

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2010

Adaptation Sub-Committee Report launch – 16 September 2010

Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP – ‘Futureproofing the present – adapting to the reality of climate change’

Thank you John (Krebs) and my congratulations on the publication of the ASC’s first report.

The report is encouraging in its acknowledgement of the progress that has been made so far, and delivers a timely warning that much more remains to be done – not least by Government.

I hope that by setting out our strategic approach this morning you will gain a clearer picture of this Government’s approach to tackling the adaptation challenge.

An approach which recognises that the impacts of a changing climate will present genuine opportunities, as well as very real threats.

Today’s report provides a wake-up call.

It recognises that there is no part of our society which is immune from the effects of climate change.

Which means that every part of our society must think about its resilience.

At this point, I’d like to make something very clear.

This Government will not give up the battle to tackle the causes of climate change.

Quite the reverse – we are committed to providing global leadership in achieving agreements to bring down greenhouse gas emissions internationally and to drive down our own emissions at home.

Mitigation and adaptation are actually the two sides of the climate change coin.

And there are many steps we can take – some as straightforward as planting trees or protecting forests– that will mitigate climate change while also helping us adapt to its effects.

But while it is vital that we continue the task of drastically cutting our greenhouse gas emissions, we know that we are already facing levels of unavoidable climate change.

UK Temperatures are an average of 1c higher than they were in the '70's.

That might not sound significant in its own right, but then we consider this:

The last decade has been the warmest on record.

The Met Office has confirmed that the last winter was the coldest in over 30 years.

And this July was the wettest since records began – 46% wetter than average.

None of which proved much comfort to our farmers - the NFU has warned that the driest first six months in nearly 70 years has hit domestic wheat production particularly badly.

Before the Stern Review in 2006 we hadn't put a price on the impact of climate change.

Post-Stern it is becoming increasingly clear that we are all paying it.

Insured losses from UK weather-related events, as this report points out, now total £1.5 billion a year.

And that's in a good year.

According to the Association of British Insurers, the summer floods of 2007 left a bill of £3.1 billion of insured damage.

The costs to those whose homes and businesses were damaged – and to the wider economy - were even greater.

There are some impacts, of course, on which we cannot put a price.

Looking back, the heatwave of 2003 is estimated to have caused the premature deaths of up to 2,000 people in Britain – and that summer was only 2c hotter than average.

While looking forward, last year's report from the Global Humanitarian Forum estimated premature global deaths due to climate change could rise to 500,000 in just twenty years time.

And UK climate change projections suggest even higher temperatures and more severe weather in the coming years.

In 1985, 29 scientists came together to discuss the issue of climate change and publicly concluded for the first time that 'in the first half of the next century a rise of global mean temperature could occur which is greater than any in man's history.'

Yet it took at least another 20 years for the fact of climate change to gain mainstream recognition amongst the public and international governments.

We cannot wait another 20 years to take the steps we must to adapt to its effects - we do not have the luxury of time.

Defra's UK Climate Projections, published last year indicate that, at the extreme end of the range, temperatures on the hottest day in summer could increase by over 7c before 2050.

While eight out of the last ten years have brought serious flooding events to Britain.

We cannot talk this impact down, we cannot negotiate with it and we cannot rationalise it away.

We must start dealing with it and we must start now.

The Coalition Agreement stated unequivocally that climate change is one of the gravest threats we face and mitigating and adapting to it remains one of this Government's central priorities.

This Government is pushing ahead with measures to ensure that climate change adaptation becomes an ingrained part of how we manage our natural environment – particularly in critical areas such as water efficiency and food production.

And, as we plan ahead we need a major horizon shift – away from solutions that only work in the short term.

Our decisions need to be effective in both the short term and the long term – with built in flexibility to adapt and change as we build a more accurate picture of what we're up against.

The forthcoming White Papers on the Natural Environment and Water as well as the new National Policy Statements will embed adaptation into decisions on natural resource management, new investments and business planning.

We will create a unified approach to making the most of what we already have – because many of our resources are finite.

Indeed, some, such as biodiversity and the plentiful supply of water are in decline.

Using what we have sustainably is going to be one of the tests we must pass to adapt successfully.

It is a challenge to which every part of Government must rise, not solely those parts of it with responsibility for the environment or for climate change, but also those responsible for transport, schools, hospitals and emergency services.

But the Prime Minister has referred to Defra as a key emergency service and I'm very clear that it is our role to help bring together the whole of Government to ensure we can and do adapt to whatever lies ahead of us – which is why I am encouraging colleagues across Government to make sure our key departmental policies are developed with the aim of supporting an economy which is strong, sustainable and resilient to climate change.

But Government cannot do it alone.

We need to shift control for action away from the state while ensuring Government maintains its role in providing world class evidence and co-ordinating the actions of the many players involved in adaptation on the ground.

And those players – be they local authorities, businesses, industry and those on whom we rely for our infrastructure – need to recognise both the economic and a social necessity to take steps to protect those areas for which they are responsible.

Because Britain's economy will only be as resilient and prepared as British firms, communities and infrastructure.

Many of our most successful businesses have been planning for the future for some time.

Our farmers are increasingly using science and precision agriculture to grow more food using fewer resources, particularly water, while reducing their impact on the environment and their own greenhouse gas emissions.

Our supermarkets regularly stress test their supply chains against extreme weather scenarios.

But there remains a gap in both awareness and action between big and small businesses.

A recent poll by MORI showed 73% of large companies were advanced in their understanding of the need for adaptation, yet only 56% of small companies had reached this stage.

And, according to Defra's own figures, while one in three businesses in England have been significantly affected by extreme weather in the last three years, just one in four have done anything to increase their resilience.

If more than 75% of our businesses remain unprotected we are in danger of ending up with a two-tier commercial sector - those that have adapted successfully and those who didn't see it coming.

This is not about investing tens or hundreds of thousands of pounds in making our assets drought, hurricane or flood-proof but of calculating the risks most likely to affect your business and taking proportionate steps to minimise them or, better still, turn them to your advantage.

And, despite the uncertainty we currently have about just how severe the impacts we must adapt to will actually get, assessing this type of risk doesn't have to be a guessing game.

I agree with Lord Krebs' view that it would be presumptuous of us to think we could advise business where they should seek opportunities. They will have their antennae and their intelligence.

What Government can do is provide them with information and models to help them calculate the risks.

Defra's world-leading UK Climate Change Projections provide useful information on how the UK climate could change up until 2100, while the Defra funded UK Climate Impacts Programme provides tools which businesses and planners can use to assess the risks most likely to affect them in the future.

And later this afternoon, the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Sir John Beddington, will launch a new website which explains the science behind the headlines on climate change.

With these and the Met Office's increasingly high resolution operational models we have the best science in the world to help us plan ahead.

And many organisations on which we depend have been using it for some time.

Network Rail is currently working with the Met Office, using their data to help stress test thousands of miles of rail tracks, embankments and bridges to see if they can stand up to the patters of extreme weather predicted over the coming decades.

It's not cheap – the investigation itself will cost them around £750,000.

But when Network Rail point to savings of around £1billion over 30 years, then this kind of work starts to look like incredibly good value for money.

Anglian Water, too, has used the UK Climate Projections to assess the likely changes in the frequency of extreme rainfall which lead to the failure of sewage systems in England.

In fact, there are few areas of our economy where opportunities for forward-thinking businesses don't exist.

Different weather patterns can allow UK farmers to grow new crops or take advantage of an extended growing season.

Warmer summers will extend the UK tourist season and reinvigorate domestic tourism.

The construction industry will gain new markets in adapting buildings and developing models for new, better ventilated homes.

And the transition to a low carbon, well-adapted global economy could create hundreds of thousands of sustainable 'green' jobs.

While many of the UK's key infrastructure decisions will always need central planning, some of the biggest wins are those available to local authorities – the point at which so many organisations meet.

Town planners working with developers can help transform our towns and cities to ensure that - instead of being at the mercy of extreme weather events, anticipating them is built into their development – potentially saving – and generating – millions of pounds in the process.

East Riding Council, for example, is responsible for one of the most beautiful and one of the fastest eroding coastlines in North West Europe.

It is one of the regions key environmental assets and its holiday parks are an important tourist destination – preserving it is vital part of the local economy.

So the Council has developed a system of 'rollback' – physically moving the parks away from the eroding coastline while improving the quality of the local environment.

It's a concept that has since been extended to houses and farms – a planning response to reducing the impact of coastal erosion which can be used in other coastal areas at risk.

The significance of the role that local authorities can play in planning everything from regenerating city centres to authorising new developments cannot be underestimated.

Because it is so often at the local level that intervention can make real differences to our communities, and here that supporting a Big Society approach can often help the most.

There are 18,000 charities in England and Wales alone which exist to help and protect the environment – the vast majority of which are volunteer-based organisations operating locally.

We want to do everything we can to encourage them to include adaptation in their work – raising awareness about the use of semi-permeable membranes rather than paving to clearing up potential green spaces to help absorb excess rainfall and cool our towns.

And, at the most local level of them all, we want individual households to make the most of the opportunities offered by the Green Deal – every one of the UK's 26 million homes can benefit from it in one way or another and help reduce greenhouse gasses in the process.

From better insulation in walls and lofts to installing solar panels on roofs this is also yet another opportunity in-waiting for businesses looking to supply a new and captive market.

Climate change and the way we respond to it is one of the biggest challenges of our time.

Adapting to it may also offer some of its biggest opportunities.

In 17 months time we will deliver the UK's first Climate Change Risk Assessment – a world first and one in which the ASC will have a major role to play in providing expert scrutiny

It will provide us with an even better understanding of both the risks and the costs of climate change to our society, infrastructure and economy, and help us to plan for the future.

The Adaptation Sub-Committee will continue to play its important role in independently and transparently assessing how the country is gearing up to cope with a climate which may be considerably different.

But we must – all of us – take steps now to recognise the problem, analyse the risk and plan ahead.

There is much more to be done. But the solution is in the hands of us all – as businesses, citizens and consumers.

Together we must rise to the challenge – minimising the risks and seizing the opportunities that lie ahead.

Thank you.