

SRA BOARD MEETING – 16th JANUARY 2017

THE SRA BOARD

Minutes of a meeting of the Board of the Somerset Rivers Authority held in the Wyndham Room at Somerset County Council on Monday 16th January, 2017 at 10am.

PRESENT

Cllr John Osman (Chair)
Ray Adlam, Axe Brue IDB
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
Cllr Anne Fraser, SDC
Nick Gupta, EA
Matthew Heard, Natural England
Cllr Ric Pallister, SSDC
David Spicer, Parrett IDB
Cllr Anthony Trollope-Bellew, WSC
Cllr John Williams, TDBC

Rachel Burden, EA
Sarah Diacono, SRA
Paula Hewitt, SCC
Bren Hodgkinson, EA
Nick Stevens, SDBC

In Attendance:

Doug Bamsey, SDC

Apologies:

Tony Bradford (Vice-Chair), Parrett IDB
Cllr David Hall, SCC
David Jenkins, WRFCC
Tom Killen, MDC
Peter Maltby, Parrett IDB

Before the meeting, Nick Gupta paid tribute to Nick Lyness, the Environment Agency Wessex Area Flood and Coast Risk Manager, who died on 2 January. Mr Gupta said that in more than 25 years in the Environment Agency and its predecessors, Mr Lyness had made a massive impact on flood and coastal risk management, and many communities were better off because of his efforts. In Somerset, he helped to develop the 20 Year Flood Action Plan and many other projects across the county. His death was a great loss.

Cllr Osman said Mr Lyness had a very impressive track record and had been extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic. He would be greatly missed.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – item 1

No new declarations of interest were made, beyond the usual ones already recorded by Members.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING OCTOBER 26, 2016 – item 2

The minutes of the Board meeting held on 26 October, 2016 were signed as correct.

3. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Richard Archer spoke on behalf of the RSPB and Somerset Wildlife Trust. He said many components of the Sowy/KSD scheme had been completed over the last two years, along with pioneer dredging on the Parrett & Tone and investment in additional pumping infrastructure at Northmoor Pumping Station while the adoption of Trigger Points in the Parrett & Tone systems had substantially reduced the flood risk to people, 140 vulnerable properties and roads. He added that recent improvements to the Sowy/KSD system appear to have worked well during high river flows and floods in November 2016.

Mr Archer then put two questions. First, what is now the residual flood risk to people, properties and roads that widening the Sowy is trying to reduce even further? Second, do these additional benefits to flood risk management now represent good value for money, bearing in mind there may well be alternative approaches, including those which work more with natural processes, are unlikely to have a significant adverse impact on the internationally important wetlands on the Somerset Levels, and may be of substantially lower costs?

Cllr Osman thanked Mr Archer and said that his questions would be partly answered by the presentation about the Sowy/KSD coming up next in Item 4, then further through the Board's ensuing debate about that project.

4. UPDATE ON THE SOWY/KSD PROJECT – item 4

Rachel Burden said that following October's SRA Board meeting, where various stakeholders had raised concerns about the Sowy/KSD project, letters had been received from the IDBs, Natural England, the NFU and the RSPB/Somerset Wildlife Trust. To go forward, the scheme has to be legally compliant with the Habitat Regulations Assessment.

Dr Burden outlined the recent history of the Sowy/KSD project. It was included in the original Somerset Levels & Moors Flood Action Plan as a means of gaining greater operational flexibility; of diverting flood water in a 2013/14-type event away from high-risk areas, from houses, roads and Bridgwater; and of reducing the risk of summer flooding, of the devastating kind seen in 2012.

The project was a one-off investment that could be maintained in future at minimal cost. It brought the biggest benefits to the upstream moors around Langport and Muchelney. In 2013/14, the biggest impact came from opening up Monk's Leaze Clyse and using the Sowy/KSD. Greater operational flexibility would allow Monk's Leaze Clyse to be opened earlier and later.

Consultation had been extensive and was ongoing. The Environment Agency now wants to talk to individual landowners directly at Greylake and the 18ft Rhyne to better understand the impact on the handful who might see some additional water on their land in a 2013/14 tidelock-type event – though a lot of impact could be overcome with operational changes.

The Environment Agency had been working closely with Natural England for 18 months, to get a legally compliant scheme. The biggest issue still to be resolved is a very small reduction in low-level flooding in designated areas of Moorlynch and King's Sedgemoor, which could adversely impact the SSSI.

More generally, Dr Burden said it had not been possible to bridge a fundamental division on how the Sowy/KSD corridor should be managed: landowners and drainage boards typically want land not to be wetter – environmental organisations want it not to be drier.

Dr Burden said that figures quoted by the IDB for land that could be impacted in a 13/14-type event represented the worst case scenario. The Board needed to think about whether mitigations suggested by the IDB – such as further pioneer dredging of the Parrett – were proportionate, when operational changes could bring impacts down considerably, leaving work to be done with only a handful of landowners in a corridor more than 20km long. Given the scheme's wide geographical benefit, the Board also needed to question whether concerns raised by the IDB were representative of the whole area.

Dr Burden said the RSPB's concerns and requests had been noted. She said the Environment Agency understood the value of natural flood management. Using the wider Sowy corridor could be an option but timescales and funding had to be considered, as well as the risk of ending up doing nothing.

Assuming a legally compliant scheme could be agreed in the next six weeks, Dr Burden said it could go out to tender in April/May.

De-silting work at Parchey and Dunball was planned for 2017 then the main scheme could start in late 2018, to continue over two years in line with the funding programme agreed with the LEP [Local Enterprise Partnership].

Points raised during the discussion:

Flexibility on all sides is required to get a legally compliant scheme.

The SRA is trying to achieve the ability for operational choice. If this work is not done, there is no choice – and there will be a bigger event in the future than 2013/14.

Only in 2013/14 when water was going more round the Sowy/KSD network did Bridgwater start to feel easier, particularly south Bridgwater. People forget how close Bridgwater came to being inundated.

LEP funding has a time-bound agreed spending profile. The LEP is under pressure to get schemes completed, the SRA to deliver on its spending profile.

The SRA needs a package of measures that can be sustained in the future: sustaining dredging, with all its costs, will be extremely difficult.

The estimated cost of Sowey/KSD work over the next 10 years is £6m v £6.5m for dredging. To spend half a million less on a long-term solution, rather than spending forever on dredging, must be a better use of public money.

Work on the Parrett must be looked at seriously. It is about putting right previous bad policy and neglect.

Dredging back upstream from the Parrett Tone confluence to Oath Lock could bring benefits to the Muchelney and Langport area that are comparable to the effects of the Sowey work, but not enough information is available to understand what the environmental impact of that would be.

A huge amount of work has taken place on modelling and data collection to understand the Sowey in combination with works already delivered on the ground. Being asked to go back to square one to look at the in-combination effects of running dredging side-by-side with Sowey work would risk derailing the Sowey project and losing everything.

Enhancing the Sowey while enlarging the Parrett substantially increases the risk of not being able to make that work legally compliant and it runs the risk of totally undermining the special characteristics of the Levels and Moors. The two activities combined would become deeply concerning environmentally.

People are concerned about the Dunball tidelock problem, when water cannot go into the Parrett so backs up the KSD and could get back up to the 18ft Rhyne. One solution is not to let water in to the Sowey system.

Many people do support what IDB Board members say. IDB members have talked to people in the relevant areas.

The Parrett and the Sowey are not drainpipes but active channels influenced by flows and siltation. The Sowey/KSD project needs to be worked on in conjunction with the dredging strategy or a silt management strategy, as the Sowey will have an effect on the Parrett and vice versa.

A lot of concern arises from human error and past difficulties. Setting out the operational side in a cast-iron way would reassure landowners.

Landowners possibly subject to additional flooding could get compensation.

The SRA and its partners do not yet understand the cumulative impact of the interventions that have already been made, and they now need to understand the total impact they are having on the special characteristics of the Levels. Each new intervention will become progressively more difficult.

Cllr Osman concluded by saying that nobody wanted a repeat of 2013/14 or summer 2012 or a worse event. The Sowey scheme was in the original 20 Year Plan. It was one of the schemes most beneficial to reducing the

frequency, depth and duration of flooding. The SRA had been given substantial funds to do the work and he would be most concerned if those monies were allowed to slip away. The benefits of this scheme meant the SRA should get it up and running as soon as possible. To work on outstanding concerns, he proposed to chair a meeting in February with NGOs and the Environment Agency to determine whether it was going to be possible to come to an agreement, then report back to the March SRA Board meeting.

The Board:

- 1) Noted progress, concerns raised and associated responses;
- 2) Endorsed the Environment Agency continuing to work with Natural England to develop the Sowey/KSD project to the point it can be compliant with Habitats Regulations, and then going out to tender as soon as possible;
- 3) Agreed that the SRA Chairman should chair a meeting in February, with representatives of the Environment Agency, Natural England and environmental NGOs, to resolve outstanding issues with the aim of enabling a legally compliant Sowey/KSD project to be presented to the SRA Board at its meeting on March 13, 2017.

5. THE APPROACH TO DEVELOPING THE SRA 2017-18 ENHANCED PROGRAMME – item 5

Paula Hewitt gave a short presentation to update members about the process of deciding how money raised through next year's council tax should be spent, and give them chance to comment, before the 2017-18 Enhanced Programme came before the Board's next meeting on February 8. She outlined policies, and briefly described the Management Group's process of developing a methodology, the involvement of Technical Group, the use of 20 Year Flood Action Plan objectives and the application of different weightings for those. Ms Hewitt said the Board would be presented with different options.

Points raised during the discussion:

The Board should check back in 12 months' time to see if there were any unintended consequences of adopting this methodology.

The Board should consider whether it was best to focus more on 'big ticket items' that would benefit the whole of Somerset, and get them done early, than run the risk of spreading money too thinly on smaller schemes.

The SRA has to be about what is holistically right for the whole of Somerset.

Geographic spread is not simply judged by where work is done, but by which areas benefit from that work.

Scheme selection is ongoing. Priorities change. The Board needs and wants to be involved.

The Board:

Endorsed the approach taken to develop the 2017-18 Enhanced Programme.

6. AOB – item 6

Sarah Diacono sought the Board's urgent permission to re-allocate funds for important de-silting works, which – if approved today – could be done before Spring began, and environmental constraints applied. Ms Diacono briefly outlined underspends, explained why Andersea Pump Platform work was no longer needed and Brue Banks was not currently proceeding. Brue Banks was disproportionately expensive, so alternative maintenance methods were being investigated. The Environment Agency would request additional funds from the SRA, if need be, to get a solution to the Brue problem.

Points raised during the discussion:

Brue banks are in a very bad condition, leaking and deteriorating rapidly. Two recent days of heavy rainfall had seen water coming over the Brue banks as never before. Commitment was needed to get work done.

The Environment Agency is committed to looking at alternatives to see what can be done within existing funding. One alternative is for the Drainage Boards to see what works they could do, with funding.

Tree work was proposed long before the SRA existed and had been repeatedly delayed. The Cripps and Hixham Rhyne had been dredged in the Brue catchment but more difficult work was not progressing.

Tree work funds from 2015-16 and 2016-17 have not yet been spent; there is nothing to stop tree work going ahead. The Environment Agency would continue to support IDB officers whose job it was to deliver tree work.

The Environment Agency is concerned about the safety of operatives working on Brue banks. Hiring different equipment may be possible, but could go over budget. The Agency might therefore come back to the SRA for extra funding or go to the Drainage Boards to see if IDB precepts could be used to support such work. It might make more sense cost-wise if the IDB worked on the Agency's behalf through a Public Sector Co-operation Agreement.

The SRA is committed to doing a LEP-funded Brue dredge once modelling has been confirmed within the dredging strategy, a project led by the Drainage Boards, to identify which reaches of the Brue are appropriate.

The SRA's Management Group will discuss Brue issues.

Cllr Osman concluded that while the re-allocation of funds was accepted, the important work highlighted needed to be developed and not forgotten.

The Board:

- 1) Agreed to top up an existing Environment Agency funded project – Wessex De-silting – to enable additional Somerset reaches to be de-silted;
- 2) Removed Andersea Pump Platform, Brue Banks Improvement and Treework projects from the 2016-17 Programme;
- 3) Agreed the re-allocation of 2016-17 funds as proposed;
- 4) Allocated £61k of 2016-17 contingency funds to fund the net shortfall.

The meeting finished at 11.01am.

Chair Signature:

Date: