



Building in the balance: a watertight approach to flood infrastructure?

Dr Simon Kaye
June 2026

Building in the balance: a watertight approach to flood infrastructure?

Infrastructure policy is in flux. Government is trying to accelerate delivery, reform planning, strengthen resilience and devolve more responsibility at the same time. Yet the institutions expected to make this work remain fragmented. Public expectations are contradictory: people are often wary of development in their own area, while also frustrated that the State seems unable to deliver major projects quickly, coherently or at scale.

Re:State was delighted to host a high-level roundtable event to explore these issues and the path forward, particularly in the context of the need for important environmental infrastructure development. The event brought together a diverse group of industry and public sector leaders and experts, including senior civil servants, as well as local and regional government decision makers. The aim was to identify underlying challenges and potential solutions for an urgent balancing act between many competing priorities.

The discussion was opened by Joanna Key, Director General for Regeneration, Housing and Planning at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, who reflected on the scale of policy change since the General Election, the effects of planning reform, and the growing significance of devolution in shaping how major infrastructure is planned and delivered.

For industry, the central issue is not only the speed of individual consents, but the coherence of the wider system in which investment decisions are made. Stop-start funding, unclear institutional roles and poorly aligned regulatory processes all raise costs and make long-term capability harder to sustain.

This short paper focuses on finding practical expressions from the insights that emerged from the event, specifically by applying the themes and issues discussed to the specific policy realm of flood infrastructure.

A changing policy landscape

Participants were clear that the wider infrastructure landscape is shifting quickly. Recent years have seen major movement in planning reform, infrastructure strategy and devolution, alongside new efforts to improve the predictability of the delivery environment. The 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy, the creation of NISTA and the Infrastructure Pipeline, the Planning and Infrastructure Act, and the continued advance of devolution legislation all point in the same direction: toward a more strategic, more place-sensitive and, in principle, more integrated model of delivery.

These tensions are especially visible in flood and coastal resilience. Flooding is not simply an environmental or emergency-planning issue. It is a question of economic security, public safety, land use, infrastructure performance and the State's capacity to manage long-term risk. This makes it a particularly interesting focus for

Flood and coastal resilience sit squarely within this changing landscape. They are increasingly difficult to treat as specialist environmental issues that can be handled separately from broader questions of infrastructure, growth, and place. Flood resilience affects the performance of transport systems, utilities, housing, business continuity, and local economies. In that sense, it is a useful lens through which to view the wider policy shift now underway.

Practical insight: questions about resilience should increasingly be treated as part of mainstream infrastructure strategy rather than as a parallel environmental concern that either torpedoes or approves projects. The more that government pursues growth, delivery and adaptation simultaneously, the less workable the old separation becomes.

From projects to programmes

A recurring theme in the discussion was the importance of moving away from fragmented, short-term and scheme-by-scheme approaches to infrastructure delivery. Participants argued that longer-term, programmatic models are not simply preferable in principle; they materially improve delivery. Where there is a sustained pipeline of work in a place, public and private actors can invest in skills, develop delivery relationships, sequence projects more intelligently and avoid the stop-start inefficiencies that come with one-off interventions and uncertain funding.

This matters especially in flood resilience. Risk accumulates over time, and so does resilience. Outcomes depend not on isolated capital projects alone, but on the relationship between asset maintenance, adaptation, land use, natural systems and future development. A system built around short funding cycles and disconnected approvals will tend to struggle to keep pace with this reality.

Participants cited Bradford as a useful illustration of what a sustained, place-based pipeline can achieve. Its significance lies in the way a longer-term approach can, over time, align funding and delivery to join up regeneration, transport, environmental resilience and wider place-shaping objectives.

Practical insight: Efficiency is not everything. If government wants infrastructure to deliver growth, resilience and better value simultaneously, it cannot focus only on speeding up individual decisions. It also needs to create the conditions for long-term, integrated pipelines at place level.

Devolution is necessary, but incomplete

During the roundtable, there was broad support for the direction of devolution and its potential to use place to integrate relevant policy conditions and overcome the dilemmas that block projects. Participants saw clear value in a stronger strategic role for places, more scope for long-term planning, and a more meaningful sub-national voice in shaping infrastructure priorities. But there was much less confidence that the supporting framework is yet coherent enough to make this work well, or that the needed capacity was reliably in place.

Flood resilience is an area that shows why. Responsibility is already spread across a dense institutional landscape. DEFRA sets policy nationally. The Environment Agency has the strategic overview and leads on flood risk from main rivers, the sea and reservoirs. Lead local flood authorities manage local flood risk from surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses. Water companies, highways authorities and others also play major roles. In that context, devolution cannot simply mean moving expectations downward while leaving fragmentation intact above.

Participants repeatedly returned to the same point: if strategic authorities and local leaders are expected to play a stronger role in shaping resilient growth, the relationship between national frameworks, regulators, funding regimes and local delivery bodies must become clearer. Otherwise, devolved institutions will be held responsible for outcomes without having the levers, certainty or alignment needed to achieve them.

Practical insight: the successful role of devolution will depend less on headline announcements of powers than on whether government can define a more workable division of labour between centre, regulator and place - and then ensure that the right capabilities and expertise are present when that devolution takes place.

Risks do not respect administrative boundaries

Flooding exposes another weakness in the current settlement: the geography of risk does not map neatly onto the geography of government. Catchments cross council boundaries. Infrastructure networks span multiple places. Economic disruption caused by flooding does not stay local. Climate impacts do not recognise jurisdictional lines on a map.

There is clearly a case for ensuring stronger local and regional leadership sit alongside clear national priorities and coherent national frameworks. This is not necessarily an argument for recentralisation: much could be achieved through more explicit and functional allocation of roles between tiers. National government should be clearer about the outcomes it expects and the standards it wants upheld. Devolved institutions should have more room to shape delivery in bespoke response to local geography, risk, and economic context. But neither tier can succeed if each assumes the other will solve the coordination problem.

This is also reflected in a wider point about scale. Strategic authorities may be a better scale than individual districts for some infrastructure questions. But they will not automatically be the right geography for every resilience issue. In flood policy, a workable model is likely to require a combination of regional strategy, catchment-scale thinking and local delivery capability rather than a one-size-fits-all map.

Practical insight: devolution policy must pay more attention to spatial logic: not just which powers move, but which kinds of problem should be handled at which scale, and how those scales are meant to connect.

Flood resilience as a test of the place-based approach?

Flooding serves as a particularly useful test case for many of the roundtable's wider insights. That is because it sits at the intersection of so many systems at once: infrastructure, land use, environmental stewardship, transport, utilities, emergency response and local growth.

Participants reflected more broadly on the difficulty of governing major infrastructure decisions through narrow silos. Choices made in one domain frequently shape outcomes in another, yet institutions and funding streams often remain separated. Flood resilience is a good example of what this means in practice. Decisions about drainage, land use, transport, energy, green space and development patterns all affect risk, but are not always planned or funded in a joined-up way.

Flood infrastructure highlights the gap between a system organised around sectors and organisations, and the needs of places facing cumulative and interconnected risks.

Practical insight: flood resilience should be treated as an area in which government can test a more integrated, place-based and cross-sectoral model of infrastructure planning and delivery, centred round integrated programme teams working toward long-term outcomes.

Alignment and capability are now the main bottlenecks

One cross-cutting issue is the risk and reality of institutional misalignment.

Roundtable participants described a system in which regulators can appear to pull in different directions, delivery bodies are required to operate within overlapping frameworks, and accountability becomes blurred when trade-offs or delays arise. The problem is not simply the existence of multiple actors; it is the absence of a sufficiently clear operating model linking them together.

That problem is compounded by uneven capacity. Participants returned repeatedly to the pressure on local government, the regulatory system and the wider delivery chain. Devolution assumes institutions capable of planning, coordinating, commissioning and convening. It also assumes regulators with the resources, systems and clarity of mandate to engage effectively. Without that capability, new powers or new structures risk becoming aspirational rather than practical.

Digital capability is also central to this challenge, particularly around planning and data. Participants saw better digital tools and better information flows as increasingly important to handling complexity, improving coordination and making routine decisions faster. But there was also a clear note of realism: technology can support better delivery, but it cannot compensate for unresolved questions of accountability, role clarity or institutional design.

Practical insight: the next phase of reform cannot be limited to policy change alone. It must also address the operating capacity of the system expected to deliver it.

Toward a more coherent settlement

Taken together, the discussion pointed the way to a more mature view of the current debate than is often visible in headline politics. The central question is no longer simply whether more powers should move out of Whitehall. It is whether England is building a settlement in which national priorities, regulatory systems and devolved institutions can operate as parts of a coherent whole.

For firms delivering complex infrastructure, the challenge is rarely growth, resilience and nature recovery taken individually.

It is the absence of a system that brings them together early enough, clearly enough and consistently enough to avoid costly friction later.

Flood resilience makes these questions clear. It is not just another infrastructure sub-sector. It is a stress test for whether government can move from fragmented decision-making towards a model that is more integrated, more spatially intelligent and more capable of managing long-term risk. The discussion suggested that real progress is visible: the policy architecture is moving, the funding horizon is improving, and the role of places is expanding. But the hardest work still lies ahead.

The ultimate operating model should clarify roles for every scale of State actor in this process: national direction to create the conditions for regulatory alignment rather than competition; strategic decisionmaking at the regional level; community engagement organised by local authorities.

This gives a sense of what will be required to make the settlement function in practice: aligning institutions, clarifying accountability, building delivery capability and ensuring that devolution of responsibility is matched by a system capable of delivering resilience on the ground.

The risk, otherwise, is a system in which mayoral plans, Natural England advice and local ambition all coexist, but without a clear mechanism for turning that coexistence into decisions.



“In our work across the UK with government, combined and local authorities and private customers, we see first-hand that outcomes improve where local schemes are backed by aligned funding and accountability at place level. Devolution is central to unlocking better flood resilience. Realising the benefits of devolving flood infrastructure budgets will depend on national government setting clear frameworks for funding, regulation and accountability, alongside sustained pipelines that enable delivery on the ground.”

Ginny Leonard, Work Winning Director, Balfour Beatty

Re:State

Re:State is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families, and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and where both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. This is reflected in our cross-party Advisory Board and our events programme which seeks to convene likeminded reformers from across the political spectrum.

Re:State is a registered charity, the Re:State Trust Ltd, charity no. 1103739.