

Combating flooding with blue belts

Severe fluvial flooding is set to become more commonplace in Britain thanks to climate change. **Nick Reeves**, executive director of the Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM), puts the case for 'blue belts' as a means of restricting development on floodplains.

Changing weather patterns caused by global warming mean that fluvial flooding is set to become an increasing feature of life around the UK. It is thus vital to restrict certain types of development on land at risk from flooding – and in some cases ban development altogether.

A statutory development control aid called 'blue belt' could fulfil this role. As with green belt, blue belt would control development for the good of people and the environment—but in floodplains and other land at risk from flooding.

Currently around 10% of people in England and Wales live with the spectre of flooding. The economic value of their homes and businesses is over £220 billion – a not insignificant risk. This figure will rise as the UK Government's 'sustainable communities plan' delivers over 500 000 new homes in south-east England, including the Thames Gateway.

Agency needs more powers

Aside from the fact that the south-east has its own particular pressures, and is already at risk from water scarcity and other infrastructure challenges, many of the new homes will be built on floodplains or on land at risk from flooding. This is despite warnings to local councils by the Environment Agency.

What is needed now is for either the Environment Agency – or another statutory agency – to be given the powers to designate blue belt land, with local authorities as the implementing bodies responsible for carrying out flood and erosion risk management works, subject to a new national system of strategy and approval.

With most UK towns and cities having some flooding problems and with the prospect of more communities facing flooding in the future, it really is time for an innovative approach to dealing with the problem. Otherwise we are simply creating problems for future generations to resolve.

Planning processes need updating

It is not all bad news. Some towns and cities are doing their best to prevent or restrict development in the floodplain. The City Council of Worcester, for example, is making strenuous efforts to protect a city of great historic and environmental significance. Ashford in Kent also deserves praise for the way it has conducted consultations on new development policy, resulting in consultees

having a big say in the limits of development on land at risk from flooding.

Nevertheless we still need to change planning priorities and processes to reflect environmental reality and protect communities. At present we are seeing out-moded, demand-led development that will require ever-increasing and costly flood defences and mean misery for many millions of householders and businesses. What is needed now is environmentally responsible and equitable development planning across the UK.

It is surely wrong that when the Environment Agency objects to development on a floodplain, it is still possible for construction to proceed – giving rise to settlements that may become a threat to health and life, as well as uninsurable properties in the longer term.

Development not sustainable

In pushing through plans for new housing in areas of high flood risk, the Government is risking criticism that its sustainable communities plan is not sustainable at all. There may also be accusations that the Government is trying to avoid public consultation by shepherding its plans through unelected and unaccountable regional assemblies and urban development corporations with 'special planning powers'.

CIWEM, various House of Commons committees, local community groups, independent experts and commentators have all raised concerns about the issue and have urged the Government to re-think its plans.

The blue belt concept probably represents some of the most innovative thinking to date on the challenge of combating floods and protecting people, property and the environment – now, and for future generations of communities. It is a sustainable solution and worthy of serious consideration.



CIWEM is proposing statutory 'blue belts' to control development in land at risk from flooding

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