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Flooding (Somerset Levels)

4.10 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I am delighted to be under your chairmanship once again, Mr Turner. I am also delighted to see my hon. Friends the Members for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne), for Wells (Tessa Munt) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath) in Westminster Hall to take part in this debate about the serious flooding in Somerset.

I have stood in this place and made many similar speeches before. I have criticised the Environment Agency annually because the flooding in our area has become an almost annual crisis—and here we are again, mopping up after the latest deluge, listening to the same lame excuses and hoping that there will finally be some sensible action. I have to tell this House that many of my constituents are not as restrained as I am, and who can blame them, or anyone else across Somerset, for feeling like that? In my constituency alone, 17,000 acres of land on the Somerset levels are now under water: homes are uninhabitable, farms are unworkable and jobs are being expensively destroyed. A huge area of Somerset is now drowning under water that should have been prevented from getting to where it is now.

What went wrong? Was it climate change or incompetence? Let me read an extract from a constituent's e-mail:

“As I write, the village of Moorland is slowly flooding. Earlier today the Environment Agency brought in additional pumps at Northmoor. But local farmers begged for pumping to start in earnest ten days before Christmas. However, the response was just too slow”.

These floods were predictable and predicted—the Met Office knew that it was going to rain, and anyone in Somerset with half an ounce of common sense or a bit of seaweed would also have realised it—but the Environment Agency apparently failed to cotton on. In spite of its highly paid bosses and a huge team of experts it missed that fact.

The Environment Agency is one of the most expensive quangos in this country. It employs more people than the Canadian environment agency, and the number of people employed by the environment agencies of Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden and Austria put together do not match the number of people that our agency employs. Many of those countries have far longer coastlines and in some cases far bigger populations than we do, but their environment agencies cost a great deal less and do a better job than ours. Why are we spending £1 billion a year on the Environment Agency? Are we seriously getting value for that money?

On the Somerset levels, people are scared and angry—very angry. My local council in Sedgemoor is angry, and I am sure the same is true in Taunton Deane and Mendip. These floods shut off our major roads; the resulting detours add many miles to our journeys, which consequently cost us more. The roads that have flooded have sunk 12% in Sedgemoor. That is not a freak act of nature; it is unforgivable negligence. Nineteen years ago, the two main rivers that run through Sedgemoor were regularly dredged by the old river boards. Dredging was expensive, dirty and repetitive, but it was a job that everybody realised had to be done, because rivers on low-lying land silt up if they are not dredged. That is common sense.

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Once upon a time, Sedgemoor was probably part of the Bristol channel, until the Romans arrived and dug ditches. It took Dutch engineers to tame the levels in the 17th century. They understood the consequences of doing nothing, as much of their own country is below sea level. It is well worth dwelling on that fact: over Christmas and in the ghastly wet days that followed, almost the same amount of rain that flooded my constituency fell in the Netherlands, but there were no floods in the Netherlands, because in Holland they dredge, they prepare and they protect. They plan for the worst and rarely suffer a problem.

One of the benefits of regular dredging is that the riverbanks are built up at the same time. It is a double whammy—ask any Dutch hydrologist. However, 18 years ago the Environment Agency was created and it made a policy U-turn that took everybody completely by surprise, and we have all been suffering from it ever since. Regular dredging of the Parrett and the Tone came to an abrupt end, and the agency decided that the future lay in managing any floods that might result. The agency bears huge responsibility for all the problems that have happened. The Parrett and the Tone are now so silted up that in some places they no longer act as rivers at all.

Mr Jeremy Browne (Taunton Deane) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate today. In my conversations with residents, business people and farmers on the levels, they raise three points with me. One is about whole-river catchment and additional house building in Taunton, and whether that is having an effect on flooding, including making it more rapid. Another issue is pumping, and my hon. Friend has already touched on that, but I would be grateful if he expanded even further on the main issue—the No. 1 priority for people on the levels—which is dredging. I am told that the Tone and the Parrett are operating at only about 60% of their capacity, due to their silting up. Everybody who I speak to on the levels is convinced that dredging is the No. 1 action that needs to be taken to try to prevent this terrible flooding problem in the future.

Mr Liddell-Grainger *rose*—

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Of course I give way to my hon. Friend.

Tessa Munt: I would like to add a plea for the Axe and the Brue to be dredged, because they are also in need of dredging, and the level of flooding caused by those

rivers is extremely worrying for my constituents. So it is not only the Tone and the Parrett that need dredging but the Axe and the Brue.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friends are both absolutely right. This is a ridiculous situation. All our rivers need to be dredged, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells has done an enormous amount for the Brue and the Axe, as indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane has for the rivers in his area. He is absolutely right that we are 40% below capacity. If we took an empty Coke bottle and filled

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40% of it with sand, we would not get the Coke in the bottle. It is ridiculous to be told otherwise. I see on the BBC website that the Environment Agency says our comments are “too simplistic”. Is the agency now insulting the people of Somerset? I think it is.

The dramatic effect became visible in summer floods two years ago. The rivers could not drain water away because of the volume of water pumped into them, which happened precisely because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane says, the capacity of both the Tone and the Parrett is so greatly reduced. The Environment Agency was attempting to push water into an outlet that was already completely full. The agency was also having great difficulty pushing water because many of the pumps being used were more than 40 years old and—as we have now discovered—they had not been properly maintained. In case anyone was wondering, the responsibility for maintaining pumps is Environment Agency’s, nobody else’s.

I am afraid that the people at the agency are what we call serial offenders. They stick to an agenda that seems to allow them to do exactly what they want. The agency’s own literature is full of vague phrases and get-out clauses. No. 1 is:

“We will continue to maintain defences where there is an economic case to reduce the risk from flooding to people and property.”

What do they mean by the words:

“where there is an economic case”?

Who decides that? No. 2 is:

“We will continue to maintain defences that are required to protect internationally designated environmental features from the damaging effect of flooding, for example Sites of Special Scientific Interest.”

That is a big clue. The agency will go out of its way to protect “internationally designated environmental features”, but not our farms or our people. No. 3 is:

“We will consider maintaining defences that do not fit categories 1 and 2 above”—

this is absolutely true—

“but where work is justified due to legal commitments or where stopping maintenance would cause an unacceptable flood risk.”

Note that the agency will only “consider” maintaining defences; it does not promise to do anything at all. No. 4 is:

“We will, following consultation, consider stopping maintenance of defences that do not fit the above three categories. We will work supportively with interested parties to explore options in such circumstances.”

So the agency admits that it may stop maintaining some defences altogether, which is precisely what it did in 1995, as soon as it was established. We have been struggling with those daft decisions ever since.

The Environment Agency believes that the levels should be allowed to return to the swampy wilderness that they were in the middle ages, and all in the name of “managed flood risk”. The most it is prepared to do is to dig out teeny-weeny bits of two rivers—“pinch points”, as it calls them. One of them, at Burrowbridge in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, is not capable of being dug out. The agency promised to do the work last year. It started—guess what?—in October and it is not even halfway through the work. The price of this unfinished business alone is put at roughly £4 million. Obviously, that is a great deal of money. I have no idea whether or not the agency is telling the truth about the figures; we are taking the best guesstimate we can.

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The Environment Agency’s argument throughout the past 19 years is that dredging is uneconomic—tell that to the locals—but when Northmoor and Currymoor were allowed to sink beneath the flood waters last year, I can tell this House that the real cost to the local economy was in the region of £10 million.

Mr Jeremy Browne: I support my hon. Friend’s last point on the economic analysis of the cost of flooding. I have first-hand experience of speaking to people who live on the levels in my constituency. They are unable to get their children to school, they are unable to get to work, and local businesses such as pubs lose a large amount of their custom during the busy new year period. That is hugely detrimental to people living in that part of Somerset, and it needs to be factored in to any cost-benefit analysis of dredging.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend. He puts the situation in a beautiful nutshell. That is delightfully put.

We are suffering because of inadequacy and absolute ineptitude. Why should people not get to work? People in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome are carrying out their bins in boats, which is farcical in the 21st century. I know you would not put up with that on the Isle of Wight, Mr Turner, and neither should we. You have a bigger island than we have.

The previous chief executive of the Environment Agency, Barbara Young, or Baroness Young of Old Scone as she is now, once admitted that she would like to place limpet mines on all the old pumping stations just to get rid of them. She preached the gospel of sustainability, and she said that the only long-term solution would be to open the flood banks and let the waters spill over the flood plains wherever the rain or tides dictate. What has changed? Lady Young has gone, but her director of operations, Paul Leinster, adopted most of her dotty ideas and took her £200,000 a year job—nice if you can get it.

Today on the levels, the Environment Agency spends far more money creating floods than averting them. Right now the agency is pioneering an extravagant, ridiculous scheme to flood the Steart peninsula near the Hinkley Point nuclear power station, which we in Somerset know about, in order to create a “wonderful” habitat for wildlife. The agency will also prove to the nosey parkers in Brussels that we are doing all we can to meet EU objectives to make life more comfortable for reed warblers. That is of course a load of nonsense, absolute rubbish and a waste of money. The agency is spending £31 million digging holes on Steart. I am all in favour of our feathered friends—I should be—but I have missed something. Is a new European directive likely to put birds before people? I am beginning to wonder.

Poor people are being baled out of their homes in Northmoor, Moorland and across Somerset, and my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome will say a few words about that in a minute. The Environment Agency has a woeful track record of being led by wets, do-gooders and twitchers. Lady Young with her limpet mines was once chairman of English Nature and chief executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Tweet, tweet.

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The noble Lord Smith of Finsbury, Chris Smith as he was when he was Labour, remains chairman of the Environment Agency until July 2014. He is a typically wishy-washy man and a townie. He is a man who described last year’s flooding as being caused by the “wrong type of rain” when he stood in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane. The Environment Agency wants us to believe that it is far too expensive to dredge rivers, which is rubbish. If those people really cared about the environment, they would know that failure to dredge completely upsets the ecology of the whole area and the very wildlife that they religiously want to protect.

So what are we going to do in Somerset? Wait until Lord Smith pulls his finger out of the dyke, metaphorically speaking? I am afraid that we have had enough. We are not going to put up with it, year in and year out. Flooding is not a once-in-100-years event now; it is happening every year. The Royal Bath and West show and Michael Eavis of Glastonbury festival fame have started rattling tins to try to raise £2 million towards dredging. That money is gratefully received, and they are doing a good job, as my colleagues in Somerset know. Perhaps Her Majesty’s Government would care to give as generously, or at least lean or sit heavily on the Environment Agency to give seriously. Perhaps the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government could sit on the Environment Agency.

It is always being said that the Environment Agency is broken, but it is still the biggest quango on the planet as far as I am concerned. The fundraisers are already talking to the Dutch. There is a wonderful machine used in East Anglia which has been brilliant, and I am going to go to see it in action—I am arranging to see Dutch engineers to support the task, and I will speak to my Somerset colleagues about it. The task is not difficult or impossible. We can do it on a much bigger scale in different areas. I am meeting members of the Dutch Parliament in Strasbourg next week at the Council of Europe to talk about what they can do to help us to get the Environment Agency to change its mind.

The Environment Agency has failed us once again, and I am absolutely sure that the Minister and the whole Government want the organisation to be slimmed down and to make it work better and more efficiently. Now is the time for action. Will the Minister please tell us what we want to hear? The people of Somerset not only deserve this; they need it. Get the rivers dredged and give us hope.

4.24 pm

Mr David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words and to congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing this debate. The Minister must have wondered what on earth he has wandered into at this Somerset festival of complaint. He can pass on the comments that are more apposite for another Department.

I just want to say on behalf of my constituents that yet again we are facing what are described as once-in-100-years events, which now seem to happen every year. Villages and communities in my constituency are cut off. Muchelney—the clue is in the name, which means “big island”—has reverted to being an island for the past several weeks, and it will continue to be so for

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weeks to come. Individual constituents have also been cut off. I have just been on the phone to a constituent who has a relatively new house built over the past couple of years to the requirements of the Environment Agency to be above the flood line; nevertheless, she has found herself cut off.

We want to get across the message that, first, the floods this year are worse than ever. We are used to flooding on the levels, but these floods are worse than ever. Places in my constituency have flooded that have never previously been flooded. The road at Pibsbury, one of the main roads into Langport, is closed. Aller drove is flooded, which may be a result of the Environment Agency tinkering with the spillway there. Nevertheless, houses there are flooded.

There is a strong feeling that we now have to do something about the flooding. I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson), who has responsibility for flooding, for taking the trouble to come down to my constituency last Wednesday. I took him around the road closures and the flooding, so far as I could, to see the affected areas. He was both fascinated and appalled to see the situation. He kindly

joined me at a meeting in Somerton with what nowadays we call stakeholders—people who know about flooding. There was unanimity on the Somerset end that we want exactly what the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset set out.

What we need to do is increase the capacity of our watercourses, which means the Parrett and the Tone; it also means the local clearing of our watercourses and rhynes to provide capacity so that we can run the pumps and get water away. That is what people find most offensive—that we cannot get water away. The pumps are not even on at the moment. We have a forecast for heavy rain at the end of this week, and right at this moment the local authority is considering whether it needs to declare a major incident for this weekend.

Dredging, dredging, dredging is our first request to increase capacity. Secondly, how on earth is it that a main road, which is mainly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Mr Browne), the A361, can be closed for weeks? It is the main road from our part of the world to Taunton. The Minister's Department can help communities to help themselves by providing support for the mitigation work that is needed and for the cost to the local authority of road maintenance. When such causeway roads are flooded, they literally fall apart and we as council tax payers have to pay.

Will the Minister please take those messages back? I am confident that this is the year we will do something about the flooding on the Somerset levels, not to prevent it ever flooding again—we understand that flooding happens—but to stop water getting into people's houses, to stop communities being cut off and to stop the water sitting for week after week with nothing apparently happening.

4.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I begin

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by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing this debate. Before I answer some of the points that have been raised and comment on the issues, particularly those affecting local authorities, I acknowledge the comments of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath) on my position in responding to some points that probably sit better with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We will ensure that that Department receives a note of what has been said today. However, I will address his comment on the possibility of a major incident being called at the weekend.

As we have been sitting here during this afternoon's debate a major incident has been called in Somerset at the request of the council. A meeting of the strategic co-ordination group has just concluded, and for the moment the situation will be managed in the county to ensure assistance is provided as required. The

Government liaison officer from my Department will be in attendance. Indeed, the chief fire and rescue adviser is sitting in the room at this very moment.

I am pleased that we are having this debate, not least because it provides an opportunity to put on the record, while we talk about local authorities, the Government's and my appreciation for the effective way in which emergency responders, local authorities and the emergency services, in particular the fire service, managed the flooding events witnessed across England throughout December into January, and for the continued support that local authorities and the wider community is providing to the ongoing flooding of villages on the Somerset levels. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset commented on the role played by local authorities, which have worked hard to ensure that people have what they need and should be congratulated.

I also want to say how sorry we are for those people who have had their homes or businesses flooded, some of whom have experienced re-flooding. I represent a constituency that has recently experienced tidal surges and flooding, and the effects are felt not just in the loss of personal possessions but in the wait for a home or business to dry out and be fit to live or work in again—flooding is equally devastating for business owners. It is horrible time for all those affected and our thoughts obviously go out to them.

We cannot prevent flooding completely, as hon. Members have acknowledged. When the weather deteriorates, there are well practised approaches to warning and informing emergency responders and the general public of what is likely to happen. That is why we have local resilience forums, one for each police force area, identifying the risks faced at the local level and drawing up plans to ensure a response if such risks materialise. If local responders are overwhelmed or if an emergency affects multiple areas, the Government can support the response.

For all emergencies, the lead Government Department—in this case the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—is responsible for monitoring the situation on the ground, assessing what, if any, Government support is needed in the immediate aftermath, and ensuring that the Government as a whole respond as necessary. Throughout this entire period of severe weather that England has experienced, the Department did exactly that, including convening daily, often twice-daily, teleconferences of officials, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs chaired daily meetings of COBRA.

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I want to be clear about what the Government have done to help communities to recover from these most recent floods. We have been there in the aftermath: not only have we activated the Bellwin scheme for emergency financial assistance, but on 17 January I announced a further severe weather recovery support package that local authorities can call on over and above Bellwin. We have continued to work with local authorities in their transition from response to recovery, and our officials have called the chief executive of every local authority affected by the flooding so that we are clear about the local impacts. We are already inviting every local authority leader from affected communities, along with representatives from the voluntary sector, to

meet me to discuss any further support that may be necessary and to look at the lessons learned exercise, which some Members have commented on today.

Tessa Munt: I wonder whether I might draw the Minister into looking forward. I appreciate everything that has been done and absolutely endorse to his comments about those who act in emergencies. The reality, however, is that if the money paid by internal drainage boards to the Environment Agency is given back to the IDBs, such as the Axe Brue IDB in my area, along with some responsibility, then contractors with expertise and knowledge of the local area can actually carry out work to prevent flooding in future.

We really have to address this. I spoke with my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), then the Minister with responsibility for flooding, when he visited farmers in my constituency in April last year. Promises have been made, but we need to take action and stop the poor farmers and landowners, who are paying rates to the drainage boards, having to pay twice. Every time they are asked to respond by taking action to help themselves, they have already paid for that response in the money that goes to the Environment Agency. We have to do something.

Brandon Lewis: All hon. Members have made strong, passionate cases for ensuring that progress is made and that they get the right response, including, in particular, forward work by the Environment Agency across Somerset. My colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will want to look at the information and will be speaking to Members. The Prime Minister has already announced that the Secretary of State will be coming back to the House in the next couple of weeks to discuss where we are going and what the Environment Agency's next steps will be. Members will then have the chance to quiz him further.

Tessa Munt: I have to say that the Environment Agency has been pretty clear locally that it cannot cope with the situation, so much more radical action is needed. The expertise sits in the internal drainage boards. They have the people with all the knowledge and they should be allowed to do the work. They can do it. Somebody needs to take some action about removing that responsibility from the Environment Agency.

Brandon Lewis: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be putting that point to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

I want to say a little bit about the Bellwin scheme, which has been supporting affected areas since we activated it in December. As most local authorities are fully aware,

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it is a means by which the Government can reimburse a local authority for its immediate and uninsurable costs associated with responding to an emergency or disaster in its area. Bellwin is a well recognised and respected funding scheme. Local authorities have one month from the end of an incident to notify the Department that they intend to apply for activation of the Bellwin scheme. So far, 37 authorities have given us notification. The colleagues of my hon. Friend the Member

for Bridgwater and West Somerset at Somerset county council have already registered an interest to apply for Bellwin support in respect of the current flooding.

Due to the way the Somerset levels and moors are managed, they are designed to flood, which results in the entire area effectively still remaining a response phase to the recent flooding—as I said, a major incident has been declared today—and will remain so for some weeks. I recognise, however, that the recent flooding in some villages is worse than that seen in 2012. The full extent of the flooding may not be realised until the levels and moors are fully pumped out. My chief fire and rescue advisor has offered additional pumping capability and the use of local fire and rescue services' high-volume pumps to support the local Environment Agency efforts in returning the levels to a safer capacity for this time of year. They have further supported Somerset county council by providing a fire boat and crew, to be used as ferry service for the residents of the cut-off villages to enable them safely to obtain necessary supplies, and this will remain in place.

I have been advised that the local Environment Agency took action to mobilise pumping appliances in advance along the River Parrett. This was following the numerous contingency plans that have been put in place since the 2012 floods. In recognition of the serious impact that the flooding is having in Somerset, the Environment Agency is mobilising an additional 20 temporary pumps, increasing its pumping capacity by 150% and making it probably the single biggest pump mobilisation in the country. The agency has also brought in extra manpower from around the country to support what has been a 24/7 incident response for some weeks.

Since the summer flooding of 2012, the Environment Agency has been working with several local organisations and communities to consider how best to manage future flood risk in the levels area. Members have made their views clear on that today, and I will ensure that comments are fed back to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson). A local task force, comprising locals, partners and communities, has been established to develop a clear, long-term vision for the future of the Somerset levels and moors. The task force will be funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, local authorities and local environmental groups with expert support from both the Environment Agency and Natural England.

On dredging, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset in particular, the Environment Agency is working closely with local partners to develop options to improve the situation on the levels.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I am sorry to intervene here, but I never hesitate to correct a Minister. I know that he is working from what material he has, but that is absolute rubbish. The Environment Agency is not working with

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locals and certainly has not been in touch with Members from Somerset, and I am not aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws) has had any

more success than us. That is absolutely not the case at all. I am sorry to have to correct the Minister.

Brandon Lewis: It is a point well made. If my hon. Friend's understanding is that the Environment Agency is not meeting locals, I will certainly feed that through to DEFRA Ministers to ensure that they instruct the Environment Agency to talk to locals about what they are doing and how they are doing it in order to get things moving in a way that is satisfactory for everyone. Ultimately, we want to ensure that residents, on whose behalf hon. Members have spoken so passionately today, are properly protected.

Mr Heath: What the Minister may not realise, because his Department is not leading on this, is that the issue is the policy that the Environment Agency is required to follow. In cost-benefit analysis, we will always lose out to city and urban areas. What we are saying today is that we have simply run out of patience. A political decision and a governmental decision are needed, and I am confident that my former colleagues in DEFRA will make that political decision.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. He read my mind because I was going to say that the matter will depend on the economic case according to existing policy. I will ensure that the Secretary of State knows hon. Members' views on the criteria. The Department will look at the matter, and I expect hon. Members to continue to quiz us and to make the case for Somerset.

As I said, I was pleased to be able to announce on Friday the extra support we are giving to local authorities on top of the Bellwin scheme. There will be a clear expectation for results to be achieved with the extra funds. Local authorities will have a key role in identifying priorities for assistance, working closely with communities and businesses to enable that to happen, using the

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re-prioritisation of existing budgets that we announced. My officials are working to finalise arrangements for allocating the money and will be writing to chief executives very shortly to outline exactly what the application process will be.

In closing, I turn specifically to the role of local authorities, who are often subject to a tough line from hon. Members and residents about what they do not do. This afternoon, hon. Members have recognised that local authorities have worked really hard and have provided superb support for the communities, pressing the case to make sure that people have the right support in the tragic situations in which they find themselves. The Bellwin scheme is there to provide extra support, as will the money we announced on Friday. Flooding is devastating for those affected, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing and to support the work of the emergency services, local authorities and voluntary groups.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Many council leaders are watching our debate, and information has been sent through to us. Could the Minister convene a meeting of the leaders of the affected councils—Taunton Deane, Sedgmoor, Mendip, South

Somerset and West Somerset—to talk about the matter in greater detail? Perhaps he will think about that.

Brandon Lewis: I would be happy to do that. This week, we are writing to every local authority in the country that has been affected by flooding to invite them to send representatives in relevant and logical groups to talk to me about the issues. Those letters may already be on their way to chief executive and leaders. I will ensure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs takes note of what has been said today that is relevant to that Department.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate that makes clear the case for the people of Somerset.