

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting – 10 January 2020

THE SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD

Draft minutes of the Board meeting of Somerset Rivers Authority held at Mendip District Council's headquarters in Shepton Mallet on Friday 10 January 2020, 10am.

PRESENT:

Ray Adlam (Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board)
Emma Baker (Environment Agency)
Tony Bradford – Vice-Chair (Parrett Internal Drainage Board)
Cllr Mike Caswell (Sedgemoor District Council)
Jeff Fear (Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board)
Cllr David Hall – Chair (Somerset County Council)
Matthew Heard (Natural England)
Rebecca Horsington (Parrett Internal Drainage Board)
David Jenkins (Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee)
Cllr Matt Martin (Mendip District Council)
Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts (Somerset West and Taunton Council)
Cllr Mike Stanton (South Somerset District Council)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Doug Bamsey (Sedgemoor District Council)
Dr Rachel Burden (Environment Agency)

Roger Burge (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)
Nicola Dawson (Somerset County Council)
Paul Deal (Mendip District Council)
Emma Giffard (Somerset Rivers Authority)
Chris Hall (Somerset West and Taunton Council)
Rebecca Hall (Somerset County Council)
Paula Hewitt (Somerset County Council)
Jonathan Hudston (Somerset Rivers Authority)
David Mitchell (Somerset Rivers Authority)
Graham Quarrier (Environment Agency)
Ann Rhodes (Somerset West and Taunton Council)
Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)

APOLOGIES:

Michele Cusack, Somerset County Council

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None apart from that noted above.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Tony Bradford, for agenda item 14b: King's Sedgemoor Drain.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 27 SEPTEMBER 2019

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

5. ADAPTING THE LEVELS

Nicola Dawson, leader of the SRA's Building Local Resilience workstream, introduced Emma Giffard, SRA Community Engagement Officer, and Dawn James, SRA Community Engagement Support Officer. Ms Giffard then gave a presentation about Adapting the Levels, mirroring the content of her slides, on subjects such as the project's timeframe and local and EU funding, its local and international partners, and climate change and rainfall patterns. The project's aims were described with particular reference to the development of Adaptation Pathways for the Somerset Levels and Moors. Ms Giffard stressed the project team's awareness of sensitivities surrounding the area's future and how important it was going to be to work with a wide range of local people on the co-creation of some natural solutions to water management issues of flooding and drought. Activities so far included lots of one-to-one meetings with farmers and landowners.

Ms Giffard handed over to Will Barnard, who told the Board that he manages a farm on Pawlett Hams near the mouth of the River Parrett and is a Parrett Internal Drainage Board member. For Adapting the Levels, Mr Barnard is employed through the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest to liaise with farmers and landowners about moving towards more naturally functioning water management measures on a total of 4000 hectares. Mr Barnard said that he wanted to help people find a way past current economic and political risks. He explained that the SRA had previously funded him to work on developing moor associations, to bring people together and determine their own fate. In an example given during his presentation – stemming from before his involvement with the SRA – Mr Barnard said that fragmented land use on Pawlett Hams had caused problems but greater co-operation between farmers and a single management structure now made it easier to interact with other agencies. It had enabled greater collective buying power, more machinery sharing, better grazing arrangements and improved farmland infrastructure. He said that modest capital schemes – such as restoring droves – could make marginal landscapes significantly easier to manage, which is why Adapting the Levels would offer real benefits.

Points raised during the discussion:

Tony Bradford felt that villages on the Somerset Levels and Moors should be top priority, not land. The SRA and its partners should be channelling their energies into protecting people's homes as best they could. If climate change predictions were accurate many villages would be in deep trouble. Farming would be gone because land would not be fit for

farming. Land could be the area's "saviour" but at the moment Mr Bradford did not see who was willing to stick their neck out on issues such as main rivers or major schemes.

Emma Giffard said that the Adaptation Pathways process was designed to address uncertainties in climate change predictions and assess fairly what would have to be done and when. This provides time to work with communities and farmers to adapt to whatever changes are coming.

Cllr David Hall said that everyone had different perspectives. It was crucial for people to keep working together and adapt as they understood what is happening.

Ray Adlam argued that it was too early to be spending money on a project like this, because its success would depend upon the confidence of landowners and farmers, and he said in his area they currently had very little confidence in the SRA due to a lack of progress with projects. Mr Adlam expressed great frustration over unrealized hopes placed in the SRA's power to get works done on the Brue. He added that if main rivers were put into order, so that water could be evacuated, then people might feel confidence and trust and then they might join together on a co-operative basis with a body like the SRA. He felt there would be a lot to answer for unless this issue was first resolved.

Will Barnard said that the SRA was not at the forefront of Adapting the Levels. The project was about landowners choosing to work together to improve their own lot. Mr Barnard said he wanted money to be used to make real changes on the ground that worked and were seen to work and that would build trust and allow for future engagement.

Cllr Hall responded to Mr Adlam's concerns and said that he did not feel that taking issue with this type of initiative was the right way to address frustrations about progress with other SRA projects. Huge progress had been made through the SRA, as seen during recent weeks of heavy rain. It was incumbent on partners in the SRA to work together to overcome any problems and make progress rather than simply criticise or dismiss the good work that has been achieved.

Doug Bamsey urged the Adapting the Levels team to make sure that their messages to the public were delivered sensitively and encouraged action rather than making the issues seem too big to deal with. He also explained it is important not to unintentionally undermine the logic of a major initiative like the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier. The Barrier will be an important part of the mixture of interventions protecting thousands of people on the seaward side of the M5. He asked the team to visit Sedgemoor District Council: Emma Giffard agreed.

6. QUARTER 2 2019-20 FINANCE REPORT

SRA Finance Manager Rebecca Hall took the Board briefly through some key details of the Quarter 2 2019-20 Finance Report. She highlighted sums paid out and committed, and a proposed increase in contingency because of two projects not needing their full initial funding allocation. SRA Senior Manager David Mitchell spoke about an issue arising from discussions at an SRA Management Group meeting, namely the need to make it clearer

when money was due to be spent in future. Mr Mitchell took a question from Emma Baker to illustrate the point that a more detailed breakdown of future spending would help the SRA Board to better monitor project progress and spend.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted the financial performance as at the end of quarter two of 2019-20.
2. Approved the re-allocation of contingency as per section three of the Quarter 2 2019-20 Finance Report.

7. HEART OF THE SOUTH WEST LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP (LEP) PROJECTS SPENDING REVIEW

SRA Senior Manager David Mitchell took his paper as read. He spoke briefly of greater confidence that the SRA's Growth Deal funding from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership would be spent by the deadline of 31 March 2021, while stressing that a very close eye would be kept on progress. Mr Mitchell said that work was due in 2020 on River Sowey/King's Sedgemoor Drain enhancements, and some activities remaining from the Oath to Burrowbridge dredging would be carried out once the weather had improved in the Spring. He noted that it would not be possible to dredge down the River Parrett between Northmoor and the M5 this January, as had been hoped. If need be, the LEP money that had been reserved for this work could potentially be re-allocated, with the LEP's consent, possibly to the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier.

Points raised during the discussion:

Cllr David Hall said the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership had a new Chair, Karl Tucker, the Executive Chairman of Yeo Valley. Cllr Hall welcomed Mr Tucker's local Somerset connections.

In response to questions from Rebecca Horsington, David Mitchell and Iain Sturdy explained why it had not proved possible to arrange for water injection dredging of the River Parrett between Northmoor and the M5 this January. It had been hoped to extend the maintenance dredging taking place this month with some trials between Northmoor and the M5. However, the 5-year permit previously granted for maintenance dredging would not cover new (pioneer) Northmoor to M5 dredging.

Tony Bradford asked if a short trial could be allowed to establish whether water injection dredging techniques would be successful between Northmoor and the M5. Emma Baker invited Mr Bradford and Matt Heard to discuss what is possible.

Recommendation

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the latest position regarding potential LEP underspend.

8. KEY PROJECT UPDATES

A & B – BRIDGWATER TIDAL BARRIER PRESENTATION (A) AND LETTER OF SUPPORT (B)

Graham Quarrier, Environment Agency Project Executive, gave a short presentation about the recent submission of a Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO) application for the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier. This was a major milestone. Mr Quarrier discussed what it meant and why he would like the Board to send a letter expressing their continued support for the Barrier to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which is now officiating over the statutory TWAO process. Mr Quarrier said the huge amount of TWAO documentation that had been submitted covered every part of the Barrier scheme. The TWAO process covers all necessary permissions to enable the Environment Agency to deliver the scheme.

Mr Quarrier explained that the design for the Barrier was well-developed and that Growth Deal funding gathered from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership and contributed by the SRA had been really valuable in getting this far. The Barrier project is led by the Environment Agency and Sedgemoor District Council. Mr Quarrier said that Defra had seen local organisations “putting their money where their mouth is” and this had made a big difference.

Mr Quarrier said that Formal Representations had to be submitted by 13 February, and that it usually took about a year for projects to get consent. Depending on the nature and number of any objections, a public inquiry could be held.

Points raised during the discussion:

Mr Quarrier explained why there is no proposal for a bypass river channel with a lock around the Barrier: the maintenance costs would be high and it is believed there is insufficient need. Doug Bamsey commented that it was important to be realistic about this. Shipping at the key site of Dunball would be unaffected. Little went beyond Dunball up the Parrett. Any time the Barrier was likely to be closed – say, because of a storm surge – was unlikely to be a good time for boating on the Parrett. Mr Quarrier also pointed out that space was being left for a future generation to build a bypass channel if they wished to seek permission for that in decades to come.

Mr Quarrier said the project team would engage seriously with any concerns that might be expressed as Formal Representations, particularly from statutory consultees such as landowners. Mr Quarrier expected that some individuals in Chilton Trinity would continue to have concerns about this flood defence scheme but he stressed that construction would be carried out considerately. He said that during recent ground investigation work, monitoring had shown that more noise came from a nearby industrial estate than it did from the operation of equipment like the mini oil rig used on the river. Mr Quarrier expected that it would take two years to build the Barrier itself (2022-2024), with work around it then going on for another year.

Doug Bamsey paid tribute to the huge amount of hard work put into this project by the Environment Agency and he thanked the SRA for its valuable support. He said the Barrier was an important part of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan and would protect homes, businesses and infrastructure. Environmental improvements such as better rights of way were being actively considered around the Barrier site and possibilities were being explored with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust.

David Jenkins said that Bridgwater was one of 12 spots nationally most vulnerable to tidal surges. Mr Jenkins praised Sedgemoor District Council and the Area Manager of the Environment Agency for the way this extremely complex project had been advanced. He added that once statutory consents were, as he hoped, in place, further progress would then depend on funding decisions taken by a number of parties including Defra, whose capital programme is administered through the Environment Agency on the advice of Regional Flood & Coastal Committees (RFCCs). Mr Jenkins said that the Wessex RFCC was going to be recommended to provide a letter of support at its next meeting. He stressed that it was very important to speak with one voice locally for this project because lots of places were competing for limited national funding. He warned that failure to show strong local support could increase the likelihood that government directed funding to another project. He therefore repeated that it was very important to have a culture and a climate of competence and 'can do' and support. Cllr David Hall agreed on the need for people to keep working together with a positive and united public front.

Cllr Matt Martin, who joined the SRA Board last year, requested more information about the mechanics of the Barrier. Mr Quarrier promised to supply this.

Recommendation

As recommended, it was agreed that a letter supporting the proposed Bridgwater Tidal Barrier should be sent as a Formal Representation by the SRA Board to the statutory Transport and Works Act Order process currently being run by Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

C – TAUNTON STRATEGIC FLOOD ALLEVIATION IMPROVEMENTS SCHEME (TSFAIS)

Ann Rhodes, Strategy Specialist (Planning Policy) with Somerset West and Taunton Council (SWTC), summarised her paper. She outlined the progress of Phases 1 and 2 of the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme (TSFAIS), and listed the local interventions developed by the council in partnership with the Environment Agency. Ms Rhodes said that SWTC's Full Council would be asked to endorse Phase 2 of TSFAIS in February, and to commit £6million towards funding three initial options. She asked the SRA Board to likewise endorse Phase 2 and to confirm their ongoing support for TSFAIS and its wider objectives.

Points raised during the discussion:

In response to a question from Rebecca Horsington about the effects of proposed TSFAIS interventions on the Somerset Levels and Moors, Ms Rhodes said that various scenarios had been modelled and the interventions selected were ones which showed no significant impacts on the Levels and Moors and on flows from the Taunton M5 junction downwards. Tony Bradford and Iain Sturdy asked for these reassuring studies to be shared. Ms Rhodes said she was happy to share. As the Chair moved matters towards Recommendations, Mr Bradford cited personal observations of a Blackbrook chicken farm in the 1970s and of Curry Moor now as evidence for how flooding situations could change over the years. Mr Bradford and Mr Sturdy then proposed that the third recommendation to the Board should be amended to include a proviso about how interventions must have no significant impact downstream of Taunton.

Recommendations

The SRA Board agreed to all proposed recommendations, and added a condition to the third:

1. Noted the progress of the TSFAIS and completion of Phase 2 work.
2. Endorsed the recommended strategic and long-term approach to the management of flood risk in Taunton.
3. Confirmed ongoing support of the project and its wider objectives, subject to the condition that interventions made as part of the TSFAIS must have no significant impact downstream of Taunton.

9. 2020-21 SRA ENHANCED PROGRAMME & BUDGET

David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager, summarised his paper and picked out some key aspects of the SRA's 2020-21 Enhanced Programme of works. He drew particular attention to how some actions, such as the Taunton Flood Action Plan and Sub-Catchment Analysis and Development of Integrated Schemes, were designed to establish a long-term pipeline of robust projects that would fulfil the SRA's purpose of giving Somerset extra flood protection and resilience and play to its strengths as a partnership. So, for example, the SRA would keep aiming to deliver projects with multiple benefits and to tie works together with other compatible activities across Somerset. Mr Mitchell noted that the SRA will have been in existence for five years at the end of January. As many early priorities had now been dealt with, now was the right time to review how programmes of works were pulled together and to put extra effort, time and resource into this important task.

Points raised during the discussion:

Jeff Fear said the SRA should be careful where it allocated its money if there was a danger that one course of action could be superseded by another. Mr Fear cited the mention of Tealham and Tadhams Moors in the Enhanced Programme's description of Adapting the Levels and drew attention to possible contradictions between recent expenditure by the

SRA and others on mechanical measures to control water levels such as improvements at North Drain Pumping Station, and Adapting the Levels' aspiration earlier in this Board meeting for more natural gravitational methods of drainage to be used. As an alternative Mr Fear suggested dredging the Brue, which would supply both capacity and containment. David Mitchell said he understood that the aim on Tealham and Tadham was not to undo what had been done but to work with local people on ideas for what they would like to see happen in the future.

Rebecca Horsington was concerned about the small amount of work on Somerset's main river system in this year's Enhanced Programme. In her view it was best to get the system sorted out for now and then invest in the future on projects such as Adapting the Levels. She said that people in her area had been made extremely jumpy by high water levels during recent wet weather and she felt it was quite difficult to justify spending on projects not on main rivers. Cllr Hall said that across Somerset there were different views on how to make the system work properly and all those views needed to be taken into account. David Mitchell said the SRA was doing a lot in its Dredging and River Management workstream, such as the recent dredging between Oath and Burrowbridge, the forthcoming work on the Sowy-King's Sedgemoor drain, and ongoing maintenance of dredged profiles. He added that the SRA consisted of its partners and could only work with schemes that came forward from its partners.

Ms Horsington accepted that the IDB was currently very overstretched, but asked why the Environment Agency was not identifying main river work that could be done. Emma Baker said that a report going to next week's meeting of the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee showed what maintenance work the Environment Agency in Wessex was planning to deliver within its funding from Defra and that over the last week Environment Agency staff had spent a lot of time with Roger Burge and Iain Sturdy at the IDB going through this. Ms Baker added that the Environment Agency locally was currently only resourced – from an SRA point of view – to deal with three big complex and challenging projects: Bridgwater Tidal Barrier, the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme and Sowy-King's Sedgemoor Drain enhancements.

Ms Horsington also questioned whether some SRA projects – such as activities involving highways and Kingston St Mary – could be funded in other ways, such as CiL (Community Infrastructure Levy) in the case of Kingston St Mary or Somerset County Council's highways department. Cllr David Hall stressed that SRA work to reduce flooding on roads was about additionality – work that would not otherwise be funded – and he was confident that principle was applied to other areas. David Mitchell concurred: the SRA funded work that would not otherwise happen. Mr Mitchell described the process of assessment by SRA partners that applications went through to test their validity. Cllr Hall reinforced "the big picture" of partners working together across Somerset on different activities.

Roger Burge said both the IDB and the Environment Agency faced a resource issue for SRA work and a big problem – because of the SRA's lack of guaranteed funding beyond the next year - was an inability to plan and deliver for more than a year ahead. So while

work was being done to identify additional main river activities that would reduce local flood risks, the question of who was going to deliver these activities would need to be addressed.

Given this year-on-year situation, Ms Horsington asked if money should therefore be saved for projects that would benefit the whole county rather than more specialist activities. Cllr Hall said he was confident that the SRA was doing the very best it could with the resources it currently had, and as long as the current Somerset County Council administration was in place and he personally had anything to do with it, the county council would continue to support the SRA, but he acknowledged that precepting legislation was important for the SRA because it would allow the SRA to evolve and develop and expand in the future.

Paula Hewitt noted that the SRA's money from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership had to be spent by the end of March 2021. That meant there was now work to be done on how the SRA should spend or save its future precept funding and on finding future funding streams to help with larger-scale projects. Doug Bamsey agreed that work had to be done this year on developing a more strategic longer-term approach. David Jenkins proposed a meeting in seminar mode between Board members and officers to address the question of "how we do have confidence that there is commitment and capacity in this partnership to deliver". Cllr Hall welcomed this suggestion.

Tony Bradford felt that work on main rivers had been decreasing and environmental work increasing. He was not against environmental work such as Slow the Flow initiatives but these should follow on from main river work. The key point for him was that water, even it had been slowed, still ended up in main rivers and still had to be conveyed from A to B. Mr Bradford called for re-prioritisation of works, focused on what most benefitted people and properties, through a review of the 20 Year Flood Action Plan that was drawn up in 2014.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board provisionally approved the proposed 2020-21 Enhanced Programme and budget as listed, subject to final approval on 6 March after funding is confirmed by SRA Local Partners (councils and Internal Drainage Boards) during February 2020.

The Board also agreed that a special seminar should be held to enable Board members and officers from the SRA and its partners to explore issues of capacity and commitment with regards to the development and delivery of SRA Enhanced Programmes of work.

10. FLOOD ACTION PLAN REVIEW

David Mitchell spoke about updating Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan (FAP), which is overseen by the SRA. Mr Mitchell apologised for the lack of progress with this review. Questioned by the Chair, he set out a timetable for how he aimed to get the process going by the end of January and completed in early 2021.

11. PRECEPTING LEGISLATION

David Mitchell said that a meeting with the Flooding Minister (and Taunton MP) Rebecca Pow had been arranged for 24 February. A previous appointment had been put off because of the General Election campaign. Cllr David Hall said that he also intended to work very closely with David Warburton (MP for Somerton and Frome, whose Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill did not progress in the last Parliament beyond the House of Lords). Cllr Hall said that he and his Vice-Chair Tony Bradford would do their very best to find a way forward.

12. 2020-21 ADMINISTRATION

David Mitchell asked members to come to the next SRA Board meeting prepared to sign the SRA Memorandum of Understanding 2020-21, once they had had time to read it properly and consult upon it if need be. There was no other discussion.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Approved the draft 2012-21 SRA Memorandum of Understanding.
2. Agreed 2020-21 SRA Board meeting dates.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Ray Adlam requested that a meeting be convened with Board members to discuss the prioritisation of SRA-funded projects. Paula Hewitt recommended that the SRA's Management Group should be tasked with organising this. The Board supported this recommendation.

Jonathan Hudston advised the Board that the Parrett IDB would be carrying out maintenance dredging for the SRA during January, along the River Parrett downstream of Burrowbridge. Mr Hudston said that contractors Van Oord had agreed that SRA Board and SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel members could visit on Monday 20 January to see the vessel Borr close-up and learn more about water injection dredging. Further information would be circulated by email.

The meeting concluded at 12.16pm

Chair Signature:

Date: