

Committee on Climate Change
7 Holbein Place
London SW1W 8NR

Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP
Secretary of State,
Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs,
Nobel House, 17 Smith Square,
London SW1P 3JR

5 March 2014

Dear Owen

A sustainable, long-term plan for the Somerset Levels and Moors

I am writing with advice from the Adaptation Sub-Committee (ASC) on the preparation of the 20-year plan for the Somerset Levels and Moors following the recent episodes of flooding.

As you know, the ASC gathers a range of evidence to help understand the country's exposure and resilience to flood risk in our changing climate. Based on our analysis, described in more detail in an annex to this letter, I offer five high-level suggestions for the 20-year plan.

1. The plan should recognise the rising sea levels and flood risk with climate change.

The weather events of this winter are consistent with those we'd expect to see more frequently in a warming world. Average sea levels rose in the English Channel by 12cm over the 20th Century and are expected to rise by a similar amount again by 2030. This will make draining the Levels ever more difficult. There is evidence that high river flows in the winter in the UK have already increased and that rainfall events are becoming more intense. Centuries of extensive drainage has shrunk the peaty soils of the Levels, exacerbating vulnerability to flooding and sea level rise.

2. The plan should consider the range of drivers of flood risk on the Levels. The Levels is a largely artificial, engineered wetland landscape. Development – property, farming and other economic activity – becomes vulnerable to flooding when it encroaches on to the floodplain. To address this, the full range of land management and engineering options should be considered. These include reviewing current farming practices, soil conservation in the uplands, restoring degraded peatlands in the floodplain, and increasing the resilience of properties likely to flood frequently. The vision published in January by the Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force recognises these factors.

3. The plan should be sustainable, and cost-effective. Funding from central Government for flood risk management is limited, and as a result many worthwhile projects have to

be held back each year. Whilst the immediate needs of the affected communities will be a priority, it would be unfair in the long-term for the Levels to attract more taxpayer support than similar areas elsewhere. The long-term approach needs to be sustainable, and cost-effective. It shouldn't require taxpayer funding to be diverted from other projects that would deliver greater flood risk benefit. The range of public funding going in to the Levels, including under the Common Agriculture Policy, should be reviewed to make sure good value for money is being achieved.

4. **The plan should focus on adaptation, and be responsive to new evidence.** We expect flooding to become more frequent and sea levels to continue to rise. Therefore the first adaptation must be to avoid decisions that are difficult to reverse, such as further development that may exacerbate the issue. Our analysis shows that new properties have continued to be built in areas of significant flood risk, both nationally and particularly in Sedgemoor District. Whilst being long-term in its outlook, the plan should also be adaptive in its approach. This is because the benefits of the plan may be uncertain at this stage, including the contributions that land management and dredging will deliver. An adaptive approach will keep options open whilst monitoring the drivers of vulnerability and assessing whether the plan is having the desired impact.
5. **Responsibility should be shared for funding and delivering the plan.** The benefits of an effective action plan will accrue to private landowners and businesses as well as the wider public. Decisions that can help, or hinder, flood risk are taken locally by individuals, councils and local partners as well as by national bodies. There is an onus on all involved in preparing the plan, from central Government and the Environment Agency to the local authorities, land owners, businesses and residents, to be fully transparent about the costs and benefits of the plan, who will benefit, and who might contribute. To make sure incentives are aligned, the long-term costs should be shared amongst those who have a role and an interest in avoiding future flood damage.

There are many other low-lying rural locations across England exposed to similar levels of flood risk. Monitoring and evaluating a sustainable, long-term plan for the Somerset Levels and Moors will hopefully provide many lessons that are transferable elsewhere.

I hope that you find these suggestions to be a useful contribution to the debate, and of course I would be willing to discuss them in greater detail.



PROFESSOR LORD KREBS Kt FRS
Chairman, Adaptation Sub-Committee