

Local Government Association briefing, Westminster Hall debate, support for local authorities after Storm Eva, Wednesday 20 January 2016



KEY MESSAGES

- Local government reacted promptly to recent bad weather and flooding. Councils worked alongside other bodies, including the emergency services, voluntary sector and the Environment Agency, to ensure the safety of residents and businesses.
- The recovery process following flooding is long and expensive, in particular damage to roads and bridges is extensive and costly to repair. Therefore in addition to funding for flood management, councils will continue to require ongoing Government support in the future to provide repairs caused by bad weather.
- We are working with affected councils to ascertain the likely costs of repair of the infrastructure in their area. As soon as these figures become clear, we will be able to make an assessment of whether the overall funding provided by the Government is the right amount.
- We would also like the Government to assess the impact of funding changes to flood defences across the country and how this has impacted on resilience in local areas following recent extreme weather.
- The UK Government should give serious consideration to applying for a grant from the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) to help those communities who have been affected by the floods.
- Councils care passionately about protecting their communities from the devastating effects of flooding. A number of devolution bids submitted in 2015 called for additional powers over funding for flood risk management, including from Cornwall and Greater Lincolnshire, in order to improve partnership working and efficiencies.
- Capital and revenue (maintenance) funding for flood and coastal risk management should be devolved into a local place-based 'pot'. This would increase flexibility and allow local areas to support a more diverse set of outcomes to meet their priorities.
- The Government has given the Somerset Rivers Authority the power to raise a Shadow Precept from April 2016 which will enable the Authority to raise additional funding for flood risk. We would like the Government to allow other areas to use a similar mechanism where there is local agreement to do so.
- Last year the Government responded to LGA calls to introduce tax relief for businesses contributing to flood defence projects. We would like the Government to broaden the scope to enable tax relief for all flood defence projects and further promote the relief available (currently businesses can only get tax relief if the Environment Agency has allocated funding by way of grant-in-aid to the project).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Local government and fire and rescue response to flooding

Councils have been at the forefront of activity ahead of, during and after flooding to support their residents and businesses. This includes monitoring weather forecasts and keeping residents informed through regular postings on their websites and via social media. Teams were involved in clearing roadside drains and gullies to alleviate the risk of road flooding, managing road closures, and supporting rescue of stranded motorists as

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well as assessment of damages to local transport infrastructure. Emergency rest centres and emergency accommodation were set up for families evacuated from their homes and plans were put in place to ensure other vulnerable and elderly residents were not put at risk and could still access the necessary council services. Skips to remove flood-damaged goods and other debris have been provided as well as other equipment to assist with recovery, including dehumidifiers, cleaning equipment and access to specific council-run hardship grants. Many staff were diverted from their normal duties and other placed on standby to work with emergency services and other partners as required to get help to where it was needed.

The fire and rescue service has been working alongside councils in responding to the flooding. Firefighters from 24 fire and rescue services have been involved in rescuing hundreds of people across the affected areas. In addition to supplying fire engines, firefighters in water rescue boats and operating specialist high volume pumps have worked around the clock to protect life and property in often very challenging conditions.

The role of local authorities in flood risk management

The Flood and Water Management Act 2010 implemented the recommendations from the 2007 Pitt Review and placed a series of new responsibilities on 152 Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFAs). LLFAs, which include county councils and single-tier councils, have a 'lead' role in managing flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses (non main-rivers), working closely with other partners involved in flood and water management.

Their main duties include: putting in place a local flood risk management strategy; cooperation with other risk management authorities including district and borough councils (in two-tier areas), water and sewerage companies, the Environment Agency and others; maintaining a register of local structures and features likely to have a significant effect on flood risk; investigation following significant flood events; a statutory consultee to the planning process on the management of surface water for new major developments.

Funding for flood defences

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published the 2014-2015 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) performance report last month. On flooding, DEFRA has committed to a six-year programme of capital investment of £2.3 billion to improve defences up to 2021 (and just over £1.9 billion by 2019/2020). This is a real-terms increase on investment in the previous Parliament. To enable delivery this requires an additional £600 million of 'partnership' contributions. £250 million has been identified so far. The majority (£190 million) of this is from local authorities and only £60 million has been secured from the private sector. The Government has committed to maintaining current levels of revenue funding.

The current approach to funding for flood protection infrastructure funding is allocated on a prioritised basis nationally to secure the maximum outcomes, namely how many households are protected from flooding. Devolving capital and revenue funding into a single place based pot would allow local areas to support a more diverse set of outcomes. The Environment Agency and Internal Drainage Boards would then continue to work with councils to ensure effective arrangements for local maintenance. The existing model tends to mean smaller, more rural and dispersed areas are unable to compete for funding. Other areas have catchment areas that are characterised by industry, commerce and critical infrastructure yet little residential accommodation and national funding contributions through Flood Defence Grant in Aid (FDGiA) to such areas are very low. Devolution bids calling for additional powers over funding for flood risk management include:

- **Cornwall:** The agreed deal includes proposals to join together funding for flood defences from a range of partners to provide a joint investment programme to improve coastal defences.
- **Greater Lincolnshire:** The bid offers to use delegated powers and funding to deliver a 30 per cent efficiency in developing projects currently subject to DEFRA's funding controls and approval processes.

Somerset Rivers Authority: A case study on flood management and protection

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) was launched on 31 January 2015 as a response to the floods of winter 2013/2014. Establishing the SRA is a key action of the Somerset Levels and Moors Flood Action Plan, which was developed at the Government's request, and signed off in March 2014. It was set up with interim funding of £2.7 million for the financial year 2015/2016 from: DEFRA (£1.9 million); Somerset County Council (£600,000); the county's five District Councils and the Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium (£200,000 all together). It is run by a board of partners from the five District Councils, Somerset County Council, the Environment Agency, Parrett and Axe Brue Internal Drainage Boards, the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee and Natural England.

The bodies have been working together to identify a preferred approach for funding additional flood protection in Somerset. Earlier this month the Government announced it was giving the Somerset Rivers Authority the power to raise a Shadow Precept from April 2016 which will enable it to raise additional funding towards flood risk. This sets an important precedent for other areas to potentially follow where there is local agreement to do so.