

A flood-resilient future for the Somerset Levels.

The RSPB & the SWT call on MPs and others to press government and its agencies to develop a water management strategy for a more flood-resilient future on the Somerset Levels. Defra and its agencies must work with Level's communities to create an evidence-based, effective, and sustainable flood management strategy, fit for the 21st century.

Recent floods provide a foretaste of things to come on the Levels, as extreme weather events become more frequent, and winters become wetter. A long term systematic shift to more resilience is key and a sustainable response should be based on **five key** principles:

1. **Focus flood defence resources on protecting lives, homes, businesses and utilities.**
Invest in: better local flood defences for vulnerable rural properties, improvements to key roads making them less vulnerable to disruption, and more support in preparing Level's communities for extreme events.
2. **Slow the water flow upstream to reduce peak floods on the Levels.** For example, upstream soils can be made less compact, natural habitats can be restored, more broadleaved trees can be planted and temporary flood storage created along drainage systems – in both upstream towns and the countryside.
3. **Use the existing water management infrastructure better by spreading flood water more appropriately when it reaches the floodplain.** Make better use of the Parrett Flood Relief Channel and the gravity floodplain across King's Sedgemoor. Plan and enable land-use change to provide more space for water.
4. **Build greater resilience in the floodplain land uses.** Incentivise the use of more flood-tolerant pastures, and encourage flood-sensitive crops such as silage and maize to be grown off the floodplain.
5. **Maintain critical watercourses to ensure appropriate levels of drainage.** This includes dredging at the right scale (see note below) to keep water moving on the Levels, but in planning how & where to dredge, don't damage the Level's wildlife-rich wetlands.

There is nothing new in these calls - they have been made collectively by many local stakeholders - after all the big flood events in the last 15 years. Lack of leadership, for whatever reason has been the biggest barrier to achieving a fair transition to a more flood-resilient floodplain that works for both local people and the environment. Innovations can be developed like payments for ecosystem services to enable transition.

Note: RSPB and SWT views on the dredging proposals recently put forward by the Royal Bath and West Society (RB&WS) & others.

These proposals for dredging the Rivers Tone and Parrett would extensively re-shape sections of the rivers based on a scheme design developed over half a century ago in the

1960s. Much has changed on the Levels since then, and the scheme as put forward by the RB&WS & others is currently of great concern to the RSPB & the SWT.

We are cautious about this dredge being widely seen as the best or only solution to give the extra protection to homes and critical infrastructure that is needed. We haven't yet seen the evidence to demonstrate that a dredge is likely to stop a prolonged flood of roads like the A361, the isolation of villages like Muchelney, or significantly reduce flood risk of other vulnerable homes. The Environment Agency also says a dredge is unlikely to pass public spending cost-benefit tests. Finally, because large parts of the Levels are wildlife rich, we have yet to see guarantees that nature will be secured in both any dredge and then any subsequent water management operations.

We do though welcome the approach made by the Royal Bath and West Society to engage us in the Somerset Levels Relief Fund initiative. As organisations with a strong interest in the important Somerset Levels and Moors area, we share in common with the Society and other stakeholders across the area a desire to find the best long-term, viable and sustainable ways of managing water and flood events.