

ITEM 6e

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper

Title: Somerset Rivers Authority Strategic Approach to Mitigation

RECOMMENDATION

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Note the progress made in the development of a Strategic Approach to Mitigation including the timescales for delivery.
2. Note timescales will need to adjust to align with the pace of associated projects.
3. Note reference to costs associated with developing and implementing detailed mitigation.

Purpose of the item:

To update the Board about progress in developing a Strategic Approach to Mitigation.

Background and context

The Board commissioned Natural England to co-ordinate the development and implementation of a Strategic Approach to Mitigation for the environmental impact of SRA works. The aim of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation is:

- To develop positive solutions enabling delivery of schemes to reduce flooding whilst making appropriate use of the flood plain to convey and temporarily store flood water, and maintaining the special characteristics of Somerset.
- To provide greater certainty and clarity to Flood Action Plan developers/deliverers, reducing costs and time spent, and provide a positive solution that works for flood risk, people and nature.
- To ensure compliance with relevant legislation.

In January 2018 the SRA Board:

- Endorsed the principal aspiration to achieve both better management of water in high order rainfall events and better management of the natural environment - in particular the maintenance of water levels necessary to protect the wetland environment.
- Approved the priorities for focus of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation as set out below.

Timescales – The initial project timescale was aiming for completion of the plan by end March, though this has now slipped, aligning with other activities in the SRA work plan.

Priorities

Following the formation of a Working Group and associated workshops to agree an approach, in January the SRA Board approved that the initial focus of the strategic mitigation should be (in parallel priority):

1. **Enabling Maintenance Dredging Programme** - Production of a 5-year joint NE/EA advice/protocol and associated consent to enable ongoing maintenance of the recently dredged profile. This will mitigate for and minimise direct, in-channel, impacts of works, enabling maintenance works to progress in a timely and cost effective manner. (*Important:* This will not cover mitigation for the direct, in-channel, impact of works associated with pioneer dredging projects.)

Timescale: End of August 2018

2. **Enabling measures that reduce flooding to be delivered whilst ensuring greater certainty of A Resilient Wetland at the Heart of Somerset** -The group asks the SRA Board to endorse the principal aspiration to achieve both better management of water in high order rainfall events and better management of the natural environment, in particular the maintenance of water levels necessary to protect the wetland environment. The group is of the view that these two things must go hand in hand for the Strategic Approach to Mitigation to be effective.

Work with partners, stakeholders and landowners to develop a broad package of water level management measures to mitigate for loss of natural wetland function resulting from SRA-funded works, with a view to:

- Ensuring that the floodplain is managed to maximise resilience of vulnerable farmland.
- Supporting adaptation of farm businesses with land in vulnerable areas.
- Achieving an appropriate area of splash and shallow flood conditions from December to end February for migratory duck and wader species and with some areas also being managed to maintain damp condition into springtime in order to maintain the value of the living wetland.
- Maximising future opportunity for land managers to benefit from agricultural environmental support schemes.

In line with the letter from the Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium (SDBC) regarding Sowey and King's Sedgemoor Drain Enhancements dated 17 November 2017, the group has recognised the need for mitigation to maintain

appropriate water levels and splash conditions in the wetland as a priority. The group has also recognised the challenge in quantifying the degree of impact, given that predictive modelling is much less sensitive in low level events. On this basis, the approach will, with the support of SDBC, NFU and CLA, initiate a conversation with key landowners, asking them what improvement to flooding they consider necessary/possible and what mitigation they can offer to enable its delivery; with an emphasis on splash and shallow water conditions from December to end February and with some areas also being managed to maintain damp condition for wetland species into springtime.

Timescale: November 2018

Cost of Mitigation

As referenced in the SDBC letter of 17 November 2017, the costs associated with the mitigation work will need to be the subject of SRA grant aid. The Board should note this important point, and the need to resource on-going engagement with landowners in developing solutions that encourage increased resilience in land use. The SRA should also consider the long-term environmental and economic benefits of investing to increase resilience in land use and reduce the impact of flooding in areas where water needs to spread during flood events. Cost estimates for mitigation delivery projects will be developed with key partners and presented in future Board papers

Key Activity since February

In recent months the project has been waiting for detailed design and modelling data in order to understand and describe the 'in combination' effects of proposed dredging and Sowy-KSD channel works on the wetland. This is needed before we can work with drainage board engineers and members in order to develop an agreement to provide certainty regarding implementation of necessary water level management to mitigate for land drainage in order to protect the wetland. There have been early engagement meetings with NFU, CLA and IDB members have indicated support for this approach.

Recommendation:

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Date: 11 May 2018

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