

SRA BOARD MEETING – 8th FEBRUARY 2017

THE SRA BOARD

Minutes of a meeting of the Board of the Somerset Rivers Authority held in the JMR Room at Taunton Deane Borough Council on Wednesday 8th February, 2017 at 10am.

PRESENT

Cllr John Osman (Chair)
Tony Bradford (Vice-Chair), Parrett IDB
Ray Adlam, Axe Brue IDB
Rachel Burden, EA
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
John Harris, WRFCC
Matthew Heard, Natural England
Cllr Tom Killen, MDC
Peter Maltby, Parrett IDB
Cllr Ric Pallister, SSSC
Cllr Anthony Trollope-Bellew, WSC
Cllr John Williams, TDBC

Emma Beardsley, SCC
Tim Burton, TDBC
Sarah Diacono, SRA
Cllr David Hall, SCC
Paula Hewitt, SCC
Barry James, SCC
David Jones, SCC
Mike O'Dowd-Jones, SCC
Chris Rusbridge, Defra
Nick Stevens, SDBC
Ben Thorne, FWAG SW

In Attendance:

Doug Bamsey, SDC

Apologies:

Cllr Anne Fraser, SDC
Nick Gupta, EA
David Jenkins, WRFCC

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 JANUARY 16, 2017 – item 2

The minutes of the Board meeting held on 16 January, 2017 were signed as correct.

During this item, Tony Bradford raised concerns about the Sowy, as a result of calls he had received about the amount of water going down the Sowy during recent rainfall events. IDB members had voted unanimously at a Parrett IDB meeting held on Tuesday, 7 February that the SRA projects (Sowy enhancement and dredging) were being developed in the wrong order, and as a result it had been agreed to invite the SRA Board to a workshop at the IDB offices to explain how the system worked and the IDB's views about future impacts.

Cllr Osman said that a workshop was a good idea. The last SRA Board meeting had had a full discussion and set a direction but members were happy to hear further information and would wait for an invitation.

A letter from the NFU about the Sowy would be discussed at the SRA Board's March meeting. It had arrived too late for today's meeting.

3. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Cllr Osman said that Adrian Dunbar had written to the Board. Mr Dunbar was not present to put his questions in person. Cllr Osman said that subjects raised by Mr Dunbar included the SRA's relationship with FLAG and concerns that some members of the community were not getting all the information they should because of the way it flowed through community groups. Cllr Osman said that he would write to Mr Dunbar and provide copies of Mr Dunbar's questions, and his response, to the Board.

4. PRECEPTING LEGISLATION AND 2017-18 FUNDING – item 4

Cllr Osman welcomed Chris Rusbridge, the SRA's new contact in Defra's Flood Risk Management team.

Sarah Diacono said she believed that the IDBs had already made their decisions about next year's funding for the SRA. Indicative funding levels had been received from all local authorities, who would now go through their normal February budget-setting meetings, at which SRA funding would be confirmed.

Mr Rusbridge said that ministers had committed very publicly to putting the SRA on a statutory basis as a precepting body, most recently in their response to the EFRA committee's flooding report and in a Westminster Hall debate last night. His first message therefore was: 'This is going to happen'.

Mr Rusbridge's second point was that Parliament was currently extremely busy and it was challenging to find a slot even for small measures such as this. He could not say when legislation would happen, only that it will happen at some point.

He expected that legislation would give the Government power to set up rivers authorities: Somerset Rivers Authority would be the first and probably only one. He said it would be up to the SRA to come up with a proposal for what it wanted the statutory SRA to look like. Members might therefore want to start thinking now about whether they would prefer the SRA to go ahead on its current basis or consider other models.

Cllr Osman said he understood the difficulties with Parliamentary time, but this legislation was important. The SRA had been waiting a number of years and progress needed to be made. When he met Sajid Javid and Marcus Jones at DCLG later this month, he would impress on them the need to move this

forward as quickly as possible. While stressing he was not making a political point, he said that Somerset County Council supplied most of the money for the SRA – about £2million via the 1.25% shadow precept – but the opposition voted against that. There was therefore uncertainty about what would happen after the election in May. He hoped the SRA would carry on but he did not know. Legislation therefore needing sorting in the next 12 months.

Points raised during the discussion:

If Somerset were going to have the only rivers authority, that meant only Somerset's council tax payers would be paying for flood work, whereas everywhere else would get national funding. This was not acceptable.

People in Somerset had decided they wanted additional spending beyond what the Environment Agency would normally provide. Somerset was being gifted the ability to do that. If it did not want to, it did not have to.

The SRA had been made an absolute promise last year that legislation would come forward. The current situation was very disappointing. The Government must live up to the promises it made. Action was needed; not just kind words and reassurance. It was understood that civil servants' time was limited, but there always seemed to be another reason for delay.

The luxury of being in opposition and the reality of being in administration are two different things.

It is important not to lose sight of the disaggregation of the IDB levy: £1.3m of Sedgemoor District Council funding goes to the IDBs, with Sedgemoor contributing by far the most. That is unsustainable with Rates Support Grant, a compensatory factor in the past, diminishing and soon to be gone.

Cllr Osman thanked Mr Rusbridge, and said he would always be welcome to attend Board meetings. He said there was a unified, strong, passionate consensus for action. He looked forward to working with Mr Rusbridge to get that.

5. REVIEW AND REVISION OF WORK STREAM 6: ASSESSING THE FLOOD RISK LONG-TERM CHOICES AND OPTIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE – item 5

Mike O'Dowd-Jones, Highways and Transport Commissioner for Somerset County Council, said he had reviewed progress against the original action plan and considered whether there was a need for this Work Stream to carry on in its current form. W6 had been about developing multi-agency collaborative working to ensure that investment plans from different parties were considered in a more joined-up way, about gathering evidence of the financial loss from the floods that Somerset had suffered and the impact of those floods, to help support the business case for future investment. He said excellent progress had been made. Areas where work could still be done

included: national infrastructure provision and planning; flood modelling; understanding and quantifying residual flood risk; and some fundamental points about the area and its future. But most actions were complete and issues were being looked at in other work streams.

Points raised during the discussion:

Hinkley Point C would give the opportunity to raise points about infrastructure again with bodies such as Western Power. It was important to remember how close people felt they had come to losing the sub-station in Bridgwater.

Nothing would be lost by closing down W6, as the key outstanding actions had been absorbed into other work streams.

Cllr Osman said it was fantastic to see a report which showed lots that had been completed.

The Board:

1. Closed down work stream W6 in its current form as most of the actions are either completed or substantially underway.
2. Endorsed the need for further work to quantify and understand the residual risk of flooding on road, rail and communication networks following the implementation of infrastructure improvements and on-going flood and water management activity.
3. Endorsed the need for further work with agencies and communities to consider the long term sustainable future of the levels and moors in the light of the available evidence base, activity progressing under Work Streams 5, 2 and 3, and possible agricultural policy change linked to Brexit.

6. REVIEW AND REVISION OF WORK STREAM 4: RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE – item 6

David Jones, Commissioning Manager – Highway Assets and Improvement for Somerset County Council and Leader of Work Stream 4, looked back at the damage and costs of the 2013/14 flood, and actions arising, such as the need for every community to have at least one access route, the need to keep Somerset's strategic network open and the need to enable infrastructure to recover more quickly. He highlighted achievements including the deep clean of all highways systems, the installation of road closure gates, repairs to flooded carriageways, and national award-winning schemes at Muchelney (road raising) and the A372 at Beer Wall (repairing and raising the road, larger new culverts). All initial targets had been completed.

Recent work included extra highways cleansing (drain jetting, gully emptying, road sweeping, de-silting structures), working with FWAG to identify whether changes in land management could alleviate local flooding, lots of local flood

schemes, CCTV surveys, work on culverts, and the replacement of trash screens on culverts to stop debris getting in.

Cllr Osman thanked Mr Jones and his team for the huge amount of infrastructure work that had been, and was being, done.

Points raised during the discussion:

Need to better communicate to the public that the SRA is paying for *extra* work on highways – and that this work is not Somerset County Council's everyday job. The county council programme takes a risk-based approach – but the SRA work delivers a higher standard of work, further reducing the risk. There was a need to stress that if it were not for the SRA, this work would not take place.

Residents and the parish council in Long Load are lobbying for bridge improvements. The SRA's Technical Group had responded and received a reply. Technical Group would now look at the issue again, pull together a revised position statement and distribute it to all interested parties.

The new culverts on the A372 at Seven Bends did not look very healthy at the height of last week's rainfall – water needed to stay in channel. However, as the channels were only dug last Autumn they were not going to be totally stable: repair work is planned for the Spring.

The Board:

1. Noted the progress made in delivering all original actions.
2. Approved the proposals to update W4 and supported Grant Proposals aligned to the revised workstream.

7. SRA 2017-18 ENHANCED PROGRAMME – item 7

Sarah Diacono outlined how the Enhanced Programme and Policies had been developed. Weightings had produced no real differences in results but none of the weighting systems used had created a balanced programme from a work stream perspective – they left out building local resilience and tackling urban runoff. Ms Diacono explained that some adjustments had therefore been made, for workstream balance, geographic spread and value for money. The Enhanced Programme would need to be finally confirmed by the Board in March after local authorities' budget-setting meetings. Policies needed to be approved so they could be enshrined in next year's proposal forms and embedded in processes.

Points raised during the discussion:

The hamlets of Shurton and Burton in the parish of Stogursey get cut off for a short time practically every winter, affecting about 200 people. Furthermore,

the escape route from Hinkley Point comes out between Shurton and Burton, although EDF seem unconcerned about this and not interested in contributing towards remedial works. The issue will be raised at a forthcoming meeting with EDF by SRA Board substitute member Cllr David Hall. The Chairman of the SRA will also write to EDF.

If issues with the ability to deliver works are resolved during the year, there is a desperate need to do works in the Axe and Brue catchments – described as ‘fire brigade’ works that will affect houses and businesses, rather than long-term works.

It is a challenge comparing different kinds of works. The SRA could have adopted national means but that would have defeated the purpose of the SRA, which is about local decisions, and different valuations. Work will continue through the year to improve the process and it will be reviewed in 12 months’ time as the Board wished, to see if there had been any unintended outcomes. The aim is to get sense within the process, not continually adjust it.

Members discussed the need to take a much stronger line on SUDS, as this was very important to the public, even if some developers regarded stipulations by planners as impediments. An effective balance must be found. Subjects included: 1) The desirability of cataloguing all SUDS installations in Somerset. Work will be done to assess the cost of doing that. 2) Somerset aspires to make SUDS part of the whole planning process, from pre-determination onwards. There is a good case in Somerset for producing enhanced guidance for developers, as a Part 2 to existing guidance. 3) Getting serious about SUDs requires Supplementary Planning Documents. That does give matters greater weight and can be progressed. 4) It would be even better to aim for a virtuous circle that includes environmental considerations along with SUDS.

The Board:

1. Approved the proposed SRA 2017-18 Enhanced Programme, subject to funding being confirmed.
2. Approved the proposed SRA Policies in relation to fundable actions.

8. SRA 2016-17 QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE REPORTS – item 8

8a. FWAG Highway and West Somerset Referrals Extension 2016-17

Ben Thorne, Leader of Work Stream 2 and senior farm conservation adviser with FWAG SW, said the number of referrals from West Somerset Flood Group looking at possible land management solutions to local flooding problems had been underestimated and his team had been overwhelmed, so additional funding was being requested from contingency so as to be able to keep working on sites for the rest of the year. Mr Thorne gave two examples of work done, firstly at Carhampton where work with a farmer to address soil

compaction and improve infiltration had reduced surface water run-off on to the A39 a lot, according to the Area Highways Manager, and secondly at Curry Rivel where farm-scale attenuation had, in the last few days, meant that three normal village highway flooding hotspots had not flooded at all.

The Board:

8a. Approved a bid to the 2016/17 contingency fund of £12.5k to extend the land management follow up work on referrals from Highway/LLFA (£5k) and West Somerset (£7.5k) local flooding hotspots

8b1. Q3 2016-17 Enhanced Programme Update

Sarah Diacono gave very brief progress updates on a range of schemes. The dredging trials had been successfully completed; silt monitoring would continue to collect data for analysis; both activities would feed into the dredging strategy, next year's maintenance dredging and dredging on the Brue. Work at Beer Wall had been completed; there was a need to get a legally compliant scheme for widening the Sowby/KSD. A lot of de-silting work had been done and more was to come through the Environment Agency's Wessex Desilting package: adding extra work to this had been approved at the last SRA Board meeting. Excellent progress was being made with the Environment Agency's scheme at Cannington, to which the SRA was contributing; enhanced highways maintenance work had been done; and local authorities were now expected to make more use of SUDS inspections of local schemes after LLFA Flood Risk Manager Dan Martin met local planning control managers. Forty-nine schemes had been completed out of 75 applications approved for capital grants for natural flood management work.

No risks needed to be escalated to the Board.

Points raised during the discussion:

Cannington is on budget, on programme and nearly complete.

The Board:

8b1. Noted the overall progress and key risks of the SRA's Enhanced Programme for the year, as shown in the 3rd Quarter 2016/17 Enhanced Programme Performance Dashboard.

8b2. Q3 2016-17 Finance Update

Emma Beardsley said that Ben Thorne had already dealt with Recommendation 5. She explained the other three recommendations for financial changes.

Delivery partners had indicated that almost 70% of the planned spend for 2016-17 had taken place, so things were well on track financially.

Two declarations of interest were recorded: Peter Maltby's son owns land by the Sowy, as does Tony Bradford.

The Board:

1. Noted the contents of the attached 3rd Quarter financial summary report.
2. Approved setting aside £654k remaining funding from the 2016-17 Local Partner Funded Maintaining dredged profiles is set aside as a provision for the Sowy/KSD and/or pioneer dredging.
3. Approved setting aside £426k savings from the Growth Deal funded Pioneer Dredging as a provision for the Sowy/KSD and/or pioneer dredging.
4. Approved setting aside the £200k remaining funding from the 2015-16 Interim Funds funded Funding Mechanism as a provision for the Sowy/KSD and/or pioneer dredging.
5. Approved the increase in budget of £12.5k for Land Management activities, funded from 2016-17 contingency.

9. FLOOD ACTION PLAN SPECIFIC UPDATES – item 9

9a. Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme

Tim Burton said consultants from Capita/Aecom were progressing with the Stage 2 commission for the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme. Modelling is underway. Discussions had begun with landowners at Bradford on Tone about gaining access: most had agreed; conversations were being held with two who hadn't. A surveyor is being appointed this week to further help with this work.

Points raised during the discussion:

This scheme needs to happen as early as possible to protect Taunton and the Somerset Levels and Moors.

The Board:

9a. Noted the contents of the report and progress made on the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme for Phase 2 and endorsed this as an appropriate basis for continued joint project working.

9b. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier

Doug Bamsey said the project board had decided to take a little bit more time to get the assessment of the two preferred locations for a Barrier right: Site 4 is just upstream of Dunball Wharf, Site 5 is near Express Park. The choice

was finely balanced: a robust case for finance would be crucial. Types of gates were being considered. The preference now was for a gate that would come down – a failsafe mechanism that would work without any power – not a Thames Barrier-style gate that would come up. Downstream defences would need to be enhanced, including secondary defences for Chilton Trinity (which currently has below-standard, 50-year protection). Mr Bamsey said that more public consultation would be held in the summer after a preferred option had been chosen. A business case would be submitted in Autumn 2017.

Points raised during the discussion:

The Bridgwater Tidal Barrier will not be affected by prevarication in the legislative process of the sort affecting the SRA. This project requires a successful Transport and Works Act application – which is challenging, so a robust project is needed.

The Board:

9b. Noted the progress made in the technical assessment to identify a preferred option for the scheme.

9c. Dredging strategy

Nick Stevens said this was a challenging project, that was taking time, but it was very interesting and very encouraging. It looked like it would produce very positive results on costs and environmental issues. Investigations in modelling suggested that an extra 7 cumecs could be carried in-channel during a flood, though there could be one or two slight increases in water levels, particularly in Curry Moor. Mr Stevens said that 60mm had to be seen in the context of Curry Moor being 3 metres deep.

The Brue had lagged behind as the small and very capable dredging team had focused on the Parrett but work was now just about to start on modelling.

The dredging trials had gone so well, they had been extended. Water engineers and the company involved had all learned from the trials. Mr Stevens said that in conventional dredging, operators were very hamstrung when the river came up because plant had to stop working, but with water injection dredging you get better results when the river comes up, because you can get silt out further.

The key to everything is working out how silt moves around the system, so that dredging can be done at the right times. Monitoring is vital for getting better information and doing a better job.

Only minor environmental effects had been recorded; it made sense to work with natural processes of erosion and try to maximise the benefits of those. More maintenance work would be done in the winter [2017/18] and work done to see how lessons learned might be applied to other lengths of channel.

Points raised during the discussion:

SRA Board members need to see elements of the dredging strategy – even if it is unfinished – so they can make calculated decisions about the future of the Sowy and Parrett – as these decisions could change the landscape of the Levels and Moors forever.

It would be good to understand more about the environmental impacts of the dredging trials, and issues such as the impact of dredging on current Raised Water Level Areas and the compatibility of dredging with Water Level Management Plans.

The Board:

9c. Noted the progress made and the encouraging interim results of investigations.

9d. Sowy/KSD

Given the shortfall in funding for the Sowy, Sarah Diacono said it was prudent to put aside minimal provisions of shadow precept money, to make up that shortfall over the next four years. Proposed provisions were minimal because of the levels of savings achieved on pioneer dredging and maintenance dredging; those two big chunks of money could be put to one side, possibly for the Sowy, possibly for further dredging. When tenders for the Sowy work came back this summer, the Board could look again at this funding approach to see if any additional financial actions were needed.

Points raised during the discussion:

The paper presented to the Board calls for the drawing-down first of funds for the Sowy/KSD from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership. It is very important to help the LEP demonstrate that their money is being spent so they can draw down further Government funds in future.

The Board:

1. Noted the funding options available at present to cover the Sowy/KSD shortfall and agreed to set aside the underspend of £1,080k to be used for either the Sowy/KSD or further pioneer dredging.
2. Endorsed the funding strategy of drawing down LEP funds first.
3. Approved setting aside £200k of contingency and £150k from next year's shadow precept for the Sowy/KSD scheme (the latter figure to be subject to review as soon as an agreed scheme has been costed).

10. 2017-18 SRA CONSTITUTION AND MoU – item 10

Sarah Diacono said that in the light of the proposed development of the SRA as a precepting authority, it was proposed to roll over the existing MoU and constitution from 2016-17 to 2017-18. The SRA should focus its resources on whether it wanted a new authority to be structured and run the way the SRA is run now, or whether it should be different. She added that at the moment legislation is enacted, there will then be nine months to develop a proposal and consult with the people of Somerset. The more preparation that can be done, the better.

Points raised during the discussion:

The 2017-18 MoU will be updated for changes to Board members and funding amounts.

The Board:

Agreed that the existing SRA Memorandum of Understanding and Constitution should be rolled over to 2017-18 without amendment, save minor updates in relation to changes in personnel, dates and funding amounts relevant to 2017-18.

11. RISK SHARING ACROSS THE PARTNERSHIP – item 11

Barry James summarised his paper, which was a prelude to a future, more detailed consideration of issues to do with risk-sharing. Risk affected people's willingness to act as delivery partners. Mr James said legal advice indicated that obtaining an overarching agreement across all partners would give the SRA a mechanism for sharing risk as equitably as possible, and more efficiently.

No points were raised or questions asked.

The Board:

Noted the current situation with regard to risk management in preparation to receiving a future report about agreeing a way to manage financial risk between partners, primarily in relation to Local Enterprise Partnership funding.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS – item 12

Cllr Osman said that last week he had attended the first meeting of the SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel, and had been very pleased with what he saw. Parrett IDB representative Julian Taylor had been elected Chairman, Taunton Deane Borough Cllr Simon Coles Vice-Chair. It would be a huge help to have more people who understood the issues.

Sarah Diacono said the Panel had made two recommendations to the SRA Board. 1) As a result of the success of the West Somerset Flood Group, the Panel then recommended each district to set up their own flood group or encourage one. 2) The first objective of the Flood Action Plan should have the words “including flash flooding” added to it. The high risk posed by flash flooding to life is a key feature in West Somerset.

She said the Panel had been fully engaged and was very supportive of the push for legislation. To stress its urgency, the Panel Chair will write to Somerset MPs. The Panel is also going to write to outside bodies who have expressed an interest in scrutinising the SRA, such as the RSPB, Somerset Wildlife Trust, CLA, NFU, and community groups to encourage them to attend.

Points raised during the discussion:

The formal process for taking forward recommendations from the SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel would involve papers coming to the Board and it was expected that in these instances the Panel chair would write to the SRA Chairman.

A date should be fixed for the IDB Sowey workshop, as soon as possible. It was hoped all SRA Board members would attend. Cllr Osman concluded by asking officers to investigate possible dates.

The meeting finished at 11.40am.

Chair Signature:

Date: