WEST BERKSHIRE COUNCIL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 15 September 2026

Presentation by Sally White, Area Flood and Coastal Risk Manager, Environment Agency.

Update on the Environment Agency's ongoing actions in managing flood risk.

Hello, my name is Sally White and I am one of the Thames Environment Agency Area Flood Risk Managers. My remit includes leading the team which oversees our capital programmes for the area, and our three Partnership and Strategic Overview teams who manage our responses on flood risk to planning and permitting applications. Our Flood Risk Department also holds the Area Incident Team, who lead on planning and managing our response to incidents. I am joined today by one of my team leaders who oversees our work across Berkshire, Rich Hancock.

Today I will update on relevant changes from the Environment Agency and government. We have reviewed the questions raised in advance and I aim to address the general issues raised in my update, rather than addressing each of the many individual issues raised. We are aware of these individual issues and have previously engaged on these directly with those who have raised them.

Firstly I'd like to highlight a success for the area from last summer, when the Environment Agency, in collaboration with West Berkshire District Council and the local community, completed construction of the flood alleviation scheme in Great Shefford. The scheme reduces the impacts of flooding to more than 20 properties and the A338 road. The lowest part of the scheme is open channel which establishes new chalk stream habitat flowing into the River Lambourn. We're pleased to confirm that the scheme operated successfully in February/March 2026 with high groundwater levels feeding into the stream during that period.

Looking at wider Environment Agency updates since the last meeting, a number of improvements have been made over the past 2 years.

In autumn 2025, we launched the new, improved Get flood warnings service. While there have been no changes to the core service, including when, where and how flood alerts and warnings are issued, several improvements have been made to the way users access and manage their accounts. These improvements include:

- Maps that allow users to easily view the areas covered by flood alerts and/or warnings.
- Clear information on the types of messages that will be received for a given location, including descriptions of alerts, warnings and severe flood warnings.
- Automatic notifications when an alert or warning is no longer in force.
- Use of one time passcodes rather than passwords and email verifications.

Future enhancements will be prioritised based on a combination of user feedback, operational requirements and cost-benefit considerations. We review the accuracy and timeliness of flood warning messages following each event to help ensure the service remains effective and continues to improve over time.

Lastly, our Forecast Model Improvement Programme continues to enhance flood forecasting models across the country.

The EA carries out reviews of our flood alert and warning thresholds after high flows by checking the river levels and thresholds reached, the decisions made and timings of each warning issued. We always welcome feedback related to the timing of flood alerts and warnings from communities, without such feedback it is not possible to improve the service.

As an example, information gathered from feedback from residents during the January 2024 flooding from Storm Henk, and subsequent meetings of the Newbury Flood and Drainage Forum, resulted in the thresholds used relating to the Shaw river level gauge to issue those alerts and warnings being altered that winter. Fortunately, the higher flows which would trigger alerts have not been experienced since.

We have built a new National Flood Risk Assessment known as NaFRA2 – this system was last updated in 2018. This was released in January 2025, and continues to be reviewed and improved. It provides a single picture of current and future flood risk from rivers, the sea and surface water for England. It uses the best available data both from the Environment Agency and local authorities. Our new data on depth of flooding also provides more information to help people understand the potential flood hazard they could face.

Our flood and coastal erosion risk data and mapping information is available on GOV.UK and the Data Services Platform. This mapping is not static and when new models or reported information on flooding is received, it will be reviewed to see whether adding this would improve the data we have and that people rely on.

This data is used by many people for many services, for example UK insurance underwriters may use this modelling to support their determination of insurance premiums. This data is available to anyone via the National Data Library (data.gov.uk). It should be noted however that the Environment Agency has no role in setting insurance premiums.

In 2025 we also launched our Smart Incident Reporting service. In June 2025 this allowed the public to report water pollution and odour via GOV.UK. In August 2025, we added illegal fishing as a third incident type, with report a Blockage in a Watercourse being released in January 2026. Members of the public can now upload photos directly with any reports, giving us better information about an incident immediately, collate information from multiple reports and understand where there are clusters of or ongoing issues.

The project will continue to expand the service with more incident types and new functionality over the next 12 months.

As a final update, in 2025 the Government committed to invest £4.2 billion over 3 years, from April 2026 to March 2029, to build and maintain flood defences and increase flood resilience.

Following this, the Flood and coastal erosion risk management funding policy was published, which simplified the model for funding flood risk projects. Subject to prioritisation, projects up to £3M may now be fully funded, with projects over this threshold expected to seek 10% partnership funding. Projects will be prioritised by value for money, and against criteria such as creating wider benefits for people or the environment or targeting deprived areas. The policy will also drive more investment in existing assets, with fewer new large schemes. However, these changes will also support more investment in wider local measures around surface water, natural flood management and property flood resilience. It will be reviewed in 2028 to assess effectiveness in meeting its aims and objectives.

While this represents a significant investment overall, demand on this budget is high, and will be prioritised at a national level according to the new policy and tools.

The new programme will be based on improved risk evidence from NAFRA2 as outlined earlier, and from our Asset Management planning system. This will develop a new evidenced based pipeline of projects to deliver the best value for money flood assets and prioritises projects in the places with the greatest risk of flooding. The programme will help enable resilience and adaptation to climate risks.

NAFRA2 has fed into a new National Investment Steer, which will guide investment to areas of greatest need across England. The update to the funding policy and National Investment Steer means that we have an opportunity to revisit some areas which may not previously have met requirements, particularly around partnership funding contributions. It should be noted that allocation of funding is prioritised at a national level and we continue to need to work within the resources available.

Locally, our flood risk teams continue to respond to planning applications, statutory plans, flood risk activity permits and data requests across the area. The EA is statutory consultee for any application involving flood risk from main rivers and the sea and we provide advice and guidance to the Local Planning Authority to assist them in making a determination regarding whether any development may be appropriate. Authorities are under no legal obligation to accept nor apply this advice/guidance when making their decision, or when applying conditions to any planning application.
Our partnership and strategic overview teams and engagement advisors have a key role in working with local flood groups to help communities understand flood risk and prepare and respond to flooding. We also work with local authorities and other partners to develop and progress flood risk management projects. Our incident team continue to be busy responding to drought, but are also starting to prepare for the wetter weather expected over the winter months.

Alongside this our operations and asset management teams plan and undertake maintenance work to assist riparian landowners in higher flood risk areas for the benefit of the wider community. Our work consists of in-channel vegetation control and blockage removal, tailored to the local environment and river conditions. We also liaise with flood groups locally, for example in Eastbury and Great Shefford, regarding incident response, asset maintenance and channel maintenance.

It should be noted that riparian landowners are responsible for ensuring that water flows through their watercourse naturally, and for maintaining it by removing

blockages that may impede the flow of water or cause flooding. The EA have a duty to ensure riparian owners are aware of their responsibilities. No risk management authority including the Environment Agency is provided with the powers to direct riparian or asset owners to operate or maintain their assets.

Where riparian or asset owners contact us for advice and guidance, we are happy to help, and have offered this advice for a number of the issues raised in the advance questions. I hope this clarifies our role in managing flood risk, and highlights the many and ongoing advances in this area.