-term plan. The £2.3 billion set aside for new barriers or other ways of managing floods is there, and has been mapped out. We have already seen that kind of work at a high level. The RFCCs are obviously there to advise the EA on local deployment of that. In essence, this is high-attention; the Resilience Review is going to form part of the actions to address that. Let's put it this way: floods are certainly at the top of the agenda in Defra and very much on the minds of other elements. If you want to clarify what you are looking for a bit more, I would be grateful.

Q621 **Ms Ritchie:** I am more than happy to do that. Does the Environment Agency have the right remit, Minister, to enable it to co-ordinate long-term flood risk management priorities, and does its culture and structure enable it to reflect local priorities well?

Dr Coffey: Three days ago, I would have been looking at it like a constituency MP. Possibly more than any other MP since 2010, I have touched the Environment Agency in many ways, or as much as certain other MPs. Having done that over the last six years, my impression is that the Environment Agency is well equipped to look at that risk across the country. The 12 areas of the RFCCs provide that kind of local interface for deployment. It is right that the Environment Agency should be focused on strategic risk, as well as the work.

From my experience, and I will hopefully be exploring this in my future role, I would like to see what more can be done to be more effective in making sure that our resources go further and further to match local needs. I am thinking, for example, of the use of IDBs and that kind of thing, but we know that IDBs are not everywhere. It is about how we can use appropriate strategic thinking and strategic responsibility for the EA, but use local areas to focus that and deploy it.

Q622 **Chair:** The drainage boards could do a lot more work on the ground, where they exist, couldn't they?

Dr Coffey: Yes, absolutely. They do a lot more than just draining land.

Q623 **Ms Ritchie:** Would a Netherlands-style regulatory system with a national commissioner for flood risk management help to deliver long-term programmes and join up delivery more effectively?

Dr Coffey: I did not even know that the Netherlands had a commissioner, so forgive me.

Q624 **Chair:** We have been on a visit there, so we could probably upstage you on that one. The whole idea is that what the Netherlands do is co-ordinate it. Some 60% of their country will flood, and more, so it is a huge strategic issue for them. The idea is whether we need somebody to bring everything together. That is the idea of it.

Dr Coffey: To some extent, you could argue that is the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, I would have thought.

Chair: Or it could even be the Chairman.

Ms Ritchie: As long as he does not go on holiday.

Dr Coffey: Indeed. You are seeing the potential candidate for the Chair soon, aren't you?

Chair: Yes, we are.

Dr Coffey: If you take the Cumbria Action Plan that has recently been published, you are seeing for the first time different catchment areas properly being pulled together and an action plan specifically developed for that. Learning from that should be used at different points around the country. Of course, you cannot do everything at once—I recognise that—but that is nevertheless a good blueprint.

Again going back to my particular area and the River Deben holistic water management project, local councils are trying to do that themselves, with a bit of help from the EA. Learning from other parts of the country could start to be rapidly deployed; they may not need such intensive resource from the EA to make it happen, but the EA has a key role in rolling that out more effectively. I always believe that local is good in ensuring that we have solutions that work effectively locally but, if you have the strategic framework and also the principles that you can see have worked elsewhere, that is going to be most effective for local communities.

Q625 **Ms Ritchie:** Realising, Minister, you have only been in position for three days, but perhaps you have given some thoughts to this, what efforts will you undertake to ensure that the flood contingency plans being developed for the next 25 years are sufficient to handle the greater risk of extreme weather that is likely due to climate change?

Dr Coffey: My understanding is that part of the resilience review, and this was in the terms of reference, was about climate modelling. There have been much larger data sets fed through the models, which I understand validated the Environment Agency's extreme flood maps already. I do not think it has brought up anything new. It was within the remit, so it is encouraging that that was accurately identified. That has obviously formed the basis of the future investment strategy. We have to start thinking about 2021 onwards quite soon, for the next phase of that. I am sure that some of the learning that will be taken in the next few years, as well as the stuff from Cumbria and Somerset, can be rolled into that thinking in the future.

Q626 **Ms Ritchie:** Finally, are those sufficient to deal with the upper levels of climate change or potential climate change, given the extreme weather impact that this would be likely to cause?

Dr Coffey: Margaret, right here, right now, I cannot give you that, because I have not been in place long enough, but I do have confidence in the Environment Agency. I know there are criticisms. I recognise that; I have levelled them myself. I have also given praise in the past and I am confident that they are there. Stress-testing that resilience to these kinds of risks has been part of the review and that is not just going to stop. Neil might want to add something a bit more, because he knows a bit more about it.

Neil Hornby: It is probably worth mentioning the Environment Agency's long-term investment scenarios work, published about 18 months ago, which sets out what level of investment there might need to be for the next 50 years, under different climate scenarios. That work is being updated in light of the new work around the climate change risk assessment that is happening more widely. When that is re-published in two years' time, we will have new scenarios on what investment is likely to be needed, based on the latest information on climate change.

Q627 **Chair:** I have just one last question on the Environment Agency. It has a role for strategic overview of flood risk. Is that in conflict with its role as a delivery agency for national flood-risk measures? If we want more powers and more delivery of measures, be it dredging or any management of those waterways, to be done more locally, can the Environment Agency do both? I fear that it sometimes has an interest to hold on to its powers and responsibilities, rather than devolve them down to drainage boards, local authorities and local people. That is the bit that we are really trying to push.

Dr Coffey: I do not think you need to completely separate strategy from delivery. I am open to the idea the Environment Agency should use a wider range of contractors and IDBs. My personal experience is that is happening. It may not be happening all over the country, but I do not think it would be wise to completely separate the theory of it from the actual execution of it. That would be my suggestion to you.

The Environment Agency is involved in a number of ways around the country. The Civil Contingencies Act for emergency planning brings together multi-agencies, so there are local solutions there—the council, the blue-light services, as well as the EA—in order to make that work together. To be very open about it, I have some sympathy regarding trying to expand the number of contractors available to do that work with the European process at the moment. I know that IDBs are very keen to step up to the plate themselves.

Just remember though that the EA really does have a lot of expertise. There is a risk that, if you try to divorce that, councils would then be expected to have all this expertise. The EA plays an active role in trying to help local authorities improve their expertise and resilience in what they do on local issues.

Chair: You are right, Minister. I just want to be sure that the

Environment Agency in practice delivers what it is saying. That is what I would ask you to watch as a Minister. They are very capable of devolving down those things, but I want to make sure that it happens and it is not just rhetoric that does not deliver on the ground.

Dr Coffey: You make an interesting point. Everybody will have their own case work on which stream has not been cleared but, as you are aware, local authorities and IDBs do quite a lot on local watercourses.

Chair: The Environment Agency is saying it is going to devolve more power. It is just making sure that it does so.

Dr Coffey: There are certain aspects of the devolution deals. I know Lincolnshire is making some progress with it. Norfolk and Suffolk are keen to do something, but some of the details still need to be worked out about transferring responsibility. It is quite a big responsibility to transfer away from the Environment Agency to a county council, but I understand talks are happening.

Q628 **Rebecca Pow:** I also sit on the Environmental Audit Committee. They did a flooding inquiry and, in June, they reported in *Flooding: Co-operation Across Government* that accepted levels of flood risk for infrastructure varies a lot throughout the UK, and that it is apparent that there is no cross-party committee setting aims for that or recommendations for flood risk, as we have for other environmental risks. I was wondering, Minister, who might look at this. Now that the Cabinet Minister who was driving a lot of this forward is not in post anymore, who do you think might be responsible for it? How should we deal with that? I would like to come to Mr Hornby as well, but I do not mind who answers first.

Dr Coffey: I am just trying to think about it. Sorry, I have not looked at the Environmental Audit Committee report.

Rebecca Pow: It is obviously a really key finding that came out about this cross-departmental aim.

Dr Coffey: Sorry, I thought you said "cross-party".

Q629 **Rebecca Pow:** It would be a cross-party committee setting aims and recommendations for flooding and flood risk. Who is going to be in charge of it now that the Cabinet Minister who was driving all this forward is not there anymore?

Chair: Oliver Letwin's role was cross-Cabinet, cross-department. That is the issue really, rather than party.

Dr Coffey: I am not aware of the technicality. I do not know if Ben Gummer is stepping into that role but, ultimately, we are the lead department on this, so responsibility will still fall back on the shoulders of Defra.

Q630 **Rebecca Pow:** It might transpire that there are different degrees of what is risk, whether it is in the transport department or the energy department, protecting our strategic sites.

Dr Coffey: Forgive me; it might be better if Mr Hornby is able to answer.

Neil Hornby: It is very clear that the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and the Cabinet Office will take that cross-departmental approach. We have looked quite carefully in the National Flood Resilience Review about infrastructure and whether the level of protection for significant local infrastructure is sufficient. That will identify a number of pieces of work to take forward, which the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and the Cabinet Office will oversee centrally. The question of which Minister might be responsible for that is probably still to be determined, given the changes we have seen over the last week.

Rebecca Pow: It will be a priority that someone will.

Neil Hornby: Yes, very much so.

Chair: There needs to be a cross-departmental look at it.

Q631 **Valerie Vaz:** When will you know who is going to be responsible?

Dr Coffey: I do not know.

Neil Hornby: It will be CCS; it just depends which Minister's portfolio it is. That is being determined. I suspect, as we are, that they are currently doing that in the Cabinet Office.

Chair: Certainly Ben Gummer has a role in that.

Dr Coffey: I would assume so, but even that is slightly changing a bit. We are still to finalise our portfolios in Defra.

Q632 **Rebecca Pow:** In the report this morning, which you were referring to earlier, which I believe was the resilience report summary, it transpired that energy is pretty good at protecting its key power stations, substations and all that, but some other departments were not, it suggested, adequately putting flood risk protections in place for certain infrastructure.

Dr Coffey: The critical national infrastructure has already been pretty well defended, wherever it is. It was looking at the local infrastructure, so mobile phone masts and stuff like that.

Chair: We are going to look at local priorities in a minute. That brings us on to that one, so David, please, local priorities.

Q633 **David Simpson:** Some of the points have been touched on in relation to this question. Just to clarify, who should be responsible for ensuring that local flood management priorities are delivered effectively and efficiently?

Dr Coffey: You will be aware from the 2010 Act that strategic plans are a requirement. We are still at a stage where 10% of councils have not produced their plan. I understand my predecessor recently wrote to councils; I guess I will be following up on that to understand where we are at. There is an independent evaluation being undertaken of those plans. I have not seen this, but I am told that it is going to be published shortly. You know "shortly" can be a bit more than a week. In that regard, the responsibility is clearly with local government to be the strategic player on that.

Q634 **David Simpson:** Over the past number of years, there have been successful partnerships dealing with flooding and statutory agencies. How can that be replicated and adapted nationwide? How can we move that forward? Where there has been success, how can we move it nationwide?

Dr Coffey: It is a fair question. My assumption is that this review will probably comment on that. As I say, I just have not seen the review at all, but you would like to think that, if you have plans that have been effectively evaluated, we should be able to see quite quickly which ones they think are good, and then encourage the other local councils to reconsider.

Q635 **David Simpson:** When you say "encourage" them to do it, is there anything in the legislation, and Neil is nodding, where you can force them to do it, rather than encourage them?

Neil Hornby: For the legislation in the 2010 Act, we are currently doing a post-legislative scrutiny memorandum, which will come to the Committee shortly, so you will see some more information about our assessment of that, which will also set out some actions we have proposed to improve that further. One of the requirements on local authorities is to form those partnerships locally. We have seen them work very well in places like Lincolnshire. More recently in Cumbria and Yorkshire, we have seen some really good, strong local partnerships, but you are right; we want to see that much more widely. The challenge is how we bring up everyone to the standards of the best, and that is something we will address a bit in our action plan. "Encourage" is the right word, but how do we do more to support those local authorities to get up to that standard?

Q636 **David Simpson:** In doing that, if that could be achieved, it would make them more accountable to local communities right at the coalface. Would you agree with that?

Dr Coffey: Ultimately councils are accountable to their electorates. It so happens that the Chairman of the Coastal Special Interest Group on the LGA is one of my councillors. He is very keen to see me quickly in my new role. I am hoping that I will be able to use his good forces, working with the LGA, to see what we can do to make all of our councils gold standard and learn from each other.

Q637 **Chair:** One of the issues is that, if you look at it on a catchment basis, local authorities may not fit into exactly where the water flows and how you collect it into a catchment area. One of the issues is how we are going to deal with that, because that is quite important and something we are looking at in our report particularly. Local government will need to very much work together and across boundaries as well, I suspect. That is something you need to talk to your guy about, I think.

Dr Coffey: It is a fair point. On LEPs, we are seeing people working across county boundaries, in some cases. You are right that some of the mindset has been, "It is not my part; it's not there," but I find a lot of the councils very sensible at this. If the river starts in another county, it does not matter. You have to work together in order to have whole-river catchment plans.

Neil Hornby: We also have experience of them working very well together on the Regional Flood and Coastal Committees. In March, we published for the first time the river basin flood risk management plans, where again they all came together across different districts to look at what the overall strategy for the area was.

Q638 **Chair:** There are lead local flood authorities now and we believe they are reasonably effective, so are you going to establish other bodies to do this, as in Cumbria or Somerset, or what do you intend to do across the country? Perhaps that is more one for Neil.

Dr Coffey: I have not given it any thought yet myself. I am a great believer in natural partnerships forming.

Neil Hornby: That is a good example in Cumbria. That is an informal partnership that has come together and done some excellent work to support the work of the Cumbria Flood Action Plan, which you may have seen. Again, we are doing similar work in Calderdale in Yorkshire, where those partnerships are forming to look at how they responded to what happened last winter and get better prepared for the future. Somerset is another classic example, and I assume we will spend more time with Somerset.

Chair: There is a Somerset Rivers Authority now, which is across three district council areas, I think.

Q639 **Rebecca Pow:** That is a thorny issue, Chair. Perhaps the Minister could give us some guidance on when that is going to be made statutory, so that it goes on the precept to pay for the Somerset Rivers Authority. We have seen through the first year and, if it is going to be used as a model, the idea is to put it on the bills and repay.

Dr Coffey: The former Secretary of State of course gave effective powers for that to happen, but my understanding is that Defra is talking to DCLG about potential legislation in the near future.

Chair: This is where a levy per house naturally goes on. Of course, the argument is that the houses that are above the floodplain have to pay as well, because their water lands up in the floodplain. This is the argument from householders. Who should pay for what?

Dr Coffey: 'Twas ever thus. It is solidarity.

Chair: If we are going to get the local maintenance looked after, it needs to be raised locally. I think that is our argument.

Dr Coffey: It is a kind of solidarity across the county, isn't it?

Q640 **Rebecca Pow:** I am particularly interested in this. Just as a bit of background, Minister, in the course of this inquiry, it has become apparent to us that flood risk management seems to be dealt with in isolation from the rest of the water cycle. The roles are split between water companies doing their business and then the Environment Agency. I wonder what your answer might be about whether water companies could be required to undertake flood management roles alongside their water quality roles and water provision roles. Maybe Neil would like to answer.

Dr Coffey: I am not sure about that. I think you end up having too many cooks spoiling the broth. In effect, they already co-operate.

Neil Hornby: Yes, and they are already formally a flood risk management authority and they have responsibility, particularly around drainage and managing surface water. They have responsibilities there, and to co-operate with other flood risk management authorities. I think you are right though that part of the challenge for Defra is how to integrate that agenda much more between flood risk, water quality and water resource.

We have seen in Cumbria that there has been particular debate around reservoirs, for example, and whether the role of reservoirs should be just to ensure supply or might there be a role for flood risk management as well. There are some interesting issues around. Thirlmere is mentioned in the Cumbria Flood Action Plan as the example, but how do we integrate that agenda much more? That is one of the issues we are looking at, as part of the 25-year environment plan.

Q641 **Rebecca Pow:** We had a very interesting session with the water companies, and a number of them are operating these catchment-wide management schemes. Although it is to help with the water provision and water quality, by the by it also does a lot of very good holding of floodwater in catchment areas. Would you look at this more closely?

Neil Hornby: We have an opportunity now with price review 2019 to look at what framework water companies will have to operate in. Flood risk will certainly have to be part of that.

Q642 **Rebecca Pow:** Would you, Minister, have an open mind to looking at this much wider catchment approach, which is something they have put into practice very successfully in the Netherlands, for example, and in projects in Scotland?

Dr Coffey: We are seeing that with the Cumbria Flood Action Plan, I would say. I would have thought that they would be the natural steps to take next. I do not want to completely declare new policy without having a bit more time to think about it.

Q643 **Rebecca Pow:** Of course, but then the question is how. At the moment, water companies are private companies; if they are going to deliver other goods and services, how will we incentivise them to do it? Do you have any suggestions? Would you require them to do it?

Dr Coffey: I do not know about new legislation in that regard. Ultimately, there is an element of it being in water companies' interest for all of this to be better managed. They are not immune to what goes wrong when floods happen. I would have to think about it a bit more.

Q644 **Rebecca Pow:** Is there anything to add, Neil? Would you like financial incentives or requirements?

Neil Hornby: I would reiterate that the price review 2019 process is the opportunity to work with the water companies on what their obligations should be for the next period and what they can charge for as part of that.

Rebecca Pow: Sorry, I did not catch the beginning of that.

Neil Hornby: The price review 2019 is setting the prices for water companies, from that period onwards. There is a conversation with Government about what obligations they should have on them for that period and how much they should be able to charge customers.

Q645 **Rebecca Pow:** Is that when you think the whole Ofwat regime should be considered and looked at regarding what they are delivering for what?

Neil Hornby: It is definitely an opportunity to look at it.

Q646 **Chair:** For instance, South West Water is rewetting part of Exmoor to hold the water back in the winter, so that they can then release that instead of in the summer, so the peat holds it and then they have that as a reservoir resource, but of course it also holds the water back in times when you have a lot of rain to perhaps prevent floods, as well. Is there a role for water companies there? This will not be for all water companies, but where they are holding a lot of water in a catchment area, is there then a role for them to deal with flood risk overall? In some ways, we are inclined to have too uniform an approach across the country. It is just an idea that they could deal with the flood risk management delivery in that area, if they have that expertise and that is how they are managing water.

Dr Coffey: Instinctively, they should absolutely be partners in delivering it. I do not know whether we should be making them accountable for the risk of it. Again, I would have to think about that a bit more, but I would not instinctively feel that putting all the risk on the water company is the right way to go about it.

Rebecca Pow: You could if you incentivised it, if there was a financial reward. I think there is a lot of interest from the water companies.

Q647 **Chair:** What we have felt, and we have taken quite a lot of evidence on this, is that the water companies feel that they are dealt with in isolation slightly and they are not brought into the package. That is really worth looking at, if we could be so bold, this afternoon, Minister.

Dr Coffey: It is a very fair point. I know my local water companies rather well. It is Essex & Suffolk owned by Northumbrian, and Anglian. I know them well. I know Essex & Suffolk do a heck of a lot on moving water around from stressed areas to non-stressed areas. Nature is a big part of it. It is a useful indication to have conversation with water companies on their potential role in the future.

Q648 **Chair:** The other issue is that we talk a lot about floods now, but I remember from 2010 to 2012 this Committee talked of nothing but drought and how we are going to move water around. As we do all this work, we must not forget perhaps that there is also how water companies can co-operate more with one another in order to deliver a water resource. Coming from your side of the country, I can understand that.

Dr Coffey: There are other things that we can do as well, in terms of us pumping out more water to sea than we use in irrigation and abstraction.

Q649 **Rebecca Pow:** This is absolutely directly related to this role of the water commissioner in the Netherlands, which my colleague Margaret raised. Their local involvement is through the water companies for the management of all water for everything. I would urge the Minister to consider having a look at that.

Dr Coffey: I will commit to you to go and find out about it.

Chair: Thank you very much. Can I move on to long-term funding now, David?

Q650 **David Simpson:** Again, we know you are only three days into the job, but what is the Government’s long-term vision for funding flood risk management? Oliver Letwin, whose name was mentioned earlier, said recently to the Environmental Audit Committee that every time it floods extra cash is thrown at an area, which is a political decision, not evidence-based. Surely something needs to change. I know that there is a six-year plan, which will take us to 2021 or whatever it is, but that is relatively short, so what is the long term? Maybe Neil could answer this more than the Minister, but what is our strategy?

Dr Coffey: I thought LTIS, the long-term investment scenario, was supposed to be that work, which was produced in 2014 looking out further. The Government took a step by at least committing capital spending for the next six years in identifying that work, so that is a good start.

David Simpson: A six-year period is relatively short. If we look at other inquiries we are doing, farming or whatever, we are looking at a 25-year strategy and where we are going to be within that. I agree six years is a start, but we need to be looking beyond that to try to get a settlement or a decision.

Dr Coffey: Do you not feel that the strategy has been set out for that longer term in LTIS? It is a bit like what has happened in transport, instead of year-to-year budgets, allowing Highways England and Network Rail to have that longer term. I am sure we are all fighting, certainly we are in England, to try to get investment now for the 2019-25 period. The companies need that kind of lead-in in order to plan the work effectively and deliver it.

Q651 **David Simpson:** I appreciate that, but will the Government ensure that there are funding streams to do that? Will there be financial assistance to try to move that forward?

Dr Coffey: The £2.3 billion takes us into the next Parliament. The commitment for the maintenance budget has only been made to the end of this Parliament, but I am fairly sure that we will continue to need to invest in this area. We are leveraging in finance from other areas, such as LEPs. You will be aware of the beneficial tax treatment that private companies can have for investing. That came into effect last year. We are starting to see that come through, and that is the kind of direction we will keep going in.

I cannot make spending commitments on behalf of the Government, but I feel that we will continue to spend centrally. If we can do more to leverage in, especially when it is related to economic growth, that is a good thing that the Government are doing, rather than just saying we will pay 100% for everything. As you will be aware, it used to be the case that loads of projects got nothing. Now we have a situation with partnership funding where every project has got a chance of getting some public money alongside other money.

Q652 **Valerie Vaz:** Welcome, Minister. It is absolutely fantastic that you are here three days into the job and it is remarkable that you have decided to come to the Committee. I know how assiduous you are.

Dr Coffey: I would not let you down.

Chair: She is a very brave lady.

Q653 **Valerie Vaz:** You have been really assiduous in responding to us in Parliament, when you were Deputy Leader of the House. I wanted to get a firm commitment that that £2.3 billion has definitely been allocated and definitely been committed in the budget.

Dr Coffey: Yes, it is for 2015-21. I do not know what the rounding is. I do not know whether it is £2.270 billion, but £2.3 billion is the figure I have.

Q654 **Valerie Vaz:** Did you say that the LEPs would be expected to commit some money for that or are you giving money to the LEPs?

Dr Coffey: It varies. There are different examples around the country. If I use the example that I know about in Ipswich, the LEP has used some of its money in order to put in extra flood defences, because they believe that that will unlock land for economic growth and for housing, so it is a sensible use of LEP money to drive economic regeneration. I do not think there is any requirement on LEPs to have to do it, but several of them have been very sensible, and that way they can pull in extra money from the centre.

Q655 **Valerie Vaz:** I am sorry, but I have to mention it; it is the EU question. Was there any committed EU funding for any of this?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer to that question. I do not know if Neil knows.

Neil Hornby: The £2.3 billion is all Exchequer funding. There is no EU element to that. We understand there might be some EU structural funds used to support some schemes in some places.

Q656 **Valerie Vaz:** Can you give us a vague idea of the figure?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer.

Q657 **Chair:** I take it the Treasury will match that, will it?

Neil Hornby: That is the discussion that we will need to have.

Q658 **Valerie Vaz:** Could you write to the Committee and let us know that?

Chair: Yes, that would be quite interesting.

Valerie Vaz: We can try to establish that from the Treasury.

Chair: That was a good question, thank you. Can I lead on now to Margaret on local funding?

Q659 **Ms Ritchie:** Question 10 is about local funding, Minister. How should local funding augment national investment?

Dr Coffey: It used to be the case prior to 2011 that there would be quite a high cut-off in terms of economic benefit/cost ratio, so you would have a whole series of projects that just did not go anywhere. Perhaps there were not enough houses being protected or it was not grade 1 agricultural land and so on. Introducing that change and allowing local funding to come forward to be augmented by central funding was a big, radical shift. I can think of a lot of smaller schemes that have only happened as a consequence of that. It is a good idea to try to encourage some significant elements of local funding, particularly on smaller schemes, because that is what matters to that local area. As I say, if they did not put anything in at all, they would not have any scheme.

Q660 **Ms Ritchie:** To probe that a little bit further, Minister, what are the pros and cons of pooling flood-risk management funding at catchment level?

Dr Coffey: Does that happen? I think it probably would be sensible.

Neil Hornby: It is looked at through the Environment Agency areas. The Regional Flood and Coastal Committees look at it on a river basin level. They look at the priorities for that area together and agree what the priorities should be for that particular area.

Dr Coffey: It is an interesting point you make, because obviously LEPs tend to cover much bigger areas than just one or two local district councils. It is certainly worth considering and worth encouraging people to do that.

Q661 **Ms Ritchie:** Should the Somerset Rivers Authority levy be put on a statutory basis and a similar levy be legislated for nationally?

Dr Coffey: There has been a request for the Somerset Rivers Authority to have that and Government are responding positively to that request. I guess it will be for other people to come forward, if that is what they want, in order to have that local element. If we go back a while ago, my memory is that county councils were certainly supposed to have included within their council tax a certain amount, which is then used for flooding risk right across their county, so it happens to some extent already. However, this is very specific and very targeted, and the money will go directly to the rivers authority.

Chair: Unless it is ring-fenced, Minister, you might find they are short of cash and it disappears into some other coffers.

Dr Coffey: Indeed and, at the end of the day, it is down to the local councils how to use their money. We all know that the Revenue Support Grant is going to be going and there will be a lot more self-financing through business rates and so on, but they have to decide what their local priorities are.

Q662 **Ms Ritchie:** How can more partnership funding be raised, particularly from outside the public sector, for example from water companies, insurance companies and developers to bring them all on track?

Dr Coffey: Some things are already done through the planning system, things like the SuDS stuff where, instead of regulating it, we have brought it in through the planning process, so that they have to do those kinds of elements. You are seeing that. The community infrastructure levy is another example of how finance will be raised through development, which can then be used for the local infrastructure required. As I say, things like the tax changes that were done, I hope, will encourage more and more private companies to invest in that.

Q663 **Ms Ritchie:** Minister, I have just one final question. Is the International Climate Fund staying with Defra, as some suggest it might not be?

Dr Coffey: I do not know and I do not know what the International Climate Fund is, I am afraid, so I will find out. Shall I write to the Committee?

Ms Ritchie: Yes.

Valerie Vaz: We love letters.

Q664 **Chair:** On asset management, maintenance of assets, how can we ensure flood-risk management assets are maintained adequately and efficiently by the Environment Agency and by other bodies, including private owners and local authorities, especially when it comes to maintenance as well? Very often you can get a capital scheme through, but it is then making sure it is maintained afterwards. Who would like to answer?

Dr Coffey: In the last budget, as you will be aware, an additional £40 million per year was put into the budget for maintenance. Overall, over the five-year timeframe of the Parliament, just over £1 billion is to be deployed. Of course that will have Barnett consequentials, so should feed through to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

It is a very good point that you make about how we keep that scrutiny. I understand that my predecessor had regular meetings with the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency. I will be looking to see what kinds of processes are in place. Ultimately, it is the board of the Environment Agency that is responsible for that, but of course they are accountable to this place.

Neil Hornby: We also have targets for the Environment Agency on maintenance that they need to deliver, in terms of the proportion of their assets that are at target condition. Also, in the Spending Review they were set an efficiencies target to reinvest back into maintenance.

Dr Coffey: You all know that IDBs are largely very assiduous in their own mechanisms.

Q665 **Chair:** That leads me neatly on to another question. Internal drainage boards have told us that dredging can require a number of different licences from different bodies. How are you working to cut red tape, which can hold up effective silt dredging and increase flood risk?

Dr Coffey: The Environment Agency and Natural England have just very recently aligned their boundaries. There is a lot more working going on together. As I have been educated in the last few days, they are very much considered to be part of the Defra family. The chief executives sit on the Defra ExCo, and the chairs of both of those are automatically on the Defra board as well. I would love to see close partnership working.

Certainly in my own part of the world, when Richard Benyon was the Minister, we pioneered something called "one environment" in order to stop that kind of issue happening where left hand/right hand was conflicting. You have got the additional challenges on the coast of the MMO as well, and I would like to see even more of them being brought into the tent to have that joined-up process.

Neil Hornby: It is probably just worth highlighting the change in April to the permitting regime. A number of activities were taken out of the permitting regime, where it was considered low risk to remove that red tape. One of those was around dredging ditches up to 1.5 kilometres, so that was a positive change from that perspective.

Q666 **Chair:** I have said this before in Committee. Even in one of my local towns, in Axminster, we had a shopping trolley that somebody threw into the stream. It then collects a load of wood. That then blocks a culvert and then several houses are flooded. You need somebody to be able to act quickly, locally, in order to hoick that thing out. That is where you cannot necessarily expect the Environment Agency to be able to do it. That is why devolving the responsibility is so important, I think.

Dr Coffey: I do not know the situation you specifically describe. There is a huge role at local parish council level. A lot of places have flood wardens now and some of this is frankly about doing it yourself and hoicking it out.

Q667 **Chair:** It is how we encourage that to happen. This is the final question on flooding. The point that Oliver Letwin was making, and I have made this before, is that if you look at overall spending on flooding in both governments, you will find that, if you have a dry period, the amount spent on flooding seems to drop away and get eaten away at. Then it starts to flood somewhere and then the figures go up again. We are trying to say with this resilience report that, if you are going to have a long-term plan on floods, you have to try to maintain that level of funding throughout and not be tempted to steal it in dry times.

Dr Coffey: Hopefully the six-year capital plan gives you confidence that that is certainly not going to happen in this Parliament. I am sure that we will be pushing to recommend a similar six-year, perhaps even longer—who knows?—plan for the future.

Q668 **Chair:** You, with your constituency responsibilities, will also realise that there will be a need to look at coastal flooding more as well, and what we may or may not have to do to defend ourselves against the sea.

Dr Coffey: That is a fair point. One of the questions I have already asked is about shoreline management plans. I know that can lead to some heartache locally. I have experienced that in my constituency, where people have been told that they are not going to be defended anymore, managed retreat, hold the line and all the lobbying that goes on to achieve that. I will try to look at that more, given the experiences.

I will never forget my first weekend as an MP. A woman cried in my arms, as half her garden had gone overnight, from 60-foot to 30-foot. It is devastating. Fluvial flooding is very disruptive but, in effect, it is temporary. With erosion, it is gone for good and it is devastating.

Chair: We have lost roads and all sorts. They just cave in.

Q669 **Simon Hart:** This is a slightly different point from the general way we have been discussing the risk management as we have gone along, which is again borne out of constituency experience. Of course Natural Resources Wales is outside the jurisdiction of your department—lucky you—but I think there are an increasing number of cases, and would be interested in your ministerial view, where legitimate attempts to expand and develop businesses are being frustrated by a very cautious approach by authorities when it comes to granting consents or assisting people who want to do things that are, in many cases, perfectly reasonable and economically helpful. I just wanted your view on how we strike the right balance between enabling people to expand and sustain and, at the same time, making sure that that is not going to contribute to a flooding issue. Where I am, the attitude tends to be very cautious: "There might be a flood at some stage in the next 200 years; therefore no planning, definitely not. We are just not doing it and we are not prepared to discuss it."

Dr Coffey: I am led to believe that the Environment Agency has been an active adviser to councils, and 98% of EA advice has been taken by English councils. We have to have appropriate development. I am in a part of the world that is in effect a floodplain, and frankly so is London. I do not think it is sensible to say "No more building anywhere". You have to do appropriate housing design, as Rebecca referred to earlier with the FBU chap about plugs halfway up. We are not going to regulate everything, but it is about having sensible approaches and recognising that we do have barriers in place. I understand that the Thames Barrier saved 800,000 houses in the surge. That is what it is there for. I am sorry to hear if your councils are being overly cautious.

Q670 **Simon Hart:** In many ways, it is not councils. Councils are really quite keen to encourage it. It is National Resources Wales, which is our equivalent of the Environment Agency, making a judgment based on a map that some of us would argue contains data that is simply inaccurate. It can be challenged, but of course then a potential developer or business has to go through the cost of hiring its own experts in order to challenge the expertise. I have personal experience of this, where the maps upon which they rely are, on the one hand, inaccurate and, on the other, simply out of date. I just hope that what we are not doing as a Government here is going down a road where reasonable applications to improve and sustain economic activity are going to simply be frustrated on the off chance that somebody, somewhere, might come up with a flooding theory.

Dr Coffey: I guess the role of the flood advisers is to give a view. It is up to councils whether to take that view or not, but the view then feeds into the market about how much it then costs to insure or other elements like that.

Simon Hart: Your earlier point that 98% of Environment Agency recommendations are accepted by local authorities was quite interesting. It is quite a brave local authority to overrule the expert advice of a statutory authority.

Dr Coffey: This was not in my briefing. This is political memory. I thought that we changed this in the last Parliament, but I do not know what happened with Natural Resources Wales. We changed and we put a duty on our regulators to have a mindset to economic growth. I cannot tell you enough about whether that has changed some of the advice that has been given, in order to get that balancing act. However, I have seen in other elements the Environment Agency's stance change gradually, on a constituency level, in terms of "this is how you could do it", as opposed to "this is how you cannot do it".

Q671 **Simon Hart:** That was sort of my next question, in a way: whether due consideration can always be given to establishing a proper balance when it comes to making those decisions, rather than there being a precautionary approach. Such an approach always results in even the slightest concern that might be raised by the Environment Agency or NRW being almost sufficient to get in the way of any quite reasonable developments. I appreciate it is a difficult one. I appreciate that you only have to get one of those wrong in order for all sorts of difficult questions to be asked. However, there is no doubt that there would be developments across Wales, and presumably across the UK, that would bring great economic benefit and would not be susceptible to reasonable flood risk, in any sense of the words. The Government need to recognise that, which is what I was trying to get to.

Dr Coffey: There is risk in almost anything and everything, and it is either how you categorise or manage risk, and what kind of level of risk you are prepared to bear. That will always come down to the developer deciding what level of risk they are going to bear, and indeed the local council. My expectation, Simon, is that we have seen a shift, and Neil might be able to say a bit more, because obviously he has had a lot more experience, looking more holistically than I have.

Neil Hornby: It is very much the policies around avoiding inappropriate development, not avoiding development. It is hard to comment on Wales and the specific case, but certainly the Environment Agency's approach is very much that their advice is not just yes or no; it is about how. It is about how you can make these things happen. Their mantra is very much "yes if", rather than "no but". It is something they definitely use.

It is about how you make that development appropriate for the location being proposed, so that it does not add to flood risk.

Q672 **Simon Hart:** I have two questions. I suspect a lot of difficulties come where there is an existing enterprise, an existing business or an existing housing development, which is perfectly situated and what have you, and the application is to expand it. The application to expand is rejected, which seems to the developer to be rather an illogical approach. If the area in question is susceptible to flooding, presumably the logical argument would be to remove the businesses that are already there, let alone prevent expansion. It is either dangerous or it is not; it is not just dangerous for the additional houses or the additional aspect of the business. That is the frustration. It is taking a pragmatic view and ensuring that the Environment Agency or NRW are not too exposed, on the odd occasion, as the Minister says, when risk cannot be eliminated, but can be minimised, and there might be a mistake made.

Dr Coffey: It is difficult to comment on hypotheticals.

Simon Hart: The one I just covered is a real one, but I just did not put names in.

Dr Coffey: I do not know the basis of what Natural Resources Wales said, but I can see a scenario where you reach a tipping point and a capacity constraint. Having a higher amount of activity and a higher amount of element just takes you over that balance, in their recommendation. I can see how that would work.

Simon Hart: I will not labour the point, other than that this was a hotel expansion from a 21-bedroom hotel to a 48-bedroom hotel. It was rejected on the basis of flood risk and you think, "Really?"

Dr Coffey: Perhaps if they had replaced all their baths with showers, they might have been alright.

Q673 **Simon Hart:** Exactly. Some people would say that the Environment Agency already has the power to veto planning applications. Should that be formalised or do you think that the existing arrangements for statutory consultees are sufficient?

Chair: Just to correct you, Simon, they do not have the power to veto, do they? They have the power to recommend refusal, but the planning authority can overrule that, I think.

Simon Hart: Technically they are an applicant. That is pretty well the same thing, but you may wish to take a legal approach. The question was about whether one formalises their statutory position and whether you think they should have the powers—not whether they do but whether they should have powers to veto.

Dr Coffey: It is best if planning decisions are left largely in the control of local councils or, in the case of NSIPs, ultimately the Secretary of State, and that they take the advice that they deem appropriate. I do not think we should get into veto territory. I think I am right in saying that we changed the law so that water companies are now statutory consultees.

Chair: I do not think they have yet, but it is one of the issues that we will probably be raising.

Dr Coffey: It is being touted. I guess it is under consideration.

Q674 **Simon Hart:** If a developer is given consent in an area, which may or may not be susceptible to flooding, and there are conditions attached to that consent, if the developer then fails to adhere to those conditions, what liability do you think should be attached to the planning authority that granted the original consent with those conditions?

Dr Coffey: I am not a planning lawyer. I would assume that there is, in effect, some kind of contract and that there is a reasonable expectation that those conditions are fulfilled. I do not know the answer to that question.

Q675 **Simon Hart:** It is just whether we should be shining a brighter light in the faces of the planning authorities and whether, once they have passed the thing, there should be an ability to return to the manner in which the consent was granted.

Dr Coffey: We know that we have changed the law so that you can go and review.

Q676 **Chair:** Say the only way that planning permission is granted is that you retain a certain amount of water on that site for a certain period of time, either with water tanks or with having a pond or whatever to hold that water, and then the developer does not do that when they develop the houses, and then those houses get flooded. Is it right then that the residents can go back to the planning authority and say, "Right, you granted these. You did not make sure that they adhered to the planning conditions. Our houses are flooded," so you can claim against the planning authority?

Valerie Vaz: If I could help, I used to do legal planning work for the Government and I have seen many decision letters by inspectors where they have mentioned this and the developers have gone ahead. I think you are thinking more along the lines of a planning condition. It is ultimately up to the planning authority to enforce that.

Q677 **Chair:** That is exactly the point. It is a condition, but planning authorities do not always enforce them. When it goes wrong, the planning authority is not liable, you see. Should they be liable for people to be able to claim against the planning authority?

Dr Coffey: I expect those residents would not vote for that councillor again if they did not get it sorted out.

Q678 **Valerie Vaz:** Chair, there are a series of decision letters that go out there when inspectors refuse. I just wondered if there was a possibility of gathering that all together. One of the things that have been mooted is to have local planning authorities report back to Parliament. Then again, we get enough pieces of paper and tick boxes. I just wondered if it was possible to garner the evidence, say from the Planning Inspectorate, and publish all those decisions that have been made on the floodplain, so people can see.

Dr Coffey: I am in day three of my role and I feel I am now straying into DCLG ministerial relationships with the Planning Inspectorate. I will make sure that your questions and suggestions are put to Gavin Barwell, who is the new Minister for housing and planning.

Chair: That is why, you see, Minister, going back to a previous question, we need to have somebody across Government who is pulling this all together.

Dr Coffey: At the moment, I cannot say.

Chair: I accept that.

Q679 **Dr Monaghan:** Hello again, Minister. I bet you yesterday feels like a very long time ago. I would like to turn to sustainable drainage schemes, which I suspect is a subject close to all of our hearts. You might be familiar with the Flood and Water Management Act 2012, which has not yet been enacted, as I understand it. It creates an opportunity for organisations and developers to be required to implement sustainable drainage schemes in certain circumstances. A number of witnesses to this Committee have been really quite critical of the Government's role in not implementing that legislation. The question really is: why have the UK Government rejected repeated recommendations to commence this legislation on sustainable drainage schemes?

Dr Coffey: I understand that we have been doing this through planning policy and planning conditions, and that is working. I do not know the technical reason—and Neil might be able to help me with that—but in my view it is outcomes that matter. If this is happening in practice and we are doing it through the planning process, that is fine.

Q680 **Dr Monaghan:** Is it happening though?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that it is not happening. I am led to believe it is happening.

Chair: It is not as fast as we would like it. I do not know if Neil wants to say anything.

Neil Hornby: It is still early days. It has only applied since April last year and it applies to major developments over 10 houses. The expectation is that it is out there, but it is early days. It will need to be monitored to see how effectively it works. The Government took the decision to go down the planning route, rather than through a legislative route, in the end.

Q681 **Dr Monaghan:** The House of Lords suggested an amendment to the Act, which was rejected and defeated in the Commons, in May of this year, with a commitment that the UK Government would undertake a review of the legislation. Can you tell us what the terms of reference for that review will be, when it will report and perhaps even when the recommendations will be implemented by the UK Government?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer to that, so I will need to find out.

Neil Hornby: Partly there is no answer to it yet. It is a DCLG ministerial review. Those precise questions are being discussed with DCLG Ministers at the moment, we understand.

Q682 **Dr Monaghan:** Maybe we could get that in writing. Would that be okay?

Neil Hornby: Yes.

Q683 **Rebecca Pow:** It is interesting to know when the review is going to take place but also, as the Minister having to deal with all this flood resilience—and you have been very open so far to saying you will look at what the water commissioner does and you will look at catchment plans—do you think that SuDS would be a useful tool? Should we have an open mind to using it more as a tool to help control the amount of water that hits the rivers and builds up?

Dr Coffey: My understanding is that is under way. I assume there was a good reason for it at the time and there is still a good reason to insist on them within the planning process. I am afraid I will have to revert to the answers that have been given.

Q684 **Rebecca Pow:** Can you use it more, so it is just a standard procedure?

Dr Coffey: It is a standard procedure.

Rebecca Pow: It is in Scotland.

Neil Hornby: It is for major developments.

Rebecca Pow: It is not in England.

Neil Hornby: It is for major developments, but not yet for minor developments under 10 houses.

Dr Coffey: You are talking about for all—okay.

Neil Hornby: We would expect that to be looked at as part of the review.

Chair: It is where sewers are sometimes overloaded as well. You do not always have the surface water being separated as well. You get quite a lot of problems with that in smaller developments sometimes.

Q685 **Dr Monaghan:** I would like to turn to flood-risk management strategies and ask how wider use can be made of natural flood management approaches.

Dr Coffey: I am led to believe by the Environment Agency that this is part of what they want to do. It is not all just about having hard walls. The £2.3 billion will include elements of reintroducing meandering rivers and recreating that, so we have a more natural element, as well as your big things like the Thames Barrier existence or flood walls. That is very much part of their thinking.

Q686 **Dr Monaghan:** Do you think the Environment Agency is set up in such a way that it can encourage natural flood defence systems and those sorts of strategies?

Dr Coffey: From what I have seen so far, that is what they say they are going to do as part of their strategy, so I do not see any reason why they cannot do it.

Q687 **Dr Monaghan:** Could we challenge that, perhaps, by suggesting that the Environment Agency in the past certainly has had a focus on delivering hard-edged engineering solutions, as opposed to thinking about the natural environment and how adaptations could be made there for longer term strategies?

Dr Coffey: It is a fair challenge. In the past, everybody was focused on walls, floodgates and so on. I am glad to see that there is more thinking about how you change and adapt the response to be more appropriate to the local environment. I do not know enough about more recently.

Neil Hornby: It is about a combination. You are still going to need to make those investments in engineered defences in the right places, but you need to supplement that and complement that by work upstream to manage and slow the flow coming down into those places, in the first place. It will be broader than just the Environment Agency; it will bring in Natural England and other organisations as well, in how we manage the land, alongside managing the flow of water through towns.

Dr Coffey: Certainly the coast in certain parts of the country is very much a moving element. By not having flood defences in a particular community, you protect communities further down the coast, which can be quite tough at times. The combination of rocks or groynes and so on needs to be adapted to the local environment. There is no one rule that fits everything.

Dr Monaghan: You would be encouraging of that then.

Dr Coffey: Yes.

Q688 **Dr Monaghan:** The Environment Agency is a very big organisation. Certainly in terms of the site visits and the information that we have received from witnesses, there is an issue about how the Environment

Agency develops and implements its tactics, in terms of implementing across-England strategies but at the local level, to reflect some of the local knowledge that you are speaking about. These are very early days, I appreciate, but do you have any idea about how you would want to encourage the Environment Agency to take that model of approach?

Dr Coffey: I thought the RFCCs were the way to try to bring that local strategy to life. You may see that going even further, but the RFCCs are constituted as lead flood authorities, with sufficient voices around there with experience. Going further with things like the Cumbria Flood Action Plan and other river catchment area managements, I do sense a big change in attitude. My local manager, called Charlie Beardall, has been working exceptionally hard, not just in imposing solutions but in working with the people who farm the land and do all these things in order to try to create something that is appropriate for those estuaries and rivers.

Neil Hornby: One of the things we have been trialling in Cumbria is this idea of a catchment director or catchment manager, so a single person responsible for a single catchment, working with everybody along that river.

Q689 **Dr Monaghan:** Do you see that being rolled out more widely?

Neil Hornby: That is why we want to try out how it works in Cumbria, but it has been positive so far.

Dr Coffey: I do not know if you have seen this. It came out recently. It is an impressive document, clear with good communication to people, but it also has a timetable and it could well be a good blueprint for many other parts of the country.

Q690 **Dr Monaghan:** You mentioned a little while ago a large sum of money that is going to be invested in flood management across England and Wales. One of the things that this Committee has seen elsewhere is that there need to be clear cost/benefit calculations when money is being spent, so that it is not just devoted entirely to large-scale engineering projects but has the flexibility to recognise that relatively small local developments can have a cumulative significant impact on flood prevention. In terms of distributing that money, are you going to make sure that there is a focus on relatively small-scale developments and not necessarily all of that money goes to huge engineering projects?

Dr Coffey: The current funding formula is largely focused on protection of homes. That does not mean that it only gets spent in towns and cities. We know Environment Agency money gets spent around the country. I am not aware specifically of whether multiple defences along a stretch are costed together. I do not know the answer to that. It may or may not be. I would not want to speculate, but the changes that were made, probably about four or five years ago, mean that every scheme now has a chance of getting some central government money, when before they may not have hit the hurdle.

Neil Hornby: It is worth saying that the £2.3 billion covers 1,500 different projects, from very large projects down to very small projects as well.

Dr Coffey: Is it right that the Environment Agency has about half of that money and the other money goes to things like the IDBs and local authorities to do that?

Neil Hornby: Yes.

Dr Coffey: It is not only the Environment Agency spending that money.

Q691 **Dr Monaghan:** Clearly you accept that relatively small-scale schemes can have that cumulative effect. Particularly when we are looking at natural flood defences that is the direction of travel that should be encouraged.

Dr Coffey: What do I think? This idea of the river catchment area plans will probably support moving and adding that. We are still going to need some big barriers to protect strategic settlements, definitely where the local environment supports it. Instead of having big rocks everywhere that just shift things along, thinking how you do things is part of a sensible approach.

Q692 **Chair:** When farmers are asked to store water on their land, they really need some recompense, especially if it affects their farming practice. At the moment through CAP, it has largely been income forgone. As we move away from that, can we work out a payment that would pay farmers to proactively take that water and be part of their income? There is no doubt that, in some parts of the catchment areas, storing water on farmland is a very good approach but, at the moment, they are not really properly compensated for it. Have you considered that at all in the three days that you have been in office, Minister?

Dr Coffey: I thought, where a farmer's land was part of a formal flood storage area, so designated, they were compensated, whether the EA buys the land or leases it.

Q693 **Chair:** There are those schemes, certainly through stewardships schemes at the moment, where perhaps part of that could be water management. There is no real way of being able to positively pay farmers for that attitude. We are going to move our payments anyway, I suspect, or we are going to change our payments. As we look at new ways, we could have a good environmental policy that also helps with the natural environment and with holding that water. It may be for short periods; it may be for longer periods. That is where the department needs to be a bit more imaginative, because it could be now.

Dr Coffey: There are all sorts of post-Brexit opportunities, aren't there? We will be thinking about that. You will be aware that CAP II payments have to follow certain criteria. Obviously we now have the opportunity to shape that ourselves in the future. It is a very interesting point and one that I am sure will be carefully considered.

Q694 **Chair:** We had the National Farmers Union here giving evidence and I did tell them off for not being positive enough about it. Somehow or other, we have to engage with the farmers to say that there is not a licence to print money but a different way to use that land to help stop the local village or town flooding and, at the same time, be recompensed for it. That is the balance.

Dr Coffey: I am not sure you would want to get to the situation, and you will know this in your own areas, where someone buys something that has always been a floodplain and then expects to be paid for the fact that it has always been a floodplain. I do not know if that is what you would want to use taxpayers' money on.

Q695 **Chair:** Somerset, for instance, has all sorts of schemes where it has been flooding forever. Yes, I accept that. We are saying that, maybe in the North of England or maybe anywhere, where you have quite hilly terrain, you might well have an area of land where you would want to store some water to stop the local town or village flooding, and then have a leaky dam or something to let that water out quite slowly. That is where we can be a bit more imaginative, not in the Fens or wherever, where it has always been potentially flooded.

Neil Hornby: We do that already. In those examples where there is an agreement with the farmer to store water, farmers are paid for that outside of Countryside Stewardship. They will receive a payment from the Environment Agency out of the capital budget for the ability to do that. At the moment, that is an upfront payment when the agreement is reached. When the engineering is put in so that it will store that water, those people who own that land receive a capital payment.

Chair: In the future, it may not necessarily need to come out of the Environment Agency budget. It could come out of the equivalent of a farm policy, because it is not a CAP policy; it is an agricultural policy now. Perhaps it is a BAP, a British agricultural policy, or an English agricultural policy or whatever. That is what we could look at. That is just the plea I make.

Q696 **Rebecca Pow:** Can I very quickly chip in as well? At the moment, Minister, and I am sure you are aware of this, under the CAP there is no box for doing this stuff. I know there are some examples that the Environment Agency does, but it is not bread and butter, across the board. As the Chairman says, we are not specifically talking about floodplains. We are talking about this wider catchment approach, where you would pay farmers as part of their wider land management strategy, which involves producing food of course and environmental goods, but also perhaps having holding ponds and things that can temporarily hold some water and then it gets released. This all helps control all this floodwater. There is a general feeling that perhaps we could try to feed in this sort of thing. It is the perfect opportunity, Minister, thinking about the 25-year plan.

Dr Coffey: Indeed but, to reiterate, I am fairly sure that already happens where this has been formally agreed.

Chair: It is just beyond that. We have made our point, Minister. Thank you very much for that.

Q697 **Ms Ritchie:** Thank you, Minister—it never ends. Dealing with residual flood risk, how can people be supported in making their homes and businesses more resilient to floods? In your earlier submissions to our questions, you referred to your own constituency experience. Bearing that in mind but also your ministerial role, how can people be supported to be made more flood-resilient?

Dr Coffey: We know that areas that were affected by the significant floods were eligible to receive a £5,000 grant to try to help adapt their homes to make them more resilient for the future. I know that was really different in my part of the world. It just depended; the surveyors would come in and give advice, and houses three doors down might have a completely different solution from what was needed there. There is quite a lot that is personal there.

If you are thinking forward in the future about how we can get more resilient homes generally, there are questions to be asked. You do it through planning enforcement or the planning process. Are there incentives for insurers to encourage builders to make more resilient homes, in the first place? That is the kind of thing, but again you cannot have one size fits all, in terms of regulating on this, because every community is different and, within communities, there are different risks. Perhaps some of the market may come into play in that regard.

Q698 **Ms Ritchie:** Building regulations currently do not require resilience measures to be installed in buildings in flood-risk areas. Do you believe that building regulations should require installations of measures to improve properties in flood-risk areas, so that they are more resilient to floods, such as the use of resilient materials and higher level sockets, or could a voluntary code be as effective in increasing uptake?

Dr Coffey: I always prefer the voluntary approach. I completely understand what you are saying: if you want to develop in a particular area that is high-level risk, you should really be thinking about, say, putting the garage on the bottom floor and living accommodation upstairs or whatever it is. I think I am right in saying about the Flood Re scheme—and you can correct me if I am wrong, Neil—that people who have struggled to get that can now get it. If you are in a floodplain and your home is not adapted, you cannot access that.

Neil Hornby: No, you can; everybody can access it.

Dr Coffey: Everybody can access it—okay, my apologies. Is that even if they have not been adapted and they know it is a flood risk?

Neil Hornby: Yes.

Dr Coffey: Forgive me; I have not got on to that part of the brief in detail yet. We should be encouraging builders to be a lot more sensible, so that the homes they build are fit for the future.

Q699 **Ms Ritchie:** Should there be a need for new standards and processes to foster self-help in installing flood resilience measures? I know that you have said you favour the voluntary approach.

Dr Coffey: I do favour voluntary. We would have to go with more experiences if we then had to start regulating. I genuinely believe that trying to have a one-size-fits-all approach across a country just does not work when our communities are so different.

Q700 **Ms Ritchie:** How can developers be brought into catchment partnerships? How can they be encouraged into catchment partnerships?

Dr Coffey: It is a natural extension, when a local council is trying to develop their area, to bring that in as part of the discussion. I do not know if Neil wants to add stuff there.

Neil Hornby: The development approach to that area will need to take account of a whole range of things. We have talked about flood risk quite a lot. There are things you can do through planning conditions, instead of building regs. There is quite a lot in building regs already, but most of the requirements for new developers are through planning conditions.

Q701 **Chair:** We have talked a little bit about Flood Re, Minister. One of the weaknesses of Flood Re is that it does not cover businesses. When is the guesthouse no longer a private residence and becomes a business? It is how they get insurance. Like you said, it is very early days yet, but I expect you have probably had some experience of this in your own area. How do we get some support for those businesses, so that they can get affordable insurance? That is what it is all about. It is the "affordable". You can probably get insurance if you paid enough for it, but it might be more than your business is worth to get that insurance.

Dr Coffey: You will be aware that Flood Re was specifically introduced to focus on homeowners. I recognise what you are saying about the balancing act of when a home is no longer a home. We should allow the market to come together. They are trying to produce a product, which is coming out in the autumn, which I hope business owners will be able to access. At the end of the day, this is all quite new. Flood Re has only been in place since April. We will just need to see how that works and see how the commercial offer works, as well.

Q702 **Dr Monaghan:** Minister, you have only been in post three days. We accept that, but do you think a longer term focus on improving flood resilience is going to obviate the need for Flood Re?

Dr Coffey: I do not know. I would have to think about that. We cannot just wave a magic wand and there will never be a flood ever again, anywhere. Improving the resilience is important. There are established communities in very high-risk areas. Unless those communities decide to evacuate, the Flood Re solution will probably be a long-term feature.

Neil Hornby: It is important to say that Flood Re is designed in the legislation as a transitional measure for 25 years.

Chair: It will be reviewed along the way.

Neil Hornby: It is reviewed every five years along that path. One of Flood Re's responsibilities is to help manage that transition so that, at the end of that period, there is no longer a need for Flood Re, because we have developed things like resilience and also had the opportunity to invest more in defences over that period.

Dr Monaghan: The clock is ticking, effectively. You have 23 years now.

Neil Hornby: Yes, we have 23 years now.

Dr Coffey: That is quite a long timeframe. We have the long-term investment scenario, so there may well come a time when we do not think it is needed anymore, but we are only a few months into it.

Q703 **Dr Monaghan:** When do the review periods occur?

Neil Hornby: Every five years.

Q704 **Dr Monaghan:** At each of these review periods, will you really take a strongly analytic approach, as to whether Flood Re is delivering what it is supposed to deliver, which is affordable and obtainable insurance for households? There is the wider question of businesses as well.

Neil Hornby: For households with Flood Re, yes, exactly, and we will particularly look at the level of levy that it currently charges. Is that still at the right level and how is it progressing towards the transition plan?

Dr Coffey: We are sharing risk across the country by doing Flood Re.

Q705 **Chair:** That is right. The interesting one with Flood Re is that, in some ways, the principle is very similar to what we may be asking people in the future, which is to pay for flood maintenance, because you would then be asking individuals from a wider catchment area to pay for it. It is not quite national, like it is with Flood Re. On the Flood Re, are you happy that people are aware it is there and they can get insurance through it? I do not know whether Neil wants to answer that.

Dr Coffey: About 80% of the market is now signed up to the Flood Re programme. That is the majority of the insurance industry, so I would expect them to be marketing that quite substantially now. I do not know what the take-up has been in the first few months.

Neil Hornby: Flood Re is collecting that. The first year will be the year when they build up, as people renew their policies and come into Flood Re through that process. The reports from Flood Re are very positive so far.

Chair: We were down in Somerset only at the very beginning of Flood Re coming into existence. I know there were still some concerns from individual residents, who did not necessarily know a lot about it. I suspect that is getting better.

Neil Hornby: They should not need to because of the way the system works.

Q706 **Chair:** It should be done through their insurance company. I realise that, but it is making sure that happens. Finally, if you have any more information on how we may or may not be able to get those resources or that insurance in place for business in flood zones, we would be interested, please.

Dr Coffey: The commercial offer is due to come out this autumn. Just like householders across the country are helping each other, we will effectively be asking other businesses to subsidise other businesses. Is that the approach we really want—one business paying for somebody else's commercial risk? It would be quite an unusual step to take.

Chair: Some businesses will have the resilience measures in hand. It will be a warehouse that will have all their plug sockets up. They may accept that they flood. The flood comes in and the flood goes again.

Dr Coffey: You have that with fire as well. Some businesses proactively install sprinklers. I know that Mr Fitzpatrick would love every business to be required to have sprinklers but, at the moment, we do not do that. As a consequence, they often have lower insurance payments. People take commercial risks and commercial investment decisions.

Q707 **Chair:** Just one final question: are you interested in using the private capital green bond market to finance national flood management, for both local areas and the 25-year environmental plan? It would be one way of bringing in some extra cash, but is that Treasury and not your Department or would you be asking Treasury about that?

Dr Coffey: Any way to bring in external investment is very interesting. It is not something I have considered at all, in the last six years or the last three days. As ever, any submission is always of interest and should be considered in due course.

Chair: I was expecting you to have been thinking of nothing else in the last three days, Minister.

Q708 **Rebecca Pow:** Just to go back a tiny bit to that issue about the Environment Agency paying farmers to have the water on their land, would it be possible to ask Mr Hornby perhaps to write to us, Mr

Chairman, and tell us how many of those agreements are in place?

Neil Hornby: Sure.

Chair: That is a very good question, because you will find it is not that many and we could broaden it. That brings us very neatly up to the division. Minister, thank you so much. You have done very well, after being three days in the post, to come here before us. In your usual manner, you have been very straightforward and honest. When you have not been able to answer, you have said so, and you have answered us very well. Thank you as well, Mr Hornby, for coming along.