North Kent Marshes
Water Level Management Board

Corporate Strategy 2026-2031

Delivering Resilient Water Level Management

Resilient water level management that protects communities, supports the environment, and adapts to a changing climate.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document outlines the vision and strategic priorities of the North Kent Marshes Water Level Management Board, to be delivered over the next five years, and complements the Board's supporting framework of policies, procedures, and governance arrangements.

Internal Drainage Boards and Water Level Management Boards perform an important statutory duty in managing water levels in areas of special drainage need. As Flood Risk Management Authorities, they play a key local role alongside the Environment Agency, Lead Local Flood Authorities, and other Risk Management Authorities.

Historically, land drainage was managed primarily for agricultural benefit. In recent decades, the role of Internal Drainage Boards and Water Level Management Boards has evolved in response to increased development pressures, changing agricultural practices, and growing environmental and climate challenges. Effective and proportionate water level management is essential to protecting people, property, agricultural land, and the natural environment.

Climate change has redefined the approach to water level management, highlighting the need for a more holistic and adaptive response that considers flood and drought risk, water scarcity, water quality, environmental conservation and enhancement, and the Board's changing relationship with the landscape. Achieving a climate-resilient marshland is only possible through partnership working across administrative boundaries and by taking a catchment-wide approach that recognises the interdependencies between urban and rural areas.

Being locally operational, with strong local representation, the Board is well placed to support the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of its District, and to work collaboratively with communities, landowners, public bodies, and stakeholders across the flood risk management community to adapt to the impacts of a changing climate.

INTRODUCTION

The North Kent Marshes Water Level Management Board is one of the Internal Drainage Boards operating in England, collectively responsible for managing water levels across low-lying areas of special drainage need. Together, Internal Drainage Boards cover approximately 1.2 million hectares, representing around 9.7% of England's land area.

Water Level Management Boards and Internal Drainage Boards are responsible for the management of ordinary watercourses within their Drainage Districts where land derives benefit or avoids danger as a result of drainage operations. While the historic focus of land drainage was primarily agricultural, the role of Boards has evolved to reflect wider responsibilities, including flood and drought risk management, supporting sustainable development, and conserving and enhancing the natural environment.

The North Kent Marshes Water Level Management Board builds on the established functions and experience of its predecessor Boards, operating across an expanded geography with a continued focus on locally led, proportionate, and risk-based water level management. A map of the Board's District is included at Appendix 1.

Through the operation, maintenance, and improvement of watercourses, pumping stations, and associated control structures, the Board manages water levels in a way that supports agricultural productivity, reduces flood risk to people and property, and protects and enhances environmental features across the District.

ATTRIBUTES

Total area of the Drainage District: 23,667 ha

Adopted watercourses (km): 206 km.

Pumping Stations: 4

GOVERNANCE

Under the Land Drainage Act 1991, the Board is accountable to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The governance of the North Kent Marshes Water Level Management Board is the responsibility of its Board Members, comprising elected landowner representatives and members appointed by the Local Authorities within the District who contribute to the Board through special levies. This structure ensures a balance of local knowledge, stakeholder representation, and public accountability.

The Board operates as an independent public body and has established robust and proportionate arrangements to ensure that business is conducted lawfully, transparently, and to proper standards. Committees operate under delegated authority in accordance with the Board's Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, and associated policies and procedures.

The Board aligns with the Association of Drainage Authorities' Good Governance Guidance, which provides a recognised framework covering roles and responsibilities, effective decision-making, financial management, transparency, accountability, and the management of risk.

Key governance documents, including Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, and the Scheme of Delegation, are published on the Board's website.

DELIVERY

The Board is supported by a professional and multidisciplinary team with expertise across water level management, engineering, environmental management, finance, governance, and operational delivery.

This structure enables the Board to plan, maintain, and operate its water management assets effectively, respond to flood and water level management incidents, and work collaboratively with partners and stakeholders across the District.

The separation of governance and operational delivery ensures that the Board can discharge its statutory functions efficiently, proportionately, and in accordance with good governance principles.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The Board is funded through a combination of drainage rates and special levies, reflecting the statutory framework for the management of water levels in areas of special drainage need. Agricultural drainage rates are paid directly by landowners and occupiers, while special levies are collected on the Board's behalf by Local Authorities within the District through council tax and business rates.

The Board sets its annual drainage rates and special levies to meet forecast expenditure and to ensure the effective operation, maintenance, and improvement of its assets, while maintaining appropriate reserves to manage financial risk and future investment needs.

Additional income is received from contributions by the Environment Agency, including payments associated with the management of water received from upstream catchments, and from charges for regulatory activities such as land drainage consents.

The Board may also secure external funding, including grants and loans, to support capital investment and improvement projects. This includes access to Flood Defence Grant in Aid and other funding streams where projects deliver wider flood risk management or environmental benefits.

LEGISLATION

The statutory functions and powers of the Board are set out primarily in the Land Drainage Act 1991, which provides the legal framework for the management of water levels and land drainage in areas of special drainage need. The Act also defines the land drainage functions and powers of local authorities.

Under the Land Drainage Act 1991, the Board has duties and powers relating to the supervision of land drainage within its District, the operation, maintenance, and improvement of drainage systems and pumping stations, the regulation of activities affecting watercourses, the creation of byelaws, and the raising of income to fund flood and water level management activities. In exercising these functions, the Board is required to have regard to environmental, recreational, and public access considerations.

The Board's role is further informed by a wider legislative framework relating to flood risk management, water resources, and environmental protection, including:

- **Flood and Water Management Act 2010**, which promotes cooperation between Risk Management Authorities and establishes clearer roles and responsibilities for the management of flood risk;
- **Water Resources Act 1991**, which sets out the responsibilities of the Environment Agency in relation to water resources, main rivers, and groundwater
- **Water Industry Act 1991**, which defines the powers and duties of water and sewerage companies in relation to water supply and drainage; and
- **Environment Act 2021**, which provides the framework for environmental protection in England, including duties relating to nature recovery, biodiversity enhancement, and water quality.

POLICY AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Flood and coastal erosion risk management policy in England is led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, with the Environment Agency providing a national strategic overview. Delivery is undertaken locally by Risk Management Authorities, including Water Level Management Boards and Internal Drainage Boards.

The Board's activities are aligned with the Environment Agency's National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy for England. The Board's Policy Statement on Water Level and Flood Risk Management sets out how national policy objectives are translated into locally led, proportionate delivery across the District and underpins this Corporate Strategy.

In delivering its statutory functions and strategic priorities, the Board works collaboratively with Local Authorities, other Risk Management Authorities, landowners, and partners. Where appropriate, the Board aligns its objectives and activities with relevant national, regional, and local strategies, including:

- Local Flood Risk Management Strategies;
- Shoreline Management Plans and estuary strategies;
- River Basin Management Plans and Flood Risk Management Plans; and
- Local climate change, ecological, and nature recovery strategies.

EXPENDITURE

The Board's expenditure is primarily focused on the operation, maintenance, and improvement of its water level management assets. This includes routine and planned maintenance of watercourses, pumping stations, and associated structures, as well as the operational costs required to ensure these assets perform effectively.

Expenditure is also incurred on administration and governance to support the effective management of the organisation, alongside contributions to the Environment Agency and investment in capital works where required.

The Board ensures that the majority of expenditure is directed towards frontline operational delivery and asset resilience, while maintaining appropriate administrative and governance arrangements that represent value for money and support effective decision-making.

WORKING WITH RISK MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

Flood and water level management in England is delivered through a partnership of Risk Management Authorities, each with defined statutory responsibilities. The Board works closely with these organisations to ensure coordinated, effective, and proportionate management of flood and water-related risks across the District.

Key partners include the Environment Agency, which provides a national strategic overview of flood and coastal erosion risk management and is responsible for main rivers; Lead Local Flood Authorities, which coordinate local flood risk management and strategy development; Local Authorities, which exercise land drainage and planning-related functions; and water, sewerage, and highways authorities, which manage drainage associated with their respective assets and infrastructure.

The Board also engages with Regional Flood and Coastal Committees to support strategic investment, prioritisation, and understanding of flood and coastal erosion risk at a regional scale.

Through partnership working, information sharing, and collaboration across organisational and administrative boundaries, the Board contributes to a coherent, catchment-based approach to flood and water level management.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Board operates in a changing and increasingly complex environment. A number of strategic challenges also present opportunities for more integrated, resilient, and sustainable water level management across the District.

Climate change

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, resulting in greater risks from flooding, drought, and sea level rise. These pressures place additional demands on drainage infrastructure and require a more adaptive, risk-based approach to asset management, maintenance, and investment.

Growth and development

As a consenting authority for surface water discharges within the District, the Board plays an important role in supporting sustainable development. Working closely with Local Planning Authorities and developers, the Board ensures that new development does not increase flood risk, place additional burdens on the drainage system, or compromise existing water level management arrangements.

Environment and biodiversity

The Board has statutory duties to conserve and enhance biodiversity and to have regard to environmental considerations in the exercise of its functions. These duties also present opportunities to deliver wider benefits, including habitat enhancement, natural flood management, and improved ecological resilience, through partnership working and the integration of environmental considerations into routine operations and capital projects.

Partnership and collaboration

Effective water level management increasingly relies on collaboration between Risk Management Authorities and other public bodies. Mechanisms such as Public Sector Cooperation Agreements enable partners to share expertise, resources, and capacity, supporting more efficient delivery and improved outcomes where there is mutual benefit.

PRIORITIES AND MEASURES

This Strategy builds on the progress achieved to date and sets out how the Board will continue to develop and strengthen its approach to water level management, providing a high-quality and resilient service for the communities and stakeholders across the District.

The following section outlines the Board's six strategic priorities, which are of equal importance and are not listed in any particular order:

- Staff Health and Wellbeing
- Asset Management
- Serving the Community
- Environmental Good Governance
- Good Governance
- Financial Sustainability

STAFF HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The Board recognises that a skilled, supported, and motivated workforce is essential to the effective delivery of water level management and flood risk functions. Maintaining high standards of staff wellbeing, safety, and professional development is therefore a key strategic priority.

The flood and coastal erosion risk management sector faces long-standing skills and capacity challenges, particularly in technical and operational disciplines. The Board will retain and develop a resilient workforce with the skills, knowledge, and experience required to respond to evolving environmental, technical, and regulatory demands.

This priority will be delivered by:

- maintaining a clear, consistently applied safe system of work;
- ensuring health and safety performance, assurance, and incidents are appropriately reported, reviewed, and addressed; and
- supporting training, professional development, and career progression through proportionate and competitive employment arrangements.

ASSET MANAGEMENT

The Board's assets include adopted watercourses, pumping stations, and associated water level management structures that control, convey, and manage water to reduce the risk of flooding and drought, protect people and property, and support the natural environment. In addition, the Board exercises permissive powers under the Land Drainage Act 1991 to regulate and, where necessary, enforce activities affecting land drainage within the District.

Effective asset management is essential to ensure that infrastructure performs reliably when required and remains resilient to the impacts of climate change, environmental pressures, and changing land use.

The Board applies a whole-life, risk-based asset management approach, encompassing governance, planning, prioritisation, data management, maintenance, and investment. This approach enables the Board to:

- maintain a functional and resilient drainage network while conserving and enhancing the natural environment;
- integrate climate adaptation and carbon reduction considerations into operational and investment decisions;
- ensure assets are adaptable to future climate impacts and the evolving infrastructure needs of communities;
- regulate land drainage activity using available legislative powers and byelaws; and,
- ensure that new development has a nil or positive impact on the Board's assets and land drainage interests.

SERVING THE COMMUNITY

The Board delivers public value through effective water level management that supports communities, landowners, and the local economy. Working in partnership with Local Authorities, Risk Management Authorities, landowners, and other stakeholders, the Board aims to understand local needs and ensure that its activities maximise social, economic, and environmental benefits across the District.

This priority will be delivered by:

- engaging constructively with communities, landowners, and partner organisations through participation in relevant local and regional partnerships;
- working collaboratively to identify adaptive, innovative, and proportionate approaches to water level management; and
- maintaining awareness of industry best practice, emerging technologies, and funding opportunities to support continuous improvement and effective delivery;
- playing a proactive leadership role in shaping local and regional approaches to water level and flood risk management.

ENVIRONMENTAL GOOD GOVERNANCE

The Board is committed to high standards of environmental good governance and operates in line with the Association of Drainage Authorities' Environmental Good Governance guidance. This provides a recognised framework for meeting statutory environmental duties and promoting best practice in the management of lowland freshwater environments.

Through the delivery of its functions, the Board works with landowners, partners, and stakeholders as custodians of the environment, integrating environmental considerations into decision-making and operational activity.

This priority will be delivered by:

- ensuring transparent and proportionate compliance with environmental legislation;
- identifying opportunities to protect, enhance, and deliver wider environmental benefits through routine operations and investment;
- understanding and reducing the carbon footprint of the Board's activities where practicable; and
- adapting approaches to reflect climate change and emerging environmental pressures.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

The Board is committed to maintaining high standards of good governance, recognising that effective governance underpins public confidence, accountability, and the successful delivery of its statutory functions. The Board maintains a clear and effective governance framework that supports timely, informed, and accountable decision-making.

As an independent public body, the Board operates in accordance with recognised sector guidance, including the principles set out by the Joint Practitioners Advisory Group and the Good Governance guidance published by the Association of Drainage Authorities.

This priority will be delivered by:

- ensuring that decisions are taken objectively, transparently, and in the best interests of the Board and the communities it serves, in line with the ethical standards expected of public office holders; and
- maintaining a balanced and appropriately skilled Board, with clear lines of accountability and effective information sharing to support informed decision-making.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The Board is committed to ensuring long-term financial sustainability, enabling it to deliver effective water level management while providing value for money for those who fund its activities. This includes maintaining appropriate reserves to support operational resilience during periods of increased risk and to enable future capital investment.

This priority will be delivered by:

- safeguarding public funds and ensuring they are properly accounted for and used economically, efficiently, and effectively;
- seeking efficiencies in expenditure, protecting and optimising income, and reinvesting savings where appropriate;
- diversifying income streams where this supports the Board's statutory functions and does not compromise delivery; and
- adopting a whole-life approach to the investment and management of assets to support long-term resilience and affordability.

MONITORING AND REVIEW

Progress against this Corporate Strategy will be reviewed annually by the Board to ensure that strategic priorities remain relevant, proportionate, and aligned with the Board's statutory duties and operating environment. Interim progress updates may also be provided periodically where appropriate.

Performance will be assessed using a proportionate, risk-based approach, including a RAG-rated review of progress against each strategic priority and its associated delivery themes. RAG ratings will reflect the Board's overall assessment of delivery progress, key risks, emerging issues, and the extent to which activities are progressing broadly in line with expectations. Narrative commentary will be provided where appropriate to support transparency and informed decision-making.

The Strategy will be kept under review and updated as necessary to reflect emerging risks, changes in policy or legislation, and evolving priorities.