

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss)

Statement on Flooding – 5 January 2016

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the impact of Storm Eva, which brought flooding to the north of England between Christmas and the new year. I want to express my deepest sympathy for all those who have been affected across the UK. The Prime Minister, Ministers and I have visited the affected towns and communities and seen for ourselves the terrible impact that this flooding has had on homes and businesses in Lancashire and Yorkshire. I pay tribute to the tireless work of the emergency services, the military, the Environment Agency, council workers and other responders and volunteers. Many people have not had time with their families over Christmas, and they came from as far afield as Norfolk and Somerset.

The Met Office confirmed today that we have had the wettest December in a century. In fact, the north-west faced the wettest December on record. Later in the month, rain fell on saturated ground, meaning that all the rivers in Lancashire were at record levels, and Yorkshire rivers such as the Aire and the Wharfe were up to 1 metre higher than they have ever been. This resulted in the flooding of about 9,000 properties, which, together with the earlier flooding in Cumbria, brings the total to about 16,000 flooded properties in England. While of little consolation to those who have been flooded, it is important to note that flood defences have protected over 20,000 properties from being flooded during December.

In order to deal with the forecast rainfall, I convened Cobra meetings on 23 December and on Christmas day. The Environment Agency, emergency services and the Army worked through the night deploying temporary defences, rescue boats and pumps, and warning and informing residents.

On Boxing day, I chaired a further Cobra meeting to assess the impacts and ensure that local responders were receiving all the support required to deal with a situation of that scale and gravity. That day, I travelled to Yorkshire and Lancashire with the chief executive of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan, to ensure that all that could be done was being done.

The Prime Minister chaired a Cobra meeting on 27 December and visited Yorkshire. About 600 military personnel were deployed in support of the operations, with a further 1,000 on standby. The RAF played a vital role in delivering power generators to the Foss barrier in York and repairing defences in Croston in Lancashire, using a Chinook helicopter.

Since Storm Eva passed, our focus has been on doing everything we can to help Yorkshire and Lancashire get back up and running. The Prime Minister announced that £40 million would be spent on repairing defences, including £10 million on upgrading the Foss barrier with new pumps to ensure that it can cope with higher volumes of water. We are providing £60 million of help for local residents, businesses and farmers. That help has been provided in record time. Storm Eva took place on 26 December and we made the first payments to local authorities on 29 December so that they can help businesses and residents straight away.

The speedy repair of the Tadcaster bridge is a national priority. Once we have identified a solution, the funding needed will be provided promptly. The flood recovery envoy for Yorkshire—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill)—will convene a meeting in the coming days with local authorities, wider local representatives and Highways England experts, with the aim of

finalising a plan early next week that can be put immediately into action. That will complement the work of the floods Minister and floods envoy to Cumbria and Lancashire, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart).

Work is already under way on our six-year programme to upgrade flood defences. This investment of £2.3 billion is a real-terms increase on what was spent in the last Parliament, which itself was a real-terms increase on what was spent between 2005 and 2010. It includes £280 million in Yorkshire and £120 million in Lancashire. In January 2015, work commenced on a new £33 million scheme to protect the centre of Leeds, and projects for the Humber, Rossall and Calderdale are in the pipeline.

In the light of recent events, we have commenced a national flood resilience review to ensure that the country can deal with increasingly extreme weather events. The review will look at forecasting and modelling, resilience of key infrastructure and the way we make decisions about flood expenditure. In particular, we will ensure that the Leeds scheme would cope with the new levels of rainfall we are now seeing. The work of the Natural Capital Committee, to which I have reappointed Dieter Helm as chair, will complement that. It will further develop the catchment-based approach we are now using for our environment planning, including slowing the flow upstream.

I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our sincere sympathy to those who have been affected by these extreme weather conditions and subsequent flooding. The Government will continue to do what it takes to get those areas up and running and prepare for future events. I commend this statement to the House.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for advance sight of it. I join her in paying tribute to the emergency services and armed forces, to the efforts of the many Environment Agency and local authority staff who came back from their leave over the festive period, and to the many volunteers who helped.

Last week, I visited the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and the neighbouring Calder Valley constituency. It is difficult to convey the devastation in those communities, but our sympathy is not enough. The urgent priority, of course, is to ensure that people have a roof over their heads and can return to their own homes as soon as possible; that businesses, schools, and other local services can reopen as soon as possible; and that the infrastructure is repaired and restored.

Each time this happens we are assured that the Government will learn the lessons, so I have a few questions for the Secretary of State. Why did the Government choose to ignore warnings from the Committee on Climate Change that they needed a strategy for the increasing number of homes at flood risk, and the warning from the Association of Drainage Authorities that the cuts had put homes and businesses at risk? What action did the Secretary of State take in October after Professor Colin Mellors warned that the authorities in Yorkshire would have to look at where to discontinue maintenance because of cuts? Flood-hit communities will also want to know why the national flood resilience review was not instigated earlier.

How is the public to have confidence in another Cabinet Committee chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin)? What happened to his last one, which was set up after the Somerset floods and then disappeared? Does the Secretary of State agree that it needs to be an independent review in order to have any credibility?

If flood protections are a priority, why did the coalition Government set out to cut flood spending by 10%, and why are this Government spending less this year than was spent in 2010, when, as Pitt warned, year-on-year real-terms increases are needed to keep up with the growing risk?

The Secretary of State has told us repeatedly about the £2.3 billion capital budget over six years. Is she satisfied that it takes into account the impact of previous capital cuts and cancelled schemes and that it is enough, given that the Government have underestimated the climate change risk? Will she finally address the revenue budget? We still have no firm commitment on maintenance spending beyond protecting an inadequate budget.

The Secretary of State is hoping to step over a £2.5 billion hole in the maintenance budget. Are the Government going to commit to investing the £800 million a year in the maintenance and strengthening of flood defences that the Environment Agency has said is required to protect our communities? Every £1 spent on flood prevention saves £8. The Secretary of State needs to remind the Chancellor of that.

I note that the Secretary of State did not mention the EU solidarity fund. I would be grateful if she could clarify why the Government have so far not applied to it.

I welcome the Secretary of State's mention of the natural environment, which must be central to any efforts to reduce flooding, but I have yet to be convinced that the Government are undertaking the "complete rethink" that the Environment Agency has said we need. I would be grateful if she could tell us more about how she will work with landowners and managers on those upstream measures that are so badly needed.

Rather than a sticking plaster response every time the floods hit, with vague promises and random numbers that are forgotten by spring, we need a long-term, co-ordinated approach. Our priority must be making sure that communities in flood-risk areas across the whole country do not endure another Christmas like this one, and that needs leadership from the Secretary of State now.

Elizabeth Truss: First, we have learned lessons from previous flooding incidents. That is why we were holding Cobra meetings throughout Christmas and deployed the Army immediately to support people on the ground, and made sure that people's homes and lives were protected and that 85% of all of the temporary flood assets were deployed in Yorkshire in Lancashire in the immediate rescue effort. That was extremely important.

We have also learned the lessons in terms of supporting communities and those people who have been out of their houses. I saw for myself the devastation. I saw the Christmas presents by the side of the street and the very difficult circumstances that people are in. That is why, within three days, we had money in the local authorities' bank accounts so that they could help those communities get back on their feet.

The hon. Lady talks about the long term. The fact is that under the Labour Government there was an annual budget process for flood defence spending. They spent £1.5 billion when they were in government between 2005 and 2010; we are spending £2 billion over the course of this Parliament. For the first time ever, we have set out a long-term programme of six years so that those communities can have the security they need. That is why we are already building new flood defences in Leeds and planting trees right across the country to help slow the flow. Those things require long-term decision making and adequate funding. The fact that this Government have a long-term economic plan means that we have been able to invest in our flood defences and that we are able to lay out the long-term programme.

The hon. Lady asked about maintenance spending. We are increasing it in real terms. The Chancellor announced that in the autumn statement. It is £171 million and it will go up in real terms.

We are also empowering local communities. We have set up the Somerset Rivers Authority, to which the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has given shadow precepting powers. We are also working on a Cumbrian floods partnership, to make sure that the local community is involved. We are taking a long-term approach to dealing with these problems, rather than engaging in short-term point scoring.

We have responded to the emergency very rapidly and learned the lessons of the past. People are able to get the funds to repair their homes and get back into them. That is what is important.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State, the floods Minister, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Prime Minister for visiting the Selby district following the dreadful floods and for offering help and support.

The Secretary of State saw for herself last week the aftermath of the partial collapse of Tadcaster bridge. I am delighted that she has reiterated that its replacement and repair are a national priority. I have been in regular contact with North Yorkshire highways department and North Yorkshire County Council, and I know that they have been considering all the options for a temporary solution across the Wharf. Will she join me in urging North Yorkshire highways to ensure that a solution is put in place as a matter of urgency and to ensure that it has the necessary funding to do that? It also needs the funding to start the repair of the collapsed bridge, which apparently may take up to year, without delay, so that the residents of east and west Tadcaster are reunited.

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work he has done to support his local community in Tadcaster. I visited local businesses with him. We saw the Army, which was there to help out, and a massive group of volunteers helping out. I know that people there are desperate to put the town together again so that people can cross over to the other part. That is an absolute priority for the Government. The floods envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), who is sitting on the Front Bench, is charged with coming up with a plan early next week to ensure that we get the bridge in place as soon as possible.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the emergency services, volunteers, local authorities and others who worked tirelessly over the holiday period to protect homes and help families left devastated by the floods. Scotland was hit extremely hard, but my SNP colleagues and I fully appreciate that devastation was caused right across the UK. Our sympathies are with everyone who has been affected.

The Scottish Government take flood prevention very seriously. However, as we have seen, exceptional rainfall still presents huge challenges. The reduced financial award made to Scotland by the Government has forced Ministers in Edinburgh to make difficult decisions. As a result of the cutbacks, the grant in aid provided to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has been reduced by 6%. However, Scottish Ministers have ensured that the flood forecasting service, which is undertaken by SEPA, has had its funding protected in its entirety. It is important to make it crystal clear that flood prevention is not a SEPA responsibility. North of the border, local authorities are responsible for it as part of their capital settlement. Councils have historically received strong support from the Scottish Government.

The Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2009 and a further 42 protection schemes are proposed between now and 2021. On top of that, an extra £4 million has been directed to support flood-hit householders, businesses and councils, including in my borders constituency. Of course, the Bellwin scheme has also been activated. All in all, that is a comprehensive response.

There certainly seems to be—*[Interruption.]* As the third party, we are entitled to make a statement. So far, we have heard no mention of Scotland. There certainly seems to be less scepticism about the actions of the public agencies in Scotland than in England. At the weekend, I received an email from my cousin Kirsty, who lives in Yorkshire. She told me that her community felt angry and powerless at what it saw as a completely ineffective response. Her message said:

“The Tory government have completely failed us. And I believe they will continue to fail us. If it’s not in London or the Home Counties, they don’t care.”

That is not the response felt in Scotland—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me try to help the hon. Gentleman by making two points. I am being very fair-minded about this. First, as he is representing the third party, he certainly does have—and rightly has—longer than Back Benchers. That has always been the case and will always be the case. I will protect his rights and those of his colleagues.

Secondly, although the hon. Gentleman probably used it as a figure of speech, he certainly does not have a right to make a statement. What he has a right to do, at slightly greater length than other colleagues, is to make some opening remarks by way of response to the Secretary of State, but those need to be followed speedily by a series of questions. All that needs to take no more than two minutes—*[Interruption.]* Order. He has taken considerably longer than that.

These are very sensitive matters and I have no desire to spoil the hon. Gentleman’s opportunity today, but he does need to get to his questions and briefly to get through them.

Calum Kerr: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that guidance. It is appreciated.

The scepticism that I have outlined is in sharp contrast to the response we have experienced in Scotland. Friends of the Earth Scotland is one organisation that agrees that flooding is a higher political priority north of the border.

Given the Scottish Government’s response, I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on Scotland’s experience and on our comprehensive approach to flood prevention to see whether there are lessons for her. Finally, will she assure my cousin Kirsty and communities like hers that the Government really do care?

Elizabeth Truss: As the House is aware, this is a devolved matter. We have worked closely with the Scottish authorities to share information and expertise while the floods are happening.

We are doing all we can to help the people of Yorkshire get back on their feet as soon as possible. That is why the financial support was made available within three days of the flooding taking place. I wonder what the record is in Scotland.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I pay tribute to the emergency services, the Army, the Environment Agency, York City Council and the huge number of volunteers for the speed with which they acted and worked together across York at a very difficult time for our city. However, other utilities were slightly slower to act. Telecommunications were down in York, which hindered communications right across the city. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that all utilities act speedily and with urgency?

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that he has done to raise the concerns of local residents. It was good to meet him at the Environment Agency's headquarters in York to talk about the situation. Telecommunications are critical. One issue has been that bridges, such as Tadcaster bridge and Elland bridge, carry critical communications infrastructure. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is part of the Cobra meetings and we have expedited getting those services back up and running.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): My constituency of Halifax and the neighbouring constituency of Calder Valley were devastated by the floods on Boxing day. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking the army of volunteers that came to Calderdale and played an instrumental role in the clean-up? Will she meet me and representatives of Calderdale Council to discuss the bridges and infrastructure projects that have just been mentioned, which will be essential in getting Calderdale back up and running?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Calder Valley was very badly affected. We have schemes in the pipeline for Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge. I will ensure that those are sufficient as part of the review we are conducting. The Secretary of State for Transport is conducting a review of all the affected infrastructure to make sure we get back on track. The hon. Lady can rest assured that Elland is definitely on our list.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd, Elland and Brighouse are five of the six Calder Valley communities that were not just hit by floods but, in some cases, decimated by them—and this just three and a half years after the last floods. More than 2,000 homes have been hit. Despite the pain and misery, will the Secretary of State join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) in paying a huge tribute not just to dozens of volunteers, but to the hundreds and hundreds of volunteers who came from all over the UK? May I, in the light of the current undertones of Islamophobia in our country, pay an incredibly special tribute to the small armies of young Asian men and women—Muslim, Sikh and Hindu—who came with mops, buckets, food, vans, lifting materials and all sorts, and played a huge part in the recovery?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—we talked on Boxing day because the Calder valley was such a hard-hit area, and ensuring that the right support was in place for those communities was vital. He is right to highlight the community spirit that we saw across Yorkshire and the Calder valley; and people came out around the country. That was tremendous, and I praise them for all their work.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank public sector workers and the incredible volunteers for the outstanding support that they gave residents and businesses in York over Christmas. Successive reports over many years by the Environment Agency and the city council have highlighted the risk that the Foss barrier in York would not be able to manage the capacity of water in the River Foss at times such as this. Given that that concern has been consistently highlighted for years, why were the barrier pumps not upgraded, as that could have saved hundreds of homes and businesses from flooding?

Elizabeth Truss: I was also pleased to meet the hon. Lady at the Environment Agency's offices in York. The Foss barrier was under review at the time the incident happened, and

the Prime Minister has said that he will spend £10 million of Government money on upgrading that barrier to ensure that it has sufficient pumping capacity to deal with the additional volumes. In all rivers across Yorkshire and Lancashire we are facing higher river flows than we have ever seen before, and we must consider our defences in light of that. We have made an initial commitment to upgrade the pumps at the Foss barrier, and we will certainly look more widely to ensure that we are sufficiently resilient to deal with these new weather challenges.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. May I ask my right hon. Friend in the review that she is carrying out to ignore one piece of work and to read two other pieces? In the previous Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee published a report that more or less trashed the Pitt review, which is a really good piece of work. May I first suggest that she builds into her review, "Droughts and Floods: Towards a More Holistic Approach" by the UK Water Partnership? Secondly, Dieter Helm, whom she just referred to, has produced a paper that arrived in my inbox today called, "Flood defence: time for a radical rethink". His words about natural capital and the need to consider whole catchments is fundamental to understanding the weather patterns that we now have to cope with.

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work as floods Minister. He is right, and the same paper from Dieter Helm arrived in my inbox today—I have read it and I think it makes some excellent suggestions. We have appointed Dieter as chair of the Natural Capital Committee for another term so that he can look at catchment-specific solutions. That is a very important part of how we become more resilient as a country.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): In 2011, the £180 million flood defence scheme that was planned for Leeds which would have protected businesses in Kirkstall was cut by the Secretary of State's predecessor. The new scheme planned for Leeds, which will be completed by 2017, will protect only the city from a once-in-75-years event, and will do nothing for businesses on the Kirkstall Road. Will she look again at that resilience review, and ensure that the £60 million scheme for the Kirkstall Road is included?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I point out that the Labour party's proposal going into the 2010 election was to halve the amount that it would spend on capital spending. We increased spending on flood defence from £1.5 billion to £1.7 billion in that period. I have already said that I will look at the Leeds scheme to ensure that it is sufficiently resilient for the new conditions that we are facing, and I am happy to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues to discuss that further.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I declare an interest, because I live 15 feet from the River Aire, and I spent Boxing day onwards sandbagged in my house, as did many of my neighbours. I thank the Secretary of State for her telephone call and her concern for my constituency. As the most flood-prone area of Britain, we have been hit repeatedly, although this time we were a little better off. Will my right hon. Friend give me two assurances? First, will she assure me that in any review, the flood defence funding that has been announced for the Humber estuary and tidal tributaries will remain in place and not be affected? Secondly, can we consider the whole policy of the EA, which seems to be about moving water as quickly as possible from the upper catchment down to people in the lower catchment in my area? We are already below sea level—water has to be pumped daily, and we need to be defended by banks that are 10 feet or higher.

Elizabeth Truss: I was happy to speak to my hon. Friend and ensure that he had sufficient sandbags in his area. I agree that we need to consider catchment management, and that is what the Natural Capital Committee will be doing. We have already seen successful pilots

such as the Slowing the Flow project in Pickering in Yorkshire, which was effective. We must ensure that we are putting such measures in the right places, which requires whole catchment management and analysis. That takes time, but I agree that it is an important piece of work that we must get on with.

Mr Speaker: It is a pleasure to welcome back the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves).

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Thank you for that welcome, Mr Speaker.

The flood envoy for Yorkshire suggested in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* today that the scheme that would have protected Kirkstall will be reinstated, but that is not my understanding. Will the Secretary of State indicate whether that scheme will be resurrected? If it had been in place, businesses on the Kirkstall Road would not have been devastated by the floods on Boxing day. We can never allow that tragedy to happen again—what will the Minister do?

Elizabeth Truss: As I mentioned in my statement, levels of water on the River Aire were a metre higher than they have ever been—we have seen simply unprecedented river levels. In light of that, the Government will be reviewing the Leeds scheme to ensure that it is sufficient to protect businesses and communities in Leeds.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): On Boxing day my constituency suffered widespread flooding, with the village of Croston the worst affected. I pay tribute to all the emergency services, the Environment Agency and the Lower Yarrow Flood Action Group which pulled together an amazing effort to protect Croston. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there will be a review of river and watercourse maintenance across Lancashire, including in the constituency of my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), and that dredging of rivers—where appropriate—will be part of that review?

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in ensuring that we had all the right information on the ground in Croston, and we had support from the RAF and the Environment Agency to keep the village protected. We are looking at the issue that she raises specifically in Cumbria, and I am sure that the floods Minister would be happy to meet her to talk about how we could extend those efforts to Lancashire.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Environment Secretary is aware that, of the 1,086 projects in the environment development programme, almost 519 are waiting for approval subject to securing other funding contributions. At the moment, the funding contributions that are lacking amount to £350 million, yet the projects are supposed to start in two months' time. How will the Government ensure that those works go ahead?

Elizabeth Truss: One of the successes of our flood defence programme is that we have been able to secure additional money through partnership funding. From 2005 to 2010, we saw £30 million of funding under the Labour Government, whereas under the previous Conservative Government there was £134 million of funding, and this Government have already secured £250 million. We have plans in place to secure additional funding.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ask the national flood resilience review to look at where we build houses? Increasingly, we are building them on floodplains and in areas local people know will flood. We are building up a bigger and bigger problem for the future. Will she ask the review to co-ordinate with the Department for Communities and Local Government on where to build houses in the future?

Elizabeth Truss: The Communities Secretary is here and I am sure he will take those points on board. The national planning policy framework makes it very clear that inappropriate development on floodplains should be avoided, but ultimately this is a decision for local people to make, as is the case throughout the planning system.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance copy of her statement, and for her activities and efforts, and those of her Ministers, over the Christmas period. They have not gone unnoticed. In paying tribute to the emergency services and voluntary outfits across the country, in particular mountain rescue services, we in Cumbria stand in solidarity and sympathy with all those in Yorkshire, Scotland and Lancashire who have suffered the brunt of this flooding.

It is a month today since Storm Desmond hit Cumbria, and there are many unresolved issues on which I wish to press the Secretary of State. The A591 north of Grasmere to Keswick remains closed, destroyed and impassable. Will she make this a national strategic priority and ensure that it is reopened as quickly as is humanly possible? The cost to Cumbria of infrastructure loss will be £500 million. Will the Government commit to fund every penny of that to make sure we get back on our feet? Will she commit to whole-system flood prevention measures, including the restoration of the River Kent flood defence scheme, which is currently shelved?

Elizabeth Truss: The A591 is a national priority. Highways England is working on that to restore it as soon as possible. That is extremely important. The Transport Secretary is here today, so I am sure he has taken that on board. Similarly, we will be looking at the funding of other infrastructure. The wider solutions are a priority for the Government, and the Natural Capital Committee is looking specifically at that. We are now developing our plans for the environment on a river basin and catchment basis. That is the way we look at

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the environment. We are not looking at it in silos of flooding, biodiversity or farming; we are looking at it altogether, as a single plan.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Fortunately, my constituency was not affected on this occasion, but my right hon. Friend will recall the tidal surge that caused major problems to residents and businesses, particularly in the strategically important port of Immingham. She mentioned allocations for the Humber. Will she give an absolute assurance that that will not slip? When does she think she will be in a position to give more detail on it?

Elizabeth Truss: In response to my hon. Friend's question, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), that scheme is very much on track and we are absolutely committed to it.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): The focus, understandably, has to be on how to make good the damage to lives and livelihoods. However, the Secretary of State mentioned Dieter Helm and his work. He said today:

“The most important single step to be taken now is an explicit recognition that the status quo is not only unsustainable, but is never likely to be sustainable. The worst reaction”—to the current floods crisis—“would be more of the same.”

Will she take on board the lessons that Dieter is suggesting, including the need to look at rivers as national infrastructure and to have genuine water catchment management,

including land use modifications where appropriate? How deep will she go in her thinking about a radical review of the approach to flooding?

Elizabeth Truss: Dieter's appointment was made mid-December, so we are currently working on the committee's terms of reference for the next five years. Combining this with our 25-year plan for the environment, and making sure we are looking at things on the basis of river basins and water catchment, is a great priority. We need to spend Government money more effectively. We need to understand better the interactions between our environmental measures, flood risk and flood management. That is very important. This is not something that can be achieved overnight. It takes thinking over a number of years. Planting trees and putting in upstream measures takes time. Building up flood defences takes time. That is why it is also important that we have a very strong emergency response effort. We are thinking about those things for the long term, which is why we set out, for the first time ever, a six-year plan for flood defences. It is why we are working on a 25-year environment plan, so that that is in place for the future.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to all those who worked so hard to help the victims, particularly in reopening the roads and rail routes to Leeds which many of my constituents use. I am sure all Leeds colleagues would like to take the Secretary of State up on her offer to meet to discuss the Leeds scheme. In the meantime, the council has said that it could do with using the emergency funds to revise phases 2 and 3 of the Leeds scheme. Can she can confirm whether that would be possible?

Elizabeth Truss: I would need to look into that, but I am extremely happy to include my hon. Friend in a meeting of Leeds MPs.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I am very grateful to the emergency services, the Army and Wakefield Council for turning out at all hours in Castleford, Ferrybridge and Kirkthorpe when floodwaters threatened. Will the Secretary of State confirm that her review will cover the entire Aire valley, including Leeds and Castleford? Does she now accept that her Government were wrong to cancel parts of the Leeds floods defence scheme? We would not tolerate, rightly, inadequate defences in our capital city. We should not tolerate inadequate defences in our northern cities and towns as well.

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with the right hon. Lady. Protecting cities such as Leeds is absolutely vital, which is why I have committed to looking at the current scheme and making sure it is adequate given the new levels of rainfall and rivers. It is important to note that in Yorkshire and the north and east region we will be investing £54 a head over the next six years, compared with £42 a head in the south-east region. We are investing more in the north and east of England. In fact, many schemes are happening in Yorkshire: the Humber has been mentioned, but there is also the scheme in Leeds.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I, too, would like to pay tribute to the countless number of people who gave up their Christmases, in an amazing display of selfless humanity, to help during the floods and with the mop-up that is still, of course, continuing. When the Secretary of State came to the Ribble valley with the chief executive of the Environment Agency, she not only saw the devastation but many people who do not have the luxury of choice between paying eye-watering levels for insurance premiums with massive excesses or going on holiday. The fact is that if they are on low incomes they either spend the money on living or on premiums for flood insurance if they can get it. I ask her to look at this again. We know that the new insurance scheme is coming in April, but that does not help the people who are hurting now. Can she give an assurance that she will look at the

levels for people who were not insured during these floods and that extra financial support will be given to them where necessary?

Elizabeth Truss: I was struck by what my hon. Friend showed me in the village and how people had been affected. The river had diverted and was a torrent going down the street. We saw people's homes and possessions decimated. It is truly shocking and we will do all we can to help those people get back on their feet and into their homes. We have provided funding to the local authority and they can apply for it. We have pre-funded it, so it is now a much simpler scheme. Rather than people having to get receipts, they can apply directly to the council for the funding.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am glad to hear the Secretary of State's support for catchment-wide approaches and more natural flood management schemes based on the restoration of landscape and so on. She mentioned the Pickering scheme, but I would also highlight the Sussex flow initiative. Those schemes work but often struggle to get funding, so will she tell us how much money she will commit to natural flood management schemes over the lifetime of this Parliament, and will it be in addition to the £2.3 billion already committed?

Elizabeth Truss: DEFRA spends money on a variety of objectives, including on improving the environment, countryside stewardship by farmers and flood defences. My view is that we can get better value for money by improving the environment and our resilience to flooding. For me, this is about spending our money better and planning for the future better.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the Yorkshire area—she did not come to my constituency but she was next door. In Collingham, the Avenue was flooded when water came over the flood defences—I thank Leeds City Council for its work in trying to sort out those flood defences. In the south of my constituency, in Methley and Mickletown, the EA's plan to hold water in the farmers' fields worked, but the water was lapping at the doorsteps of many houses in Mickletown. May I urge her to be careful about schemes in Leeds that are designed to go only as far as Woodlesford, further upstream? That extra water would have taken out dozens of homes in my constituency that, as it was, survived the flooding. Will the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), visit my constituency as soon as possible to see the devastating effect that schemes further upriver in Leeds could have in Mickletown and Methley?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend highlights the need for proper catchment-wide management. As well as meeting my hon. Friend the flooding envoy, I suggest that a meeting with the EA would also be helpful.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I pay tribute to all those who gave up their time, put their lives at risk and worked hard to save people, but I was frustrated at the sight of people being hauled into small inflatable dinghies simply because the professionals we rely on did not have the necessary kit. There are vehicles that can drive down flooded streets rescuing people not one or two at a time but 15 or 20 at a time. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and representatives of the professional heavy vehicle recovery industry, which has and can deploy that kit, to make it available?

Elizabeth Truss: It is important that we deploy the best kit, and a big effort was made on Christmas day to deploy that kit in Lancashire and Yorkshire to protect people. We rely on

those in charge of operations, the local gold command, to decide how to deploy kit, but the floods Minister will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss how we might do things better in the future.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State, the floods Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), for their magnificent support during the floods that decimated my constituency and their rapid response to requests for assistance, including for getting the Army in to help. What additional support can be given to the many businesses and homes trying to get back on their feet after the floods, particularly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said, those struggling with insurance claims, and how much will be provided for Shipley to help build the flood defences back up? Also, will she join me in paying tribute to the magnificent army of volunteers, particularly the Bingley support flood group and the Shipley Baildon support group, based in the scout hut and the Salvation Army premises respectively, who gave up much of their Christmas to help other people, and also their employers who allowed them time off work to help in those communities?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in making sure that his local community had all the support it needed, and the fantastic volunteers who worked tirelessly throughout the Christmas period—a difficult time of year—and who gave up their time and their homes, and provided food and lodging for other people. I am happy to have further discussions with him about what needs to be done to make sure that the defences in his area are adequate.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Many families, businesses and communities on Deeside in my constituency have been severely affected by flooding caused by Storm Frank. Homes have been evacuated and roads washed away. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Scottish Government and local authorities in Scotland about an application to the EU solidarity fund to make more money available to assist flood victims in Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: We have been working closely with Scottish authorities during this incident, and we will certainly look at the solidarity fund, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, but we must bear it in mind that it would take seven months to receive any funding. We have put in place funding direct to the local authorities that residents and businesses can now claim—up to £5,000 to get a home or business back on its feet. I care about getting that support to those homes and businesses as soon as possible. That is the Government's priority.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I would like to provide a bit of optimism for our poor flood victims up north. From my own checks over the recess and a report fed in by my mole—perhaps I should say “water vole”—on the Somerset levels today, I can report that the Government's protection and prevention programme put in place following the devastating floods in Somerset in 2013-14 is working. The dredging is proving effective—we have had masses of rain yet the river levels fell by 2 feet last night—as is the pumping being done by the Environment Agency. May I have an assurance that the Government will continue to support this protection and prevention work, including the important catchment-wide environmental work, so that we do not regress again?

Elizabeth Truss: The Somerset Rivers Authority is now established and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has agreed a shadow precept. It is now for local people to decide where and when to dredge and how to maintain their watercourses. I want to see more of that across the country. We are developing the

Cumbrian floods partnership so that local people can make decisions about what is best for their area.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The A590 in Lindal in Furness came close to flooding again during the Christmas storms. Will the Secretary of State beseech the Transport Secretary, who is sat just to her left, urgently to improve the anti-flooding measures on that stretch of this crucial trunk road, which connects my constituency with the M6? If, as we understand it, a particular landowner is holding out, as a result of which a compulsory purchase might be necessary, will she beseech the Transport Secretary to step in and sort it out as soon as possible?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is very happy to look at the matter.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Planning plays a crucial role in flood prevention. Will the Secretary of State join me in pleading with Kirklees Council, which is currently consulting on its local plan, to think seriously about the implications for flood prevention further down the valleys in the Holme Valley and the Colne Valley, before it rubberstamps allocating greenfield sites such as Scholes, Cinderhills, Netherton and Slaithwaite for housebuilding,?

Elizabeth Truss: The Environment Agency is a statutory consultee, and, as I mentioned earlier, the NPPF makes it clear that inappropriate development on flood plains should be avoided, but ultimately it is a matter for the local authority.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In October 2015, the Secretary of State turned down the £1.2 billion Humber tidal defence scheme. In the light of what has happened and the torrential rain, will she review that decision? Members from all areas of the Humber recognised that the area needed that scheme.

Elizabeth Truss: We are investing £80 million in defences for the Humber. I know there are further ongoing discussions with local MPs. We have to ensure that through our £2.3 billion budget we are fair to people across the country. There is a formula for making determinations, and one thing we shall look at in the national resilience review is how that formula works and how funding is allocated. Until then, we have to make sure that we are fair using the existing formula.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I express my thanks to the Government and Ministers for their collective response to the floods. It was prompt, and I firmly believe it has been constructive and helpful to the people of Carlisle and Cumbria. However, will the Secretary of State give my constituents an assurance that not next week, not next month, but in six or 12 months' time, she will ensure that the Government are still offering support and help that flooded communities and businesses might still need?

Elizabeth Truss: Of course it is vital that we help not just the present recovery efforts to get people back into their homes and provide support, but we must also restore the infrastructure and great places such as the Lake District national park while providing the economic support required for the future.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The largest river system in the UK is in my constituency, and the biggest flow of water experienced by any community goes through the heart of the city of Perth. Today, large swathes of my constituency are under water, and there was a real fear last night that the flood defences in Perth might fail, which would have been utterly disastrous for my constituents, given the flow of water that comes down the Tay.

Even if we had the most robust flood defences in the world it would do nothing if we do not tackle climate change. I know that flood defences are a devolved matter, but the Secretary of State could do something for us today if she stopped the disastrous decision to withdraw subsidy and support for onshore wind. That would enable us to invest in the technologies of the future, which might protect us in the future.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change helped to secure an historic deal in Paris in December precisely to address that issue.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend considered asking the Army, and particularly the Royal Engineers, to intervene, given that their skills—the sappers' skills—with bridging rivers is legendary, and they could easily and quickly replace the lost bridges?

Elizabeth Truss: The Royal Engineers are involved, and they have been involved in both Cumbria and Yorkshire, looking at finding possible solutions for those bridges.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): In her statement, the Secretary of State referred to the national flood resilience review that she has commissioned to ensure that the country can deal with increasingly extreme weather events. However, she did not respond to a request from the shadow Secretary of State to ensure that such a review should be independent. I ask her to respond to that request now because we need to underpin the integrity of this very important review by making sure that it is indeed independent and robust in its recommendations.

Elizabeth Truss: What we are doing through this review is involving key bodies such as the Adaptation Sub-Committee and the Natural Capital Committee and ensuring that all the findings are open and transparent. One of the key aspects of the review is looking at how Government systems work effectively, and we need to share such information more widely with the public. That does not require an independent review; it requires openness and transparency, to which I am committed.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): My constituency contains the wonderful and lovely River Wye and River Teme. They flow from the uplands of my Brecon and Radnorshire constituency across Offa's dyke into Shropshire and Herefordshire, from which they usually flood. Thank goodness, they did not do so on this occasion. What discussions is my right hon. Friend having with the devolved Administrations about upland management and capture management?

Elizabeth Truss: The Welsh authorities have been very much involved in our flood response, as Wales has been affected. I will of course seek to engage my hon. Friend in that wider issue.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Government are providing funding for businesses that have suffered from the recent flooding. While I welcome that, local traders in Cockermouth have told me that it cannot be used toward resilience measures, which can come only out of capital expenditure. What businesses need now is help with those resilience measures to make sure that the next flood—there will be one—will be survivable. Many insurance companies will not fund the extra costs of resilience measures. At a time when affected small businesses in my constituency are haemorrhaging cash, what support can the Secretary of State offer in this respect? Following her earlier offer to Lancashire MPs, will she meet cross-party Cumbrian MPs to discuss these matters as well?

Elizabeth Truss: The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), visited Cockermouth. My understanding is that businesses can apply through the local enterprise partnership to get investment in those resilience measures, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be happy to take that forward.

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): About 20% of South Derbyshire is in flood plains, so my constituents are aware and well attuned to when a crisis might hit us. Will my right hon. Friend conduct a review of how the Environment Agency has put out information and how it has been updated because some of my constituents do not feel that it has been timely enough?

Elizabeth Truss: I shall take up that point with the Environment Agency, whose website has had a lot of hits. Up-to-date information has been out there on river levels, but we are always looking at ways to improve that. The Environment Agency has a new chief executive, Sir James Bevan, who is keen to hear from MPs with suggestions for improvement. I will certainly feed through to him my hon. Friend's point.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to volunteers and all those people in the emergency services who helped out not just in northern England, but in Scotland and Wales as well. I also want to draw attention to the A55, a dual carriageway in north Wales, which is of great UK and European importance because it links the economies of Ireland and Wales to the UK and wider European markets. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she will put pressure on the Labour First Minister in Wales to guarantee sufficient funding and a starting date for essential works to ensure that the A55 route is kept flood free at Talybont from now on?

Elizabeth Truss: I think that that is a matter for the Welsh Government.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): My constituents in Louth and Horncastle know only too well the devastation caused by flooding and will want me to express our sympathy for all those affected by flooding over Christmas. The beach replenishment scheme called Lincshore helps to protect the Lincolnshire coastline from the threat of tidal surges from the North sea, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned. Since 2010, the Government have invested millions in flood defences across my constituency, but these must, of course, be maintained. Will the Secretary of State meet me, other Lincolnshire colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), and council leaders as a matter of urgency to discuss the Lincshore scheme so that we can continue to protect Lincolnshire residents in the years ahead?

Elizabeth Truss: We have protected flood maintenance spending in real terms from the current level of £171 million. I am a great supporter of internal drainage boards and making sure that they are sufficiently empowered to do work. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who has responsibility for floods, will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue further.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that the Government make the reopening before Easter of the A591 a national priority? On the £500 million or £600 million that the county of Cumbria needs to repair the damage caused by flooding, will the right hon. Lady ensure that it is linked to the outstanding devolution settlement of Cumbrian local government?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I have said, the A591 is a national priority. For the first time ever we have Highways England working on it to ensure that that happens as soon as possible.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Although I am absolutely certain that most members of the Environment Agency did work very hard over the Christmas period, does the Secretary of State agree that institutionally the agency is often found lacking when it comes to flood prevention? It seems to lack dynamism, a cohesive approach and the determination to follow through with schemes, which the agency itself often identifies and which local people identify. In Tewkesbury we are well aware of the problems associated with flooding. I have to say that in my area there is a frustration about the operation of the Environment Agency.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I said, I was in Yorkshire on Boxing day. What I saw on the ground was some fantastic staff from the Environment Agency working around the clock to protect lives and save people. That is vital. Of course, any organisation needs to learn and get better at doing things. We have a new chief executive, Sir James Bevan, who was with me in Yorkshire on Boxing day. He is clear that he wants to put people in homes and that that is the agency's No.1 priority. He is going to ensure that any issues raised by MPs are taken seriously and addressed.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The River Calder runs through the very north of my constituency. I went into the Ribble valley to see the devastation caused in Whalley. It truly was a tragedy. In the south of my constituency, the River Irwell burst its banks dramatically, having burst its banks in 2012, and nothing has been done about it. I went to Irwell village on the periphery of my constituency, where nearly all 100 houses have been flooded under five or six feet of water. In there, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) has said, are people who cannot get insurance—it is £3,000 to £6,000 for insurance, and the excess on the insurance is £20,000 to £30,000. What will the Government do to ensure that those people can access help? What are they going to do about Irwell village, which has been so devastated by this? It has now been devastated twice. What will the Secretary of State do about it?

Elizabeth Truss: First, we are making funds available to the local council so that residents can apply for up to £5,000 to put their house back in order. We are also working with the insurance industry to ensure that it is treating these cases sympathetically.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is of course right that we protect homes above farmland, but can I ask the Secretary of State that we consider that the value of that farmland is often what powers local economies and that we try to get that balance as adequate as possible to ensure we protect both the economy and houses?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Under our six-year plan, we will be protecting more farmland. In fact, between 2010 and 2021, we will be protecting an additional million acres of farmland.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Between 2011 and 2015, Lancashire fire and rescue service saw a reduction of 241 firefighters. Will the Secretary of State commit to creating a statutory duty, and with it the relevant investment, to enable our firefighters to tackle flooding in future?

Elizabeth Truss: I pay tribute to the fantastic work of the fire service and all the emergency services, the Environment Agency and the Army for what they did on the ground. We

deployed those personnel as early as possible. We deployed the assets and I think they did a fantastic job in responding to the flooding.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): In the last 12 months, the UK has paid £35.6 million into the EU solidarity fund, the second biggest contribution. We have only ever made one claim on the fund, in 2007, following flooding, and we were paid out £130 million. May I urge the Secretary of State to push an application for funding from the fund? If we are not going to do that, can she explain why we pay into the fund?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Our priority has been getting money to the affected communities as soon as possible. That was paid into the bank accounts of local councils within three days. I have said that we will look at the EU solidarity fund, but the reality is that it would take seven months for that money to come through and our priority has been responding to the immediate situation we face and ensuring that people get the support they need.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Following the floods in 2007, the Government commissioned the “Land Use Futures” report, which laid out exactly what has happened this week. The people who produced that report said at the weekend that the Government ignored the report. They should go back, read the report and listen to the evidence. Will the Secretary of State do that and respond properly to the request made earlier by a colleague to look at the Pitt review, which said that the fire and rescue service should have a statutory duty to be the first response? Will she please answer those questions properly?

Elizabeth Truss: We did respond to all the recommendations of the Pitt review, apart from those relating to bodies that no longer existed. The reality is that we saw a fantastic response on the ground from the fire service. The issue is: how do we protect our communities, given that we are seeing more extreme weather? That is the issue we are dealing with here.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Residents and businesses in Ramsbottom, Summerseat and Redvales in my constituency were all hit by last week’s floods. On their behalf, may I thank all those— the emergency services, staff from Bury Council and Six Town Housing and particularly the small army of volunteers from the local community—who have helped, and indeed continue to help, with the clean-up operation. Understandably, my constituents are worried that they could be hit by flooding again, so can my right hon. Friend reassure them that, when the review of flooding risk is completed, whatever is necessary to protect them in future is actually done?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The resilience review will look at a number of issues: first, the flood defence formula and how the allocation is made; and, secondly, how we respond and predict these extreme weather events. The reality is that we will do all we can to minimise flood risk but we cannot eliminate it altogether and that is why we need to build resilience, too.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Manchester City Council and Salford City Council responded to the flooding of the Rivers Irwell and Irk and the businesses affected by that. Those businesses need not only finance but business support and information. Salford City Council, with the councils for Broughton, and charities such as Helping Hands, responded to the River Irwell overflowing in Broughton, causing damage to up to 800 properties. Can the Secretary of State assure those councils and the House that the funding that is being made available will go beyond the Bellwin formula and allow money to be given to the charities that have spent their money and the local authorities that are already financially hard-pressed?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Minister responsible in the Department for Communities and Local Government will look at that specific issue.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, Worcester is familiar with flooding; she has visited our flood defences. I welcome the additional investment that she has supported in our area. I particularly welcome the national flood resilience review and the inclusion of transport resilience within it. In Worcester we are seeing the raising of new defences to try to improve the resilience of the city this year. Can she ensure that the Department for Transport is linked in with that review so that it can take into account the value of capital bids such as the case for dualling the Carrington bridge in Worcester for improving flood resilience?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Transport Secretary is very much linked in to that review. There are all kinds of critical infrastructure that we need to ensure are covered. One of the issues that has been raised today is telecommunications infrastructure. That is also vital and will be covered by the review.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My constituency over the last 10 years has suffered three one-in-100-year floods, but the story has got much better with the progress of the community-inspired initiative called the Connswater Community Greenway. I encourage the Secretary of State to look at that not just because it has increased protection but because it has galvanised communities. The community recognises that Government neither control the rain nor can do everything. More importantly, they have levered significant resource from outside Government to provide the level of protection from flooding that we need. I encourage her to visit and other Members to learn those lessons, too.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of involving local communities, and I should be very interested in looking at that scheme myself. Similar schemes are being delivered in areas such as Pickering, and by the Cumbrian Floods Partnership and the Somerset Rivers Authority. I think that we should give local communities more power over decisions and involve them more in building up resilience, as well as paying attention to our national risk.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Throughout Pendle, most rivers rose to record levels. The town of Ireby, on the Lancashire-Yorkshire border, was worst hit. A number of homes and businesses were flooded, and I shall be holding a special advice surgery with councils this weekend to meet affected residents and business owners. Although a number of parts of Pendle have benefited from flood defences in the recent past, Ireby suffered once again. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss what more can be done to help the town?

Elizabeth Truss: Either the Floods Minister or I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): I want to record my thanks to the magnificent team of community volunteers led by Steve Houghton-Burnett, to Bury council, to local Labour councillors and to the emergency services, all of whom provided tremendous support for flood victims in Radcliffe, in my constituency.

Can the Secretary of State explain how a Government who talk about a northern powerhouse can allow disproportionate cuts in flood defence budgets, and shocking complacency, to threaten the security of thousands of residents and business people across the north of England? When will they release the outstanding £40 million that was promised to councils?

As for what the Secretary of State has said about the European solidarity fund, I fear that Ministers are putting Tory party internal EU debates ahead of the national interest. Will she answer the question that has been asked about that?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is simply not right about the spending division between north and south. Let me give the House the figures again. In our six-year programme, we are spending £54 per head on the north-east region, which covers areas such as Lancashire, Yorkshire and Cumbria, and £42 per head in the southern region, which covers areas such as London and the home counties. The hon. Gentleman is simply wrong.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It was heartbreaking to see homes, businesses and farms along the Aire and Wharfe valley flooded, especially at Christmas time. I praise the responses from the emergency services and council workers, but, in particular, the magnificent response from the local volunteers who came out to help, and who have raised money as well. I hope that the Government will match all those funds. However, may I ask the Secretary of State to admit that it was a false economy to cancel the £250 million Leeds flood defence scheme? Will she now consider allowing the full amount to be spent, and will she also discuss with me the possibility of flood defences for Otley and Lower Wharfedale?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree that we should pay tribute to the fantastic work done by volunteers throughout Yorkshire and Lancashire at a very difficult time. Many of them had given up their Christmas.

As I have said, we will of course look at the Leeds scheme. We need to do so, given that water levels in the Aire have been a metre higher than they have ever been before. I should be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues in Leeds to discuss the issue.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): As the Secretary of State probably knows, my constituency is being flooded as we speak, the River Wear having burst its banks earlier today. Durham faces real challenges, because the huge cuts imposed on the local authority make it difficult to respond to flooding and the problems that emerge from it, such as a lack of appropriate dredging of the river and building on the flood plain. How will the Secretary of State tackle those issues?

Elizabeth Truss: An official Cobra call is taking place at the moment to ensure that the people of Durham have every resource that can be provided for them.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me in sending condolences to the family of the late Ivan Vaughan, who was swept away by the floods in my constituency and killed as a result.

The £5,000 that has been paid to homes and businesses in England seems great when compared with the £1,000 in Northern Ireland. Will Northern Ireland benefit from the significant amounts that have been paid by the Government as a result of Barnett consequential?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a devolved matter on which local government must decide.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): During the floods I have visited Heywood fire station, which is one of only two stations in Greater Manchester with water rescue units, and which has done sterling work in rescuing people from the floods. However, not only does it face significant further cuts, but, as was pointed out earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), it does not even have a statutory duty to

attend incidents of this type. Does the Secretary of State agree that we now need a serious debate about future co-ordination of flood responses, and about long-term funding for our fire and rescue services?

Elizabeth Truss: We saw a very effective emergency response from the fire service and other emergency services, the Environment Agency and the Army, all working together. That lesson has been learnt from previous flooding incidents, as we have brought in all those services as soon as possible to ensure that we protect lives and property.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My constituency was badly affected by the floods over Christmas and new year, as indeed was the whole of north Wales. There was an impact on roads, rail and homes. The Welsh Government have given extra resources, which is very welcome, but I want to press the Secretary of State on the issue of the European solidarity fund. If she is not willing to apply for it, devolved Administrations are willing to do so, and to use that money. Three years ago, the Prime Minister said that it took a long time to make an application. If he had applied then, the money could have been put to better use in the United Kingdom.

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said to other Members, we will consider applying for the fund, but it does take a long time to come through. My priority is ensuring that businesses and residents have the support that they need now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland did not experience as much flooding as Cumbria, Yorkshire, Lancashire and parts of Scotland, but if such high water levels had been experienced throughout Northern Ireland, we would have been in deep trouble. What plans have been made, and what discussions have taken place, about assisting the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Minister in times of extreme emergency when the available resources are not enough to cope with flooding levels?

Elizabeth Truss: The Floods Minister will be happy to discuss that further.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): A number of homes and businesses in my constituency were affected by floods over the Christmas period. Will the Secretary of State tell us how much of the £600 million of emergency flood money that the Government have announced and which is from sources outside Government is still outstanding? Will she also tell us whether the £5,000 that is available to people who have been affected by floods will apply to those without insurance, and what will happen when their losses are more than £5,000?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, the £5,000 does apply to people who do not have insurance. The money is being given directly to local authorities to administer, so affected residents should get in touch with their local councils.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The River Tame in the Dukinfield part of my constituency breached the retaining wall, flooding a small part of the town where it is channelled through that part of Tameside. The flooding would have been much worse had it not been for the extensive flood plains around Denton and Reddish Vale in the lower Tame valley, which took the excess water. My concern, and the concern of my constituents, is that the Greater Manchester green belt is up for review next year, and developers are already seeking to have plots of land on those very same flood plains removed from the green belt for development. The Secretary of State has told the House what is in the national planning policy framework. Will she now tell us clearly that she does not expect those flood plains to be taken out of the green belt?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It really is a question for the Communities Secretary and the local authority in question.