

ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE – A STRATEGIC STATEMENT

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges the world faces. Tackling and adapting to climate change is a top priority for this Government – at home and internationally.

The scientific evidence is overwhelming. Since the 1970s, average temperatures for Central England have risen by nearly 1.0C and the last decade was the warmest on record. Our world-class UK Climate Projections 2009 indicate that increases in total winter rainfall and more intense downpours will make the risk of flooding more severe in some areas. In other places, the supply of fresh water will struggle to meet demand.

It is absolutely essential that we mitigate climate change, so we can limit the severity of its impacts. This Government is committed to achieving an ambitious global deal to cut greenhouse gas emissions consistent with limiting global temperature increases. Domestically, our Green Deal will combine growth in the economy with a greener and more efficient way of using energy, reducing energy demand and carbon emissions while insulating homes, saving consumers money and stimulating green recovery in jobs.

But we have to accept that some climate change is now inevitable. We must act decisively and adapt to this by improving resilience in our natural resource base and our economy, across all sectors. The sooner we start to plan and take action, the less severe and costly the changes we will have to make. And for forward thinking businesses, early action can open up real opportunities to take advantage of climate change and help others to adapt.

We have already made important progress in this country in dealing with the consequences and potential benefits of climate change. In the Hadley Centre, the UK has one of the world's leading climate change research centres. Embedding sustainability into our system of National Policy Statements will ensure that climate impacts are considered in the planning and design of major roads, railways, airports and power stations.

But the progress made on adaptation so far is, in truth, only the first step. The latest advice from the Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change shows there is still a long way to go. It is excellent that some local authorities and businesses are really starting to understand the challenges and potential opportunities ahead. But many are not, and 'business as usual' will not be enough. Across England, one in three companies have been "significantly affected" by extreme weather such as flooding or drought in the past three years, but just one in four have taken action to protect themselves. We need now a step change.

This Government is determined to play its part and give the necessary lead. We intend to be the greenest government ever, working to support a strong and sustainable green economy resilient to climate change.

In spring 2011 we will publish a bold and ambitious Natural Environment White Paper – outlining the Government’s priorities for the natural environment, and setting out a framework for practical action by Government, communities, businesses and civil society organisations. This will address the impacts of climate change and emphasise the value of natural resources – such as the restoration of wetlands as a key flood management measure. We are developing a Water White Paper, in which the challenge of providing secure and sustainable supplies to a growing population and to support economic growth will be a central theme. We intend to create a presumption in favour of sustainable development at the heart of the planning system. And our evaluation of the Building Regulations will give the opportunity to consider evidence on how future buildings can be more sustainable.

Managing how we deal with floods and improving our climate resilience as a country is incredibly important. The Prime Minister has already made clear that my Department, Defra, is a key emergency service within government. We will show leadership and action and continue to improve our frontline flood defences.

But the challenges are not for central Government alone to address. Adapting to climate change is also a local issue. The impacts will vary from place to place, depending on circumstances. Buildings, streets and local infrastructure that support our businesses and communities – from major cities and conurbations to the smallest village – have been designed to cope with certain types of weather that have been the norm in the past but may be very different in future. The Government will take forward the quality work of the UK Climate Impacts Programme and continue to provide specialist information and advice on adaptation, so people and institutions at all levels can plan ahead and take the steps that are needed. We will devolve more power and responsibility to local people as we believe that individuals, frontline professionals, communities and local institutions are best placed to decide what changes are appropriate in their local area.

The changing climate also brings opportunities for forward-thinking British businesses. Different weather patterns can allow UK farmers to grow new crops or take advantage of an extended growing season. Warmer summers could extend the UK tourist season and make tourist resorts more attractive. The construction industry may be boosted as people and businesses look to change their premises as a result of climate change. And the transition to a low carbon, well-adapted global economy could create hundreds of thousands of new sustainable ‘green’ jobs to supply markets here and overseas. Those companies and organisations which have properly planned for the risks and identified the benefits of climate change will thrive.

Further progress is essential. The Adaptation Sub-Committee will continue to play an important role in independently and transparently assessing how the country is gearing up to cope with a climate that may be considerably different. And if we take steps now to plan ahead and address the need, there is time for the UK to be well-positioned and prepared.

Dealing with climate change and seizing the opportunities requires leadership and action, by government and by all parts of society. There is much more to be done. But we all have a chance to come up with the solutions – as communities, businesses and individuals. Together we must rise to the challenge.