



Association of Drainage Authorities

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Time to adopt a catchment approach to Water Level Management

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The consequences of us not doing enough to work with the forces of nature have, once again, become all too evident in the past few weeks with peoples' lives being turned upside down, businesses threatened and critical infrastructure damaged. The Association of Drainage Authorities has for many years been arguing the case for prioritising what we need to do to manage water in this country, starting with making sure that our river and drainage systems are all in a good state of maintenance and repair. Yes, we also need to update and renew flood defences which are at the end of their lives but we must accept that we will never stop flooding. Successive governments come up with political statements about not letting this sort of thing happen again, but it will, somewhere and at some point in time.

Our understanding of how we can live, work with and manage the variety of climatic events that can so easily devastate peoples' lives, damage our environment and hurt our economic wellbeing, now requires renewed and innovative thinking. Rightly so, we focus our attention on those areas most at risk of flooding. We have also channelled spending on flood defences in those areas, only to see them overwhelmed by the most recent flood events. Now is the time for us to look at a catchment-wide approach to managing water from the highest points in our hills and mountains to our estuaries and lowland areas. River catchments are like trees with many branches leading into a main trunk. The tree survives on all its component parts working together and the same applies for our river catchments.

We also operate to a set of rules about how we provide funding for our flood defences, their operation and maintenance. This is split into two streams known as capital and revenue funding. Traditionally, government Treasury officials have a liking for capital spending because the results of that spending are visible and help gain a degree of popularity with whoever the government of the day is. Revenue spending is far less attractive because it involves paying for staff and resources which, whilst being vitally important for keeping water levels under control, is often not nearly as visible and is used as an easy scapegoat for making savings.

We need to reverse that trend and accept that a sensible balance of capital and revenue spending across our river catchments is now essential and that all water level managers (the Environment Agency, Local Authorities and Internal Drainage Boards) are provided with revenue funding to allow them to properly maintain our watercourses. Such a move will also encourage private funding and investment over time.

Looking at our catchments, there are many variables at play, and sources of water such as river water, surface water, ground water and, of course, our sewage systems. In coastal areas, we also need to consider the risks of tidal flooding. There are also a number of managers of those various sources of water and increasingly, they are working together to co-ordinate a single catchment management plan, but we have still have a long

The membership body for water level management

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way to go. Kneejerk reaction is natural but a carefully considered plan calling on the country's technical experts to have a full, proper and innovative review of our options is now needed.

ADA are calling for a number of subjects which we can and must consider more carefully moving forward, namely;

- Water levels and flood risk should be managed on a whole life approach.
- Investment for maintenance should be increased and determined on a multiyear basis.
- The Government's six-year capital investment programme should remain in place and be balanced against increased maintenance spending.
- Where Government withdraws from work because it is not cost effective under their funding formula, they should 'invest to save' so that local communities can take greater ownership of water level management assets and operations, through devolved accountability and decision making.
- Encourage land managers to contribute toward, and play a part in, flood risk management delivery.
- Support investment in water level and flood risk management innovation to enable new techniques to develop that allow us to adapt to our changing climate.

With added impetus, The Association of Drainage Authorities will be continuing to work hard with its members, a range of partners and government to promote this renewed thinking and for further information on the value of water level management to our social and economic wellbeing, please refer to ADA's website at www.ada.org.uk for further information.

31 December 2015

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