

CCERA scrutiny session with the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs on the Welsh Government's response to flooding.

Comments from Natural Resources Wales in response to request from the Committee's secretariat

30 September 2020

1. Flooding is one of the top civil contingency risks in Wales, and the impacts of climate change are likely to produce more extreme weather and more flooding in the future (see for example, the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment 2017¹, Welsh Government Climate Change Adaptation Plan², UK Climate Projections 2018³, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report⁴). The impacts of flooding can be devastating, not just to human life and properties, businesses, infrastructure and the economy, but also in terms of human well-being and damage to the environment and to nature.
2. The rainfall and river levels that led to the floods of winter 2019-20, and February in particular, were exceptional. It was the wettest February since records began in 1862, the fifth wettest month of all months, and the fifth wettest winter on record. Record river levels were recorded in many locations and these events produced significant impacts across Wales, with over 3,100 properties flooded during February.
3. Managing such severe weather events, at a greater frequency, means there are huge challenges ahead. There is a need for adaptation to climate change to respond to the impacts that are locked in, as well as continuance of measures for mitigation and decarbonisation.
4. Welsh Government recognise these issues, in the declaration of the Climate Emergency, and the ground-breaking Well-being of Future Generations legislation. The WG Climate Change Adaptation Plan sets out the responses needed, with flood risk featuring prominently in the risks. The upcoming revised National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy from Welsh Government also sets out the challenges, and the nature of the response.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584281/uk-climate-change-risk-assess-2017.pdf

² https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-11/prosperity-for-all-a-climate-conscious-wales_0.pdf

³ <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/approach/collaboration/ukcp/index>

⁴ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

5. Natural Resources Wales (NRW) also recognises these risks, of climate change and increased flooding, and has a key role to play, alongside all flood Risk Management Authorities (RMAs). We need to invest in our people, processes and systems to keep pace with the challenges, to manage the risks from flooding to the people of Wales.
6. We comment on the four specific questions posed by the Committee below.

Question 1: whether the current level of funding provided by the Welsh Government for flood and coastal erosion risk management (FCERM), and for relevant authorities to provide emergency flood response, is sufficient;

7. Many elements are required for an effective emergency flood response. It is clearly not just about providing emergency funds for repairs and support after the floods – though Welsh Government acted swiftly to put such support in place after the floods in February. There needs to be the **capital investment** in flood defences, to reduce the likelihood of flooding to homes and businesses. This is not just hard flood defences, but also elements like holding back water in uplands and making space for water. There also needs to be the **revenue investment** in maintenance work, to ensure the defences are kept in good condition so they do their job when required.
8. Defences can reduce the risk of flooding, but cannot eliminate it. There is also a need for investment in a suite of other measures to manage the risks of flooding. This includes investment in mapping and modelling to understand what is at risk and where, and in development planning, to control the number of properties and infrastructure built in flood plains and put at risk in the first place. Investment in hydrometry and telemetry services is crucial to obtaining accurate information on rainfall and river levels, to feed into the forecasting models to enable effective warnings of flooding to take place. This flood warning service requires deep skills and expertise of staff to interpret data and make decisions about when and where to issue warnings, as well as investment in technology and processes. We also need to work with communities to help them understand what the warnings mean, and what action they need to take if they receive one. We also need to help communities focus in on what they can do themselves, including making their own community flood plans or their own properties more resilient to flooding. In a flooding event itself, we also need staff to go out for the operational response (e.g. clearing trash screens and closing flood gates), and have staff in incident duty roles including forecasting and warning. Although there are capital elements to the infrastructure needed, all of these activities require **revenue investment** for the staff and recurrent costs. We make decisions about the levels of effort we put into these different activities, dictated by the budget and resource available.
9. NRW invests its budgets to manage flooding on a risk basis, and this is a product of both frequency of flooding, and the impacts when it does flood. The impacts are greater when there is more at risk – people, properties, businesses. This means that our budgets are prioritised to locations with greater numbers of people at flood risk, and less on more isolated locations with fewer properties at risk. This again is another facet of the prioritisation choices we need to make.
10. Often there is a call for increased capital spend to build more defences, or emergency funds for the short term immediate recovery work. Both of these are important, but the long term revenue needs are just as, if not more, important, as this underpins the skilled and specialist staff who run the suite of flood risk management services and build our resilience to future events. Clearly, more work to manage flood risk can be done if there is more resource. The level of investment is a choice, alongside all the competing

societal demands on the public purse. The flooding of February 2020 stretched all organisations involved, and they were exceptional events – but the climate scientists tell us that we can expect that such events will be more frequent in the future. If we are to respond well to more frequent and more extreme events in the future, then the levels of resource need to keep pace. Managing such huge quantities of water will be challenging, and there is no single solution. We will need the range of measures at our disposal, and it is not just capital investment in defences.

Question 2: whether more emergency funding will be necessary to assist local authorities to deal with flooding this winter;

11. See response to Q1. Although emergency funds may be needed if there are significant floods this winter, the bigger picture is long-term investment in the services that underpin flood risk management – particularly the revenue funded services. This is both in preventative maintenance work, which should reduce the likelihood of any defence suffering damage or failure, and in the revenue funded services such as flood mapping, forecasting and warning, and work to prepare for flooding incidents (e.g. planning and exercising).

Q3. Whether local authorities are sufficiently supported to recover from a major flooding event, undertake any necessary investigations and make changes needed to manage the risk of a recurring event

12. Although this question is geared to local authorities, it is relevant to NRW as well. Recovery work after a flood takes many forms. Much of the immediate recovery is about assessing damage and undertaking repairs. Then there is making immediate improvements to our services and responding to the huge volume of public questions and concerns. Elements of this are still ongoing, and all of this unscheduled work has an impact on planned work programmes.
13. The LAs rightly lead on recovery for their communities, as it is the LAs that oversee the main health, social, transport and environmental services that are needed. However, other organisations clearly also need to be involved. For example, the flooding can be from a variety of sources – watercourses or drains – that may be the responsibility of the LA, NRW, the water company, or private owners. It is important that all parties work together to understand the causes of flooding and what can be done about it, and also work together in the recovery efforts. NRW is assisting LAs in their investigative work into why flooding occurred, where appropriate.
14. After any significant flooding or environmental incident, NRW undertakes a review to understand what went well, and what can be improved. We are undertaking a comprehensive review of our performance in the February floods and will be sharing our findings in October, including areas for improvement. The results of our recovery and review work can complement any other reviews done by other organisations.

Q4. How effective the Wales Flood and Coastal Erosion Committee is in providing an advisory and coordinating role to Welsh Government.

15. The Flood and Coastal Erosion Committee is a relatively new statutory committee with a role to advise Ministers. The members are drawn from a range of organisations with a role in Flood Risk Management (FRM) in Wales, and each member has good experience of FRM issues. The FCEC has a work programme, with themes that are

highly relevant to the furtherance of FRM in Wales. The FCEC has already been active in these themes; for example, it has provided responses to several Welsh Government consultations. The work of the FCEC on these work themes should be helpful in providing advice to Ministers. A challenge is that this is an advisory committee and its members are giving their time in an unpaid capacity, therefore consideration needs to be given to the capacity for delivery - it cannot take on too many activities.

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