Managing Flood Risk

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Click here to watch Sarah speak

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), with whose comments about the need for co-ordination and communication I completely agree. I, too, represent a beautiful coastal constituency—south Devon has taken a terrible battering but it is still beautiful and it is still open for business, and I hope that Members will come to visit us.

I wish to address three points, including the underlying causes and the need to build resilience in our coastal defences—I wish today to concentrate on coastal flooding. First, however, I ask the Minister to listen to the desperate plight of fishermen in my constituency, 21 of whom have written to me in the past fortnight. The situation for them, particularly the crab fishermen, is desperate. A crabbing pot costs £60 to replace and a shrimping pot costs £40—that is before the extra costs of materials such as rope are added on. Most of the 21 fishermen who have written to me—there are many more fishermen in this position—have lost about 100 pots, but some have lost 300 pots. They are looking at having to pay between £6,000 and £18,000. We also need to take into account the desperate conditions they have faced over the past few months. Some have been able to get out on only two or three occasions, and even then they have been having to try to retrieve gear.

That desperate situation is faced by many fishermen, and I would love to read out each and every one of their letters. However, what I shall do instead is ask the Minister to meet me to see whether we could consider having the same scheme for them as has been put in place for farmers. I welcome the farming recovery fund that the Department has set up jointly with an EU funding mechanism, because several funding mechanisms are now in place for farmers: support with business rates, and the many capital replacement grants for those who have been flooded. However, they apply only to people who have been flooded and fishermen, who of course work in a flooded environment all the time, are dealing with a different issue—the damage from the storms—although one very much related to the issue we are debating. Farmers can access a fund of between £500 and £5,000. Will the Minister reassure fishermen that a similar fund will be set up for them? That would be enormously reassuring. As the lead Minister for co-ordinating on this matter, will he talk to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and his colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government about rolling out some of the grants that have been made available to farmers and make similar schemes available to fishermen? Many of the fishermen who have written to me face bankruptcy and will lose their businesses for ever, so there is an urgent need for action in the next month, not in three months' time. I hope the Minister will address that in his response.

As the Minister will know, the other pressing issue for coastal constituencies in the south-west is the resilience of the rail line at Dawlish. As I have said, we are open for business; I would not want anyone to think that because the rail line is cut off, people cannot visit Devon and Cornwall of course they can. However, the situation is having a huge impact on the region's economy. I hope that he will address a concern that is mentioned in my constituency. Nobody wants Devon and Cornwall to be cut off every time there is heavy rainfall, and we welcome many of the measures that are being put in place to improve
resilience north of Exeter, but resilience measures that bypass the line and take things via Okehampton would have catastrophic results for south Devon. That would not be building resilience; it would be building disaster. We are seeking a super-resilient line at Dawlish; perhaps there could be an alternative route to use in dire emergencies but not a replacement for that route. I hope the Minister will address that issue in his summing up.

I wish to discuss another issue facing some coastal communities in my constituencies by drawing on a couple of examples that illustrate a wider point affecting many constituencies around the country. I have spoken several times about the community of Beesands in my constituency, which I visited recently. The council spent £50,000 trying just a few weeks ago to put back the sea defences that had been washed away there, but they were washed away again with the first easterly and high tide. We do not want to put back what has just been washed away, because that is just throwing good money after bad. Beesands needs an improved sea defence. I praise the work of individuals such as Chris Brook who have gone to enormous trouble to source the rock armour from a quarry in Cornwall. It is all ready to go, the designs are in place to increase the height of the rock armour defences, but unfortunately we have hit a barrier—the need for planning permission. There is confusion because some parts of legislation appear to give councils the ability in an emergency situation to go ahead and put in place these sea defences, but elsewhere there seems to be a measure saying that planning permission is required for sea defences over 200 cubic metres. We cannot afford to delay, because the implications for Beesands of another high tide and a south-easterly are grave indeed. There is no point putting back exactly what has just been washed away, so I hope that the Minister, in his role of co-ordinating things, will try to sweep away some of these bureaucratic barriers, because everyone knows what needs to be put in place and we just need to get it going.

I also hope that the Minister will work with councils, because we would like military support for the lift-in. Anyone who has visited Beesands will know that access to it is incredibly narrow, down a very steep hill, and we may need at least 450 lorry loads. Military assistance, as was put in place for the original delivery of the rock armour, would expedite this delivery and allow us to get the sea defences in place at this critical time. I hope that he will examine this wider point of urgency and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said, the need for agencies to work together to try to sweep away some of the barriers and just get the work done that is vital.

I will not say that Beesands is fortunate, because it is in a difficult position, but in some ways the neighbouring community in North Hallsands is in a much worse situation. Even though it is only a short distance down the coast, the shoreline management plan designates it for no active intervention, which has left the local community feeling as if they have been abandoned and people are just walking away. The road access to this community has been cut off and they are currently having to take a detour around a private car park. The trouble for this community is that Devon county council will say, "We only own the road surface." The council has sort of walked away, and so the villagers are left with rock armour scattered all over the place, there is no access for the local fishing community and the place feels as if it has been abandoned. Will the Minister examine the impact that shoreline management plans have, because I understand that there are some powers to have flexibility in this area and there is no way this tiny local community could afford to rebuild its sea defences on its own?

This is such a sensitive issue because the community at North Hallsands needs only to look a very short distance down the cliff to see what happened to the original community of Hallsands. Anyone who knows south Devon will know that in 1897 an extraction licence was granted to Sir John Jackson, 650,000 tonnes of shingle were then removed from off the
coast of the village, the shingle beach dropped dramatically and the village was swept away, with only a few ruined dwellings left behind—a population of 159 lost their homes completely. There is great local sensitivity about this issue within the community of North Hallsands, some of whom are descendants of those original habitants of Hallsands. I hope that the Minister will look sympathetically at trying to get them access along their road, or even some help so that they can have assistance in overcoming the complications, and at reviewing the shoreline management plan, which has left them feeling abandoned.

Another issue is that of the Slapton line. The shoreline management plan there is one of managed retreat, which will have terrible consequences for the economy of my constituency. It is an essential communication route between its two halves. To negotiate the alternative route down back lanes requires someone to be exceptionally good at reversing very long distances at speed. It is simply completely inadequate. I call on the Minister to review the shoreline management plan for the whole area to give us some real hope for the future.

Finally, the village of Hallsands stands as a testament to what happens if we ignore man-made impact on climate change. I hope that the Minister will consider climate change in itself because we ignore that at our peril. It is not just that the jet stream has settled over southern England but the fact that it is 30% stronger. If we ignore the problem of emissions, this sort of flooding will not be an exceptional weather event but the new normal.

Dan Rogerson. (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made specific points about coastal management plans, and I will be happy to discuss those with her. Obviously, there will be an element of local involvement in those solutions; local authorities, for example, will play a role in protecting the road infrastructure that she mentioned. The hon. Lady was right about the fishing industry. She has been advocating intervention. I went with the Deputy Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) to Porthleven, in my hon. Friend’s constituency. I met fishermen there and have met fishermen in Padstow; they came from around north Cornwall to discuss the issues with me.

We are listening closely as a Government to the fishing industry, particularly those involved in crab and lobster fishing and shrimping, which the hon. Lady mentioned, to see what might be done to help. I will not make an announcement about that now, but I know that my fellow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), is considering the matter closely. I hope that we will be able to offer support and advice to the fishing industry very soon.

Like other hon. Members, the hon. Member for Totnes raised planning issues, although those are primarily for the Department for Communities and Local Government. No doubt note will have been taken about what has been said; we can feed the points back to colleagues.

Partnership funding was raised, in relation to the Government’s approach to make sure we deliver more schemes than would otherwise be possible. We are on course to bring in £148 million of additional funding compared with £13 million under the previous spending review. The Opposition have rightly pointed out that that has not entirely happened, but the
spending review period is not yet over; it would have been slightly alarming if it had all happened by this point. We are on course, and I welcome the contribution from the private sector and local government to delivering the schemes.

Recent events will have brought into sharp focus the initial emergency responses to flooding in the UK and the need to learn lessons when things have not worked as well as they might or when we can build on successful responses. We can focus on short-term recovery, but we also need to ensure that long-term defences remain a priority for the Government. I look forward to working with Members across the House to learn the lessons from the past and ensure that we protect more homes and businesses more securely in future.

Hansard