

Reimagining the Levels – Making the Connections

Executive Summary of the Prospectus for Revitalising and Safeguarding the Landscapes and Communities in the Catchment of the Somerset Levels and Moors

This ambitious report, which is released in October 2016, has been prepared by a group of people who live on the Somerset Levels and Moors, and care passionately about their future.

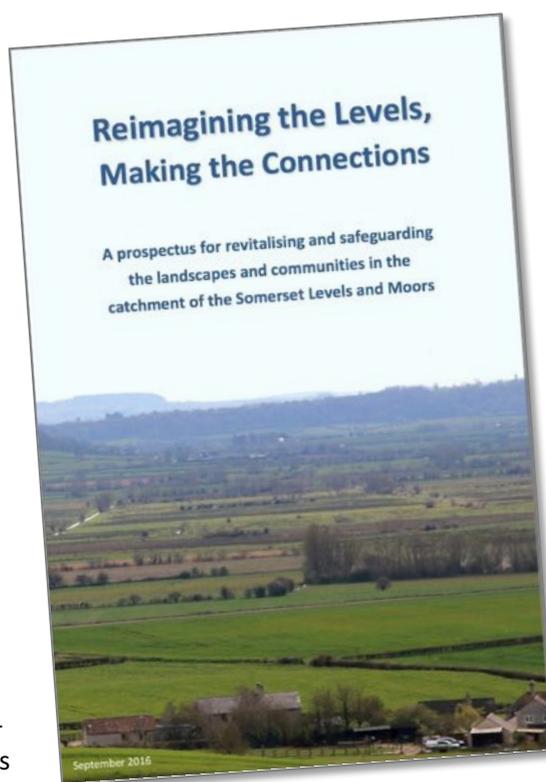
The report addresses the growing threats that face the Levels and Moors from future river and marine flooding, and it looks ahead to the challenges and opportunities that will result from Brexit.

The group uses the report to advocate a more socially, environmentally and economically sustainable future for the countryside and communities of the catchment.

The title of the report '*Reimagining the Levels – Making the Connections*' emphasises the need for joined-up thinking. The report makes connections between how we

manage the upper and middle catchments and the flooding that occurs in the lower catchment; between the food purchasing decisions of local consumers and the livelihoods and production methods of our farmers; and between the organisations that regulate and support land and water management and the people who are affected by their decisions.

This report is split into four sections. It describes the characteristics of the catchment and the challenges facing the area. It sets out the group's vision and objectives needed to 'Reimagine the Levels' and concludes with a set of recommendations for consideration by public bodies and local communities. The report is supported by a Technical Annex that provides background information and data analysis.



The Pressures for Change - Time for New Thinking

The report highlights four fundamental pressures for change that will affect the Levels and Moors Catchment in coming years.

1. Public engagement and participation.

There is a widening gulf between policy makers and the general public, fuelling a growing lack of trust in decision-making processes. This is true on the Levels and Moors where many of the communities don't have confidence in the decisions being taken by the public bodies charged with protecting them.

There is an urgent need to ensure that the communities in the Catchment are well informed and that organisations which are taking decisions on their behalf are democratically accountable.

2. Climate change. The world's changing climate poses a critical, life-threatening, challenge to the people and landscape of the Levels and Moors. Sea level in Bridgwater Bay is projected to increase by nearly half a meter by 2100 and the number of days of heavy winter rain (exceeding 25 mm) are projected to increase by between 2 and 3.5 times by the 2080s. Upstream of the Levels, the way that watercourses and soils have been managed over the last 30 years has exacerbated surface water and river flooding.

As a result, severe (1-in-100 year) flood events are likely to become twice as frequent by the 2050s and three to five times more frequent by the 2080s.

Faced with these changes, we need to restore the role of natural floodplains and improve the management of rivers, soils and vegetation. And we need to be more ambitious in cutting emissions of greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

3. Brexit. The UK’s decision to leave the EU will affect the Levels Catchment in many ways, including the removal of EU environmental designations and changes to farm support (probably reducing the income support that many farm businesses in Somerset rely on). We need to replace the EU Common Agricultural Policy with a more integrated and localised policy framework for the countryside.

4. The food supply chain. Changes to the economics of food production and consumption in the catchment over recent decades can be linked to a decline in the viability of farming, the impoverishment of landscape, biodiversity and natural resources, and also a rise amongst consumers in obesity and conditions like diabetes.

We need a new policy towards farming, food and the environment that promotes healthy and environment-friendly foods, strengthens demand

from consumers and supports strong and responsive local supply chains.

The report also identifies a number of **local issues which need addressing**, including:

- **Impoverished agricultural soils** in parts of the middle and upper catchment which increase the speed of soil run-off and the likelihood of downstream flooding.
- **Poor decisions by some Local Planning Authorities** which continue to allow development in locations that are likely to increase flood risk or which fail to require adequate drainage and flood management infrastructure.
- **Poor maintenance of much urban and rural drainage infrastructure** due partly to a lack of clarity about the responsibilities of developers and the public authorities and partly because of funding limitations.
- **Uncertainty over the future funding of the Somerset Rivers Authority**, particularly in relation to its longer term proactive work to address the causes of flooding.

New Objectives and Ambitions

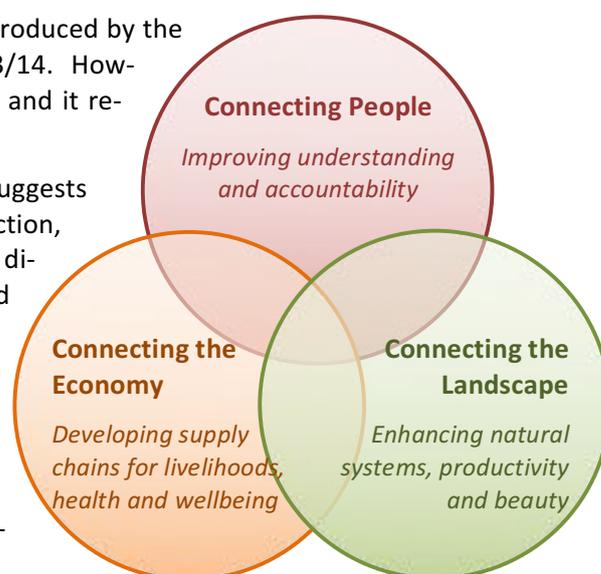
The report supports the vision for the Levels and Moors produced by the Task Force that was set up following the flooding in 2013/14. However, that vision is too narrow, not sufficiently ambitious and it requires updating in the light of recent developments.

To supplement the 2014 Task Force Vision, this report suggests that there should be three over-riding objectives for action, each focussing on strengthening connections in different dimensions. These aim to connect the people, economy and landscape of the Levels catchment.

Connecting people includes reinvigorating the network of community organisations; empowering consumers to use their purchasing power wisely, including through the establishment of Community Benefit Societies; and ensuring the planning system does more to protect natural capital.

Connecting the landscape includes reinstating the functional connection between rivers and their floodplains; and joining up habitats so that wildlife is less isolated in the countryside.

Connecting the economy includes stimulating a vibrant and efficient ‘bioregional’ economy that provides nutritious and sustainably-produced goods to consumers at all price brackets; promoting the benefits that a high quality natural environment gives to people’s spiritual and physical wellbeing; and addressing market failures in the way public benefits such as natural flood management are provided by the environment.



A bright future: What a Reimagined Levels Catchment should look like in 20 years' time

The ability to control water levels on the Levels has been enhanced. The basis of water level management on farmland has changed to **enable floodplains to perform their natural function of holding flood water during the winter.**

No development takes place on any areas of functional floodplain in the catchment. All new development is 'flood positive', using a higher 'SuDS' standard, so that it generates less flood water than before.

Tree cover in the middle and upper catchment has been increased through the targeted planting of woods, hedges and orchards. This helps wildlife, flood risk management and landscape quality and provides wood fuel, craft products and public access.

Streams and watercourses in the middle and upper catchment are managed to favour naturalised channel profiles and the accumulation of woody debris, resulting in reduced peak flows and better riparian and water habitats.

The condition of soils throughout the catchment has greatly improved, with much higher levels of organic matter and lower levels of compaction and slaking. This has required changes in agricultural land use and management, with less maize and continuous cereal production and more permanent pasture or long term grass leys.

The catchment has become carbon neutral, providing a national exemplar of the ways that households and businesses can take to reduce their impact on climate change. This has taken place through reductions in emissions from transport, heating, agriculture and waste and from renewable energy generation.

Robust and economically viable local supply chains provide consumers in the catchment with nutritious food from local farms. This has involved the re-instatement of local processing and distribution businesses (e.g. abattoirs, dairies, pack houses). Improved market intelligence has led to more equitable profit distribution along the supply chain.

People living in the catchment are better informed about the policies and work of the local organisations they are paying for and are more involved in decision making. They use their purchasing power as consumers to improve their local environment and support local jobs and businesses.

Meeting these objectives will be easier if we have a better spatial understanding of where changes to land use and management need to happen. Solutions should be based on the characteristics of the catchment (i.e. designed for local circumstances) and not on standard national prescriptions.

The report splits the catchment into five different areas based on their current land use and natural resources. It proposes the objectives that should guide the management of land and water in each area.

The fulfilment of the report's spatial objectives lies in the hands of the many private landowners and tenants who farm the catchment. Their willing involvement and leadership will be essential. Locally-targeted funding to pay for public benefits produced from the land (so called 'Payments for Ecosystem Services') will be required through a rejuvenated agri-environment scheme.

A new facility for brokering the voluntary exchange of land (so called 'Land swaps') may also help to match the aspirations and capabilities of landowners and managers with the objectives for different parcels of land.

Recommendations for Action

The project report makes many suggestions affecting land use planning, farming practices, river and water level management, environmental regulation and conservation priorities.

It is hoped that these suggestions will influence the work of bodies managing water (including the Environment Agency, Drainage Boards and Local Authorities), the local authority planning departments, the organisations representing and advising farmers and landowners, the conservation charities that own land, and others.

The final section of the report makes eleven detailed recommendations covering three topics. These recommendations are **summarised** here (please see the main report for the full text).

A. The development and work of the Somerset Rivers Authority

A.1. The Government should give new precepting authorities like the SRA a **clear statutory purpose** that establishes broad ‘public good’ objectives covering the safeguarding of public assets including property, critical infrastructure, soils and habitats.

A.2. The Government should ensure that the new precepting authorities include non-party **representatives who are elected specifically to represent the interests of local communities**, strengthening the accountability of the authority to local tax payers.

A.3. The County Council should develop options and consult widely on the potential for the SRA to collect a **statutory area levy** to fund its work on natural flood management.

A.4. As soon as it is established as an independent authority, the SRA should give a clear commitment that it will make one of its priorities the development of **long term ‘natural flood management’ measures** across the whole Catchment.

A.5. The SRA should establish its authority as the **primary body co-ordinating water management** in Somerset, commissioning or delegating other bodies to deliver agreed programmes of work.

B. Support for farming, food and the environment post-Brexit

B.1. The Government should lead an urgent national debate on how we develop a farming and food economy that is better at enhancing **national health and well-being and the condition of the environment**. It should establish a national framework under which local programmes will be developed.

B.2. Local Government and Non-Governmental Organisations in the Catchment should come together under the auspices of the Catchment Partnership to agree the **local outcomes that farming and agri-environment support** should deliver.

B.3. Government should do more to encourage the supply of **food and drink that is produced to high environmental, nutritional and welfare standards**. This should include improved food labelling standards, giving more power to the Groceries Code Adjudicator and setting targets for public procurement.

C. Community representation on issues affecting the environment, land and water

C.1. Community organisations in Somerset should improve the **networks of communication and dialogue between citizen groups**, particularly between rural and urban communities. For its part, the Reimagining the Levels Group will explore the potential for a ‘Friends of the Levels’ organisations to champion the communities and environment of the Levels in public policy.

C.2. The SRA, together with the Catchment Partnership, should accept their responsibility for **improving public understanding** of the issues and solutions surrounding climate change, land management and flooding.

C.3. The SRA, and other public bodies influencing land and water management in the Catchment such as the Catchment Partnership, should actively encourage **participation by communities and citizens in their decision-making processes**. They should consider how communities can be given stronger stake in addressing the land and water challenges that the Catchment faces.

Copies of the main Project Report and its Technical Annex will be available (when the website is created in November 2016) at www.reimaginingthelevels.org.

In the meantime, copies are available at www.rural-focus.co.uk/reimagining-the-levels/4593126101.

For more information, please contact the secretary of the Reimagining the Levels group, Robin Mewes: robin@communitypowerltd.co.uk