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23 April 2008

**From the Minister for the Environment**  
Phil Woolas MP

*Dear Mr King*

Thank you for your letter of 8 April about Government policy for the provision of sea defences.

It is untrue to suggest that we have a general policy to abandon coastal areas to the sea. The Government has more than demonstrated its commitment to the sustainable protection of people and property inland and on the coast, through our record levels of funding. Over the last ten years we have almost doubled our spending on flood and coastal erosion risk management to around £600 million in 2007/08. We have also committed a total of £2.15 billion for the next three years, with £800 million alone to be spent in 2010-11. Nevertheless, we must ensure that tax payer's money is used to best effect. However, it is a question of value for money, not saving money.

With rising sea levels and climate change it is not sustainable, cost-effective, technically possible or realistic to stop all change at the coast. Ultimately, the coast will change and we must manage the risk of flooding in the face of that change and I acknowledge that there will be impacts on communities and the environment.

We are currently developing a range of approaches to help communities to adapt to the changing risks of erosion and flooding where it is not sustainable to continue the same level of defence and we are involving local community representatives in this process. The work to be taken forward, together with our delivery partners and stakeholders, will include:

- Improving resilience through the planning system;
- Improve communications and information for communities;
- Increase the uptake of flood resilience measures to help support communities/individuals who are at increasing flood risk;

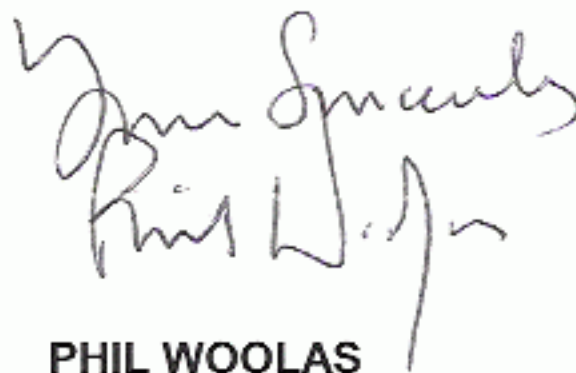
- Support for communities/individuals facing risks of erosion; and
- Exploring how other policies can deliver adaptive solutions.

Given the tremendous diversity of coastal formations in England, the operating authorities responsible must look at the range of options and avoid burdening future generations with the cost of maintaining unsustainable defences. In some places, this will be to invest public money to “hold the line” of the coast but this will not be a sustainable solution everywhere.

I understand that the preferred policy option in the Anglian Coastal Authorities Shoreline Management Plan, which you mention, is to maintain the sea defences of the Broads for the next 50 years. Indeed, the Environment Agency has recently approved a £21 million project to maintain these defences. Within Broads, the Agency is currently committed to a 20 year, £120 million project to maintain the standard of defence. Flood and shoreline management policies reviewed periodically to ensure that they are appropriate in the light of the best available information. I do not consider this approach or the levels of ongoing investment to be defeatist.

We believe that decisions about what happens where are best made by operating authorities in consultation with local communities and stakeholders. The Environment Agency are the trusted experts in flood risk management, which is why they are best placed to take on the strategic overview for the whole of the coast. The Government will still set the criteria that projects will need to meet in order to receive funding, but the Environment Agency’s strategic overview role will ensure that we can make even better decisions on which projects are funded, by taking into consideration the wider long term sustainable view of the whole of our coastline.

I understand that the Natural England report to which you refer investigates the potential impacts of climate change on the natural environment of the Broads and explores possible options for adaptation. However, it does not contain any proposals. Natural England has an important role to play in informing the future approach to management of such environmentally sensitive and special areas but this is not the whole picture and any proposals should involve all relevant authorities and be subject to appropriate public consultation.



PHIL WOOLAS