



ADA Flood & Water Conference 2025

discusses flood risk maintenance and the politics of water management

Welcoming a near capacity audience, ADA's Flood and Water Conference 2025 took place once again at One Great George Street, Westminster, supported by sponsors Balfour Beatty and Wilkin Chapman Rollits.

With a real buzz having been generated in the Great Hall for the pre-conference networking, conference attendees were treated to a top-class line up of speakers to deliver some hard-hitting messages. ADA was also delighted to welcome a contingent of students from a variety of universities, to network and discuss with ADA members.

After another year marked by both extreme rainfall, drought and rising public scrutiny, the conference brought to the surface a unifying message: the nation cannot continue to underplay the urgency of water management. The insights from the main speakers—Alistair Carmichael MP, David Hernández Gómez, Lila Thompson, David Porter, and Sebastian

Catovsky—offered a powerful commentary on where the sector stands, where it is failing, and what must change.

A Warning from Westminster

The Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair of the EFRA Select Committee, opened with a candid reminder of how poorly understood and underappreciated the nation's drainage and water management infrastructure has become. In Carmichael's view, the essential work of internal drainage boards (IDBs), engineers, and all flood risk management authorities is most notable precisely when nothing happens—when fields stay dry, homes remain habitable, and energy networks stay online. Yet this invisibility has bred neglect. Years of shrinking budgets in real terms and declining river maintenance have left many communities more exposed than they realise.

Carmichael pressed for two urgent national priorities: a meaningful definition of food



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The Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP



security—one that recognises the absolute dependence of farming on functioning water systems—and a radical reform of the water industry. Current regulatory structures, he argued, are no longer fit for purpose. Importantly, his remarks set the tone for the rest of the conference: underinvestment in maintenance is not simply a technical problem but a political failure across a range of governments in the past few decades, with national consequences.

Spain’s Tragedy: A Global Climate Reality

If Carmichael outlined the political challenge, David Hernández Gómez provided the stark human and economic consequences of getting water management wrong.

His account of the catastrophic flooding in Valencia in 2023 was chilling: 600 litres of rain per square metre in just 12 hours; peak

flows above 2,300 cubic metres per second in channels never designed to carry such volumes; and a death toll of 236 people. The financial cost exceeded €17 billion. Agricultural land vanished, irrigation networks were obliterated, and homes simply disappeared.

Gómez’s message was unambiguous. Climate extremes are accelerating far faster than many governments are prepared to accept, and traditional views of “maximum probable” events are being rewritten in real time. His recommendations—stop building in floodplains, avoid reinstating homes in high-risk zones, accelerate the construction of planned dams, and allow river channel management where it reduces risk—could easily have been directed at the UK as well as Spain.

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David Hernández Gómez





Lila Thompson



Bottlenecks and Broken Cycles

Where Gómez highlighted climatic pressures, British Water CEO Lila Thompson illuminated the structural and economic bottlenecks constricting the UK water industry. Her depiction of supply-chain instability—contractors shedding staff, consultancies diverting expertise to rail and energy projects, and projects delayed due to regulatory hesitancy—painted a picture of a system struggling to deliver even before climate pressures are added.

Thompson argued for gathering the “whole truth”: understanding not just the frustrations of water companies or regulators individually, but the systemic blockages affecting every actor, including IDBs and suppliers. Her warning was clear: without aligning regulation, funding, innovation, and delivery, the UK cannot expect improved environmental performance or resilience.

The Need for Informed Decision-Makers

David Porter, speaking from decades of engineering experience, offered a reminder that even the best technical strategies fail





David Porter



Sebastian Catovsky

without effective communication. His story of briefing Northern Ireland’s executive during a potential Belfast evacuation underscored a key point: political leaders do not need engineering jargon—they need clarity, confidence, and context.

Porter stressed that maintenance must be relentlessly advocated for, even when political attention drifts. He commented upon the decline of informed decision-making within government, calling for stronger engineering input into policy. If clients—public or private—do not understand the constraints, risks, and implications of deferring maintenance, they cannot be expected to make wise decisions.

Government’s Position: Ambition Meets Reality

Sebastian Catovsky of DEFRA provided the government’s perspective, highlighting significant capital funding commitments, including £10.5bn over 12 years and £91m directly supporting IDB-led projects. He also detailed the Government’s intention to bring about major regulatory reforms, particularly the creation of a single integrated water regulator to replace Ofwat’s, the EA’s and

the Drinking Water Inspectorate’s fragmented oversight.

Yet even Catovsky acknowledged the concerns raised repeatedly throughout the day: reduced Environment Agency river maintenance, uncertainty over how new funding rules will filter down to local outcomes, and the intensifying pressures of climate change. His commitment to strengthening partnership working was welcomed, but many in the room clearly felt the urgency surpasses the speed of government action.

A Call to Action

Taken together, the conference’s leading voices painted a coherent picture. The UK faces rising climate threats, ageing infrastructure, regulatory burden and fragmentation, and chronic underinvestment in basic maintenance. But the country also has a network of committed professionals, proven international lessons to build upon, and a growing political willingness to consider new approaches.

ADA was very grateful to its panel of experts taking their seats for an extended

discussion session to close the conference with an impassioned plea from Somerset to reverse the decision taken earlier in the year to withdraw maintenance from a number of hydraulically important main rivers there. The concept of “trusted partner” was discussed and all agreed that this approach needs testing and the use of public sector cooperation agreements could be adjusted to accommodate such an approach. Another theme from questions was related to planning and development in flood risk areas and many comments that the planning process is disjointed at best and decisions made now risk causing major issues for future generations. Worries were also expressed about putting more onus on riparian owners to carry out work and the potential unintended consequences of that.

The closing sense of Conference attendees was not about identifying the problems—they are well known—but driving action with the pace and clarity the moment demands. The message was simple: without decisive action on maintenance, regulation, and collaboration, the UK risks learning the lessons of Valencia the hard way.

