

Flooding Conference

The Safe Development in an Era of Floods – 6th February

Ashford was designated a high growth area by John Prescott in the 1990s, and mysteriously the flood plain shrank over time. This shows the need for good mitigation measures. According to the Environmental Agency, in residential areas in Ashford there are 358 properties at ‘high’ risk of flooding, 307 at ‘medium’ risk, and 1409 at ‘low’ risk.

325 non-residential properties are at a ‘high’ risk of flooding, 273 are at a ‘medium’ risk, whilst 441 are at a ‘low’ risk of flooding.

Medium risk represents a 1 in 100 or greater chance of flooding from rivers or sea in any one year.

Flooding has long been recognised as the greatest natural threat the UK faces. With Environment Agency data showing around 2 million homes in England and Wales at flood risk from the rivers and sea, with over 500,000 of these at ‘moderate’ risk or greater, and around 2.4 million additional homes at risk of surface water flooding, we know this is a serious problem facing the country today.

This problem is getting worse and the risk is increasing because of climate change and other factors such as increased building and higher population density. We expect sea levels to rise, increasing the risk of coastal flooding and the frequency and severity of rainstorms to increase, leading to more frequent inland flooding.

It has been estimated, because of these factors, that annual flood damage costs could exceed £27 billion across the UK by 2080. That is why it is important that we are prepared for flooding.

Government Action

Flood defence and maintenance funding must be seen as a vital part of our national interest by all future governments. We need sustained, ambitious, and targeted investment in the building and maintenance of flood defences.

That is why in 2013-14 the Government made a number of announcements regarding recovery and flood defence spending.

Defra invested £606.2 million on flood risk management activities.

£130 million for emergency repairs and maintenance, £30 million for 2013/14 and £100 million for 2014/15.

42 new flood defence schemes for 2014-15 which, together with other projects beginning construction in 2014-15, will protect more than 42,000 households.

£370 million in capital investment to improve flood defences in 2015-16, followed by the same in real terms each year, rising to over £400 million by the end of the decade.

A six year programme of work running up to 2021, including a new long term investment strategy on flood defences and assessments of the future need for flood and coastal defence, taking account of the latest risk maps and economic analysis.

With 1,400 projects within the programme, local authorities will be able to plan ahead and reassure communities that flood risk is being reduced in their area. New schemes may also be added as the programme progresses.

Major projects that will benefit include:

- £80 million for the Humber Estuary
- over £17 million for Tonbridge, Yalding and the surrounding communities
- £196 million for the Thames Estuary programme
- £73 million for the Boston Barrier/Barrage
- £42 million for the Oxford Western Conveyance
- £47 million for the Rossall Coastal Defence Improvement

In addition, the government will commit to spend £15.5 million in Somerset on flood defences over the next 6 years benefitting 7,000 properties, including £4.2 million on the Somerset Levels and Moors. This is part of at least £35 million committed to Somerset from this year until 2021.

In addition to these measures, the government announced an increase in availability of money through the Bellwin scheme, a mechanism that was set up to provide emergency financial assistance to local authorities.

How technology used to build safely on areas at risk of flooding

Development is necessary to meet the demand for housing, commercial operations and infrastructure. However, true sustainable development means not building in areas that are at significant flood risk. Doing so will simply cause problems in the long term.

Inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk, but where development is necessary, making it safe without increasing flood risk elsewhere.

There are things that can be done to protect homes already built in flood risk areas - for instance, targeting the source of the flooding – building a flood defence at the river that is likely to flood.

On an individual scale, for houses that have already been built on flood plains, there are different methods that people can try to reduce the flood risk to a property. First, flood resistance measures – these are designed to stop the water getting in. Properties can be developed to take measures to protect themselves. Resistance strategies such as building door barriers can be put into action.

Flood resilience measures are also important to consider – these are designed to limit the damage caused by flood water that does get into the property and to reduce the time needed to get back to normal after a flood. For instance, raising electricity wiring and plug sockets, air-brick covers, and concreting floors. Something that seems fairly obvious, but it is highly recommended is to have a suitable flood plan prepared for times when flooding threatens to happen – prioritising what home owners want to save.

The ‘Repair and Renew’ grant is available for home owners who have been flooded. The scheme provides up to £5,000 per flood affected home or business to contribute to the costs of additional flood resilience or resistance measures (such as a new driveway barrier or replacing doors and windows with water resistant alternatives, or moving electricity sockets to a safer level).

There needs to be long term planning continuity from one government to the next. Planning plays a key role in helping shape places to secure radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimising vulnerability and providing resilience to the impacts of climate change, and supporting the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure. This is central to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Insurance

In 2007 following the summer floods, there was around 185,000 insurance claims at a cost of £3bn. In the winter floods of 2012, there was 39,400 insurance claims at a cost of £594m. The winter floods of 2013/14 saw around 18,700 insurance claims at a cost of £451m.

It can be difficult if there is a history of flooding in an area to find insurance to cover.

The Water Act 2014 means that businesses, charities, and public sector customers have the freedom to switch water supplier from 2017. It will also ensure affordable flood insurance for hundreds of thousands of households from 2015. The Flood Re scheme will be a not-for-profit flood insurance fund, owned and managed by the insurance industry, and established to ensure that those domestic properties in the UK at the highest risk of flooding can receive affordable cover for the flood element of their household property insurance.

There are seven lessons we can all learn to help with future flooding risk.

1. Sandbags don't work. Use a close-fitting floor board to block doors instead.
2. Government needs to spend more, and this Government has done so.
3. Don't smother gardens with hard surfaces
4. Water should be allowed to seep into the land rather than running into the sewers.
5. The Met Office and Environment Agency should work together to produce better forecasts longer before flood threats—as they are now doing
6. Power companies in particular need to invest in resilience
7. If your own house is at risk, move the electrical sockets and take other basic precautions.