

Coastal Management



The UK coastline is shaped by interactions between complex social, ecological, and physical processes. Increasing coastal flood and erosion risk is a major climate adaptation challenge. This POSTnote examines coastal management in England, associated issues and how an adaptive approach can better prepare the country for uncertain future sea level rise under climate change.

Background

Coastal management seeks to reduce risk of flooding and erosion to communities, infrastructure, and assets on the coast. Cultural heritage sites and important ecosystems located in the coastal zone are vulnerable to coastal change (flooding and erosion).¹⁻³ Coastal flood risk is second in the national risk register.⁴ Low lying coastal regions are susceptible to flooding, with 520,000 properties in England having >0.5% annual coastal flooding risk.¹ Currently, around 8,900 properties are in areas at risk from coastal erosion.¹ Infrastructure along the coast includes 7,500km of road and 520km of rail as well as power stations,⁵ ports and industrial facilities such as oil refineries,⁶ gas terminals and chemical plants.^{1,5,7}

Coastal management is devolved. In England, it is undertaken in line with the national Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) strategy published in 2020,⁸ through an annual action plan set out by the Environment Agency (EA). While improved management and forecasting have reduced damages from coastal hazards of comparable magnitude since the previous century,⁹⁻¹² coastal development is increasing exposure of populations and assets at the coast.¹³ Temperature rise in the 20th and 21st Century has also committed the Earth to centuries of sea level rise (SLR) (Box 1),^{14,15} increasing

Overview

- Sea level rise will continue over the coming centuries, increasing the frequency and magnitude of coastal hazards.
- Growing coastal populations and the value of assets on the coast are increasing exposure to coastal flood and erosion risk, with a third of people exposed to frequent coastal flooding in the top 20% most vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- Coastal management in England is guided by the new Flooding and Coastal Erosion Risk Management strategy, but it is not clear if the strategy can address the potential scale of future risks.
- Challenges remain around the planning, funding, and delivery of coastal management. Some options may also be challenging to deliver without gaining the acceptance of local communities.

coastal hazards. This includes greater risk from storms contributing to increased flood and erosion risk.¹⁶ Following major coastal flooding in 1953,¹⁷ the dominant approach to risk mitigation has been engineered ('hard') defences, such as sea walls and storm surge barriers. However, the use of natural habitats, such as salt marsh, to manage coastal risk may be more economically sustainable with under 0.5m SLR^{18,19} as reflected in the EA's FCERM strategy.⁸

The changing coast

There are considerable challenges in projecting how coastal flood risk will evolve as climate changes. As elsewhere,²⁰ increased UK flood risk has mainly been due to increasing asset exposure at the coast.^{2,21} Predicting changes in social and economic conditions, including future adaptation, and their influence on future flood risk is challenging.^{22,23} Beyond 2050, increasing rates of SLR are likely to become the main driver of UK coastal flood losses.²³ Coastal flood risk increases disproportionately for an equivalent global warming level compared to flood risk from other sources (such as river and surface water flooding).²⁴ Softer or unconsolidated coastal rock types are more susceptible to erosion.²⁵

Compound flooding occurs when sea, river and/or surface run-

Box 1: Uncertain Future sea level

Future coastal flood risk assessments rely on projections of future sea level (POSTnote 555). Despite advances in modelling the land ice contribution,^{26,27} policy responses will have to account for persistent uncertainty in future SLR. For the UK, high resolution regional projections of future sea level to 2300 are available through the UK Climate Projections 2018 (UCKP18).²⁸ These provide future sea level projections under a set of low, medium and high greenhouse gas concentration emissions scenarios. SLR will be greater further south in the UK, with UCKP18 marine projections ranging from 0.29-1.15m by 2100 for London compared to 0.08-0.9m for Edinburgh.²⁹ Projections range from 0.6-4.5m by 2300 around the UK and across emissions scenarios.^{28,29} In addition to these, a high end climate scenario (H++) projects SLR of 1.9m by 2100 and guides projects requiring a high standard of protection.²⁹ The third climate change risk assessment similarly suggests the UK should prepare for up to 2m SLR by 2100 in the event of extreme Antarctic melting.³⁰

off happen concurrently or in close succession causing high water levels, with particularly adverse consequences for coastal communities.³¹⁻³⁶ Compound hazards are a relatively under explored aspect of coastal flood risk, especially when they occur with an extreme high tide superimposed on SLR.^{37,38} Land elevation and prevailing storm tracks lead to increased frequency of compound flood hazards in the west and south west of England.³¹ Compound flood risk in Northern Europe is likely to increase under climate change,³⁹ but localised projections are challenging to generate⁴⁰⁻⁴² and uncertain.³⁹

Various modelling approaches are used to project coastal risk under climate change, but there are modelling challenges:

- **Scale.** Simulating large regions of coast at high resolution (100's of km) is computationally expensive,⁴³⁻⁴⁵ so fixed, rather than evolving shapes of the coast are often used in flood models.⁴⁴ Coastal change processes, such as sediment transport, also occur over large scales that are challenging to simulate.^{22,46} There are also issues around downscaling climate variables from global to local scales.⁴⁶
- **Validation.** While the representation of climate, morphological and wave processes has improved in flood models,^{22,44,47-51} more observational data over time and across locations can improve hazard model validation.⁵²
- **Complexity.** Coastal erosion is highly localised and is dependent on coastal geology and geometry such as unstable complex cliffs,^{53,54} ecology and wave direction,⁵⁵ and timing of storm events in relation to tides^{51,56,57} (impacts are greater at high tide). Coastal erosion can be highly episodic.⁵⁸ Extreme sea levels and erosion interact;^{59,60} for instance, beach profiles can change in response to storm events.⁶¹ Airborne spray, an important flood source, is rarely included in flood hazard models.⁴⁴ Some physical and biological processes are poorly understood and may not be represented in models, driving uncertainty over longer timescales.⁶² Process interactions are computationally expensive to capture but not doing so can underestimate the hazard.^{37,63} Modelling natural replenishment of sediment to beaches after storms remains a challenge.⁵⁸
- **Social and economic change.** How human systems will respond to climate change and SLR, and whether policy will

be adequately formulated and funded to address challenges around social acceptance is a major source of uncertainty.²³ To address this, scenarios have been developed to represent different development pathways ranging from high levels of mitigation to continued emissions growth. Projections of future coastal change are made for each scenario, or under an average emissions scenario, but their likelihood cannot be quantified. Questions around ethical and equity implications of policy are beyond the scope of standard modelling approaches, and as with other aspects of climate policy require complimentary qualitative approaches to address.⁶⁴

Monitoring erosion and flood sources

The National Network of Coastal Monitoring Programmes of England collates monitoring data for the English coast by region.⁶⁵ Monitoring of interlinked processes such as SLR, storm activity, erosion and sedimentary processes⁶⁶ and social and economic change is needed for effective coastal management.⁶⁷ Monitoring of erosion is largely based on ground and air based surveys.⁶⁸ Advances in satellite remote sensing will increasingly improve understanding of coastal change.⁶⁹ New approaches to automated monitoring may provide real time information for emergency management and improve flood forecasting.⁷⁰

Coastal management policy

Defra is the Government department responsible for policy on FCERM in England. Risk Management Authorities (RMAs) made up of the EA, Lead Local Flood Authorities, District and Borough Councils, Coast protection authorities, water and sewerage companies, internal drainage boards and Highways authorities work in partnership to deliver FCERM.⁷¹ RMAs with oversight of erosion risk management are Coast Protection Authorities – local authorities within a maritime district as defined by the Coast Protection Act 1949.⁷² Regional Flood and Coastal Committees set levies to fund priority regional FCERM works carried out by the EA.⁷³ RMAs can apply for Flood Defence Grant in Aid and Local Levy funding for FCERM work.

Flooding and Coastal Erosion Risk Management

Under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010,⁷¹ RMAs are required to cooperate to deliver coastal management in line with the FCERM strategy.⁸ The strategy's primary goal is to 'create a nation more resilient (Box 2) to future flood and coastal erosion risk',⁸ with £5.2 bn pledged over 6 years from 2021.⁸ The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) recommended FCERM funding be based on delivering standards of resilience to flood magnitudes above an annual probability threshold.⁷³ Despite public support for this,^{74,75} resilience standards were not adopted in the Government's FCERM Strategy, due to a lack of agreed methods and definitions for assessing and quantifying coastal resilience. Instead, the level of central government funding for FCERM projects is determined through variants of benefit-cost analysis (BCA),⁸ in line with previous approaches.⁷⁶ BCA compares lifetime financial costs of defence projects to potential economic damages avoided (benefits),⁷⁷ following set appraisal methods.^{77,78}

Shoreline Management Plans

FCERM is implemented through Shoreline Management Plans (SMPs) each covering one of 22 primary areas dividing the coast of England and Wales.⁷⁹ The plans are undergoing a

Box 2: Coastal Resilience

Policies increasingly promote resilience in coastal management. However, challenges remain around defining and measuring resilience in practice, and applying it to coastal management.^{80,81} Resilience is commonly defined around the ability of a system to withstand, recover from and adapt to disturbance.^{81 82-84} In the context of infrastructure systems (POSTnote 621), the NIC adds the ability of a system to anticipate disturbance to its definition and advocates resilience stress testing.⁸⁵ Although frameworks have been proposed,⁸⁰ formalising resilience in FCERM policy has been avoided due to lack of consistent definitions.^{86,87} Further challenges to integrating resilience into coastal management lie in accessing and integrating resilience metrics from different data sources.^{88,89}

refresh to reflect changes in legislation, new information and knowledge.⁹⁰ SMPs set the preferred management approaches for each area over three time periods (2005-2025, 2026-2055, 2056-2100) from 4 strategic options:⁷⁹ 'hold the line' – maintain existing defences; 'managed realignment' of defences further inland; 'advance the line'; and 'no active intervention'.⁹¹ SMPs may guide local coastal management, but are non-statutory and propose policy approaches without funding allocated.¹

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) stated that rates of managed realignment would need to be five-fold higher to meet the SMP's objective of 550km of coastline realigned by 2030.¹ Implementing SMPs would cost a total of £18-30 billion, and would not be cost beneficial for 149-185 km of England's coastline. For coastline designated as 'hold the line', 1,460km would not achieve the benefit cost ratio of recently funded projects.¹ In many cases, existing SMPs lack transparency and scientific currency in relation to climate change making them challenging to implement.⁹⁰ Legacy coastal landfill sites can also limit options for SMPs (Box 3). Between now and 2100, around 120,000-160,000 properties currently protected from coastal flooding could face uncertainty around the continuation of hold the line policies, and some may need to relocate.⁹²

Building regulations, codes and planning law

In some sectors there is specific guidance on FCERM,⁹³ with design standards based on infrastructure type and level of risk aversion.^{74,94} For example, the Office for Nuclear Regulation mandates sensitivity studies for site defences for nuclear power plants against a H++ scenario (Box 1),⁹⁵ and encourages an adaptive pathways management approach (Box 4).⁹³ Some sectors have adopted design codes incorporating high end SLR scenarios, but commentators suggest that the system of building regulations generally lacks clarity in addressing uncertain future SLR.⁷ The EA provides guidance on addressing climate change risks for new developments,^{94,96} and appraises FCERM plans for funding against their scenarios to maximise benefits of government funding.⁹⁶ The National Planning Policy Framework permits development in coastal flood risk areas if steered away from highest risk areas and made safe for its' lifetime without increasing risk elsewhere,⁹⁷ but predicting this is challenging (see changing coast section above). Development on the coastal flood plain may provide economic benefits but increases risks, with only high value areas meeting cost benefit criteria to receive central government funding for defence, which may result in entrenching inequality.⁹⁸

Box 3: Coastal Landfills

The UK has a legacy of coastal solid waste disposal sites which predate existing environmental legislation. There are at least 1700 historic landfills in the coastal plain.⁹⁹ Whilst only a small number of these are actively eroding, if not defended, at least 79 are threatened by erosion and >1200 have a 0.5% annual probability of coastal flooding in England alone, with potential consequences for human, aquatic and ecological health.^{100,101} Although risk assessment methodologies exist,¹⁰² a lack of funding means local authorities are constrained by the presence of waste and cannot apply more sustainable management approaches, such as managed realignment, which could provide sustainable coastal defence, habitat creation, carbon storage and maintain near shore sediment budgets.^{99,103}

Nature based solutions

Coastal habitats, including 80% of existing UK salt marsh, are protected under a range of national and international conservation designations.³ Previously coastal habitat restoration has been required under the European Habitats directive, and is now required for sites designated as part of the National Nature Recovery Network.¹⁰⁴ Despite this, 15% of intertidal habitat has been lost in the UK since 1945.³ With sufficient supply, intertidal habitats can trap sediment and grow vertically, moving landward as sea levels rise.^{105,106} However, where habitats are constrained by hard defences (sea walls, levees) or development, they are unable to retreat. This process of 'coastal squeeze' may contribute to loss of coastal habitat under climate change.¹⁰⁷

Increasingly, nature based solutions (NBS) are seen as a central pillar of coastal protection globally¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁰ and in the UK¹¹¹. Broadly, NBS involve manipulating nature to address societal challenges.¹¹² Coastal NBS use the protective functions of coastal habitats in absorbing wave energy and storing flood waters to reduce impacts on the coast. The flood defence benefits provided by UK natural habitats have an estimated

Box 4: Adaptive Pathways Management

Adaptive pathways coastal management describe decision making approaches that account for uncertainty, which are incorporated into climate change adaptation standards.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁶ It involves identifying a range of future adaptation scenarios, considering and evaluating the cost and effectiveness of management approaches for each scenario, alongside decision making triggers. A preferred pathway is selected and implemented, with monitoring, evaluation and learning to assess long term management options. This iterative approach allows options to be kept open while monitoring,¹¹⁷⁻¹²⁰ and to determine if a greater level of intervention is required (i.e. if sea level is rising faster than initially projected). It allows staggered investment, avoids costly future adaptation of defences, stranded assets, adaptation that increases risk elsewhere (maladaptation) or overinvestment in defences that cease to be cost effective.^{121,122} It adapts to uncertain rates of SLR by triggering decisions earlier if it is faster than projected, and by leaving open options for future intervention (such as higher defences). Adaptive pathways approaches were developed for Thames Estuary 2100 plan,^{114,123} and are now being implemented in the Humber Estuary and the Future Fens projects, as well as being applied internationally.¹¹³

value of £4.5bn.^{3,124} The main focus of coastal NBS projects has been salt marsh restoration and beach replenishment, but offshore NBS are being explored. NBS projects can be used in conjunction with hard defences,¹²⁵⁻¹²⁷ if SLR stays below 0.5m and habitats are not constrained by defences. The FCERM strategy committed to double the number of funded projects incorporating NBS,¹²⁸ but suggests they work best when implemented throughout catchments from source to sea.¹²⁹

Saltmarsh

Typically, saltmarsh is the vegetated upper area of tidal flat.¹³⁰ It occurs in intertidal estuary environments with high sediment supply,¹³⁰ and has carbon storage¹³¹⁻¹³⁴ and other ecological benefits.¹³⁵⁻¹³⁷ It can store flood water and build up with sea level, providing coastal flood risk mitigation.¹³⁸ In addition, the vegetation absorbs wave energy¹³⁸ and consolidates marsh substrate, making it resistant to surface erosion.¹³⁸ If sediment supply is sufficient, saltmarshes can grow and move inland with SLR.^{139,140} Over 100 year time frames, incorporating saltmarsh can be more cost effective than 'hard' defences alone.¹⁴¹

In managed realignment (MR) schemes, an existing defence is breached to allow the area behind the sea wall to flood on high tide to create salt marsh.¹⁴² To ensure successful functioning, MR schemes require careful design.¹⁴³ They may not deliver the same level of some ecological benefits such as differing drainage characteristics to their natural counterparts,¹⁴⁴ and monitoring criteria are ill defined.¹⁴⁵ Modelling suggests saltmarshes can reduce flood extents by 35% and damages by 37% in some estuaries¹⁴⁶ and a study comparing costs suggests they can be 2-5 times cheaper than submerged breakwaters,¹⁰⁹ but comparing their effectiveness is challenging.¹⁰⁹

Beaches and Sand Dunes

Beach and dune systems create space between breaking waves and land, absorb wave energy and act as barriers to coastal flooding.¹⁴⁷⁻¹⁴⁹ However, they are sensitive to sediment supply and measures that stop erosion elsewhere can lead to net loss of volume. Beach replenishment aims to maintain beach width/volumes.^{150,151} Removing barriers to allow sand dune migration inland (remobilisation) maintains their protective function with SLR.^{148,152} In the UK, historic beach replenishment has involved 'beach fill' with sediment from nearshore dredging.¹⁵³ This has extended the operational life of some sea walls,¹⁵³ but concerns about ecological impacts¹⁵⁴ and sustainability¹⁵⁵ has led to more strategic approaches (Box 5).^{151,156,157}

Reducing Offshore wave energy

Offshore subtidal, green infrastructure such as oyster reefs,¹⁵⁸⁻¹⁵⁹ sea grass and kelp can absorb wave energy.^{109,160,161} They trap sediment, grow with SLR and self-repair if damaged.¹⁶² In the UK, sea grass has declined by 39% since the 1980s.¹⁶³ A coastal protection scheme incorporating oyster reef, sea grass and kelp beds has been included in the £150m Defra Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme.¹⁶⁴

Social engagement with Coastal management

A key challenge for coastal management is reflecting community requirements.¹⁶⁵ Perceptions of benefits, costs and need for coastal management interventions, including MR,¹⁶⁶ can affect whether communities challenge authorities on management approaches.¹⁶⁷⁻¹⁶⁹ People's relationships and

Box 5: Bacton to Walcott Sand-scaping Scheme

The Bacton gas terminal on the North Norfolk coast is strategically important, supplying up to a third of the UK's natural gas.¹⁷⁰ The terminal and neighbouring villages are vulnerable to beach loss, resulting in wave overtopping of sea walls in the villages and erosion of soft cliffs adjacent to the plant; 10m of cliff eroded in the 2013 North Sea storm surge.¹⁵⁷ The Bacton to Walcott sand-scaping project was a partnership between the EA, North Norfolk District Council and gas terminal operators completed in 2019. With two thirds funding from gas terminal operators, the scheme cost £19 million.¹⁵⁷ Inspired by the Netherlands' 'ZandMotor', it placed 1.8 million cubic metres of sand on beaches between the gas terminal and Walcott. The design allows sand to be redistributed, to improve villages' flood defence while protecting the gas terminal.¹⁵⁷ The scheme is expected to extend the life of Bacton and Walcott's coastal defences by 15-20 years, allowing time for adaptation.

Monitoring of the scheme shows no overtopping of defences in Bacton and Walcott since completion; sediment has been retained near shore so the beach replenishes; despite early concerns, no adverse effects on wildlife have been observed.¹⁷¹ There are ongoing projects into long term social and environmental impacts, but research suggests use of sand-scaping in England may be hindered by governance.¹⁷²

sense of well-being in relation to coastal habitats is complex and requires local studies to design locally acceptable management strategies. However, more comprehensive frameworks for evaluating coastal management benefits and costs would be needed to capture intangible cultural value ecosystems (POSTbrief 34) hold for communities.¹⁷³ FCERM projects that are ethical and just, which engage with stakeholders early on,¹⁷⁴ and take account of local knowledge and perceptions,^{175,176} can build acceptance for management interventions. Quantifying the cost of flooding and erosion has become more inclusive of costs beyond property loss, such as mental health.¹⁷⁷⁻¹⁷⁹

Metrics combining deprivation and vulnerability to coastal risk can be used alongside community knowledge to target management at socioeconomic flood disadvantage.^{180,181} There is disproportionate vulnerability to coastal and other sources of flooding among those in affordable housing and socio-economically disadvantaged households¹⁸¹, as well as gender¹⁸² and age disparities.^{183,184} Flooding from all sources disproportionately impacts ethnic minority households, those in 'post-industrial' towns and cities in the north¹⁸⁵ and rural communities.¹⁸⁶ The capacity of communities and individuals to take action (such as property level protection) is also unequal, with more affluent households and communities having more capacity to do so.¹⁶⁷ Insurance based solutions to distribute damages from coastal flood risk have limitations in uptake,^{185,187} and availability. The £6,000 Coastal Erosion Assistance Grant for demolition and removal costs is the only compensation available for properties lost to erosion.¹⁸⁸ Nationally, a third of the 1.8 million people living in the coastal flood plain are within the top 20% most vulnerable neighbourhoods.¹⁸¹ People whose homes have been flooded are approximately six times more likely to have poor mental health.¹⁸⁹ Adverse mental health effects and associated costs correlate with flood depth,¹⁹⁰ and put pressure on health and social care systems.¹⁹¹

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