

The Somerset Levels – finding optimism for a safe flood-resilient future – some key thoughts.

From the Prime Minister to the farmer and householder on the Levels and Moors, and to surely every reader of a newspaper in Britain, everyone knows things have to change now for this special part of rural Somerset to get the bright future it deserves.

In our first briefing (20th Jan) the RSPB & the Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) called for a new strategy for a more flood-resilient future on the Somerset Levels, one that would be fit for the 21st century. We offered **five key principles**¹ to underpin this systematic shift to more resilience. These work well with propositions from others.

Now, even in the face of very tough times for the people and businesses of the Levels, the search for optimism is beginning. A new Vision for the Levels in 2030, fully supported by the RSPB and SWT, has recently been launched ([here](#)), but looking back at decades of inertia what are the key ingredients for a much more successful transition to a safer future?

Work on a new 20 year Action Plan, initiated by Government, is in full swing and due to report by March the 7th but what will unlock real change for the better? In this Briefing the RSPB & the SWT offer five thoughts:

- (1) **A better Levels future demands a transition that works for the people of the Levels – one that is both fair and effective.** Farmers faced with recovering their businesses, homeowners and communities faced with the devastating impacts of the floods, need help to recover their lives. Done with both the right support and real fairness, this will be key in preparing for even more activity ahead. From the financial to the emotional, moving from despair to new practice in adaptation (eg specific defences for hamlets) just has to focus on the citizens of the Levels.
- (2) **Leadership for change must be broadened and strengthened.** While the current emergency response on the Levels has been good, if late from some quarters, the backdrop for change in the Levels is littered from the past with unimplemented plans. Delivery has just been too weak. The Levels experience doesn't lack scholarly wisdom, or definitive but unimplemented reviews, nor even initiatives from the nature bodies. Lack of leadership for change, for whatever reason, has been the biggest barrier in achieving the transition to a more resilient Levels floodplain - one that works for people, communities and nature.

¹ (1) Focus flood defence resources on protecting lives, homes, businesses and utilities; (2) Slow the water flow upstream to reduce peak floods on the Levels; (3) Use the existing water management infrastructure better by spreading flood water more appropriately when it reaches the floodplain; (4) Build greater resilience in the floodplain land uses; and (5) Maintain critical watercourses to ensure appropriate levels of drainage.

- (3) URGENT: Senior Westminster politicians must make Common Agricultural Policy implementation work for, and not against, the Levels.** Right now in Whitehall, lead by senior politicians, decisions are being made that could totally fail to secure much needed flood alleviation outcomes from subsidy payments to farmers (accounting for over £12bn of public money between 2014-2020). This would be the most perverse outcome - if the Levels are to have a bright future this mustn't happen. Defra must leverage much more delivery (eg in the catchment from soil and grassland management, buffer strips by watercourses, hedgerow management & by not allowing ploughing on steeper slopes) by making the most of the so called 'cross compliance' rules.
- (4) More leaders must step up for the natural environment as a big part of a better future for the Levels.** In the Levels, nature so obviously a keystone, brings benefits a plenty. It generates economic activity, but we don't see leaders from say the economic development community, or strategic authorities with influence, championing this. Astonishingly Somerset County Councils own new County Plan² offers nothing on the natural environment – surely a gaping hole in any sense of purpose for this County? Strategic leaders just have to get over one of the gravest misconceptions of modern times, that efforts to nurture nature can be a drag on economic growth. The outstanding environment of the Levels is a powerful asset, part of its USP, a resource for enterprise. Making the most of this means getting unambiguous leadership for gaining value from, rather than squandering, the Levels special 'natural capital'. Examples ahead could include the Local Enterprise Partnership guiding investment in climate change adaptation and in 'green and blue infrastructure' (including visitor facilities).
- (5) Healthy habitats are resilient but they need a big initiative to recover their condition.** So many people are asking us: are the current floods devastating wildlife? We are working hard to answer these questions and will be sharing what we know. For the moment though we can say healthy habitats will allow species like water voles, and breeding wading birds like the lapwing, to bounce back. But stressed and in poor condition, key habitats like the farmed flower rich meadows of certain parts of the Levels, will struggle to recover. Even before the floods in an approach describing the protected sites for nature (the 'Sites of Special Scientific Importance' - SSSIs), in five categories – from 'unfavourable' to 'favourable'- only 21% were in favourable condition (the c.7,000 ha of SSSIs cover c.25% of the Levels floodplain). As we focus on a better future for the Levels, and nature's part in this, there's a huge amount of work to do to recover health in its habitats. As its habitats are mostly farmed, a really effective, support programme, built with farmers, must be established.

² <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/irj/go/km/docs/CouncilDocuments/SCC/Documents/County%20Plan%202010-2017final.pdf>