

## **APPG for Wetlands - Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting**

**Held virtually on Wednesday, 2 February 2022 at 4pm**

### **Attendees (MPs and Peers)**

Siobhan Baillie MP (Chair)  
Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (Officer)  
Jessica Morden MP (Officer)  
Baroness Brown of Cambridge  
The Earl of Devon  
Andrew Griffith MP  
Sharon Hodgson MP  
Jim Shannon MP  
Alex Sobel MP  
Dr Ben Spencer MP

**Apologies for Absence:** Lord Cameron of Dillington and Lord Randall of Uxbridge

### **Opening remarks from the Chair**

- Noted that Jessica Morden MP was agreed as a new member of the APPG.
- Explained that there were speakers on natural flood management (NFM), flood risk and more resilient landscapes and communities.
- Speakers were: Julie Folie, Director, FCERM (Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management) Strategy & National Adaptation at the Environment Agency; and Professor David Gowing, Director of the Floodplain Meadows Partnership and Professor of Botany, School of Environment, Earth & Ecosystem Sciences at The Open University.
- Wished everyone a Happy World Wetlands Day.

### **Election of Jessica Morden MP as Officer**

Jessica Morden MP was unanimously elected as an additional Officer of the APPG.

### **Presentations from outside speakers**

*Please see presentation slides for further information*

#### **Professor David Gowing, Director of the Floodplain Meadows Partnership and Professor of Botany, School of Environment, Earth & Ecosystem Sciences at The Open University.**

Explained how natural processes could reduce the risk of flooding by use of floodplain meadows (5% of land surface in Britain), together with the wider benefits and ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration (200 tonnes per hectare) – alluvial plain systems hold more carbon than shallow peat. Water meadows increase biodiversity (provide home to more than 50% of the UK's plant species) and provide amenity recreation value for local communities. Plus water regulation, nutrient management (captures phosphorous), capturing of sediment on the surface and landscape aesthetics. Together with opportunities for cropping to feed livestock with hay selling for £5 per hectare. Explained the significance of a well-developed soil holding 50,000 tonnes of water per hectare or 2m of water during flood events.

#### **Julie Foley, Director of Flood Risk Strategy & National Adaptation, Environment Agency**

Explained the need to get ready for unavoidable impacts of climate change, and start to plan and adapt, for which NFM and nature based solutions were key. Previously flood risk management had focused on hard engineered solutions to flooding and these would continue to make an important

contribution. But we can't build our way out of climate change and need to move from protection to resilience. Nature based solutions would help to mitigate flooding by slowing the flow or providing storage in wetland areas. There has been a shift in thinking and an understanding that both hard and soft solutions has an important role to play. Government has committed to invest £5.2 bn over 6 years, starting from April 2021, in 2,000 local authority led projects around the country. In addition £15m has been spent on 60 different NFM schemes, many of which were led by catchment partnerships and community groups. The Environment Agency has published an evaluation of this work, which has been implemented by 85 partners and reduced the flooding risk to 15,000 homes, improved river and water quality, along with 4,000 hectares of habitat improvements and carbon benefits. Lessons learned demonstrated the importance of strong partnerships, with a shared vision, and engaging with farmers and landowners early in the process. Multiple funding sources were available but communities needed advice on how to access those grants, organise their group and obtain charitable status. The Environment Agency would continue to monitor the benefits delivered by these projects, to support their business case to Government for funding.

## Questions

**Julie Foley** – answered a question from Martin Skov (Bangor University) about obtaining funding for bundled benefits:

- This was becoming more common, obtaining funding for carbon storage, habitat benefits etc.
- Key was a very good project appraisal that articulated all of the associated benefits of a flood mitigation scheme; using flood protection money as a lever to building up other benefits.

**Chair** – commented that she had visited one of the projects and met the farmer and local school children, who were enthusiastic as they could become 'human beavers' to reduce flood risk.

**Earl of Devon** – commented that:

- Defra were concerned and did not know how to manage the stacking of benefits for biodiversity net gain and flood protection.
- It would not necessarily be clear to many people which sources to obtain funding from.
- Flood plains were 5% of our landscape and asked how much of our population is close to a floodplain and how easy is it for them to obtain access.

**Professor Gowing** – replied:

- Many flood plains had large urban centres or were near large urban communities. Many were peri-urban and accessible and offered a lot of recreational opportunities.
- In terms of bundling of benefits, he found that many groups were confused by the different sources: flood relief, BNG, carbon credits.
- Community groups were concerned about making decisions that would compromise their position later on.
- It would help if WWT could have a good overview and offer advice to groups.

**Julie Foley** – replied:

- Consider how to sign post these different sources, the different conditions attached and different audiences. Some were only applicable to farmers and landowners, whereas others were more suitable for community groups.
- Was optimistic that ELMs (Environmental Land Management schemes) and the new Nature Recovery Scheme had more hooks and where flood risk benefit was a secondary benefit, ELMs would be more helpful.

**Chair** – replied:

- During a recent debate it was noted that farmers and landowners were overwhelmed and had little time to apply for these grants.

- Jo Churchill responded yesterday and acknowledged the Environment Agency had had a difficult time and were over stretched, whilst people expected more and more.
- And asked if it were possible to improve the number of NFM areas and increase flood plains, would that relieve some of the pressure on the Environment Agency because less intervention would be required?

**Julie Foley** – responded:

- Our previous approach was quite short term.
- Really need to think about resilient communities, avoiding inappropriate development, SuDs and ways of living with climate change. These would help the Environment Agency achieve its wider goals.
- In order to achieve a meaningful outcome in the longer term, Defra would need to double the number of flood investment projects by 2027.

**James Robinson (WWT)** – asked:

- Whether organisations such as Local Flood Authorities needed more advice on NFM-type solutions.

**Julie Foley** – responded:

- When we talk about flood risk management authorities we mean – Lead Local Flood Authorities, Water companies, Drainage Boards and all of those organisations play a role in shaping our strategy that was laid in Parliament and approved.
- They should be thinking about NFM and building it into nature recovery strategies.
- They should also build this into Local Strategic Planning documents and place making.

**Steve Colclough (Institute of Fisheries Management)** – commented:

- About multiple benefits, had worked for the Environment Agency for 35 years and developed the Water Framework Directive.
- In terms of the marine environment, there was still a silo approach.
- Estuaries and marine were just behind the freshwater movement.

### **Concluding remarks from the Chair**

- The next meeting would be in early May at the London Wetland Centre, details to follow.
- Would be possible to hold discussions on the way there.
- Asked Parliamentarians to ask questions of the WWT team.
- Thanked Professor Gowing and Julie Foley..
- Noted that the Earl of Caithness should be invited to the next meeting.
- Recommended that the secretariat review the debate about Defra in Hansard.