



# Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Jill,

Thank you for your letter of 24 January to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about flooding in Axminster. Your letter has been passed to Defra and I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

I was sorry to hear that the community in Axminster experienced property flooding during the recent storms in December 2023, and I would like to express my sympathies with those who were affected. The Environment Agency (EA) has advised me that in December, the River Axe experienced significantly high water levels resulting in the flooding of 32 properties in six communities, with Weycroft Bridge and Stoney Bridge in Axminster experiencing the highest numbers of properties impacted.

The Government announced in March 2020 that the amount invested in flood and coastal erosion schemes would be doubled in England to a record £5.2 billion between 2021 and 2027 to better protect communities across England from flooding and coastal erosion. During the first two years of the programme, nearly 60,000 properties have already been better protected from flooding.

The Capital Investment Programme benefits both urban and rural communities. Approximately 40% of schemes, and 45% of investments, better protects properties in rural areas. The Government invests where the risks are greatest and the benefits highest for people and property. Since 2015, we have also protected over 900,000 acres of agricultural land. In addition, the Government is investing £200 million in Flood and Coastal Innovation Programmes, in which 13 projects are specifically working to improve resilience in rural communities. Wider support includes the £25 million of funding to improve flood resilience through a new Natural Flood Management programme and Catchment Sensitive Farming advice and support for farmers.

The EA has advised me that there are currently no viable schemes under consideration for Weycroft Bridge, but the situation remains open to review. The EA has advised that it has looked extensively at ways to prevent flooding to properties in Stoney Bridge, and officials at the EA have confirmed that they will continue to engage with the local community throughout this process.

The EA has looked into the removal of river gravels and silt from watercourses at Stoney Bridge, however, investigations have shown that this would have little or no effect as flood defences around 300 metres upstream would be overwhelmed first before the capacity of the bridge becomes an issue. Dredging the river further upstream will not reduce flood risk to property and will increase erosion of riverbanks leading to loss of land and more sediment in the river downstream. Last year, the EA commissioned further modelling to review again whether silt removal would be of benefit at Stoney Bridge and is awaiting the results.

Following the 2012 flood event, a scheme was proposed to create a flow route around the western side of the River Axe floodplain, bypassing the properties at Stoney Bridge as well as the bridge itself. However, concerns were raised about the impact that this would have on agricultural land, in addition to the impact that the removal of existing hedgerows would have on the environment. The EA made the decision to pause the development of this scheme until there was the potential that a larger landscape-scale project within the Axe catchment could offer incentives to landowners for construction. This is under active review.

To improve flood resilience in Axminster, the EA and East Devon District Council are continuing to work with our partners and local communities to develop a community resilience network across East Devon. I am pleased to say that EA has started work with local town and parish councils, and other partners, to deliver a flood resilience event for the wider Axe Valley communities in spring this year.

I appreciate your continued support for the resilience network and thank you for taking the time to write about this important issue.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,



**ROBBIE MOORE MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs