

The Rt Hon Oliver Letwin MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office
9 Downing Street
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14 March 2016

Dear Rt Hon Oliver Letwin MP

National Flood Resilience Review

Following the devastating floods that hit in early December and over the Christmas and New Year Break we very much welcomed your announcement of a national review of flood resilience. Flooding has a huge impact on the residents and businesses directly affected, as well as wider economic implications for the country - to illustrate, the Environment Agency's recently published estimate put the cost of the 2013/14 floods at around £1.5 billion. As such, it is vital that we reflect on and learn from recent and historic events, in order to better protect ourselves in the future.

Councils have been at the forefront of activity ahead of, during and after the flooding, working with the emergency services, the Environment Agency and other local partners to support their residents and businesses. Their role has been wide ranging and has included keeping residents informed through social media, clearing roadside drains to alleviate the risk of road flooding, setting up emergency rest centres and accommodation, as well as providing skips to remove flood-damaged goods and other equipment, including dehumidifiers, to assist with recovery.

Councils have also undertaken assessment of the extensive damage to local transport routes, including bridges, roads and public rights of way. We know from our discussions with affected councils that the repair bill is likely to run into hundreds of millions. The government funding to assist with infrastructure repairs has been welcomed by councils – we would, however, caution that the full extent of the damage, particularly to roads and bridges - and the financial cost to remedy – will take some time to assess and would ask that the government remain mindful of this.

We are also pleased that the government has listened to the LGA's call to apply to the EU solidarity fund. If the application is successful, it will be important for funds to be distributed quickly to provide further support for the councils affected and their residents and businesses.

In advance of the LGA joining you at the roundtable consultation meeting on 31 March, we thought it would be helpful to outline a number of areas where we would welcome further discussion with the government over the coming months.

Firstly, we would like to work with the government to identify ways in which we can increase flexibility in the current approach to funding for flood protection infrastructure funding, so that money can be used more effectively at a local level, to better reflect local need. We think the devolution deal process offers the perfect opportunity for such an approach to be trialled. I know Andrew Campbell, the LGA's Associate Director, had a very helpful initial conversation with yourself and Rory Stewart MP at the end of last year on this and I know our Chairman, Lord Porter, has also raised this at a recent meeting with Liz Truss MP.

We welcomed the government giving the Somerset local authorities the power to raise a Shadow Precept to fund the Somerset Rivers Authority's flood risk management work in 2016/17. We would like the government to allow other areas to use a similar mechanism where there is local agreement to do so.

There also needs to be further incentives to secure more private sector investment in flood alleviation work, including broadening scope to enable business tax relief for all flood defence projects. We were pleased that the government responded to LGA calls to introduce tax relief for businesses contributing to flood defence projects last year, however currently businesses can only get tax relief if the Environment Agency has allocated funding by way of grant-in-aid to the project - entirely privately funded flood defence projects are not eligible for this tax relief. There is also scope to do more together to engage business and ensure that it is fully aware of the benefits of investing in flood defences and/or mitigation.

Councils are ready to take more ownership of the work that prevents flooding or mitigates damage at a local level, working with local partners, including Internal Drainage Boards to ensure effective arrangements for local maintenance. There should be genuine devolution of responsibilities and funding from the Environment Agency to councils, where there is local support. Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFAs) also need to have sufficient resources and capability to lead local flood risk management in their areas. This includes the ability to set charges for processing ordinary watercourse land drainage consents, to enable full cost-recovery.

Alongside continued investment in flood defences, ensuring that communities who are at risk of flooding are fully informed and prepared for flooding can be key in reducing the damage it can cause and help communities to recover more quickly. The Government should consider how it could further promote and support community resilience at a local level. This could include provision of additional resources to: enable access to local flood warning systems, for example flood sirens, telemetry or gauge systems; build local capacity by establishing and training volunteer 'Flood Warden' groups in at-risk communities and a national campaign to encourage communities to sign up to the Environment Agency's free flood warning service.

We would also like to see availability of additional resources for catchment wide projects which would enable a fuller understanding of possible interventions and their impacts on a broader area – for example investigating the effects of holding water upstream and catchment sensitive farming techniques and how this could help mitigate flooding downstream. The Government should also review if there are appropriate safeguards in place to ensure that current land management practices do not lead to increased flood risk as well as considering whether there are additional incentives that could be introduced to encourage land owners, working with local flood risk partners, to store or hold back water on their land in appropriate places.

We hope this provides a helpful input into your Review and I would be more than happy to meet you to discuss these matters further.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Box', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Peter Box
Chairman
Economy, Environment, Housing and Transport Board
Local Government Association