

The Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Cc: Sarah Dyke MP

7 January 2026

Dear Mr Carmichael

River maintenance in Somerset

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss flood risk management in Somerset at the EFRA Committee meeting. In your letter dated 25 November 2025, you requested further information about how long the established practices of river maintenance in Somerset levels have been in place.

Following the committee meeting, the local Area Director and the Director of Asset Management and Engineering have met with Sarah Dyke MP to discuss asset maintenance in Somerset. We agreed to participate in a meeting requested by Sarah Dyke with partners and riparian owners, Internal Drainage Boards, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA). This meeting will be hosted by Emma Hardy MP, and we are awaiting details on the scheduled date.

In response to the query raised in your letter, established practices of maintenance on the Somerset Levels and Moors have broadly been in place since the landscape was drained to its current extent during and in the years after World War Two.

We do not deliver maintenance activities on all main rivers every year. Riparian landowners carry the statutory obligation to maintain watercourses, while we use our permissive powers to undertake maintenance, improvement, and construction on main rivers to manage flood risk and protect the environment. We have no legal duty to perform this work, or to notify partners and customers when we don't perform it.

Nonetheless, we follow national best-practice guidance that sets out aspirational standards and recommends consultation windows where circumstances allow.

We have a programme of works which focusses on the highest risk areas (high consequence systems) and meeting legal obligations. The Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC) are consulted in the development of this programme.

In July 2025, all local MPs in Somerset were provided with a list of sites and an explanation of the potential impact of reduced maintenance in specific locations by the Environment Agency. We need to focus our maintenance activities on the highest risk areas. The purpose of the ongoing consultation is to ensure we have all available information on flood risk and environmental value to ensure we are prioritising the right locations. The RFCC will be consulted before any final decisions are made.

The Environment Agency and local partners have delivered over £200 million worth of improvements in Somerset since 2014, with over £47 million worth of operation, maintenance, and repair work delivered. The Environment Agency and partners have delivered a large programme of work, including raising roads, widening river channels, installing new control structures, dredging, raising riverbanks, and improving flood storage reservoirs.

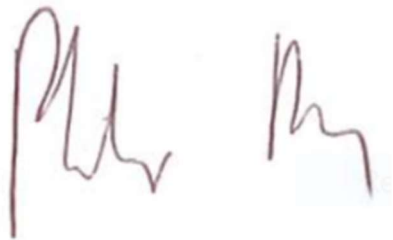
I recognise that opportunities should be explored to maximise delivery with our limited resources, in partnership with valued stakeholders. To achieve this, the Environment Agency is continuing to work closely with its partners in lead local flood authorities (LLFAs), Natural England, and internal drainage boards, to look at how maintenance in Somerset can be delivered most effectively, including the use of Public Sector Cooperation Agreements, opportunities for de-maining, and deployment of precepts and special levies.

I trust this answers the question raised before the Committee.

If you require any further information, please contact:

wessexenquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Philip Duffy', with a blue rectangular stamp or mark to the right of the signature.

Philip Duffy

Chief Executive, Environment Agency