

Media Release



Flood Risk Management in Northern Ireland

Despite increased expenditure and significant activity, there is limited evidence that flood risk management arrangements in Northern Ireland are demonstrating long-term value for money in a systematic and comprehensive way. That is among the findings of a report published today (16 June 2026) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report examines how the Department for Infrastructure and its partners are managing flood risk.

Flooding is one of the most significant natural hazards facing Northern Ireland. Around 45,000 properties are currently located within river and coastal flood plains, with thousands more properties at risk from reservoirs and surface water flooding. Climate change is expected to increase both the frequency and severity of these risks in the coming decades.

The Department has reported increasing levels of investment in flood risk management activities, with total expenditure reaching £96 million in 2024-25 (a 73 per cent increase since 2020-21). Most of this investment relates to prevention and protection measures, which are the focus of today's report.

A number of issues are identified which are limiting the effectiveness of current arrangements. The report notes that Flood Risk Management Plans, which coordinate activity across a range of public bodies, have not sufficiently focussed on defined and measurable outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate both the long-term impact of measures which have been delivered, and the consequences where measures have failed to be delivered.

In addition, the Department's oversight of applications for development of homes and other buildings in areas of known flood risk is limited. The Department does not have routine access to information, held at local council level, needed to monitor whether appropriate conditions are being adhered to.

Similarly, Flood Maps, a valued tool widely used by councils, developers and the public for planning and managing flood risks, are not always updated in a timely manner following completion of new flood defence

schemes. The report notes that timely and accurate information is important for providing assurance that flooding risks are being identified and managed, thereby enhancing transparency and public confidence in the wider planning system.

The impact of funding constraints on flood risk management is acknowledged. The Living with Water Programme (LWWP), established in 2015, was intended to support delivery of a Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan. However, LLWP is no longer operating as a structured programme, and is instead being processed at a pace determined by available budgets. The Department is also failing to consistently meet targets for inspection and maintenance of flood defence assets, with the most critical infrastructure being prioritised in response to resource pressures.

Weaknesses in capital project delivery are also highlighted. Analysis of 21 completed flood alleviation schemes shows that only around one in five projects was completed on time, with delays in some cases extending by more than three years. Similarly, only a small proportion of projects were delivered within close proximity of their estimated cost - final expenditure for some schemes varied widely from initial projections, from 48 per cent under to 118 per cent overspent.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"Flooding already poses a significant and growing risk to people, property and infrastructure across Northern Ireland, and this risk is expected to increase further as the climate changes. While the Department and its partners have undertaken a significant programme of work, our report highlights areas where arrangements can be strengthened."

"In particular, there is a need for clearer outcome-focused planning, improved oversight of development in flood risk areas, and more robust delivery of flood defence schemes. Addressing these issues will help ensure that public resources are used effectively ensuring better value for money by investing in prevention rather than the costs of clean up and support after flooding incidents, and ultimately ensure that Northern Ireland is better prepared to manage flood risk in the future."

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She

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has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.

2. The report will be available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk and is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Wednesday 16 June 2026.
3. The Department for Infrastructure has overall responsibility for flood defence in Northern Ireland, and leads the development of Flood Risk Management Plans.