

Evidence to The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee: Coastal erosion and landslips

Submitted on behalf of the Coastal Research Group, based in Happisburgh Norfolk. The group seeks to find natural and affordable projects to mitigate the effects of erosion and slow the process of change sufficiently to allow the creation of robust and sympathetic policies.

Q 2. What strategies are currently in place, or needed, to reduce the risks of landslips and coastal erosion, and what research gaps exist? What policies are in place nationally and locally, such as within the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Strategy, for mitigation of hazards associated with landslips and coastal erosion? How effective and well-resourced are they and what types of impacts are considered within the policy framework?

Our village of Happisburgh on the North Norfolk coast has long been known for its perilous fight with coastal erosion due to its naturally porous geology and the fierce nature of the North Sea. But this has been exacerbated in the last 25 years by the effect of climate change bringing both wetter summers and wetter winters which attack the stability of the cliffs from behind. The speed of change is increasing beyond our pace to plan and build solutions to address this problem nationwide.

You will no doubt receive ample evidence of what is likely to be lost forever to the sea both in heritage, cultural and community terms so I don't intend to rehearse all those valid points despite their crucial moral significance. Instead, I would like to draw your committee's attention to the vital need for community engagement in assessing this problem and the dearth of practical research in nature based, low cost, solutions.

After 25 years of various public campaigns in Happisburgh (and elsewhere) it is evident that an adversarial conflict between communities and government stake holders produces no real benefit to either party. This is almost always because the conflict is on a 'zero sum game' basis; the beleaguered community demanding complete protective defenses and the government wishing to avoid any expense that might draw on its over stretched budgets. The net result of these battles is to force those in power to win the battle but lose the trust of those communities that feel doubly abandoned, both from the forces of nature and from those who

they might have expected some protection from. Thereafter subsequent interactions between the two sides are characterized by cynicism, mistrust and conflict.

So the Coastal Research Group would like the government to consider an alternative to this approach to solving these issues: There are many case studies from around the world that show that where threatened coastal communities and governments seek to find a mutually agreeable solution, however less ambitious and maybe requiring a modest amount in funding, the consequential result is usually universally welcomed. This breeds trust and understanding, and very often useful insights that a typical 'top down' policy approach might miss.

Here in Happisburgh we are currently engaged with the North Norfolk District Council 'Coastwise' initiative which is creating plans to deliver practical projects for coastal change. The methodology used actively invites the community to share the creation and assessment of possible solutions and tries to foster a sense of partnership. There is already a cautious welcome from the community who feels that their local knowledge is being valued and can be seen reflected in the resulting project options. Unfortunately, the Coastwise project has no brief to directly address coastal erosion but we believe its methodology should be used for such.

It is commonly accepted that hard defenses are no longer the answer to coastal protection and the future lays with nature-based solutions. We would like to see more of a government commitment to the funding, research and deployment of experimental studies which have been deployed successfully around the world.

These relatively low-cost mitigations range from the dune restoration on the Spanish, Tunisian and Ghanaian coasts to the soft engineering of cliffs in the USA and New Zealand. But of course, the geology and tidal patterns vary from location to location but local knowledge and community commitment can help provide the right solution for the right location.

Here in Happisburgh the Coastal Research Group has planted some experimental marram grass to bolster the existing dunes where we as locals believe that it can survive the harsh winters. This is a slow process and takes a number of years to grow sufficiently far enough to stabilize the coast but it needs to be considered now while we have time to effect change. There are many variations on the theme of 'sand traps' which help stabilize a cliff, significantly slow erosion down and increases ecological diversity as well. We would expect some government support and encouragement for researching these schemes.

It is noteworthy that a local landscaping scheme at Bacton where local government contributed £4 million has already saved that amount in the expected maintenance that it would have normally undertaken over the last 5 years. When you consider that the benefits of that sand scheme are expected to last for another 10-15 years then purely on an economic basis alone it is a success. When you also contemplate that the community there has had a huge morale boost

with the lifting of the imminent threat to their futures then we can see that it is possible to address the human factor along with the economics. And it's the human factor that appears to be missing from current policy making.

There are a number of projects which recognize this philosophy like the Resilient Coastal Communities Project, Making Space for Sand and the Changing Coasts East Riding but they fall short of any legal obligation to collaborate with communities. We believe that there should be a statutory requirement for local government to enable communities to be fully empowered partners to deliver these local solutions, however big or small.

We recognize that change is inevitable but we can employ modest natural solutions to control the speed of change which helps people and policy makers. This is a moral and practical case for supporting communities to continue to live in their chosen villages for as long as possible, and give time for everyone to plan a better response to this huge environmental problem.

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