

**RM REP 001 - Tom Tugendhat MP**

*I am very grateful that you have accommodated me around the other hearings due to my schedule. I have not been present at previous sessions so if I cover areas which have already been mentioned I apologise, but I do want to reiterate some points that I know other contributors to this inquiry will make.*

*I should start by making very clear my position as Member of Parliament for Tonbridge, Edenbridge and Malling. The area I represent not only includes where the Leigh Flood Storage Area is located, but also many, many miles of the River Medway both upstream and downstream, as well as tributaries such as the River Bourne, River Eden and Hawden Stream. Over 50% of the residents I represent are affected by this inquiry, which is why it is only right that I speak today.*

*This shows that the impact of the decision will be felt across communities, not just the 1,430 households in the modelling. Raising the height of the FSA from 28.05 AOD (Above Ordnance Datum) to 28.60 AOD is clearly necessary to tackle some of the obvious flooding issues across our community. Every winter our community is wary for Flood Alerts and Flood Warnings.*

*In advance of today my office made reference, via Ms Vincent, to my letter to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs dated 11 June 2020, which I trust you have seen. It expresses my support for this proposal and I stand by every word of it. Enabling the enlargement of the FSA will help communities be better defended from flooding across the catchment.*

*The funding for the works have been obtained from a variety of sources which shows the commitment many authorities – Kent County Council, Borough and District Councils and others – have to the project. They are key to making this a possibility.*

*I would also refer you to comments I made in the House of Commons in an Adjournment Debate on 22 November 2016 where I said “Each individual solution must be part of a large strategy for flood mitigation along the wider catchment”. Here I was referring to smaller works, such as rebuilding the wall on Avebury Avenue in Tonbridge, which have happened to help prevent properties being flooded. Since then we have had Property Level Protection proposed in East Peckham and the completion of further works at Tonbridge Racecourse Sportsground. But this large strategy is the enlargement of the Leigh FSA, without which our communities remain more vulnerable than ever.*

*Since its construction in 1982 by the Southern Water Authority the Leigh FSA was one of the largest man-made flood defences anywhere, and it will have to remain so to continue to protect our towns and villages. It has been used in each year since apart from 13 occasions, so the case to enlarge it is overwhelming.*

*However, I would have been happy to let my written representations speak for themselves should it have been appropriate. They make clear why I support this scheme. Over the past few years and throughout this project I have spoken at length to the Environment Agency and am grateful for their time and the work they have done. Unfortunately, there are some unresolved objections to the scheme submitted and I’m glad we have a public inquiry for everyone to have their say.*

*I am conscious that I represent areas both upstream and downstream of the Flood Storage Area and it is the former where I have spent a considerable amount of time in recent weeks and months meeting residents and hearing concerns. You’ll hear from some of them during this inquiry.*

*I shall start off in Penshurst, which is where the majority of objections I have seen come from. There are two issues here; the impact on the Penshurst Place Estate and also then the impact on the village centre itself. I'll start with the latter.*

*I would draw the attention of the inquiry to my letter of 6 August 2020, with my own reference TT38295, which was sent by my office to Ms Vincent a couple of weeks ago; so I trust you have seen this already? It is addressed to the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan, and relates to a letter dated 31 July 2020 from Mr Storey at Bridge House, who I know is going to address this inquiry, to Tim Connell at the Environment Agency, who has already addressed this inquiry.*

*I am deeply disturbed that the Environment Agency had misrepresented the remarks of residents in Penshurst during its summary as part of this application. It falls below the standards I would expect when there has been significant dialogue, over many years, between all parties. Notwithstanding this I want to focus on the three measures suggested which would address the concerns of Penshurst residents.*

*The first is the installation of a measuring station at Penshurst. If you have been on site, Ms Jordan, you'll have seen a weak excuse for a sign near the southern Rogues Hill crossing by Bridge House. This is not a measuring station and is recognised by all parties. Part of the cause, in my opinion, for the objections is because residents simply do not believe the modelling of the Environment Agency. It has frequently changed and not reflected recent flood events; and I'll let residents speak for this themselves with their experiences of how the lack of trust in modelling has affected them too.*

*However, the nearest readings are too far away to make a difference in this specific location. We need evidence of the timing of flood events after the confluence of the River Medway and River Eden. I note in the Environment Agency's response to objectors that it believes measuring stations at Chafford Bridge and Colliers Land Bridge are sufficient, coupled with that at Vexour Farm on the River Eden. But I pose the question; surely it would be more sensible to measure levels after the rivers have met? It is clear from paragraph 2.3 in their response to Mr Storey that this isn't something they would consider, though I would argue it is essential.*

*The reason why Penshurst village has posed a particular problem is because of the proximity of the River Medway to the rear of properties on the High Street, including the Leicester Arms pub. The second ask in the letter of 6 August 2020 I referred to was, basically, for some form of Property Level Protection at each of these properties, including the pub as well as others affected including Mr and Mrs Calvocoressi's and all objectors here. As mentioned earlier we have a form of Property Level Protection which I've worked, successfully so far, with the Environment Agency at East Peckham. If it is suitable there then I see no reason why it isn't suitable here.*

*The reason why Property Level Protection is essential is because the latest modelling shows very clearly that the area flooded in Penshurst will grow on this northern side of the river. Which is not too dissimilar to the situation south of the main river as well.*

*There is a slightly separate solution at Bridge House though, which would be for the implementation of planning permission already secured on the property by Mr Storey, at a considerable cost. I would be grateful if investigations could happen which would determine whether the Environment Agency could come to an agreement to implement this as an already designed solution to many of the flooding issues of this house.*

*My staff have visited both The Yews and Bridge House on site with Mr Thompson and Mr Storey respectively. The issues are similar, if not the same, but I was particularly concerned by Appendix 6 when looking at Bridge House. This shows the extent of flood agreements and references K267788 made on 22 January 1985 at Bridge House. Unfortunately, this looks inaccurate as my understanding*

*is that the agreement only covers a part of Bridge House, and not all of it. Yet on the same map the blue line shows the extent of flooding with a 28.60 AOD FSA in operation heading south, up Rogues Hill, where there is no agreement.*

*Turning to Appendix 3 and the response by the Environment Agency to Mr and Mrs Storey, it is clear they argue that the depth of flooding won't increase, but their latest modelling seems to demonstrate that the extent of flooded land will. This seems to contradict figure 1, page 25 of the Flood Risk Assessment. Nowhere in the application I have seen is there any evidence to support this assertion at Penshurst. I would request that the Environment Agency provide clarification around this particular issue.*

*Before moving on to the issues at Penshurst Place Estate I wanted to mention a couple of other concerns in Penshurst village. Having spoken specifically about Bridge House a moment ago, the first relates to The Yews, and there is no recognition in the Environment Agency's response to Mr Thompson of the extent of the agreement to flood, and whether this includes the house as well as the garden between it and the River which has previously flooded. If the Environment Agency are to say that the height of the water in the most serious flooding event increases, then the evidence would suggest from the blue lines on the relevant maps that the flooded area increases too. This would be contrary to easements on The Yews regarding the area which can be flooded. In short, it would result in flooding to the house as well as the garden. I would appreciate clarification on this point.*

*Finally, I know Penshurst Parish Council will be making representations in relation to the flooding of the road between the two bridges, known as the causeway, which is the road between the entrance to Penshurst Place Estate and The Yews and Bridge House. They have requested information from Kent County Council about the impact of flooding this road on both the structure of the road and also the resultant diversion, a good 20 minutes extra via Fordcombe. I fully support this request as the closure of both Rogues Hill and Ensfield Road due to flooding has the potential to increase congestion right across Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and all villages in the area. I do trust that further questions can be asked about this road.*

*Turning to Penshurst Place Estate, I am conscious that they are not appearing at the inquiry although have submitted detailed evidence in advance alongside their hydrologists, WSP. I have spoken with the Estate in advance and know they are deeply concerned about these proposals.*

*First, they have asked me to highlight to you serious and significant errors and omissions in the Environment Agency's application, especially in relation to the impact of the revised scheme on the Estate and the lack of satisfactory mitigation or accommodation works to address the risk on the Estate's operations, and those living and working there. Specifically, they are concerned about the lack of modelling in Penshurst which I have already mentioned.*

*However there are other aspects of the application which causes concern on the Estate. Despite the EA submission, it is clear from the Estate's response that they consider there to be a significant impact on its operations and that the EA have downplayed this.*

*I understand discussions have been ongoing on this scheme since 2017 and it is concerning that no agreement was reached. Indeed, I am bemused why the extra Estate land required went from 'little or none', to 26 acres, then 12 acres and 7 acres, and finally 8.51 acres in an e-mail dated 16 April 2021. However this is still a guess on the part of the Estate, as two and a half years after asking the EA has still not provided the required maps at the scale requested (2,500:1) to the Estate. In my view this is unacceptable, and calls into question the validity of the modelling.*

*The main area of concern is the concrete road that any visitor familiar with the estate will know. In fact it is the only access to 11 residential properties, a children's nursery and the commercial parts of*

*Penshurst Place and Gardens in times of flooding. I gather that detailed plans were drawn in 2019 to protect the concrete road against flooding, and both sides agreed that further defences were necessary due to the increase in flooding levels here.*

*However, when the application was submitted in 2020 there was no notice to the Estate, and no mention of defences to the concrete road. Looking at the responses in the documents it is clear that this is due to it being characterised as a 'private road'. Unfortunately this isn't wholly the case, indeed it forms a part of the Tudor Trail, Regional cycle route 12 from Tonbridge as recognised by Sustrans. Furthermore, in the original 1976 Act the EA's predecessors were covenanted to provide reasonable alternative access to residents along the concrete road in times of flood.*

*I see no reason why the same condition should not be applied this time around. The whole purpose of this application is to protect residents from flooding; and not turn their properties into an island. Where agreement was possible during 2019 discussions, it is of deep concern that the EA have brought forward a proposal which – crudely put – leave 11 properties 'high and dry'. I have no wish to delay further the construction of this much needed facility but it is essential, and I cannot emphasise this enough, for this issue to be resolved in full through conditions on any permission arising from this inquiry.*

*The reason I emphasise this is also because of what the Estate strongly believes is an inaccuracy in the EA's submission at paragraph 21. It states they are working with landowners to assess options to modify the concrete road, and in response to other objectors suggests they are in discussions with the Estate. They would like to clarify this is certainly not the case, since the application was submitted without their knowledge. Clearly it requires two sides to speak, so this part of the submission is inaccurate.*

*As a result I do hope that conditions can be implemented to force the EA to come to an agreement with Penshurst Place Estate to address flood risk on the concrete road. Any additional excess of water will have an impact and all precautions must be taken, being such an important access route for the estate, including the potential uncertainties in the EA modelling around the area and the possibility of greater flood risk in the future.*

*I also ask whether any condition could require a mutually agreed set of principles by which agreement could be sought, which would establish the extent of any additional flooding due to the revised scheme. This should result in agreed protocols for compensation payments following flood events too.*

*I appreciate that I have spoken in some detail about Penshurst, including the Penshurst Place Estate and do this simply because the risks upstream are great here, and the changes arising from the scheme will affect Penshurst more than almost any other community. That is not to say that there are not other issues though and I wanted to bring into the inquiry the impact around Hildenborough and west Tonbridge too.*

*Again, in advance of appearing today I met with residents in Hawden Close, Hildenborough and Correnden Road and Stacey Road, Tonbridge, to speak about their concerns. These primarily relate to the Hildenborough Embankment which, of course, is a separate scheme. I don't want to bring any of these issues into this conversation – the EA representatives here will know there are a number of specific concerns they have about that scheme.*

*However, the position of any bund is of importance because there are options, whether it is closer to Tonbridge School, for example, that control the flow of water from and to this whole area and the River Medway, including during the operation of the Leigh Flood Storage Area. Specifically, the plans presented so far, with works in and around Stacey Road rather than Tonbridge School, do not resolve*

*flooding issues for some 7 properties in Hawden Close that flooded in 2013, nor protect a further 10/15 properties on Watersfield Lane, Correnden Road and Stacey Road which were not previously flooded, from flooding.*

*My question for this inquiry is to what extent these works have been factored into the application, and what impact any changes will have on the ability of an enlarged barrier to perform the role all residents downstream expect it to? I know the works at Leigh were 'decoupled' from the works at Hildenborough some time ago, for reasons I understand, but we cannot ignore the impact that one will have on the other.*

*Finally, to be clear, despite all I have said I am in support of this scheme and would like this to be recognised. As I said at the very start the impact of flooding on each property and community affected is devastating and we must not lose sight of this. The strong objections which have come in upstream have only happened because residents and key businesses in our area – the reputation of Penshurst Place is clear to everyone – wish to protect their assets too. I have campaigned and fought for many years for investment in flood defences in our community and will not endorse any option which either brings more delay, or cancels, this much needed investment in the community. The impact downstream has been covered extremely well in the documents submitted by the Environment Agency and key supporters and I would recognise and agree with all of these.*

*However, my concerns about the impact upstream remain and that is why I would strongly advocate clear, concise, enforceable and relevant conditions be placed on consent to grant this application which address each of these matters. For me the key is getting accurate measurements at Penshurst, protecting properties on High Street, Penshurst as much as possible. Recognising the vulnerability of The Yews, Bridge House and indeed the road between the two bridges as well and finding a solution that all parties can agree too, and looking further into the impact of the Hildenborough Embankment. Coupled with addressing the issues at Penshurst Place Estate – which are of deep concern to me – this should enable this application to be granted.*

*I trust this is helpful for the inquiry.*

**ENDS**

The Hansard transcript of the November 2016 Adjournment Debate in the House of Commons

Flooding: River Medway

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

19:14:00

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)

It is a privilege to be here for my first Adjournment debate on a particularly topical matter: flooding along the River Medway and its tributaries. The recent storm has brought some serious flooding across our country. I am sorry to have to report that some properties have been flooded in Edenbridge in my constituency. I am very grateful to the flood wardens in Edenbridge, Tonbridge and across the community who have done such sterling work not only in warning people about the floods but in ensuring that drains were cleared and culverts were not blocked. That has prevented surface water from becoming a problem.

Surface water and more serious flooding has been an issue for us in Kent in the past, although Kent is rightly recognised as the garden of England and has some of the most beautiful countryside in our

land. I am blessed not just to represent it but to live in it. This unites me with all those who live from the coast to the High Weald, whether they are “men of Kent” or “Kentish men”—a distinction based on which side of the Medway they are from and whether they come from Jutish or Anglo-Saxon stock.

The river has shaped much more than just the names of the people. It has carved its way through our history and is reflected in two of the towns that I have the privilege to speak for in this House—Tonbridge, with the Medway running through it, and Edenbridge, with the tributary, the Eden, running through it. Both testify to the importance of the river in our county’s life. Further downstream, towns such as Maidstone and Rochester have grown over the centuries as a result of the river providing an important trading link with neighbours. Communities have grown up around the river because of what it offers. The Medway is no different. The floodplains offered fertile fields and later cheap development options with good flat land.

It is no wonder that the history of flooding long pre-dates my time representing this wonderful community, but it has also marked me. Three years ago, just weeks after being selected as the Conservative candidate for the seat of Tonbridge and Malling, I found myself making some of my first visits as a candidate to local villages. Sadly, many were under water. I can vividly remember seeing the impact of floodwater in Hildenborough in January 2014, when I visited with Councillor Mark Rhodes, now the mayor of our wonderful borough council.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)

I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour on bringing this important debate before the House. As he knows, my constituency was devastated by floodwater in the Christmas floods of 2013, and even now some of those areas are not fully recovered. Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to everything that the Government are doing in respect of flood defences, they should also earmark funding for the more natural flood defence schemes, such as the four-acre wetlands site in Marden in my constituency, which can hold up to 15 million litres of floodwater? I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that many of these schemes are low cost, low tech and low maintenance, but very effective.

Tom Tugendhat

My hon. Friend and neighbour makes some persuasive points. I shall shortly speak about some local flood defences.

The Brookmead estate and surrounding roads, which I visited with the present mayor, were struggling to recover—as my hon. Friend and neighbour pointed out, some parts are still struggling to recover—from flooding by what to some may sound like a very small amount of water. In many parts it was just over a foot, and sometimes only a foot and a half, of water, but the damage done, even by so little water, can be overwhelming.

That Christmas will not be forgotten by me and, I know, by many residents, some of whom are still struggling to get insurance deals sorted out. Having been elected their MP, I am proud to be here representing them, but I am also conscious that flooding is one of the most pressing issues for me to solve.

The underlying causes of the massive Christmas 2013 flood have not changed significantly in the past three years, unfortunately. We all know that these instances may be getting more frequent. That catchment area flooded severely in 1947, 1958, 1960, 1963, 1974, 1979 and 2000, before the 2013 flood, and these are just the major events. Localised flooding on tributaries can occur much more often.

On Saturday 25 June this year, when many people were either celebrating or mourning the result of the referendum, very few people noticed that homes in Ightham, a beautiful village to the north of the community that I am privileged to represent, were being swamped, following only 33 millimetres of rainfall in just two hours. Busty stream was not able to cope and burst its banks, and the village suffered what the Environment Agency calls a one-in-19-year flood. Today, five months on, many residents are still not back in their homes, and sadly, they are not alone. In Hadlow and East Peckham, recent localised floods on the River Bourne have forced people out of their homes, while in Penshurst, Chiddingstone and Edenbridge, the River Eden has threatened to burst its banks many times since 2013. All these tributaries feed into the River Medway and underline the importance of finding solutions that address the underlying causes of these localised floods without simply passing the problem on to communities further downstream.

Let me take Tonbridge as an example. The new 320-metre flood wall at Avebury Avenue shows a local solution that works. Following restoration of the ground height, 80 homes in the Barden Road area, which were flooded in 2013, are now less at risk from the river. However, the scheme works only because the new walls work in conjunction with existing defences at Leigh and in Tonbridge town centre. Each individual solution must be part of a larger strategy for flood mitigation along the wider catchment.

I recognise that communities in the River Medway catchment are not the only ones in the country that flood. Indeed, we in Kent have great sympathy with the people of Somerset, Yorkshire and Cumbria, who have had their own dreadful floods in recent years, and Government funds to help those communities are welcomed by us, too. Both the larger schemes and the smaller projects, such as the £4 million investment in riverside footpaths in Cumbria, show a Government seeking to address the causes of flooding events. However, every time there is investment elsewhere, Kent residents rightly consider its effectiveness and ask whether such defences could help in our county, too.

Finding solutions to flooding on the River Medway is important for not just Kent but our country, because so much more depends on it than simply the protection of homes. Yes, our catchment area has 3,000 properties at risk of flooding, half of which are in Tonbridge and Hildenborough, with 500 more in East Peckham, but it is about more than that. Kent is also an economic powerhouse, and many businesses that rely on the ability to operate even in severe weather will be protected should we get the appropriate level of protection.

That is why I support the creation of a Medway flood action plan, which would bring together local authorities, businesses and residents, as happened in Cumbria and Calderdale. Indeed, the Cumbria model, which was well championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is rightly recognised by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as a central feature of its 25-year environment plan. I hope that success can be mirrored under the banner of a Medway flood partnership. I look forward to its work starting in the new year—it would certainly have my support, and I hope it would have that of the floods Minister, too. Having a flood partnership panel on the horizon would be very popular, as it offers the possibility of a collective solution—one that is cost-effective and that does not cause unnecessary problems elsewhere.

That would support the work already done by the Environment Agency to protect each community and would reinforce the thorough work it has done to demonstrate where the greatest gains can be made. Those inquiries all point in the same direction. It will come as no surprise to the Minister, who is very aware of this issue, that the most viable scheme involves the enlargement of the Leigh flood storage area, the Hildenborough flood alleviation scheme and the East Peckham flood alleviation scheme. That is where resources for capital projects should be directed, with the Government also

being clear that property-level resilience should be explored, where feasible, to deal with the 350 properties that may fall outside the effectiveness of those schemes. Where community defence projects are shown by agencies not to be viable, the Government should commit to property-level resilience. The fact that collective defence does not work does not mean that people should be left out. I am told by the Environment Agency that that applies to communities bordering my own.

For my community, however, tomorrow will be the defining moment, as we very much hope to hear from the Chancellor's autumn statement the outcome of local growth fund allocations. I am sure the floods Minister will agree that the bid for the Leigh flood storage area is impressive and compelling, and it would be deeply disappointing to everyone involved were the £4.5 million requested not provided.

This bid is crucial to our community. It has the third largest amount of "other funding" of all the south-east local enterprise partnership region bids. It includes contributions from local businesses in East Peckham, from Kent County Council, from Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, and contributions in kind from Southern Water and Tonbridge School. This is a true community project and, with the Environment Agency's commitment of £15.5 million of flood defence grant in aid, a viable one too. The Environment Agency's contribution is not symbolic. It understands better than anyone that the project would increase capacity at Leigh by 30% while constructing much needed local embankments at Hildenborough and East Peckham. As I mentioned earlier, those projects work in conjunction with each other to improve the wider catchment area. That was why the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, promised Government funding on his visit to the area in the aftermath of the Christmas 2013 floods.

However, there is a wider issue at stake along the River Medway and all its tributaries that goes beyond individual bids through the local growth fund and localised schemes in particular villages—the strategic importance of the Rivers Medway, Eden, Beult, Teise and Bourne to Kent and to the wider south-east region. The Government have been very clear in highlighting the growth that they want to deliver in our part of the country over the coming years, and that depends on investment and people—and, in turn, on viability. This project alone would enable an additional 2,100 homes to be built in sensible locations in an area of predominantly green belt in the south-east of England. It would also deliver over 13 hectares of employment land by 2031, roughly equating to 2,900 associated jobs. The Government targets are rightly ambitious, and to succeed we need to address the creaking infrastructure of the towns and villages nearby. The long-term economic plan, about which we all once heard so much, would focus on these communities to ensure that we have every possible option open to us locally to plan for the future.

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council is currently consulting on that future through its local plan, and has shown that without significant investment in local flood defences it will be unable to deliver the growth required by Government. The consequences of a funding shortfall would be severe. Investors would be deterred from coming to the area, new buyers would be priced out of the market due to a lack of supply to keep up with Government demand—or rather popular demand—and current residents would remain at severe risk of flooding. For the cost of a rather modest house in Chelsea, thousands would be left at risk.

Further upstream in Sevenoaks district, the demand for more services in Edenbridge is increasing, yet without additional defences on the River Eden, land will not be available to make these important developments. The doctors' surgery needs more space, as do many in the town of Tonbridge, but their search is severely limited by flood risk in the town. Localised projects that tie in with the collective aim of the catchment could help to solve a variety of problems that our towns and villages face.



I feel it only right to end by referencing the importance of finding solutions to flooding on the River Medway and its tributaries for each individual community involved. A trip upstream from its mouth near the Isle of Grain through Aylesford, Maidstone, East Peckham and Tonbridge will show to all just what a beautiful county Kent is. It will also demonstrate the reliance that each of the communities places on the river, and how economic and cultural links have been forged by the connections it provides. Each of its tributaries, from the Beult and Teise to the east, to the Bourne to the north and the Eden to the west, have seen communities built around them. They no longer feed the tanner's yard and the cricket ball factories, but they are still at the heart of our life. It is crucial that this Government make their contribution to ensuring that Kent has the ability to grow and to deliver its plans in the region. That is important not only for the Government but, most of all, for the people of Kent. The work has been done and the options are now present for each town and village. Some will require larger capital schemes, while others will require property level resilience to deliver the appropriate outcome. Each has its place.

Christmas 2013 is still in my mind, and I know just how much of an impact it has had on many others who lived through that night and the past three years. We all know that it could happen again at any time. I hope that the Government will do their bit so that next time we flood—sadly, I fear it will be next time, rather than never—the impact is limited and the people who have made their lives and businesses in west Kent are able to do so in the security of the appropriate flood defences.

19:29:00

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate on flooding on the River Medway and its tributaries. He spoke passionately on behalf of his constituents, and I congratulate him on securing his first Adjournment debate in the Chamber; I think this is also my first reply to an Adjournment debate in the Chamber.

I am very aware of the impact of flooding. I have supported my constituents in Suffolk following flooding in recent years, and I understand the impact it can have on people's homes, businesses and livelihoods. I am committed to doing my utmost to raise awareness of, and to reduce, flood risk. My hon. Friend referred to the Edenbridge flooding today, and he praised flood wardens. I absolutely congratulate them on coming forward, and I thank the Environment Agency for working with Kent County Council in training those wardens. I am also pleased to hear of the preparations that were made to try to alleviate the risk of flooding today.

The Government continue to play a key role in improving protection for those at flood risk. We are spending £2.5 billion on 1,500 new flood defence schemes to improve protection for 300,000 homes by 2021, and we have increased maintenance spending in real terms over this Parliament to more than £1 billion. I understand that we have also spent £825,000 on the River Medway on maintenance in the last year; that is the highest it has been for some time. Moving to a six-year settlement has given the Environment Agency greater certainty on schemes and has made it easier to protect more homes, in contrast with the hand-to-mouth existence that arose from the previous annual settlement.

Mrs Helen Grant

The Minister is talking about funding. I wonder whether she thinks, as I do, that the Chancellor's autumn statement tomorrow may be the perfect opportunity for the Government to turn their very wise and warm words about innovative flood measures into reality at last.

Dr Coffey

The plans that people at the Environment Agency are working on with DEFRA, which include potential developments on natural management schemes, are exactly the kind of initiatives that I hope might get highlighted in the autumn statement. Nevertheless, we will all have to wait and see.

In the catchment area of the River Medway more than 3,000 properties are at risk of flooding, including 1,500 homes in Tonbridge and Hildenborough and 500 in East Peckham. During the winter 2013-14 floods, more than 900 homes and businesses in Tonbridge, East Peckham, Maidstone, Yalding and other smaller communities were flooded from the River Medway and its tributaries. This flood was the largest ever measured in many parts of the catchment of the River Medway. The Leigh flood storage area is situated upstream of Tonbridge and currently protects 1,200 homes and businesses from flooding. Although the Leigh flood storage area already plays a vital role in protecting those properties, the Environment Agency has also been working in partnership with the local community to improve the level of protection.

I wrote to my hon. Friends in August this year with an update on the work to reduce flood risk on the Medway, and I assured them that we remained committed to working in partnership to provide a scheme that will further reduce the flood risk to local communities. The Environment Agency has been working in partnership with local councils to find the most effective way to reduce flood risk for communities along the Rivers Medway, Beult and Teise. This work included an initial cost-benefit assessment of various options. In April 2014 those partners committed £1 million to fund the development of a business case for the schemes. That work included carrying out more detailed modelling of the Medway catchment.

Currently, the Environment Agency, Kent County Council and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council are progressing the business case for enlarging the Leigh flood storage area and the Hildenborough embankment. I am aware that that is the favoured option for improving flood protection to homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough, because together they will provide additional storage capacity that will benefit more than 1,400 properties. The project to enlarge the Leigh flood storage area and to build embankments is estimated to cost £17.1 million. The scheme qualifies for around £11.3 million of grant in aid, with a further £5.8 million of partnership funding contributions required. Work is also ongoing on plans for the East Peckham flood alleviation scheme, which involves constructing walls and embankments to protect some 560 homes and businesses. The scheme costs £7.5 million and requires £3.25 million of partnership funding contributions, which are being sought, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling described, from the South East local enterprise partnership and from local businesses that will benefit.

I am pleased that local partners are already working together to contribute to these schemes, alongside the considerable Government investment, and work is continuing to bridge the current funding gap. I should remind the House that it was under a Conservative-led Government that we changed the funding policy to give every scheme that had a positive benefit-cost ratio a chance to secure some grant funding, rather than the old system of all or nothing.

The Environment Agency is also scoping how it can work with partners to develop a Medway flood action plan, modelled on the successful integrated catchment planning approach of the Cumbria flood action plan. I am very pleased to hear that my hon. Friend is looking forward to participating in that process, and that the newly established Medway flood partnership will have its first meeting in the new year.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), I understand that natural flood management options will be considered for the action plan. Where schemes meet the objectives to which she referred, about the potential reduction in flooding, with economic benefits, such an option is already given to farmers. There are several schemes for which that is the case, although, admittedly, I believe that there is little such opportunity in Yalding.

This debate allows me to highlight what we are doing on a broader level to improve resilience and to be better prepared for whatever arises this winter. No Government can promise that no one will be flooded ever again, but we can learn and act. That is what we did with the national flood resilience review. The review was undertaken to assess how the country can be better protected from future flooding and extreme weather events. I can report that considerable progress has been made to help to prepare for future flood events. We have invested £12.5 million in mobile flood defences, which means that the Environment Agency now has 25 miles of such temporary defences, located in seven key areas, which are available to be deployed flexibly around the country, compared with the 5 miles that was available last year. We also have 500,000 sandbags ready. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has announced, 1,200 troops are on standby if the worst comes to the worst and councils need their help.

Infrastructure providers have been reviewing the resilience of key assets that provide vital services to our communities. They are identifying where they can also protect these assets with temporary defences this winter, while longer-term solutions are implemented. This means that the country will be better protected this winter, and services to our communities will be more resilient to flood events. We have also worked with the private sector to develop a new property flood resilience action plan, which illustrates some straightforward measures that homeowners and businesses can take to improve the resilience of their property to flooding, as well as enabling them to get back in far more quickly if, unfortunately, they are flooded. These can be simple measures, such as in-built airbrick covers, to more substantial works, such as installing a pump, having solid floors or installing wiring so that plug sockets are higher up the wall.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald is in the Chamber, I thought it would be helpful to refer to the flooding that happened in her community. I recognise that, unfortunately, flooding in this area is a frequent occurrence. An event leading to flood depths of more than 1 metre occurs roughly every 10 years in Yalding. The communities of Yalding and Collier Street sit at the confluence of the Rivers Beult, Teise and Medway, which makes the flood risk there particularly challenging. The communities could be flooded by any or all of the rivers.

I am aware that although the Leigh flood storage area helps to reduce downstream water levels on the River Medway, it offers only a marginal benefit because it is 10 miles upstream. Given the local geography and topology, as well as existing developments within the catchment area, flood storage areas constructed on the Rivers Beult and Teise would not be sufficiently large to make a meaningful difference to flood levels in areas such as Yalding and the surrounding communities. That is simply not possible.

The Environment Agency now has a dedicated project manager working with the councils in Yalding and Collier Street to make progress in making properties and infrastructure more resilient to flooding. Early estimates suggest that approximately 350 houses may benefit from such property-level resilience. I am pleased that the Environment Agency will begin detailed surveys of each property in early 2017, and I, too, look forward to hearing the outcome.

The Environment Agency will continue to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling to reduce flood risk in the area and will continue to work collaboratively to deliver projects

in this part of west Kent. I assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have listened to all the comments that have been made today and that the Government will continue to ensure that we are always as well protected from flooding as possible.

Finally, as has been referred to extensively, the autumn statement is tomorrow and there will be forthcoming announcements about LEP funding. If anything changes as a result of those announcements, I will be happy to update my hon. Friend again. Of course, he does have Question 1 at oral questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday, when he may talk about flooding.

Question put and agreed to.

19:40:00

House adjourned.