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Blueprint for Water coalition Briefing for the Autumn Statement 2014

Dredging up trouble

A submission to the Government's Autumn Statement consultation on the prioritisation of investment in flood risk management

Last winter's record rainfall wreaked havoc across the country, bringing misery to thousands of people. The sense of loss, anger and frustration amongst those affected was all too obvious and understandable. As the media and politicians looked to apportion blame, the focus turned to the scaling back of river dredging over the past 30 years. However, the idea that a return to wholesale dredging would have prevented last year's floods is not supported by the evidence. February's report from CIWEM, *Floods and Dredging – A Reality Check*, cited evidence that dredging can even make some downstream communities more vulnerable to the risk of flooding by moving water more quickly down the river catchments.

The report draws on decades of experience and scientific evidence which shows that dredging is not a stand-alone solution to flooding. Instead it should be seen as one of a range of tools and interventions, such as holding water at the top of the catchments, ending damaging farming practices that cause rivers to choke with sediment, protecting floodplains from development, working with natural processes to slow the flow of water, and increasing infiltration and flood storage throughout catchments.

Despite this, environmental and wildlife organisations are concerned that the political appetite to be seen to be 'doing something' could send us back to the 1960's and 70's; a time when public money was wasted on ill-conceived dredging and drainage schemes that unnecessarily turned many rivers into straightened flood channels, causing huge environmental damage often with little real benefit to flood risk reduction for communities.

Dangerous Signals

In June 2014 the Environment Agency informed stakeholders of a new instruction from the Environment Secretary appearing to prioritise dredging over other flood risk management options:

"I want to let you know that the Secretary of State has requested that we provide Defra with a prioritised list of locations where dredging would improve conveyance and reduce flood risk. This follows the ongoing response to the winter floods and the recent response to the EFRA Committee."

We believe this represents a clear shift in policy, cutting across Defra's own funding rules which ensure the Environment Agency targets its limited budget where the benefit to communities is greatest. Any attempt to apply different tests to dredging would inevitably come at the expense of much needed flood barriers, by-pass channels and upland management schemes that can deliver real protection to vulnerable communities. It also risks causing environmental damage, which could then require public funding to put right in the future.

That said, we don't believe the current policy framework and funding arrangements are perfect. That's why we have set out how any new monies could be better spent to protect homes, people and the infrastructure we all rely on, as well as to help communities and individuals cope with flooding. These include a top ten of key areas where new investment is urgently needed.

1. Schemes that protect life and public health

Big strides have been made in protecting people from flooding over the past decade, but there are still areas where more investment would make a crucial difference. Schemes protecting hospitals, care homes and bungalows – where people can't escape upstairs – should be top of the list, along with help to decontaminate and dry out people's homes after flooding, so that they aren't vulnerable to damp and disease.

- Over 2,000 health centres are at risk of flooding in England – almost one in ten
- Over a third of flooded families suffer health problems because of the flooding

2. Natural flood management

There is increasing consensus amongst engineers and scientists that working with nature can be a cost effective way of offering a vital first line of defence from floods. As a result more and more towns and villages are being protected by schemes that integrate habitat restoration with traditional flood walls: wetlands that store floodwaters, woodlands that slow flash floods and river restoration to hold more water in uplands, meanders and natural floodplains. These include Holnicote in Somerset and Belford in Northumberland, where natural processes helped protect homes from severe storms last winter. But much more needs to be done to target investment towards natural solutions.

- Winchester was saved from widespread flooding last winter by the very opposite of dredging: army engineers lowered gravel into the river Itchen, diverting floodwater into nearby fields before it reached the town. Schemes like this should be planned rather than emergency measures – to reduce damage, and to be fairer to people living and working nearby. At the Winnall Moors Nature Reserve just north of Winchester, river and floodplain restoration has provided enhanced water-holding capacity and this also helped reduce the 2013-14 flooding impacts. Such sites have a crucial role to play in flood storage, but more extensive river restoration works are needed to create greater capacity for holding water in periods of high rainfall.



Army engineers lower gravel into the river Itchen, February 15th

© image from Winchester Echo

(http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/11015160.Winning_the_war_against_Winchester_floods/)

- Intact upland blanket peats hold and slow water during storms, but a long history of drainage and burning have left them damaged and unable to protect people downstream. £11M would restore 200,000 hectares of upland peatlands in England by 2020, allowing them to fulfill that role again.

3. New flood defences awaiting funding

There is a long list of worthwhile new flood defences waiting to be built once there's enough funding available, and clear evidence that areas in need are not being allocated anything like the level of funding required. For example the North West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee recommended that £6m be allocated to Cumbria during the next financial year to tackle flood risk, but the area has been allocated a mere £320,000. Hundreds of thousands of homes are still at high risk of flooding. Schemes across the country, that would improve defences in towns like Ashford, Brixham and King's Lynn – and villages like Cheriton and East Meon in Hampshire – could be complete within years if extra money can be found.

- The Hampshire villages of Cheriton and East Meon have faced flooding twice in the past few years. Property-level floodproofing here could defend 120 homes for only £250,000. Schemes like this are extremely valuable, and deserve more public investment.
- In Cumbria, residents of an area of Grange over Sands are awaiting flood work to protect their properties which flood in heavy rain. This programme is not scheduled to happen until 2018/19, when it should have gone ahead a couple of years ago.
- A number of shovel-ready schemes to defend vulnerable parts of towns that are awaiting funding: among many others, examples include a £2M project to defend 284 homes in Ashford, a £1.2M scheme in Brixham and £1.1M in Kings Lynn.
- Demountable defences, which can be put up during emergencies, proved vital at Upton and Bewdley on the Severn, preventing a repeat of the 2007 floods there. These could be purchased and kept ready in other parts of the country.

4. Delivery of resilient transport and utility networks

Last winter demonstrated that critical infrastructure remains vulnerable to flooding. One-fifth of our rail, a quarter of our gas infrastructure and many of our largest ports are at risk. Last winter, floods destroyed the railway line between Exeter and Cornwall, and closed one of the UK's busiest ports for days. It is urgently important that we invest to adapt and build flood resilience into our critical national infrastructure.

- It took two months and cost £35M to restore rail services to Cornwall and West Devon, after floods destroyed the line at Dawlish this February. The line at Dawlish was known to be at very high risk, years before it was flooded.
- Government needs to do more to ensure key infrastructure operators, such as Network Rail, highways and ports authorities improve the long-term resilience of their assets to future flood risk either through funding, incentives or regulation – inaction isn't an option.

5. Flood Recovery

It can take months or years to get back into your house after a flood, and the long and complicated recovery process can be as upsetting as the original event. Government could offer an important helping hand to people as they put their home or business back together. Dedicated advisors, a recovery fund or help with extra costs – such as getting children the extra distance to school or waiving council-tax on emergency accommodation – could make all the difference to people facing enormous worry and upheaval.

“It affects everything. You know, you’re not in your own place anymore. It depresses me to go back to that house, even to pick up mail. I don’t like it. It smells, it’s cold, it is really upsetting me. It’s depressing. It’s horrible.”

Charlotte, Hull flood victim in 2007

‘Right now I just feel like I have failed both my sons and should be able to provide a home for them instead of just a house’

Melanie, Hull flood victim in 2007

6. Sustainable Drainage

Britain has some world-class sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) – which prevent hard surfaces like roofs, roads and paving from causing flooding – but risks falling behind other countries in Europe and the rest of the world. Cities in Denmark, Germany and the United States are rolling out green SuDS measures such as rain gardens, swales, soakaways and green roofs. The Government can do much more to support projects like the example below in a London primary school, which absorbs, slows and cleans stormwater – and also brings nature into people’s everyday life.

Example: Hollickwood Primary School, London

Stormwater which previously flooded the school playground or ran straight into London’s overloaded drains is now diverted from the school roof to a raised garden and a temporary stream through nearby fields. This has prevented flooding during heavy rain, left the water much cleaner and allows children to learn and play in the wildlife garden.



7. Coping with Climate Change

Severe flooding is already far more common than it was only twenty years ago, and by the end of the century we can expect extreme 'once in a hundred years' floods to be happening every decade. We must plan and invest now, or within our lifetimes floods like last winter's will hit us each winter. This requires long-term investment in robust defences – like recent big coastal projects at Medmerry and Steart – as well as planning for emergency response.

- The Medmerry flood defence protected 350 homes last winter, and stopped the 10,000 people who live in Selsey from being cut off from the rest of the country. It was only finished last September, and was unscathed by the worst storm in decades; the sea walls were buffered by a wildlife reserve, which protected them against floods that destroyed nearby defences.
- The Steart project in Somerset has created one of the UK's largest new wetland reserves while protecting houses on the Steart peninsula and a transmission line from Hinkley Point from flooding.



8. Enough staff to tackle emergencies

4,500 Environment Agency staff were involved in last winter's emergency flood work, including 800 who don't usually work on flood management. These people, plus those that work in flood response for Local Authorities represents a critical asset at times of crisis. However many are at risk of lay-offs and redundancies with over a thousand jobs expected to be lost in the Environment Agency.

- More than half of the Environment Agency staff fighting last winter's floods in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall do not usually work in flood management. It is their jobs that are most at risk.

9. Enforcement of existing rules that protect us from flooding

It is vital that the legal safeguards in place to protect the capacity of our landscape and rivers to hold back flood water are effective and enforced. However, evidence from the Environment Agency suggests farming causes thousands of incidents of soil erosion that chokes our rivers and reduces their capacity to carry flood waters. At the same time official statistics suggest the risk of a farmer being caught and penalized for breaking soil protection rules is vanishingly small. Meeting existing flood safeguards is the least we should expect from the £2 billion spent supporting farmers.

Lack of enforcement is also an issue with urban development with the statutory climate change adaptation sub-committee highlighting the fact that building on the floodplain continues apace despite controls to prevent it.

- Fewer than 200 out of tens of thousands of soil problems resulted in even a small fine last year.
- New housing is still being built disproportionately on floodplains: 220,000 homes between 2001 and 2011, which was a 12% increase in the number of homes at flood risk at a time when the total nation's housing stock went up by only 7%.



Soil flooding off fields and into the river Wye in early February – a small part of the soil seen washing into the Bristol Channel in this February 16th satellite image.

10. Helping people and communities adapt to the reality of future flood risk.

We recognize the fact Government needs to make tough choices about how the flood budget is allocated. However, this will come as little comfort to those who don't qualify for significant investment and can't afford to defend or adapt to increased flood risk. We believe there should be much greater clarity about the role of local and national government in planning and facilitating

adaptation, with funding dedicated to help people, communities and businesses who can't be fully protected.

Conclusion

With so many communities still at flood risk and so much that could be done to help it is vital that investment made by Defra and the Treasury offer best value in protecting housing, assets and the most vulnerable in society. There is simply no evidence that this can be achieved by a return to wholesale dredging with the associated downstream risks and damage to river and wildlife habitats it can cause.

Instead, we call on Government to recognize the reality that flood risk management is a complex challenge requiring sophisticated, considered and long-term programmes of action built on sound science, local engagement and an honest appraisal of cost and benefits of the choices we face.

Blueprint for Water coalition

The Blueprint for Water is a unique coalition of environmental, water efficiency and fishing and angling organisations that is calling on the Government and its agencies to set out the necessary steps to achieve “sustainable water” by 2015. The Blueprint for Water is a campaign of Wildlife and Countryside Link. More information is available at www.blueprintforwater.org.uk

This briefing is supported by the following 10 organisations:

- Amphibian and reptile conservation
- Angling Trust
- Buglife
- Friends of the Earth
- Institute of Fisheries Management
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Salmon & Trout Association
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
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