

EXTRACT

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The Work of the Environment Agency, HC 557](#)

Tuesday 21 November 2017

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Paul Flynn; John Grogan; Mrs Sheryll Murray; David Simpson; Angela Smith; Julian Sturdy.

Questions 1 – 106

Witnesses: **Emma Howard Boyd**, Chairman, Environment Agency; **Sir James Bevan**, Chief Executive, Environment Agency; **Dr Toby Willison**, Executive Director of Operations, Environment Agency, gave evidence.

Chair: I am very happy to have that information as well. That will be fine.

Q59 **Angela Smith:** I have listened carefully to Sir James and Emma on flood management and, Sir James, you said that it is a “cardinal principle that we will not protect one community at the expense of another”. Emma, you said, “We look at the catchment in its entirety and want to take a holistic perspective”. That is absolutely the right thing to do, but I want to use, as a test case of that approach, the Sheffield flood scheme, because obviously that is the scheme that I know best. It is being developed at the moment and the council’s website makes it clear that it is a partnership with the Environment Agency. However, the scheme, as it is developed so far, has been severely criticised for a number of very good reasons. One is that the scheme proposes significant numbers of flood storage areas that are controversial, in some cases involving ancient woodland and which, in many cases, have involved no consultation with the landowners, including farming areas.

The second part of it is that it is depending heavily on making use of the major reservoirs in my constituency. I have the entire Upper Don in my constituency. I have 14 or 15 reservoirs in my constituency and I suspect very strongly that the water companies may not be entirely happy with having their capacity used as a major plank of a flood prevention scheme.

The third point is that it relies heavily on hard engineering, so it is broadly flood storage, use of reservoirs and hard engineering. When the design consultants, who are effectively

civil engineers, were asked about natural flood management they were incredibly dismissive about it. The worst part of it is, if we are going to look at catchment, there is no involvement of Barnsley, where the Upper Don has its catchment, its source. The Don comes into Sheffield from Barnsley, of course. There is no involvement of the two authorities down the river from Sheffield, which is Rotherham and Doncaster, before the Don flows into the Trent.

On that basis, where is the Environment Agency on this? This is a complete failure to take a catchment-level approach and to take into proper account the importance of natural flood management. It is an appalling scheme, as far as I can see. It looks like a chase for Government money. It looks like a bid for the money set up in response to the floods three or four years ago when Oliver Letwin set up the Cabinet Office inquiry. It does not look like a serious flood management scheme.

Sir James Bevan: I have been to Sheffield. I have talked to local parties. We do not do fake schemes. The Environment Agency is full of people who are absolutely committed to doing the best they can for the—

Q60 **Angela Smith:** But they have you as a partner on their website. They are using your name, Sir James.

Sir James Bevan: Our job is to best protect people from flooding, and we are very passionate about that and very serious about it. We will always try to design a flood scheme that meets local needs and local choices, and consultation is a core part of what we regard as a fundamental ingredient of a good flood scheme. If this scheme is not yet meeting the wishes of significant people in Sheffield, then we need to have further conversations and we will.

We always need design schemes that deliver and they will always have a mix of techniques; you have mentioned flood storage, reservoirs, hard engineering. We will always look to see if we can build a natural flood management element. We always ask that question when we are designing schemes. Sometimes it is possible; sometimes it is not. We always want to do any scheme in a way that is, as far as possible, consensual rather than anything else, so if there was a conclusion that we needed a flood storage area, for example, we would want to work with landowners to see whether they were up for doing that and adjust schemes if certain landowners were not. The same would apply in relation to reservoirs. We are always trying to achieve the best possible effect, but in a way that the local community and all those interested want to achieve it.

Q61 **Angela Smith:** What is the real role of the Environment Agency there? Are you advisers? Are you really going to allow your name to be attached to schemes that do not come up to standard? You have not mentioned the failure to include the whole of the Upper Don or the whole of the River Don; it is a spine of South Yorkshire, and the failure to involve Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster in this scheme is a failure to look at catchment levels. Surely the Environment Agency is not happy to attach its name to a scheme that, effectively, may just protect one community at the expense of another, because Rotherham and Doncaster could well feel the impact of this scheme.

Chair: What we need to get clear is what your role in this particular scheme is.

Sir James Bevan: In some schemes we are the lead deliverer and we work with other partners, which might be local authorities or others. In other schemes—and we will need to check the Sheffield one and the one you are referring to—we will be supporting a lead local flood authority, like the local authority, in delivering the scheme. However, everything I have just said would apply whether we were leading or supporting. The point is to make a difference that protects people, to not increase anybody else's flood risk and to design a scheme that meets the wishes and requirements of the local community.

Q62 **Angela Smith:** It would be really good if you could let the Committee know whether the Environment Agency has advised Sheffield, as the local authority, to work with the other authorities affected by the River Don on this scheme and whether or not they have properly taken into account the natural flood management work—it has already taken place in the partnership; this is more for the future—up in the Peak District where the River Don has its source. I just would really like to know what role the Environment Agency, in concrete evidence terms, has taken in all of this.

Emma Howard Boyd: It is something that we will have to get back to you with, but I visited Sheffield too and the whole nature of that visit involved talking to our partners, which included civil society. We will have to have a look at why our visit, which did involve all the right ingredients, feels very different from what you are experiencing at the moment.

Q63 **Angela Smith:** Do not take my word for it. There are academics locally and the Sheffield Wildlife Trust has it on its website. If you look at Sheffield Council's updates on the scheme, it is not very far different from where it started; it really is not. They have taken one or two storage sites out, but that is all. Reservoirs are not the answer to the problem, because Yorkshire Water has a balancing system across Yorkshire, so I do not think the scheme is going to be able to use the reservoirs in quite the way, perhaps, the council is suggesting.

Chair: It is interesting what Angela raises because, in a way, this is very much what we found when we did our flood report. It is trying to make sure that it is all dealt with with a very wide catchment area and, of course, the problem is it does not fit into local council boundaries and the like. That is where perhaps there is still more work to be done. Perhaps the catchment area in this case is not big enough and that is not altogether your fault, but it is how we look in the round at that bigger catchment area. Therefore, it might be useful for you to go back and really look at this one to see if it does meet the new criteria.

Emma Howard Boyd: I will go back to the examples of where we have taken some of the models of these flood action plans, which are very detailed and take a full catchment area and have been taken to other parts of the country, to see whether this is something that could be used in and around Sheffield and the broader environment.

Angela Smith: The Chair is absolutely right in his summing up of the questions I have asked. The point is that when we had that really bad flooding 10 years ago, the flooding started in Barnsley, it hit Sheffield, but it hit Rotherham and Doncaster a lot harder. That is why it needs to be at that catchment scale.

Mrs Murray: Very quickly on this same issue, I just want to make sure that you realise it is not all in the north of England. I have two schemes in my constituency. One is Environment Agency-led; it is the Upper Tamar. I attended the public consultation there and was very impressed with the way you were engaging with the community and with Natural England to make sure that the areas flooded were managed in an appropriate way afterwards. I have another one where you are engaging with the local authority, but do seem to be adopting a very heavy-handed approach, although since my intervention you are now consulting and engaging with my constituents, who stood to have the access to their house completely flooded. There is a lot of work for you to do and talking to people and making sure that, when you are working with local authorities, you do work in a joined up way. That is something that you should take on board.

Q64 **Chair:** We have made our point and it will be interesting for you to look at those particular schemes. If we can all work together—local authorities, Environment Agency, water

companies, landowners—and take the catchment as a wider area, it will work better for all of us. I know whenever you have a scheme there are always one or two individuals also badly affected, which is not always so easy to sort, but it does need to be taken into consideration, which I am sure you try to do. Perhaps pleasing all the people all the time can be a trifle difficult, but I know you are more than capable, Sir James, Emma and Dr Toby.