

SUBMISSION FROM: ENVIRONMENTAL INDUSTRIES COMMISSION (EIC).

RESPONSE TO THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE CONSULTATION ON FLOOD DEFENCES.

ABOUT EIC:

The Environmental Industries Commission (EIC) represents the companies, large and small, working in the environmental services and technologies sector to deliver a more sustainable society. Comprised of technical specialists, dedicated professionals, and cutting-edge innovations, EIC members have the knowledge and expertise to advise, guide, and facilitate the delivery of green growth within the U.K. economy.

INTRODUCTION:

We welcome the opportunity to engage in the consultation on the UK Government's flood risk management strategies. Our members are deeply committed to fostering resilience and safeguarding communities against the escalating threat of flooding.

Recognising the gravity of climate change, population growth, and urbanisation, the EIC acknowledges the necessity for a comprehensive and balanced approach to flood risk management.

Our recommendations are rooted in the commitment to reduce the number of homes at risk, investment in natural flood management (NFM) measures, and enforce flood-resistant standards for new developments. We also highlight the imperative of collaboration between the public and private sectors to drive innovation and implement effective flood risk solutions.

EIC SUBMISSION:

Current State of Flood Risk Management:

We welcome and support the National Audit Office's (NAO) report that the Government's current risk management arrangements have 'not always produced the best return on investment'. We believe that there has been an over-reliance on hard defences, such as walls and barriers, and not enough focus on natural flood management (NFM) measures.

NFM measures, such as creating wetlands and planting trees, can be more cost-effective and sustainable in the long term than hard defences.

We also believe that the Government needs to do more to encourage property developers to build flood resilient homes and businesses. This could include requiring developers to use flood-resistant materials and designs, and to install flood warnings and alarms.

The Environment Agency (EA) has made significant progress in protecting homes from flooding between 2015 and 2021. The EA has invested £2.6 billion in new flood defences, which has better protected over 242,000 homes. However, as the NAO report points out, the EA's focus on this target has not necessarily represented the full picture in terms of tackling overall flood risk.

The EA has also made some progress in promoting NFM measures. For example, the EA has worked with local communities to develop NFM plans for a number of catchments. However, there is still a long way to go before NFM is widely adopted as a cost-effective and sustainable approach to flood risk management.

Challenges and Future Preparedness:

The UK is facing a number of challenges in managing flood risk in the future. These challenges include:

- **Climate change:** Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of rainfall events, which will lead to more frequent and severe flooding.
- **Population growth:** The UK's population is expected to grow by 10 million by 2030, which will put additional pressure on existing flood defences.
- **Urbanisation:** The UK is becoming increasingly urbanised, which means that there is more land covered by concrete and other impermeable surfaces. This reduces the amount of water that can be absorbed into the ground, which increases the risk of flooding.

Thus, a more comprehensive strategy is required to address the multifaceted nature of flood risk, encompassing river, coastal, and surface water flooding. The Government needs to do more to prepare for the future challenges of flood risk. This includes:

- Investing in research and development to develop new and innovative flood risk management solutions. Therefore, the EIC urges the Government to commit to their £38M investment pledge to support the Flood and Drought Research Infrastructure. Fostering innovation will enhance the UK's capacity to address hydrological extremes and promote efficiency and resilience.
- Working with local authorities to ensure that flood risk is properly considered in planning decisions.

In addition, the EIC underscores the significance of providing high-quality flood defence data for effective risk management. Currently, issues in England include a lack of specificity in the dataset regarding the types of flooding covered by protection and the absence of 'standard of protection' information for future climate scenarios, attributed partly to the Environment Agency flood model's limitations.

Valuable information from nationally maintained geospatial data should include areas earmarked for new flood defences or enhancements to existing ones. Knowing areas without planned or ruled investments would also be beneficial.

Insurance plays a vital role in flood risk management, currently supported by Flood Re. Transition planning is critical for the removal of Government support in 2039. Insurers must consider flood defences at both large-scale schemes and property-level improvements made by homeowners.

The Government's preparedness should be characterised by adaptive planning that anticipates future climate change impacts. It is important to incorporate flexible and dynamic strategies that can evolve in response to emerging challenges.

Future preparedness should also prioritise integrated water management approaches that consider upstream and downstream impacts. A holistic understanding of river basins and coastal ecosystems is critical for effective flood risk reduction.

Finally, the importance of investing in resilient infrastructure that can withstand the changing nature of flood risks cannot be understated. This includes sustainable urban planning, green infrastructure, and the incorporation of nature-based solutions.

Recommendations for Future Action:

In addition to the above, the EIC would like to make the following specific recommendations:

1. **Reduction Target:** Set a target to reduce the number of homes at risk of flooding by 10% by 2030.
2. **NFM Investment:** Allocate £1 billion annually to NFM measures, recognising their cost-effectiveness and sustainability.
3. **Mandatory Standards:** Introduce a mandatory requirement for all new homes and businesses to adhere to flood-resistant construction standards.

We believe that these recommendations would help to make the UK more resilient to flooding in the future.

In addition to the above, we would also like to add that the Environment Agency's framework for flood defence works has been far slower than expected/planned. As a result, we fear that there will be less homes defended than originally planned.

We believe that the Government needs to address these issues as a matter of urgency. The delay in delivering flood defences is putting lives and livelihoods at risk

Risk Management Arrangements:

Holistic Risk Assessment:

EIC members advocate for a comprehensive and integrated approach to risk management that goes beyond the protection of individual properties. Arrangements should be broadened to encompass a holistic risk assessment that considers infrastructure resilience, environmental sustainability, as well as community well-being and social value.

Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement:

Effective risk management requires collaboration between government bodies, local authorities, environmental agencies, and private sector stakeholders. EIC members have a critical role to play in ensuring this and emphasise the importance of sustained engagement and partnerships to identify, assess, and address risks collectively.

Investment in Technology and Innovation:

EIC members play a pivotal role in adopting innovative technologies for risk prediction, early warning systems, and adaptive infrastructure design. Increased investment in such technologies is crucial to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of current risk management practices.

Conclusion:

Flood risk is an escalating concern exacerbated by climate change, demanding immediate and comprehensive action. The EIC's recommendations, coupled with collaboration with the private sector, offer a robust foundation for a sustainable and effective approach to flood risk management. We appreciate your consideration and remain committed to working collectively for a resilient and secure future for the UK.