

# **North West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee**

## **Minutes of the meeting held on Friday, 25 April 2025**

Held virtually via MS Teams

### **Attendees:**

#### **Members**

Adrian Lythgo, Chairman  
Councillor Giles Archibald, Cumbria Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Stephen Clarke, Lancashire Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Jane Hugo, Lancashire Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Alan Quinn, Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Tony Davies, Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Jaqueline Owen, Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Elizabeth Grey, Merseyside Strategic Flood Risk Partnership (Part attendance)  
Councillor Mhairi Doyle, Merseyside Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Mark Goldsmith, Cheshire Mid Mersey Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Kate Morley, EA Appointed Member – Conservation (part attendance)  
Chris Findley, EA Appointed Member – Development and Sustainable Investment  
Carolyn Otley, EA Appointed Member – Communities  
Susannah Bleakley, EA Appointed Member – Coastal  
Amy Cooper, EA Appointed Member - Water and Sewerage Industry  
Neville Elstone, EA Appointed Member – General Business and Assurance  
Paul Barnes, EA Appointed Member – Agriculture and Land Management  
Stewart Davies, Environment Agency Board Member for the North West

#### **Environment Agency Officers**

Ian Crewe, Area Director, Greater Manchester Merseyside and Cheshire (GMMC)  
Nick Pearson, Area Flood Risk Manager (Greater Manchester)  
Mary-Rose Muncaster, Area Flood Risk Manager (Merseyside and Cheshire)  
Richard Knight, Area Flood Risk Manager (Cumbria)  
Fiona Duke, Area Flood Risk Manager (Lancashire)  
Anthony Swarbrick, Area Operations Manager (Cumbria & Lancashire) (C&L)  
Sally Whiting, Senior FCRM Advisor  
Andy Tester, FCRM Programming Manager (Greater Manchester, Merseyside & Cheshire) (GMMC)  
Rachel Harmer, RFCC Secretariat  
Sarah Fontana, Capital Programme Co-ordinator  
Boaz Sadeh, FCRM Programming Senior Advisor (C&L)  
Tom Bakes, FCRM Programming Advisor (C&L)  
Mia Mullender, Local Authority Capital Projects Advisor (C&L)  
Robert Taylor, Local Authority Capital Projects Advisor (C&L)  
Rachael Broadhurst, Local Authority Capital Projects Advisor (GMMC)  
Gary Hilton, Local Authority Capital Projects Advisor (GMMC)  
Debra Glover, Local Authority Capital Projects Advisor (GMMC)  
Stuart Mault, FCRM Programming Advisor (C&L)

#### **Local Authority Observers (Councillors and Officers):**

Jason Harte, Westmorland and Furness Council  
Ali Harker, Cumbria Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Councillor Bob Kelly, Cumberland Council  
Andrew Harrison, Cumberland Council  
Karl Melville, Cumberland Council  
Clare Nolan-Barnes, Blackpool Council  
John Davies, Lancashire County Council  
Lorah Cheyne, Lancashire Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Imran Munshi, Blackburn with Darwen Council  
Sarah Wardle, Merseyside Strategic Flood Risk Partnership (Part attendance)  
Laura Gilmore, Liverpool City Council  
Francis Comyn, Rochdale Borough Council (Part attendance)  
Jill Holden, Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
David Boyer, Warrington Borough Council  
Jim Turton, Warrington Borough Council  
Matt Winnard, Cheshire Mid Mersey Strategic Flood Risk Partnership  
Ellie Rigby, Cheshire East Council  
Dan Matthews, Cheshire East Council  
Katie Eckford, NW Shoreline Management Plan Co-ordinator / Coastal Group Secretariat  
Johnny Phillips, United Utilities Business Development Manager

**Other observers:**

Talha Esmail, United Utilities  
Terri McMillan, incoming North West RFCC Member

**25 (17) Welcome, Chairman's Introduction & Apologies for Absence**

Adrian Lythgo opened the meeting, introduced himself, and welcomed everyone.

He conveyed apologies from: Councillor Adam Langan (Cheshire Mid Mersey Strategic Flood Risk Partnership); Councillor Tony Brennan and Councillor Daniel Barrington (Merseyside Strategic Flood Risk Partnership); and Councillor Philip Cusack (Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership).

Members noted and approved the following correctly nominated RFCC LLFA Member substitutes:

- Councillor Tony Davies representing the Greater Manchester Strategic Flood Risk Partnership on behalf of Councillor Philip Cusack
- Dave Boyer representing the Cheshire Mid Mersey Strategic Flood Risk Partnership on behalf of Councillor Adam Langan

During the meeting it was questioned as to whether Councillor Jacqueline Owen had been correctly nominated by Councillor Laura Boyle to attend the meeting and place any votes on her behalf. Adrian Lythgo advised that any votes cast by Councillor Owen at the meeting today would not be counted. Following the meeting it was clarified that Councillor Owen had been correctly nominated by Councillor Boyle and subsequently any votes placed by Councillor Owen during the meeting were noted and accepted.

Adrian advised no declarations of interest had been received and he welcomed Terri McMillan to the meeting, who will be joining the RFCC from 1 July 2025.

Adrian highlighted that in his update to Members circulated earlier this week, there was a letter from the outgoing EA Chairman, Alan Lovell, confirming the agreement by the EA Board to the national investment programme for 2025/26. Adrian then reflected back on the outcome of the Local Choices and programme consenting process which the Committee agreed to in March 2025. With a total North West GiA allocation of £122.4 Million, he noted the North West finished in a significantly better position for communities at risk of flooding than looked likely in January when the initial allocations were announced. We secured the highest allocation of any of the 12 RFCCs nationally.

He remarked that Risk Management Authorities (RMAs) now have the very significant challenge of delivering a very large one-year programme against the background of tight resource across the public sector and the Committee will need to continue to play a constructive and supportive role in achieving delivery over the next twelve months.

Adrian again thanked all colleagues for the patience and speed with which they collaborated in a very short timescale to enable the Committee to achieve that substantial allocation to the North West, recognising the very short timescales there were for dialogue and consultation during the January to March period and the inevitable bumpiness in process that was associated with that. He advised given the timescales and ongoing policy uncertainties related to the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), it is inevitable that timescales associated with 2026/27 will also be tight and that the strength of relationships that we have across the North West between the different agencies will help the Committee to respond to another set of challenging timescales that don't resemble what we have been used to in the past.

Adrian advised he also circulated a letter from the twelve RFCC Chairs to the Floods Minister, which outlines some of the challenges going forwards, which this Committee has also highlighted. He advised Chairs will continue to seek to influence both the timescales and the content of the Spending Review as far as flood funding is concerned.

In relation to today's agenda, Adrian advised that the RFCC Finance and Business Assurance Sub Group have asked for more time to consider some of the items that were originally scheduled for discussion today, which will now be discussed at the July RFCC meeting. As a result there is more time available to discuss other important items without time pressure, including the updated guidance on the use of the increased Local Levy Quick Win funding.

Ian Crewe concurred with Adrian's comments particularly around the Local Choices process and on behalf of the EA he noted it has been a really tricky time since the New Year, where officers were under pressure dealing with the flooding and its associated impacts, dealing with asset maintenance and management challenges, in addition to working through the Local Choices process. He thanked Members for making this period of time as painless as it could have been. He thanked the Committee for their input and support to what has been a complicated process.

There were no further comments or questions.

## **25 (18) Minutes of the RFCC meeting held on 14 March and matters arising from the January 2025 RFCC meeting**

Councillor Giles Archibald enquired if there is sufficient activity underway to enable a July RFCC meeting agenda item on peatland restoration. Adrian advised there is peatland restoration work ongoing in the North West, in addition to some broader developments nationally, and links into the wider land management issues which are to be presented by Kate Morley today. He advised he believed there is enough meaningful information to have an item and there will be consultation with interested parties to prepare for this.

For clarification Rachel Harmer provided the detail of a small amendment that needs to be made to the draft minutes of the RFCC Finance and Business Assurance Sub Group (F&BASG) meeting on 11 April. The minute of a comment raised by Councillor Giles Archibald at the F&BASG meeting should have included the word 'not', so it should read 'he stated that he was not comfortable with voting on the proposal today because he feels Cumbria has not received enough information'.

Adrian provided an update on the matters arising from the January 2025 meeting:

- Rainfall data  
A link has been provided for access to a hydrology data explorer which provides up to date information on rainfall at any point in time.
- PFR Framework question  
Responses to the questions raised by Councillor Philip Cusack were shared with Members earlier this week.

Adrian advised there were no matters arising from the meeting on 14 March as the whole meeting was to deal with the consent to the GiA Local Choices allocation for 2025/26, the EA asset maintenance programme and the Local Levy allocations for 2025/26.

The minutes of the RFCC meeting held on 14 March were nominated by Councillor Giles Archibald and seconded by Councillor Jane Hugo.

The minutes of the 14 March RFCC were approved by the Committee.

There were no further questions or comments raised.

## **25 (19) Report from the RFCC Finance and Business Assurance Sub Group meeting**

Neville Elstone reported the good discussion and debate which took place at the RFCC F&BASG meeting and hoped to be able to spend time today talking about Quick Wins funding, the RFCC Business Plan and about our financial position now.

Andy Tester provided an overview of the investment programme which forecasts that 1,439 properties will be better protected from flooding this year against a target of 1,499 properties. He reported this is a good outcome noting a tough quarter with changes to the programme in terms of severe flooding impacts and recovery costs, which have slowed in-year delivery.

Members noted that better protecting over 1,400 properties is a success and that the outcomes not quite achieved this year will now be achieved in 2025/26 or future years, giving us a strong start going into 2025/26.

Andy advised in terms of our contribution to the national target of 25,000 properties for the year (forecasting circa 27,000 properties), circa 6% are in the North West.

In terms of capital funding for this year, the North West total is £113.4 Million, which includes £103.1 Million GiA, £7.6 Million Local Levy and £2.6 Million of Partnership Funding contributions.

Forecasts at mid-March 2025 showed we are expecting to draw down £110.4 Million this year, which is £3 Million less than allocated and £5 Million less than forecasts reported at the last meeting. This is partly due to several projects being deferred or delayed (details in the report), and following the in-year national instruction to reduce the GiA over-programme (forecast overspend) to zero. The latest forecast shows a year-end overspend (remaining over-programme) of 0.1% (£129k) for the North West. Andy noted that even though we have had success in delivering outcomes and landing the GiA allocation, it has been a tough year and throughout there have been many challenges.

Actual spend at the end of February was 82% of the full year forecast. EA schemes have spent 80% of their forecast (just under £19 Million) with £88 Million left to spend. LA schemes have claimed 94% of their forecast, with £1.15 Million (6%) still left to claim for 2024/25.

In terms of capital (GiA) efficiencies, Andy advised there is always a timelag with reporting with the quarter 4 figures yet to be received. For quarters 1 to 3, total efficiency claims have been around £2.59 Million, 41% of our annual target. Andy advised it is unlikely that the target will be achieved. Despite this, we have seen a year-on-year increase in terms of North West efficiencies reported.

With regard to the Capital investment programme for 2025/26, Members again noted the North West has the largest settlement for GiA in the country, totalling £122 Million, which provides a total project expenditure of just under £135 Million.

Andy summarised the challenges throughout 2024/25 including:

- Severe flooding events across the North West in January 2025
- National steer to manage the capital over-programme down to the allocation
- Delays to Local Choices impacting in-year delivery
- Reduced timeframe of the investment programme (finishing a year early in March 2026).

Adrian Lythgo advised he wanted to return to his opening remarks - to compare the 2025/26 programme allocation of £122 Million with the forecast spend this year of circa £110 Million. This emphasises the scale and significance of the programme to be delivered in 2025/26, and the work this Committee does to provide resource to Risk Management Authorities (RMAs) in delivery of that programme is just as important as ever.

**Resolved: The North West RFCC:**

- Noted the progress on delivering the 2024/25 capital and resource programmes.

- Noted the approved FCERM Investment Programme and Asset Maintenance Programme allocations for financial year 2025/26 and the associated targets.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Doyle, Councillor Davies, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Owen, Dave Boyer, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley and Chris Findley.

### **Local Levy Programme**

Ahead of the update on the Local Levy programme and balances, Andy Tester referred to the RFCC F&BA Sub Group meeting where Members had asked to defer the vote on the Local Levy minimum balance proposals until their next meeting in June 2025. Members noted the two key discussion points on the level of risk, and the Minimum Working and Absolute Minimum balances.

Councillor Giles Archibald highlighted he just wanted to be sure that we are representing the discussion on the minimum balances. He reiterated his comment that his concern was not that the Committee should agree an Absolute Minimum balance, but that the paper stated it could never be used.

Adrian Lythgo advised he was not present at the RFCC F&BA Sub Group meeting but understands that colleagues wanted to have more time to discuss what the minimum balance should be, to be able to receive some more input from officers, and also to consult some of their wider council colleagues.

### **Resolved: The North West RFCC:**

Noted the RFCC F&BA Sub Group agreed to defer the vote on a Local Levy Minimum Balance to their next meeting in June 2025.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Davies, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Owen, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley and Chris Findley.

Andy Tester advised the total Local Levy resource at the start of 2024/25 was £15.757 Million (made up of income, balance carried forward and interest earned). The latest spend forecast for 2024/25 is £5.996 Million, a decrease by approx. £0.7 Million in comparison to the January 2025 RFCC meeting. This would leave a remaining balance of £9.767 Million at the end of 2024/25. Members noted a breakdown and brief reasons for some of the reductions in forecast spend.

The 2025/26 forecast also includes the two Local Levy requests for Lindow Primary School, Alderley Edge (£90k) and River Winster Rehabilitation Project (£164k), which are seeking approval at today's meeting.

One of the schemes reporting reduced Local Levy spend was Hambleton. Fiona Duke advised the amount of funding for Hambleton may need to be looked at as the works are having to be paused and only a small amount of Local Levy will be used. Councillor Stephen Clarke raised his concern about the delay and enquired as to the cause. Fiona explained that this is due to a large funding gap, which was previously due to be filled with government

funding, but which has now been removed. The scheme is now not fully funded and cannot progress to full business case and therefore will not begin construction this financial year. Fiona advised an amount of GiA has been allocated through Local Choices so work is continuing alongside Wyre Borough Council to discharge some of the planning permissions and establish the marine licences. She reported that further information will be available on The Flood Hub next week and can also be shared with Councillor Clarke outside of the meeting.

For the 2025/26 Local Levy programme, Andy Tester advised we start the financial year with a (forecast) total balance of £14.8 Million. This is made up of £4.681 Million income, £9.761 Million carried forward from 2024/25 and £0.4 Million interest on balances.

The spend forecast for 2025/26 is £10.1 Million, which includes the recommended Local Levy requests for Lindow Primary School and the Winster Rehabilitation Project. The North West is then forecast to finish the year carrying a balance of £4.732 Million.

He advised it is important to note that at this point in 2024 we were forecasting to drop below the zero balance level in 2026/27 (which is not permissible), so the work that's been taking place around Local Choices and also the additional allocation of the £9.2 Million. This has given the North West RFCC a stronger balance going into the next financial year, where there is a level of uncertainty and there will continue to be some fluctuation in the programme.

## **Local Levy Requests**

### Lindow Primary School Flood Alleviation Scheme

Andy Tester advised this Local Levy request came back to the April RFCC F&BA Sub Group and was to increase the Local Levy allocation from their original £30k request in April 2024 to £90k. The RFCC F&BA Sub Group has recommended this for approval.

**Resolved:** The RFCC approved the Local Levy request for £90k.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Owen, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Doyle, Councillor Davies, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley, Dave Boyer and Chris Findley.

### Winster Rehabilitation Project

Andy Tester advised this Local Levy request of £164k was recommended for approval by the RFCC F&BASG, but with the condition that the project carries out a further stage of options appraisal working with contractor 'Land and Water', and within the wider context of the Our Future Coast project, to confirm the most effective and appropriate method. The recommended proposal has the Local Levy attached to minimise any delay to the project.

Councillor Jane Hugo asked that the outputs or update report on the options appraisal be made available to the Committee to show the work that has been completed. Neville Elstone confirmed this will be available and is expected to be provided to the RFCC F&BA Sub Group in June.

**Resolved:** The RFCC approves the Local Levy request for £164k with the condition that the project carries out a further stage of options appraisal involving Carl Green, which will be reported back to the RFCC F&BA Sub Group in June.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Davies, Councillor Doyle, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Owen, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley, Dave Boyer and Chris Findley.

#### Property Flood Resilience – Local Levy Support Proposal

Neville Elstone highlighted the good discussion at the April F&BA Sub Group and noted some really important points had been raised. It was agreed that further work to develop the proposal is needed and will be brought back to the June RFCC F&BA Sub Group for further consideration.

Councillor Giles Archibald advised his objection to the current proposal is not one of principle, but one of condition and that he does not wish to hold up progress on the project.

Neville Elstone and Councillor Giles Archibald agreed to have a discussion outside of the meeting and there were no further questions or comments.

**Resolved:** The RFCC notes that further work is required on the Property Flood Resilience Local Levy proposal, which will be brought back to the June RFCC F&BA Sub Group meeting for further consideration.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Davies, Councillor Doyle, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Owen, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley, Dave Boyer and Chris Findley.

#### RFCC Business Plan Update

Sally Whiting provided a brief RFCC Business Plan progress update, referring to additional detail in the information papers and on the North West RFCC SharePoint site.

Members noted there has been good progress overall and of the 21 projects that have been progressed 5 are complete, 13 are progressing well of which 3 are nearing completion, and there are 3 currently behind schedule or resolving issues.

In 2024/25 the Business Plan received a Local Levy investment allocation of £1.375 Million, with a current spend forecast of £1.347 Million. The proposed programme for 2025/26 totals £1.24 Million and the indicative investment need for 2026/27 is again around £1.2 Million.

The spend forecast for 2024/25 is slightly over the allocation £1.375 Million. The final spend year end figures still need to be confirmed, but the Committee noted that variances are all either reprofiling from the previous year or funding that wasn't needed.

Members noted the proposed programme for 2025/26 of £1.24 Million, including two proposed changes which were recommended by the FBA Sub Group:

- **Uplifts to reflect cost increases** – 3% annual increases for the work programme being delivered by Newground (the Flood Hub and the support that they provide to the EA and LAs around community engagement) and for the Natural Flood Management (NFM) technical appraisal resource which sits within Mersey Forest. This equates to an additional £9k in 2025/26 and an additional £18k in 2026/27, a total of just over £27k.
- **A one-year extension to the Shoreline Management Plan Co-ordinator role.** The proposal is to extend the role to March 2027, which will then align the role with the other RFCC funded roles. We noted the North West SMP Co-ordinator role has been held up as national best practice. This proposal represents additional Local Levy spend of £54.6k and covers the additional one year of funding including a 3% uplift.

Sally advised that she is currently working with the Partnerships to review their strategic aims under each of the ambitions with a view to identifying if there are further projects that any of the partnerships wish to bring forward and progress.

There were no further comments or questions.

#### **Resolved: The North West RFCC:**

- Noted the update on the Business Plan implementation.
- Approved the increased funding (3% annually) for projects ID5,6,7 and 9A to cover increased costs, representing total additional Local Levy investment of £27.1k.
- Approved the extension of the funding for the SMP Co-ordinator role for 1 year to March 2027, including the 3% uplift, representing total additional Local Levy investment of £54.6k.
- Approved the proposed programme and Local Levy investment in Business Plan projects for 2025/26.

**Votes in favour:** Councillor Quinn, Councillor Archibald, Councillor Clarke, Councillor Doyle, Councillor Hugo, Councillor Owen, Kate Morley, Amy Cooper, Carolyn Otley, Susannah Bleakley, Dave Boyer and Chris Findley.

#### Quick Win funding updated guidance

Sarah Fontana provided Members with an overview of the Quick Win funding review. For the last three years, the Quick Win funding has been set at £100k per partnership and has been extremely welcomed across the region. For 2025/26 only, in recognition of the challenging GiA funding position, the Committee agreed to raise this to £250k per partnership.

The current Quick Wins funding guidance was comprehensively reviewed in 2022 by a Local Authority-led Technical Advisory Group, but in light of the significant uplift this guidance has been looked at to ensure it remains fit for purpose. Aside from some minor updates the guidance is still relevant and correct, so no major changes are proposed, but there will be some minor document references and date amendments and an additional appendix relating to this year's uplift, with the intention to keep this funding as flexible as possible within the grant claiming rules we have to work within.

Sarah highlighted certain elements of the guidance including what it could be used for but certain exclusions that it can't be.

The application process for the fund will be kept as straightforward as possible, but due to the possible increased value of projects, there will be increasing scrutiny and a proportionate amount of evidence will be expected to support the higher value bids.

LA officers were encouraged to have early conversations with Sarah or their LA Capital Project Advisor in order for support to be provided through the process.

She advised the draft refreshed guidance has already been shared with one person in each Partnership for them to do a sense check and encouraged people to contact her if there were any questions or queries or suggestions on how to further improve the process. Sarah also asked for the partnerships to provide her with detail of what the increased allocation has been used for, later in the year.

There were no further questions or comments.

## **25 (20) United Utilities Update – PR24 Final Determination and Sustainable Water Fund Overview**

Johnny Phillips provided Members with an overview of the Price Review 2024 Final Determination and United Utilities Sustainable Water Fund. The presentation covered:

- working to drive down the storm drain overflow frequency over 400 sites across the network, with a look to see if projects have opportunities for potential hybrid work where rainwater can be removed and separated out from combined sewers to reduce the amount of grey storage currently needing to be built.
- getting a head start on future targets by reducing the need to invest in grey storage.
- securing funding to increase network resilience to the impacts of climate change and consequences of flooding work to remove rainwater over the next five years in six catchments to reduce their risk of flooding.
- working to proactively invest in providing capacity and working with partners to reduce the flood risk to communities through blue-green partnership schemes and using the Integrated Water Management Plan established in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region.

Members received an overview of UU's Advanced WINEP (Water Industry National Environment Programme), a rainwater management programme focusing on unlocking rainwater management solutions in the catchment areas of storm overflows, which go beyond the requirements set out in the 2025 – 30 environmental programme. This will drive £281 Million of investment (£231 Million through UUW and £50 Million leveraged from partners) for delivering wider environmental outcomes.

An overview of the Sustainable Water Fund was provided, which offers the opportunity to deliver rainwater management solutions in partnership with UU in specific areas. This fund forms part of UU's Advanced WINEP programme which unlocks early investment in rainwater management to address storm overflows.

Councillor Giles Archibald enquired about peat restoration by UU. Johnny advised he will provide the name of UU's peat restoration lead outside of the meeting. Adrian thanked Johnny for this and advised this contact will be able to help plan a substantive future RFCC agenda item on peat restoration.

Councillor Alan Quinn asked Johnny to share the information on the rainwater schemes mentioned today and advised he has an interest in these as a Prestwich councillor.

Fiona Duke advised Preston City Council will be meeting with the EA in mid May in order for the Council's senior managers to receive up-to-date training on climate change and flooding. She asked if she could share Johnny's contact details with them noting that Preston is one of UU's priority areas.

Councillor Stephen Clarke raised his concern about the actions being taken by developers and the need for a plan with regard to connecting to sewers. Johnny advised the automatic right to connect to water company drainage systems is still a barrier for UU to operating a sustainable network.

Adrian thanked Members for their comments and advised that the RFCC Chairs have been told by Defra that, although there is no certain news about Schedule 3 being taken forward, the Government have recognised the significant challenge regarding the automatic right to connect.

Paul Barnes supported the work being carried out by UU and enquired about measuring the increase in natural capital benefit. Johnny advised UU has a methodology for natural capital calculations based on the industry standard tool.

David Boyer advised this is good news and anything which can bring funding into this area is to be welcomed. He advised there had been a similar discussion at a recent Cheshire Mid Mersey meeting and one area of concern is another funding round, which take time and effort, but hopefully going forwards these can be streamlined as much as possible.

Kate Morley thanked Johnny for his presentation, advising this is a fantastic piece of work and enquired how the eligibility criteria for location is being put together. Johnny advised this is a first test to make sure that nothing is being double funded. He highlighted UU are working on 400 overflows on this AMP and anywhere where work is being carried out is marked off the map and a check is done to see if any other projects are taking place in the same area and a check can be carried out to see if the work will be eligible for the Advanced WINEP.

Adrian Lythgo noted from the presentation slide that all the areas pinpointed are areas where there have been major floods and where there are EA or LA led flood schemes in delivery. He asked if there are any opportunities about how shared investment might align in those locations. He also touched on the point raised earlier by Dave Boyer regarding LAs being stretched on revenue funding and wondered if where some of UU's investment leads to a specific flood benefit and LA's are keen on developing something, but haven't got the resource, that possibly the LA create a pipeline in that area and he suggested this conversation could be discussed offline.

Adrian thanked Johnny for his overview and advised he was interested to see the connection between the £9 Million in existing benefits and the outcomes of that, and then the scaling up to address the point raised by Paul Barnes. He noted with all of this there is still the need to scale up a lot more around surface water and its impacts.

There were no further comments or questions.

**25 (21) Update and observations from the RFCC Conservation Member, including feedback from the national network of Conservation Members**

Kate Morley provided the Committee with a number of observations as the NW RFCC's Conservation Member for the last twelve months and she shared information on what is happening within the RFCC Conservation Members' national network. This includes representatives from all the twelve RFCCs and is chaired by Phil Rothwell, Northumbria RFCC Chair. Members noted the purpose of this network is to ensure nature gets a fair hearing in structures and decisions and to share information, knowledge, ideas and best practice about what has and what hasn't worked in each region.

Kate advised work is underway and discussions are taking place around focusing and exploring ways in which environmental outcomes are not just one metric in the Partnership Funding calculator, but are intrinsic to what we do, especially in the face of the climate change and biodiversity crises. Conservation Members have had the benefit of presentations from across the Defra family, from learnings from the EA's £25 Million Natural Flood Management (NFM) Programme to updates from Defra's Rural Resilience Team on the £50 Million Internal Drainage Board (IDB) funds.

Discussion topics over the last twelve months have included:

- How Conservation Members can provide an environmental perspective at Committee meetings.
- Outcome Measure 4 – exploration of additional environmental outcomes benefits built into FCRM projects.
- Sharing and investigating local nature investment initiatives, which may deliver flood risk management benefits
- Work being undertaken by the British Standard Institute, funded by Defra and the devolved governments, to look to produce a Nature Investment Standard, launched in March 2025, designed to bring greater confidence and consistency to nature markets in the UK.
- Mainstreaming NFM and Working with Natural Processes update
- January 2025 Round Table discussion on NFM involving Phil Rothwell with Minister Hardy, where the Minister is keen on increasing investment in NFM. Members noted Defra are keen to use the experience gained through the £25 Million NFM Programme application process to inform how projects are assessed, they also wish to ensure proportionality.
- Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMS)
  - o Sustainable Farming Incentive (Closed to new applications in March 2025 with the fund being reviewed. Act as incentive payments to adopt sustainable farming practices and deliver environmental protection)

- Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (geared at more complex and ambitious actions to maintain and restore habitats. This is where the main opportunity for NFM measure funding lies.)
- Landscape Recovery (56 projects currently in the development phase)
- The EA's Natural Processes Evidence Directory.

Adrian thanked Kate for providing an overview of what's happening in the conservation network and acknowledged there are a number of national initiatives which are seeking to mainstream nature-based solutions as part of the way we address flood risk, something which the North West RFCC has been doing for some time. It is good to hear all the learning is being captured and shared nationally.

From a Council perspective, Councillor Giles Archibald recognised that there are lots of things happening and many potential sources of funds and he asked how we view the Local Nature Recovery Strategies in terms of helping to organise our thoughts and our actions strategically in terms of land management.

Kate responded that she was herself not directly involved in Local Nature Recovery Strategies but was aware of their development by local authorities. She recognised the remaining challenge of bringing the right partners together to progress the opportunities, emphasising the importance of being able to build relationships with people to ensure they are coming with you on the journey for change, in order for those strategies to be delivered.

Councillor Giles Archibald raised his concern with regard to this process which he views as suboptimal and commented that this will result in less than the success that's needed given the extent of the biodiversity and climate crisis. He suggested that a discussion is held at a national senior level on the role of Local Nature Recovery Strategies and how they are implemented. Adrian Lythgo advised he will consult with his RFCC Chair colleagues to gauge the temperature around Local Nature Recovery Strategies in their areas and agreed there is a massive opportunity for wider benefits around aligned investment. Currently the wider benefits are not fully in focus at the front end of the investment process.

Councillor Alan Quinn highlighted the success of the beaver releases in Devon and also more locally.

Susannah Bleakley commented that in recognition of the significance and the importance that we are placing on NFM in our future work, are we confident that we have got the right connections with Natural England within this Committee or do other committees have other approaches, for example do they have a Natural England representative? She asked if senior officers in the EA are aligning priorities with Natural England and if there is a way to improve that partnership so that our priorities are better understood by Natural England and vice versa.

Kate Morley advised there is definitely an opportunity to reach out to Natural England colleagues and build on our current relationships to look at what their priorities are in the pipeline and how we can work together. Members also noted that currently Natural England is facing budget cuts and potential redundancies so is in a challenging position to respond to our approaches.

Adrian Lythgo reflected that the best crossover between Natural England and the RFCC family is within the Coastal Group. There are also some local project-based examples of good engagement with Natural England, for example in Cumbria around the NFM programme, but he highlighted it has been a considerable struggle to get that more strategic engagement for some time. He agreed to enquire and see what is happening across the country.

Ian Crewe thanked Kate for her presentation and advised the EA in the North West has a good strategic relationship with Natural England and he would be happy to raise the issues we have just discussed with them to see if there is more that we can do. With regard to more engagement with the RFCC, he asked if Members are aware of the increased activity the EA have particularly with the agricultural sector. He reported that EA farm inspections have increased hugely over the last 12 months and will continue to do so, which has been designed primarily to improve our relationship and understanding with the farming sector, and also to manage the water quality issues better in terms of potential pollution.

He asked Kate if she is aware of the increase in inspection regime and is there an opportunity there to work alongside the EA, bearing in mind there will be some crossover of conversation with the agricultural and land sectors in terms of ELMS. It was noted that more could be done which would improve information and understanding on both sides. Ian Crewe advised he will contact Kate outside of the meeting to take this forward.

**ACTION: Ian Crewe**

Paul Barnes advised on a piece of research which he encouraged the Committee to recognise – that all of the isotopes of nitrogen in the Irish Sea come from United Utilities, none from agricultural diffuse pollution.

Secondly, he remarked on what he sees is the abject failure of all the ELMS scheme, originally developed under Michael Gove's leadership, which has resulted in farmers being in crisis. He reflected that the farming sector have stopped listening to anybody. He also reflected what he sees as the limited success of the Landscape Recovery schemes in securing funding (only two of the 56 so far), limiting the benefits of the funding scheme, and potentially putting the funding in the hands of rich people.

Adrian clarified that the opinions expressed were Paul's personal opinions. Paul advised that the evidence on isotopes of nitrogen derives from Durham University and several other universities. Adrian then added that related to Paul's comment that Kate had highlighted the challenges associated with the implementation of ELMS in her excellent overview, and that from his perspective, particularly in upland areas the framework looks coherent until you realise that individual landowners have to apply for a whole series of individual measures. The RFCC and constituent partners can play a role in opportunity spotting and relationship management.

Neville Elstone advised there is significant change happening in this space and commented that he believed the devolution process will be positive with greater place-based focus for land management in future. He advised organisations in the land sector, such as the Forestry Commission and Natural England, are going to be tasked much more to work in the devolution space and incentives will be tweaked towards local place-based working. He advised the Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be part of that and the Land Use Framework consultation, that's currently ongoing, will be incredibly positive.

Adrian thanked Neville and recognised that a lot of opportunities are brought home in national policy more often than not when they are delivered at a local place level, and that a lot of the progress made is as a result of strong local partnership working. He advised the direction of this has to be positive and will strengthen this Committee's ability to work with our five sub-regions whatever devolution arrangements they decide upon, which can be a wholly positive opportunity, providing the funding is there to drive it forward.

Adrian thanked Kate for her update around the work of conservation. He confirmed that there are clear indications of Minister Hardy's wish to see more flood investment going into natural solutions, and when the funding consultation comes forward, we can respond as a Committee and see where some of the opportunities might be.

There were no further comments or questions.

## **25 (22) Any Other Business**

Councillor Alan Quinn asked where the EA source their steel from and suggested that Defra and the EA should take the position of not importing Chinese steel instead sourcing steel from the UK, both to support our steel industry and its surrounding communities, and to reduce our carbon footprint. He commented this is also a matter of national security and that a letter should be written to Ministers.

Adrian suggested to Ian Crewe that an enquiry is made in terms of EA FCRM procurement to clarify what the current criteria are and whether there are any planned changes to make sure we are focussing on domestic steel production in our procurement of sheet steel used for FCRM. He highlighted what is done by the EA is done within the Office for Government Commerce and their framework and what advice is given to its agencies. He suggested that Local Authorities could usefully do the same in terms of their procurement decisions. Councillor Quinn agreed with this suggestion.

With regard to carbon, Nick Pearson advised that the Littleborough Flood Risk Management Scheme has been awarded an International Green Apple Award, which is an annual international campaign to recognise, reward and promote environmental best practice. He noted that although there's lots of steel being used in the scheme, it is using Eco Sheet Pile Plus, which is using electric arc furnaces to reduce the scheme's carbon footprint.

Carolyn Otley suggested the potential use of social value clauses within procurement and whether we're maximising their use to do things like creating community resilience funds that allow us to work with communities. Adrian advised this is probably something that we've got more direct control over with our Local Authority colleagues, but also with the EA as well and agreed this should also be picked up.

Finally, Adrian was keen to recognise that this is the last RFCC meeting that David Boyer will attend. David has been a senior officer at Warrington Borough Council for many years and chairs the Cheshire Mid Mersey Strategic Flood Risk Partnership Group and has been a serial contributor to this Committee for a long time. He thanked David for the brilliant contribution he has made on behalf of both that Partnership and the people who are at risk of flooding in that area, and wished David all the very best for the future.

There were no further items of business. Adrian thanked colleagues for their contributions and advised he looked forward to seeing them in person at the July meeting. This will be in Manchester on Friday 11 July 2025.