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Ministerial Presentation

The National Flood Forum - 25th February 2010

Flooding is indiscriminate. It favours neither the rich or the poor. The young or the old.

The damage it can inflict on a local community is huge. The physical destruction is there for all to see. The slow road to recovery can be measured by the number of families getting back into their homes. The number of businesses that can start to trade again. The roads reopened the bridges rebuilt, tourism returning.

What is more difficult to measure is the emotional scarring left by such a traumatic event. The stress of rebuilding a life. A lifetime of memories washed away or damaged beyond repair. And above all the grief following the death of loved one.

No amount of money can replace this type of loss. No warm words of comfort. Nor the well meaning offers of help can take away the anxiety felt in the aftermath of such devastating events.

I know from talking to people in Cumbria how difficult their lives have been since more than a foot of rain fell on already saturated ground in the space of a few days last November.

I found people's responses to the flood fascinating. I met Joe Fagan landlord of the Bush Pub on Cockermouth Main Street who continued to serve his customers despite the flood water swirling around his chest. I promised Joe I'd go back and have a pint with him when he reopened.

I also talked to Joe's next door neighbour at the carpet shop in Main Street who had moved all his stock upstairs in anticipation of being flooded and confidently predicted he would open within a week.

And in Keswick it was interesting to see householders reacting to the flooding in different ways. Some getting on with the clean up right away. Others just locking their doors and walking away for a few days and returning after the water subsided.

But last November's event was not the first time the region had been affected by flooding. A few short years earlier Carlisle was devastated by flooding.

And between these two events - in the summer of 2007 - we saw many parts of our country affected by some of the worst flooding for over 200 years.

I think what all of this shows us is that we are living in uncertain times. Particularly when we think about the risk posed by our changing climate. By 2080 we expect sea levels to be 40 cm higher in London.. We expect peak river flows to increase by as much as 40% in some regions. And in the drier summer months, we can expect the rain to come in heavier bursts and run quickly off parched ground. All of this points towards more frequent and severe flooding, and increasing coastal erosion.

So it's important that we act now to minimise any future problems.

We've already started. Since the summer floods of 2007 the Environment Agency has been working hard to improve our flood defences. They've completed and maintained over one hundred flood defence schemes protecting over 60,000 additional homes.

Investment in flood defence work has never been higher. Currently standing at over £2 billion - spending across Government has doubled in the last ten years. Our grants to the Environment Agency have increased from £500 million in 2007 to around £660 million in the coming financial year.

After the 2007 floods Sir Michael Pitt published a lessons learned review. From that arose the Flood and Water Management Bill currently working its way through Parliament.

This piece of legislation is looking for a significant improvement in the way we manage flood risk. It's looking to adopt a wider risk management approach that addresses all sources of flooding and considers the consequences as well as the probability of flooding.

I know that people find it frustrating and confusing trying to understand which authority is responsible for different aspects of flood risk. The Bill provides a balance between clarity of responsibility and flexibility of delivery. It ensures Local Authorities are accountable for managing local flood risks and the Environment Agency has the strategic overview for all sources of flooding and coastal erosion, and will lead the management of flooding from designated main rivers and the sea.

The bill dramatically strengthens local accountability for flood risk management with provisions for lead local flood authorities to establish overview and scrutiny committees to hold all of the organisations involved to account.

The provisions in the Bill have been accused of being too centralising; too 'top-down'. I don't see it like that. What I would like to see is local residents and organisations getting involved in the decision making process. The Bill provides for that, in ways that can be flexed to suit each area. After all, the nature and extent of risk varies from one area to the next, and the best way of tackling it will too.

There is already considerable local input into flood risk management strategies and plans. But we need to go further. Currently what happens locally is largely determined by decisions taken nationally. That's because investment in flood and coastal risk management is almost entirely paid for by general taxation.

We know investment in flood risk management works, and it delivers significant local benefit. Flood defences across the country prevent an estimated £6 billion in losses every year, primarily in terms of preventing flood damage to private property. But less than 5% of costs are borne directly by those whose property and livelihoods are being protected.

Sir Michael Pitt concluded that long-term plans should not assume that all future costs will be met by central Government. Otherwise such plans would be constrained by what it would be fair to ask taxpayers to pay for. Instead he said that local areas should be encouraged to invest more in their own protection.

We know investment needs to increase. But the question is by how much, and who should pay for it? Who should decide how much risk is too much? As I said earlier, at the moment Government decides by default, because investment is almost entirely paid for centrally.

I would prefer a situation where local communities can decide for themselves the level of risk they are willing to live with, and how much investment they can justify to themselves. So if plans by Government do not go far enough for their area, they can take matters into their own hands and raise the extra funds required.

This view is echoed in the Environment Agency's Long Term Investment Strategy. A strategy that sets out the costs and benefits of potential investment scenarios for the coming 25 years. A strategy that recognises the fact that a one size fits all approach to funding is unlikely to work alone. A strategy that recognises that different places have different priorities, and that those people at risk should have a real choice as to what gets done in their neighbourhood.

It's clear there are things we can all do to better protect ourselves and our communities. We all want to better protect our homes at risk, our businesses and communities. But no longer should we limit our ambition to what Government can afford. We will all need to pool our resources to tackle the increasing risk we face.

The National Flood Forum has an important role to play. As the advertising literature to this conference spells out you have now become and I quote 'a credible and respected force in the world of Flood Risk Management – providing a voice for individuals and communities affected by flooding'. As well as providing a point of focus for those individuals and communities looking for advice when preparing for a flood, or during a flood as well as in the aftermath of a flood.

The NFF website talks of the organisation being a collective authoritative voice that aims to influence central and local government and all agencies that manage flood risk. A noble objective and goal.

Some have called on Government to provide the necessary funding to ensure the work of the NFF can continue. However in the current financial climate that is not realistic. Moreover, I do not believe that reliance on central government funding would be consistent with NFF's role as an independent stakeholder in the world of flood risk management. A stakeholder who is free to challenge the centre and others. Free from core funding and free to be a critical yet honest friend.

All of this is about the long term. However, we recognise that in the short term there is a job to be done to make the Forum financially sustainable. It therefore gives me great pleasure to announce that we are going to give the Forum £20,000 to help it develop a business plan and secure its immediate future. I very much hope that the Forum can build on this investment and continue to play an important role as a conduit between those people affected by flooding events and policy makers.

I'd also like to announce today that we are giving a similar amount of money to the National Voice of Coastal Communities to help it establish itself on the national stage and provide a point of contact for coastal communities around the country.

If I may I'd like to end where I began. Serious flooding is unpredictable. It has a huge impact on so many people's everyday lives. Our hard work now and in the future will ensure that whatever this changing climate of ours throws at us we will be better prepared.

Thank you.

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