

# Flooding

## Westminster Hall debate briefing

6 February 2024



### Background

- Rising sea levels and more frequent heavy rainfall - attributed to climate change - has made flooding a more prevalent threat to communities across the UK. Flooding can have devastating socio-economic consequences for people. In October 2023, Storm Babet alone incurred insurance costs estimated between [£450 million and £650 million](#). Analysis from the Met Office finds that record breaking rainfall events could be [ten times more likely](#) by 2100, which would make flooding risks significantly greater.
- When excessive rainfall saturates the ground, it causes surface runoff into rivers and flooding occurs. Urban areas are particularly affected as hard paving makes land less permeable. Climate change also causes drought and this can cause flooding when the ground is too dry and hard for water to be absorbed, instead running into rivers and streams.
- A [recent report from London Climate Resilience](#) finds that 5.7 million properties in England and Wales are currently at risk from climate change. Local authorities must [compete over funding for flood defences](#), although they are often better placed to know what adaptations their communities need. London, despite already having extensive flood resistance schemes in place, is also underprepared for climate related events involving surface water flooding and rising sea levels. Just 9km of the 126km flood defences west of the Thames barrier are sufficiently high to last beyond 2050.

### What is the government doing to combat flooding?

- In 2021, the government began funding its [six-year programme](#) to spend £5.2 billion on protecting 336,000 properties from flooding by 2027. However, the Environment Agency [underspent by £310 million](#) in the first two years of the programme.
- The project's slow start means that the Environment Agency is likely to fall short of its target to build 2,000 flood defence projects, with only [1,500 of these now expected to be completed](#). Although this should protect 200,000 properties by 2027, this is a 40% shortfall from the government's original target.
- A [House of Commons Committee report](#) published in January 2024 found that [Defra's plan](#) to create a nation more resilient to future flood and coastal erosion risk was loosely defined and lacked objective methods by which it could measure this progress.

### How can natural flood defences help protect us from flooding?

- Traditional flood defences can be expensive to build and maintain. Instead, a nature-based approach can be more effective, sustainable and have wider benefits beyond flooding resilience, such as carbon sequestration and habitat restoration.
- Nature Flood Management (NFM) involves [restoring or creating natural defences](#). Some examples include river and flood plain restoration, sustainable urban drainage systems and

tree planting. NFM [enhances the natural function of water bodies](#) like rivers and wetlands whilst increased vegetation and proactive soil management can slow the flow of water and reduce surface runoff.

- An example of where an NFM has successfully been deployed is [WWTs Steart Marshes](#) as part of the Severn Estuary's flood management scheme. Hundreds of acres of saltmarsh and freshwater make up these wetlands, naturally absorbing wave energy and protecting nearby areas from storm surges. This helps safeguard 100,000 homes and businesses along the Bristol Channel, collectively worth £5 billion, including large cities like Cardiff and Newport.

### **What action needs to be taken?**

- Competition over limited funding pots and a lack of leadership from central government has hampered regional efforts to improve their resilience to flooding. As such, more [funding and greater powers for local authorities](#) need to be made available.
- A greater proportion of the government's £5.2 billion for flood defences needs to be allocated towards NFM schemes, given the vast benefits they can provide to rural and urban communities alike. According to Rewilding Britain, NFM accounts [for less than 1% of the flood defence budget](#) though it has the potential to provide around 20% of the solution.
- Defra needs to set out specific targets to improve England's flood resilience. These can then be used to definitively measure progress.

### **Suggested interventions**

- Will the Minister introduce more ambitious targets to measure progress in combatting the impact of flooding events in the UK, as climate change makes extreme weather events more likely?
- How will the government ensure that the funds remaining from the £5.2 billion designated to flood defences are effectively directed to reach its objectives?
- Will the government consider the many benefits of NFM schemes and allocate more funding towards these sustainable and effective flood defence measures?