

Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts
House of Commons
London
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Dear Chair

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to your committee on 14 January on managing flood risk. We said that we would provide you with our recent research into flood risk for deprived areas – I have enclosed a copy of our evidence report: *Social deprivation and the likelihood of flooding*.

I also wanted to take the opportunity to clarify and expand on a number of points covered during the session.

Chalk streams

In response to a question from Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown about protecting chalk streams (question 22), I said that: "Philip Dunne's Bill is essentially about addressing sewage discharges from combined sewage overflows into rivers. I am not sure that it will have direct implications for chalk streams because, almost by definition, we are not allowing people to discharge sewage into chalk streams, but I will check whether there is any direct read-across".

I should clarify this point. The Environment Agency does not permit companies to discharge untreated sewage into any chalk stream on a day to day basis. But – as with other watercourses – we do allow storm overflows to discharge exceptionally into chalk streams during rainfall in order to prevent sewers being overloaded and backing up into people's homes. We also permit sewage treatment works to discharge treated sewage to chalk streams, but only within the strict permit limits required to protect the water quality of the receiving watercourse. These limits are set on a site-specific basis to protect the requirements of each chalk stream.

Asset recovery programme

Since 14 January I have received an update on progress with the asset recovery programme (question 27). The programme now consists of 604 projects to return flood defence assets which were damaged in winter 2019/20 to their required condition. Of these, 321 have had their standard of protection restored by permanent or temporary repairs, 140 have contingency plans in place, and the remaining 143 do not need contingency plans. We have prioritised the repair of assets that pose the most significant risk to lives and livelihoods, and where work is complex and not yet

completed we have robust contingency plans, such as the deployment of temporary barriers or mobile pumps. The projects which do not need contingency plans relate to assets that are providing their expected standard of protection this winter, but which require repair to damage that if left would cause the asset to degrade over time.

Reduction in flood risk

In response to a question about reduction in flood risk for non-residential buildings, agricultural land and other infrastructure (question 43), I said that we measure these in relation to particular flood schemes, which we do. But the Committee may want to know that we also measure these benefits for the capital investment programme as a whole. The 2015-21 programme is providing better protection to around 700,000 acres of agricultural land, 279 miles of railway and over 5,000 miles of highways in addition to delivering our target of 300,000 homes better protected by the end of March 2021. The 300,000 homes better protected only includes those which move to a lower risk band. In addition to these, our capital investment programme is also providing increased flood protection to many thousands of other homes and businesses, without moving them to a lower risk band.

Property value and the economic benefits of flood defences

The NAO has also queried one point in our evidence to you which I would like to clarify, with regards to the role property value plays in our assessment of economic damage (question 52). Our appraisal of the economic benefits of investing in flood defences are based primarily on the cost of repair and reinstatement rather than the market value of property. Whilst there may be some indirect influence, for example larger properties may see higher damages, property value is not a primary factor in our cost/benefit appraisal and geographic variations in property value do not significantly impact how we prioritise investment in flood defences. In addition to homes, we also include the economic benefits to businesses, agriculture and infrastructure as part of our assessment, as well as other non-tangible benefits including mental health.

Parish council precepts

I also undertook to respond in writing to James Wild MP's question about whether parish councils can issue precepts (question 51). We have agreed with DEFRA that they will be responding to this as it is principally a policy question.

Yours sincerely



Sir James Bevan
Chief Executive