

Debate on Catchment Solutions for Floods in the UK

Our representation to the House of Lords made by Lord Stone (7.26)

Followed by Lord de Mauley's reply (7.31)

Wednesday 26th November (from the Hansard; also available online)

7.26 pm Lord Stone of Blackheath (Lab): My Lords, the Moses Room is an appropriate room for this debate: maybe we should just part the waters. Seriously, as money is short while the dangers of flooding and water mismanagement are rising, rather than going for more and more expensive government infrastructure projects, commercial solutions, more research and lengthy reports, Her Majesty's Government would do well to turn to already tried and tested, successful community methods of river and water control. There are very simple measures that can be taken now and do not cost a lot of money. They are not high-tech interventions, but they improve the catchment capacity by working with the community on simple measures.

There are several case studies in which solutions to flooding were achieved at low cost. There are many other flood-risk areas where such measures would equally apply. I compliment the Government on the work that has already been done, but there seems to be a great opportunity of implementing these measure more through local communities at low cost. In the village of Belford, in Northumberland, the Government estimated a £2 million cost of preventing the village from flooding using high-level engineering solutions. The actual cost of building a local, simple intervention in the landscape was less than £150,000 and the village now has the lowest incidence of flooding in its history. Moreover, last year at Holnicote in Somerset, the National Trust spent just £160,000 building such a community intervention, using natural flood management from the source of the river right down to the sea. The Environment Agency says that this protected £30 million of assets from the consequences of flooding last year.

Preventable soil-compaction events— due to basic lack of understanding or responsibility— could be averted at minimal cost by liaising with landowners on keeping their topsoil fertile and uncompacted. Runoff from grazed watershed has been shown to be 30% greater than that from ungrazed watershed. In the cases where this has worked, community action by farmers, land managers, the Environment Agency, local government and residents has led to very simple measures being taken, such as buffer strips, bunds and other soil retention techniques.

These have slowed the flow sufficiently to protect downstream areas from serious flooding events and retained the fertile topsoil in the area, rather than washing it away into the sea downstream.

In 2011, Defra commissioned a study on 25 catchment management solutions such as these. The findings proved that catchment based planning was successful and viable financially. Its recommendations included the following:

“Recognising that the costs of the Catchment Based Approach are low compared to the benefits generated, there is a compelling case for the wider adoption of the approach in England ... Catchment groups should be allowed to develop their objectives and approach based on the needs of the catchment, the support available from the catchment stakeholders and local circumstances ... This should not be prescriptive but allow local governance and activities to reflect local issues”.

However, it also spoke of the problem of funding. It went on to say that there are also a number of barriers, particularly through,

“confusion over available funding streams and timescales”.

There is a mismatch between the work that needs to happen and the current streams of funding.

This is not a top-down approach requiring huge funding and planning; these are small, simple, community-led initiatives with local and national government as equal partners. It is a lot less expensive and could even be self-funding in the long run. As in other areas of our ineffective banking system, while channels exist to put money into expensive technology and heavy solutions to flooding, there are only fragmented streams of funding to support these inexpensive natural measures. It is imperative that channels are created to allow local authority funding for these simple measures. This requires work at two levels: bringing the community together and building the needed interventions along the catchment area. We need more engagement from large landowners and land managers. The Government need to begin to approve, across the nation, the availability of local funds to experts and the community in restoring the catchments with simple measures, so preventing major flood events.

This is not either/or; it can occur alongside the bigger measures and will show the Government to be effective in a very short time in turning around the bleak prospect that we face this winter. The rapid and good growth in this country of social enterprises and the creation of impact bonds, developed by Sir Ronald Cohen, could be an excellent mechanism here. We could look at starting an impact bond programme where the community itself is able to invest in the long-term benefits of such measures for its area, and this would become self-funding.

Is the Minister prepared, with appropriate members of the government team, to meet those who have been working on such successful low-cost methods, cutting across disciplines and bringing unlikely departments together to achieve community-led results? I would be happy to play a part in facilitating that.

7.31 pm Lord de Mauley (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs):

The noble Lord, Lord Stone, called for more local involvement in action. I agree with him. That is the basis for the partnership funding concept, which stems from recommendations in the Pitt review. The aim of this approach is to give local areas a bigger say in what action is taken to protect them, in return for more local contributions towards the benefits delivered. It provides more transparency over funding levels from Government for each and every potential investment, creates space for local and private contributions to come forward to help to pay for the significant benefits to land,

property, infrastructure and other assets realised when defences are built, and focuses government support on areas most at risk and people in the most deprived parts of the country.

The noble Lord, Lord Stone, raised another issue, in response to which I will say that Defra is sponsoring three demonstration projects to assess more thoroughly the impacts that land management might make on local flood risk. These are all partnership projects between Government and other entities: Pickering in North Yorkshire, led by the Forestry Commission; Holnicote in Somerset, led by the National Trust, to which the noble Lord referred; and the River Derwent in Derbyshire, led by the Environment Agency and a national park.

The noble Lord also commented on the catchment-based approach. Our evaluation shows that there is potential for the catchment-based approach to support flood and coastal erosion risk management, but the degree to which we use those partnerships for that purpose is something that we are still exploring with them or with the relevant risk management authorities. I agree with the noble Lord that it is not all about hard solutions; he made a point about soft solutions being appropriate in some cases. I have no argument with that; finding the appropriate solution is the important thing. I am of course happy to meet him, as he suggested.

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