Written evidence submitted by the Environment Agency (CWR0300)

EFRA Committee call for written evidence on emergency response to flooding

Environment Agency written submission

Contextual information

1. Flooding is one of the most serious and growing risks facing England. Our National Flood Risk Assessment shows that around 6.3 million homes and businesses are already at risk from rivers, the sea, surface water or a combination of sources. As climate change drives rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather, this could increase to around 8 million properties by mid-century — around 1 in 4 properties in England.

2. Recent years show the challenge clearly: intense rainfall, drought conditions, exceptionally wet winters and major storms such as Babet, Ciarán and Henk have caused widespread disruption. Flooding damages homes, businesses, infrastructure, local economies and wellbeing, and costs the UK economy billions each year.

3. Climate records continue to be broken across the country and worldwide, with the summer of 2026 provisionally being the UK's hottest on record. This was a dramatic shift from winter 2025/26, where England received significant rainfall of 42% above the average amount. El Niño is now firmly established in 2026 and has already exceeded previous records. The strong El Niño doesn’t mean increased flooding is guaranteed, but it does mean that the odds of the UK seeing repeated storm systems, prolonged rainfall, saturated catchments and consequential flooding are higher than average

4. The Environment Agency works with Risk Management Authorities and local responders to reduce flood risk, maintain assets and support emergency response. As a Category 1 responder, its role depends on accurate forecasting, timely flood warnings and coordinated multi-agency action before, during and after incidents.

5. Since 2015, the Environment Agency and partners have better protected more than 455,000 properties from flooding and coastal erosion. In 2025 to 2026, flood and coastal defences protected approximately 67,000 properties.

6. Government has committed £10.5 billion for flood resilience investment through to 2036, including long-term capital funding to build and repair flood defences. This investment is critical to strengthening preparedness, improving resilience and reducing the impacts of flooding as the climate changes.

Executive Summary

7. Flooding is a significant and increasing risk in England, with around 6.3 million homes and businesses currently at risk and climate change expected to increase this to around 8 million properties by mid-century.

8. Recent storms, wet winters, drought conditions and significant rainfall show the growing complexity of flood risk and the need for strong forecasting, warning and response arrangements.

9. The Environment Agency has a strategic overview of the management of all sources of flooding and coastal change and are the lead authority for managing the risk of flooding from main rivers, estuaries and the sea. We work with Risk Management Authorities, Local Resilience Forums and other responders to manage flood and coastal erosion risk. We maintain, operate and deliver flood and coastal risk management assets and schemes, and provide forecasting and warning services.

10. Multi-agency flood plans, Strategic Coordinating Groups and Tactical Coordinating Groups provide the main structures for coordinating flood preparedness, response priorities, resources, public messaging and recovery activity.

11. Flooding can have severe immediate impacts on rural communities, farming businesses and wellbeing, including damage to homes, roads, bridges, utilities, crops, livestock, farm infrastructure, local services and supply chains.

12. Local authorities play a central role in ensuring access to critical supplies and welfare support during flooding, including rest centres, emergency accommodation, transport coordination and links with voluntary organisations.

13. The Environment Agency has established national and local resources to support immediate recovery, including Area teams, specialist staff, strengthened national coordination, forecasting and warning functions.

14. Current arrangements are strong and scalable for most flood events, but more frequent, prolonged and concurrent incidents create increasing pressure on forecasting, warning, incident management and recovery capacity.

15. There is scope to further strengthen preparedness for rapidly developing flood events, improve shared situational awareness, and ensure information is translated consistently into coordinated action across responding organisations.

EFRA Committee questions

1. How prepared is the national response for flooding events that affect multiple critical infrastructure sectors at the same time, such as transport, food, water and energy?

16. Responsibility for national critical infrastructure policy and cross-sector arrangements sits with central government, with Defra as the lead government department for flooding. The Environment Agency does not hold a complete list of other critical national infrastructure in areas at risk of, or protected from, flooding, as sector information is held by the relevant lead government department on the Cabinet Office Knowledge Base. Preparedness for flooding affecting multiple infrastructure sectors therefore relies on established multi-agency response arrangements, supported by central government coordination where cross-sector impacts arise.

2. How effective are current arrangements for coordinating responses across different sectors during major flood events?

17. Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) bring together emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies, the Environment Agency, utility providers, transport operators and other local partners to plan for and coordinate emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

18. LRFs create and maintain Multi-Agency Flood Plans. The plans contain information on areas and communities at risk, warning and escalation procedures, evacuation arrangements and rest centres. The plans complement broader major incident and emergency response plans that are used for multiple risks. The plans were last audited in November 2025 and showed that a good level of arrangements were in place, while identifying areas for improvement, including up-to-date maps and linked plans. Defra wrote to all LRFs to communicate the findings and provide plan feedback. The next review will take place in 2028. Local Resilience Forums have differing levels of experience of significant flooding, with some much more practised than others. This makes maintaining consistently high standards of flood planning, exercising and preparedness particularly important.

19. This will become increasingly important as responders plan and prepare for rapidly developing flood events, such as surface water flooding, which can take place away from water courses and where the time available to understand emerging impacts and coordinate action may be more constrained. Continued improvement in multi-agency planning and exercising can help raise standards and strengthen consistency across LRF areas.

20. Strategic Coordinating Groups (SCGs) bring together senior representatives from responding organisations, including the emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies, the Environment Agency, utility and transport providers, and government representatives where required. Tactical Coordinating Groups (TCGs) draw on

representatives from the same responding organisations, but at a tactical or operational level. The Tactical Coordinating Groups (TCGs) are the main multi-agency structures used by a Local Resilience Forum to coordinate the response to flood events across all responding organisations. The SCG operates at the strategic level and is responsible for setting the overall direction and objectives for the response. This includes response, requests for additional resources or national support, coordination of public messaging and media communications, and overseeing the change from flood response into recovery. The TCG translates strategic objectives into practical action and manages the response across agencies.

3. What are the immediate impacts of flooding events on rural communities, farming businesses, livelihoods, and people's wellbeing?

21. Flooding can have significant and immediate impacts on rural communities, farming businesses, livelihoods and wellbeing. It can damage roads, bridges, power supplies and other critical infrastructure, leaving communities cut off from essential services and utilities. These impacts can be more severe in remote areas, where alternative routes, services and support networks may be limited. The closure of local shops, community facilities and services can also have a disproportionate economic and social impact, while dispersed populations and disrupted transport or communications can make recovery slower and support harder to access.

22. For farming businesses, flooding can prevent access to livestock, making it difficult to provide food, water and care. Crops can be damaged or lost, and floodwater can prevent access to fields for drilling, cultivation and harvesting. Flooding can also damage soils through compaction, degradation and, in coastal locations, salinisation, reducing agricultural productivity. Farm buildings, machinery, fencing and other infrastructure may require costly repairs, replacement and clean-up.

23. These impacts can interrupt agricultural production and prevent rural businesses from operating normally. The economic effects often extend beyond individual farms, affecting local supply chains, contractors, rural employers and food production. Communities that rely heavily on agriculture and small rural businesses can therefore face significant financial pressures immediately following flood events.

24. Flooding also affects people's wellbeing. Residents, farmers and business owners may experience stress, anxiety and uncertainty as they deal with damage to homes, land, businesses and possessions. Isolation caused by damaged infrastructure and loss of services can affect community cohesion and individual wellbeing, particularly in remote rural areas. Disruption to daily life, livelihoods and access to support services can also have lasting effects on mental health and quality of life.

25. Flood and coastal erosion risk management investment helps to reduce these impacts. Between April 2025 and March 2026, this investment benefitted around 15,000 hectares of agricultural land.

26. The Environment Agency also works with rural stakeholders to improve understanding of flood risk and strengthen resilience. The Rural Flood Resilience Partnership, established in September 2024, brings together Action with Communities in Rural England, the Association of Drainage Authorities, the Country Land and Business Association, the Environment Agency, Natural England and the National Farmers Union. We work together with these partners to improve collaboration, deepen understanding of rural vulnerabilities and support communities and agricultural businesses to prepare for present and future flood risks and coastal erosion.

27. The Partnership is strengthening the evidence base on the impacts of flooding to rural areas by reviewing existing data and research, and gathering insight from farmers, rural communities and flood risk professionals. It is supporting stronger engagement through a national community of practice involving representatives from the Action with Communities in Rural England network, encouraging greater rural representation on Regional Flood and Coastal Committees, and exploring how rural community flood preparedness can be strengthened through Local Resilience Forums.

28. It is also improving access to practical support by developing and signposting resources for rural communities, farmers and landowners before, during and after flooding, available at https://www.ruralfloodresilience.org.uk/. It has also developed guidance for farmers on improving the resilience of agricultural buildings. These actions are helping to improve understanding of rural flood resilience needs, increase rural voices in flood risk management decisions, and improve access to relevant guidance and support.

29. Alongside this, the Environment Agency is working with rural stakeholders and the Floods Resilience Taskforce on actions including reviewing maintenance protocols, promoting Public Sector Co-operation Agreements, improving flood risk activity permits, and reviewing guidance and standards on the de-maining of main rivers.

4. How do public bodies, including Local Resilience Forums, ensure communities are able to access critical supplies, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas?

30. During flooding, local authorities play a central role in ensuring communities can continue to access vital services by working through the Local Resilience Forum and coordinating with emergency services, utility providers, health services, voluntary organisations and government agencies. They ensure people have access to care

and welfare, they will open and run rest centres, provide emergency accommodation, they will co-ordinate and manage transport and access.

5. What challenges, if any, do public bodies and local authorities face in meeting their responsibilities during flood emergencies under the current legislative framework such as the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and Flood and Water Management Act 2010?

31. The Environment Agency is a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, responsible for assessing emergency risks, planning responses, and informing the public. It works with other responders through Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) to develop Multi-Agency Flood Plans that prepare for local flooding scenarios to support response activities. These plans are being reviewed and improved in collaboration with Defra.

32. The EA engages with at-risk communities to raise flood awareness and encourage proactive measures, such as signing up for flood warnings and creating local flood plans. The Flood Forecasting Centre (a partnership between the Environment Agency and the Met Office) supports this by providing daily flood risk assessments (Flood Guidance Statements) to response partners.

33. During flood incidents, the Environment Agency issues flood warnings via the Get Flood Warning Service to help protect lives and livelihoods. It also advises partners through the Flood Advisory Service and participates in Tactical and Strategic Coordination Groups to ensure a coordinated multi-agency response. The Environment Agency operates flood defence assets and deploys temporary defences as needed.

34. The Environment Agency has well established arrangements for preparing for and responding to flooding, working with Local Resilience Forums and other responders through established multi-agency emergency arrangements. The challenge is increasingly how these arrangements and the capabilities that support them are sustained as the nature of flood response changes.

35. Flooding is increasingly a year-round operational challenge, including more intense summer rainfall, prolonged events through the autumn and winter and the potential for concurrent emergencies such as drought and flooding. Climate change and changes in land use (such as the use of tamped plastic to support early season maize) are also making it increasingly challenging to maintain accurate and effective flood forecasting and warning services. The Environment Agency is therefore investing significant resource in improving its forecasting and modelling capability and reviewing and updating Flood Warning Areas, so that services continue to reflect changing flood risk. Post-event learning has also highlighted the growing challenge of misinformation during and after incidents, particularly through social media, which can create confusion and make clear, consistent and authoritative public

communication, such as through the UK Common Warnings Framework, increasingly important.

36. The Environment Agency is responding by continuing to strengthen the resilience of its forecasting, warning and incident management arrangements. We recognise that effective response depends not only on mobilising resources when flooding occurs, but on providing timely information that enables responders and communities to anticipate impacts and take appropriate action. This includes continuing to improve forecasting and modelling capability and keeping flood warning coverage aligned with changing risk. This supports established multi-agency arrangements through which strategic and tactical groups coordinate priorities, resources, public communications and operational activity during significant incidents.

37. There is nevertheless scope for further strengthening. In particular, the Environment Agency sees value in continuing to build the resilience needed to sustain critical forecasting, warning and incident response capabilities through:

- prolonged and concurrent incidents
- strengthening preparedness for rapidly developing flood events, including from surface water
- ensuring that forecasting and warning information is translated consistently into shared situational awareness and coordinated action across responding organisations.

38. The current Cabinet Office review of the Civil Contingencies Act provides an opportunity for Local Resilience Forums and relevant bodies to identify any legislative barriers and where changes could further support effective multi-agency response.

6. What resources are available at a local level for immediate recovery from a flood event and to what extent are they sufficient and delivered in a timely manner?

39. The Environment Agency has established resources across England to support the immediate recovery of communities following flooding. Working through locally led, multi-agency arrangements, our Area teams provide flood risk expertise, operational information, asset knowledge and operation and community engagement support. We work closely with Local Authorities, Lead Local Flood Authorities, Local Resilience Forums and other partners to identify priority communities and coordinate recovery activity.

40. Our contribution draws on an array of specialist staff which enables us to gather and share flood information, support investigations, explain our operational response, communicate plans for asset inspection and repair, and help communities

understand and manage their future flood risk. The strengthened National Operations Centre and Forecasting and Warning functions launched in 2026 complement local capabilities by improving national coordination, situational awareness and the support available to Area teams during significant incidents.

41. Concurrent, widespread or sustained flooding can place additional pressure on our operations. In these circumstances, resources are prioritised according to risk, impact and community need. Local capacity can be supplemented through established regional and national arrangements.

42. Overall, we have a strong and scalable national capability that is sufficient to support recovery from most flood events, enabling support to be targeted effectively and delivered promptly.

7. Given that responsibility for flood response is shared across multiple national and local bodies, how effective is coordination during and immediately after a flood event?

43. Coordination during flood response is effective and is underpinned by well-established, regularly exercised arrangements that are understood across local and national responder organisations.

44. At the local level, flood response is coordinated through Local Resilience Forums and Strategic and Tactical Coordinating Groups, bringing together emergency services, local authorities, the Environment Agency, utilities, health partners and other responders. The Environment Agency participates in these structures throughout a flood event, sharing real-time information on flood risk, impacts and forecasts to support operational decision-making. These arrangements are supported by multi-agency flood plans that set out roles, responsibilities and escalation procedures in advance of an incident.

45. At the national level, Defra, as the Lead Government Department for flooding, coordinates activity across government departments and agencies to maintain a common operating picture, identify emerging risks and, where necessary, mobilise additional support. During significant or widespread flooding, the National Flood Response Centre can be activated to strengthen situational awareness, improve cross-sector coordination and provide robust information and advice to ministers and, if required, COBR.

46. The effectiveness of these arrangements has improved considerably over the last two decades. Reviews following major flood events, including the Pitt Review and the subsequent Multi-Agency Flood Plan Review, led to significant strengthening of national flood response arrangements, clearer command structures, greater interoperability between agencies and more consistent planning across England.

Independent reviews have concluded that multi-agency planning provides a strong foundation for coordinated flood response and that Local Resilience Forums play a critical role in delivering effective local action.

47. Once the immediate response phase ends, leadership of flood recovery transfers to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, working with local authorities and other partners to support recovery and consider the activation of recovery schemes, including financial assistance where appropriate. Although many communities receive excellent support, the practical challenges of securing temporary accommodation, restoring businesses, accessing grants and rebuilding affected homes can differ between locations depending on the scale of impacts, local capacity, access to insurance and specialist support.

October 2026