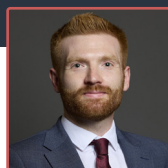


Flood Risk & The Sequential Test

With Danny Beales MP, Max Kidd-Rossiter (Lichfields) and Cllr Duncan Enright (W. Oxon. District Council)



Danny Beales MP



Max Kidd-Rossiter



Cllr Duncan Enright

Introduction

This roundtable brought together practitioners from across planning, engineering, consultancy and local government to examine how England's current flood-risk policies interact with the ambition to deliver 1.5 million homes. While participants came from different technical backgrounds and regions, a shared theme emerged: the existing framework (particularly around the sequential test, surface water management and the operational capacity of statutory bodies) runs the risk of losing alignment with real-world risk and the scale of development required to address our housing crisis.

Participants highlighted the intensifying political salience of flood risk, driven by repeated localised events and growing flood risk brought on by climate change. Councillors and local authorities face a growing tension: they must deliver homes at pace while navigating heightened community sensitivities, increasingly complex policy requirements and often slow responses from regulators. SMEs, in particular, were seen as disproportionately affected by the current system, facing significant delays and technical burdens that larger developers can absorb more easily.

The group also stressed that climate change and ageing infrastructure demand a more integrated, catchment-wide approach to water management, one that recognises defended areas, unlocks more land safely and enables long-term funding for maintenance and enhancement of defences.



Key takeaways

- **Introduce a new “Flood Zone 3C” to distinguish defended from undefended floodplains.**

Participants argued that current classifications fail to reflect real risk. Defended areas are treated the same as undefended ones, significantly restricting development in places that are, in practice, safe. A formalised “3C” category would allow authorities to consider residual risk proportionately, unlock substantial land in coastal and defended regions and support targeted financial contributions for defence upkeep.

- **Create a national, integrated mapping approach for surface water flooding.**

Current surface-water flood maps were described as topography-driven and insufficiently reflective of historic flooding or critical drainage areas. A more robust, jointly maintained database incorporating Lead Local Flood Authorities (LLFAs), the Environment Agency and local evidence would improve consistency and better identify genuinely high-risk sites.

- **Reform the sequential test to improve clarity, proportionality and consistency.**

The sequential test was described as overly theoretical, variably interpreted and increasingly misaligned with modern flood-risk mitigation techniques. Clear national guidance on “reasonably available alternatives” and methodological expectations would reduce delays, avoid academic exercises with limited practical value and allow more site-specific assessments of whether development can be made safe.

- **Enable developers to contribute directly to long-term flood-defence funding.**

Coastal and defended authorities rarely use existing mechanisms such as Section 106 (S106) and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to secure developer funding for flood-defence maintenance. A ring-fenced, transparent approach (perhaps akin to biodiversity credits) would give developers certainty while helping maintain and enhance defences and unlock additional land safely. Participants noted a strong willingness among major housebuilders to contribute, if the mechanism is robust and protected. One hindrance voiced here was that one-off payments like S106 and CIL would be unconvincing for a robust, long-term approach to defence maintenance.

- **Promote catchment-wide, integrated water-management planning.**

Participants emphasised the need for local planning to move beyond red-line local boundaries, recognising that interactions between surface water, groundwater, fluvial and tidal systems affect areas larger than just their own. Integrated water management similar to approaches trialled in Greater Manchester would better align development with strategic investment, address cumulative impacts across authorities and reduce downstream risks. Greater devolution, and its potential consequences for LLFAs, could provide an easy opportunity for this.

- **Encourage national alignment between flood-risk policy and housing delivery targets.**

The group noted increasing tension between flood-risk caution and the scale of housing required nationally. Clearer government direction on how the two objectives should balance (especially in high-risk counties) would help local authorities take decisions with confidence and avoid the risk-aversion that currently inhibits sound proposals.

- **Improve statutory consultee capacity and responsiveness.**

Delays frequently arise not only from the speed of Environment Agency responses but also from

under-resourced LLFAs. Strengthening their capacity, skills and response times would reduce bottlenecks and improve consistency, particularly for large or complex sites which require iterative modelling.

- **Re-establish robust local plan coverage to reduce case-by-case sequential testing.**

Limited local plan coverage forces sequential testing to take place at planning-application stage rather than plan-making stage, significantly increasing burdens on applicants and councils. Strengthening local plan production and embedding strategic sequential testing early would remove substantial work downstream. This is particularly challenging for small sites, where there is a greater likelihood of failing the sequential test.

- **Introduce a system of flood-risk “credits” for developers.**

Building on biodiversity-net-gain mechanisms, participants suggested allowing developers (especially SMEs) to buy into catchment-wide flood-storage or defence-improvement schemes when on-site mitigation is limited. This would improve resilience for existing communities, support strategic climate-adaptation projects and reduce barriers for smaller sites.

- **Support greater innovation in masterplanning and SuDS deployment.**

Case studies such as Upton in Northampton, where areas at risk were reserved for playing fields which could drain more easily and face less impact from flooding, demonstrate that good masterplanning can reduce flood risk not only on-site but also across wider areas. Policy should further encourage high-quality SuDS, multifunctional landscapes and place-making approaches that deliver flood mitigation, ecological uplift and long-term community value.

Issues raised

- **SMEs disproportionately affected by sequential-test requirements.**

Smaller sites lack local-plan allocation exemptions and often cannot absorb the technical costs or delays generated by sequential-test ambiguity. Historically unenforced tests are now applied more rigidly, creating significant new barriers. Smaller sites are also more likely to be impacted by alternative site viability (simply because there are more small parcels of land than large ones), meaning developers have a greater obligation to provide more detailed evidence than those with large sites.

- **Lack of clarity and inconsistency in sequential-test methodology.**

Terms used in the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) such as “reasonably available,” “proportionate,” and “robust” are interpreted differently between authorities, generating unpredictability, elongated pre-apps and repeated requests for further information. Though this will likely standardise over time, this will only happen if stewarded by strong guidance on best practice across local authorities.

- **Groundwater data and mapping remain unreliable.**

Developers reported increasing requests for groundwater-based sequential testing despite inconsistent or low-resolution data, creating methodological disputes and unnecessary delays.

- **Over-demand for technical detail at outline stage.**

LLFAs and other consultees often request highly detailed modelling long before it is reasonable or feasible, slowing delivery and creating a misalignment between outline permission and plan-making evidence. As mentioned above, this is particularly impactful for SMEs and a consequence of insufficient planmaking.

- **Surface-water flood mapping is too coarse and overly restrictive.**

The current maps pick up minor topographical depressions, do not distinguish local flow paths or historic events and can trigger disproportionate responses in planning.

- **Capacity issues in LLFAs and statutory bodies.**

Slow or inconsistent responses from LLFAs were highlighted as a chronic issue, sometimes more significant than delays from the Environment Agency.

- **Flood-risk concerns can be used as a proxy for wider local opposition.**

Several participants noted that surface-water anecdotes and perceived risk are increasingly invoked to challenge development, even where formal assessments indicate low risk.

- **Lack of catchment-wide coordination creates downstream impacts.**

Developments in one authority may increase flood risk in another, with insufficient mechanisms for shared planning, responsibility and long-term strategic management.

Conclusion

The discussion made clear that England's current flood-risk framework is struggling to keep pace with the realities of climate change, the ambitions for national housing delivery, or the pressures faced by local authorities and developers alike. Participants recognised that significant expertise already exists within industry and government, but it is often constrained by unclear policy, inconsistent practice and fragmented responsibilities.

A shared appetite emerged hoping for a more coherent, proportionate and forward-looking system that better reflects the real-world challenges of flood mitigation. The opportunity is to refine policy so that mitigation, place-making and sustainable growth can be achieved together rather than traded off, enabling the planning system to deliver both safer communities and the homes the country urgently needs.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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secretariat@plghousing.org