

## **Written evidence submitted by the Local Government Association (LGA) (FLO0088)**

### **Managing flood risk**

Thank you for inviting the Local Government Association to provide supplementary evidence further to my letter of 13 May 2020 on managing flood risk, following the Government's long-term plan to tackle flooding. I thought I would write to you to outline local government's response and provide information on some of the additional areas that the Committee is considering. I also look forward to giving evidence to your Committee on the 1 September and hope this is a helpful guide on the LGA's policies and analysis in advance of that session.

### **How effectively do the new Government policy statement and Environment Agency strategy meet the challenge posed by a changing climate?**

The new policy statement and funding announced by the Government on 14 July 2020 comes against a backdrop of significant funding constraints for councils. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, councils were facing a funding gap of £6.4 billion by 2024/25<sup>i</sup> even with the assumption of council tax increases of 2 per cent each year, fees and charges rising and sustained levels of business rates growth. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing funding pressures councils were already facing. The newest information from the June round of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) financial information survey indicates that the financial challenge related to Covid-19 that councils are dealing with is nearly £11 billion.

The financial situation facing many councils will have a significant impact on their ability to put in place suitable resilience measures to deal with flooding and we welcome the additional investment from the Government in strengthening the nation's flood defences. Last winter showed the devastating effect of flooding, and this was particularly difficult for those areas that were hit by several severe storms.

The strategy indicates that businesses and communities will need to strengthen their capacity to deal with flood risk and become more resilient to flooding. This is clearly important to our ability to respond to climate change and unpredictable weather patterns. Physical barriers can only do so much to protect peoples' homes and livelihoods from the increased risk of flooding. We recognise that this is a significant shift in national policy, and councils as local leaders are keen to understand how this will be communicated.

Having set out the vision, the Government should now work with local government and other partners on how this can be delivered. Action plans will need to be developed at the local level, as each place will face different risks from flooding and coastal erosion. For example, the flood risk management plan for Cumbria Council notes a number of risk factors due to its specific geography, with high levels of rainfall and run off from steep land<sup>ii</sup>. By contrast, Coventry<sup>iii</sup> has identified areas of localised risks from river and surface water flooding and the need for targeted investment.

We welcome the confirmation in the policy statement and the Environment Agency strategy that they form part of the Government's wider strategy for tackling climate change. Government needs to build on this approach and develop a climate emergency framework that sets out clear roles for central and local government. This should provide local government with enabling powers and funding to deliver effective responses to climate change in their local areas. In the context of flooding and coastal erosion, the framework should include an understanding of what actions will generate the best outcomes, at what cost and over specific timescales.

## **What level of investment will be required in future in order to effectively manage flood risk in England, and how can this best be targeted?**

### *Ongoing costs for councils*

Due to funding constraints which have been exacerbated by the current pandemic, councils are already stretched in dealing with flood risk and already struggle to meet their existing statutory responsibilities. While many areas will already be planning to review flood risk plans and strategies, the new vision from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Environment Agency will need to be reflected locally in plans and strategies and this will require new skills and technical knowledge, such as natural flood management. We welcome further information on how councils will be supported to lead and implement the new strategy locally.

Lead local flood areas (LLFAs) were established in 2010 in county and unitary areas. Their roles include development of a local flood risk management strategy, investigating flood incidents and as statutory consultees, providing technical advice on surface water drainage to local planning authorities. Grant funding from Defra for LLFAs runs out at the end of this financial year and it is not clear how this critical role will be funded from 2021. This needs to be addressed in the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review this Autumn, along with the broader issue of local government finance.

### *Investment in schemes and projects*

It is taking councils many years to assemble funding for large, complex flood and river defence schemes, such as the River Thames Scheme. We encourage Government to bring forward funding and enable councils to lead a place-based approach, where funding is based on local needs rather than individual agency budgets. Research for the LGA highlighted a number of challenges in bringing funding streams together locally. Flooding and coastal erosion schemes can be multi-purpose so a significant amount of effort is needed in obtaining funds from different sources, such as grant in aid from the Environment Agency, the LEP and structural funding (based on experience of EU funding). Each application process has different requirements and criteria to meet, making this a labour-intensive process.

The challenge of securing investment outside urban areas is an ongoing frustration for many councils. A weakness of the existing national flood and coastal resilience partnership model for grant funding is that smaller, more rural and dispersed areas are unable to compete for funding. The nature of the model also means that areas with catchment areas characterised by industry, commerce and critical infrastructure, yet with little residential accommodation, will only secure very low levels of national funding contributions. It is unlikely that other contributors will willingly step forward to fill these gaps.

## **How can communities most effectively be involved, and supported, in the policies and decisions that affect them?**

Councils are experienced in community engagement and have been doing this for many years as leaders of their local communities. The LGA's latest public opinion survey shows 71 per cent of residents trust their council and 75 per cent are satisfied with the way their local council runs things in their area.<sup>iv</sup>

Talking to communities about resilience to flooding and coastal erosion, rather than investing in flood defence, is a new conversation and currently there are limited examples to draw on such as the Middle Midway flood resilience scheme, developed by the Environment Agency, Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council. This will need to be carefully explained to ensure that resilience is not misread by communities as abandonment. The national and local messaging on

resilience must be joined up. Councils and other local partners may need different tools and resources for community engagement, as well as technical training in new ways of flood and water management. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of a research project backed by the Environment Agency to work with community engagement specialists in two pilot areas.

**With increasing focus on natural flood management measures, how should future agricultural and environmental policies be focussed and integrated with the Government's wider approach to flood risk?**

Councils are well placed to bring together farming, environment and flood risk policy in their local areas. We are recommending that Government works with councils and business to establish a national framework for addressing the climate emergency and to ensure all elements of national policy are geared towards supporting climate smart outcomes and reduced greenhouse emissions whilst supporting economic recovery and fixing social inequalities.

**How can housing and other development be made more resilient to flooding, and what role can be played by measures such as insurance, sustainable drainage and planning policy?**

The LGA would like to see building regulations changed to include mandatory flood protection measures for new properties. These would require developers to introduce measures like raised electrical sockets, fuse boxes, controls and wiring, sealed floors, and raised damp-proof courses.

The planning system must also have public participation at its heart, enabling councils to deliver resilient, prosperous places that meet the needs of their communities. It means beautiful areas and better homes. Our message to Government is that reform of the planning system must not take further powers away from communities and councils. This will only deprive them of the ability to define the area they live in and know best and risks giving developers the freedom to ignore the wishes of local communities.

**What lessons can be learned from the recent winter floods about the way Government and local authorities respond to flooding events?**

The State of the UK Climate report<sup>v</sup> notes the rise in rainfall and significant flooding events over the last decade, and this picture is reflected by feedback from councils about their experiences last winter. Many councils are starting to prepare now for severe winter weather, even though they are still stretched in dealing with the Covid-19 response.

Some parts of the country were hit repeatedly by severe storms. Councils in these areas have told us about the pressure of continuously responding to emergencies, where in the worst case the recovery cannot be completed before the next flood comes. This is placing extreme pressure on communities and council staff. I would also like to re-iterate the challenge of securing investment in flood prevention for smaller towns and rural areas. This is a common theme of feedback to the LGA.

I hope you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr David Renard  
Chairman, LGA Environment, Economy, Housing & Transport Board

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i <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/re-thinking-local/re-thinking-local-funding-services-and-investing-communities>

ii <https://cumbria.gov.uk/eLibrary/Content/Internet/544/3887/5894/4212914848.PDF>

iii [https://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/70/water\\_management\\_and\\_flooding/1414/local\\_flood\\_risk\\_management\\_strategy](https://www.coventry.gov.uk/info/70/water_management_and_flooding/1414/local_flood_risk_management_strategy)

iv <https://www.local.gov.uk/polling-resident-satisfaction-councils-june-2020>

v <https://rmets.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/10970088/2020/40/S1>