

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting – 6 March 2020

THE SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD

Draft minutes of the Board meeting of Somerset Rivers Authority held at Sedgemoor District Council, Bridgwater on Friday 6 March 2020 at 10.00am.

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 Mike Stanton (South Somerset District Council)

IN ATTENDANCE:

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

Roger Burge (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)

Rebecca Hall (Somerset County Council)

Jonathan Hudston (Somerset Rivers Authority)

David Mitchell (Somerset Rivers Authority)

Cllr Clare Paul (Somerset County Council)

John Rowlands (Environment Agency)

Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)

APOLOGIES:

Paula Hewitt (Somerset County Council)

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts (Somerset West and Taunton Council)

Martin Woods (South Somerset District Council)

MINUTE TAKER:

Jennie Channing (Somerset Rivers Authority)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies noted above.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 10 JANUARY 2020

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting, save for one minor amendment noted by David Jenkins on page 6, to include the whole Environment Agency team.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No public questions were submitted before the meeting, but Peter Maltby attended as a spectator. Mr Maltby used to represent the Parrett Internal Drainage Board on the Board of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA). The Chair invited Mr Maltby to speak. Mr Maltby said that although he had been retired for 18 months, he still received phone calls about works being carried out by the SRA. He told the Board that people had been ringing him to congratulate the SRA on the wonderful job done on the Stathe to Burrowbridge dredge and what an enormous difference it had made. Mr Maltby had also had feedback from residents in the Muchelney area indicating they were absolutely thrilled with the way the work had gone. Mr Maltby then moved on to the history of the River Sowey. He recalled how the Sowey itself had only been constructed to two-thirds of the capacity first envisaged, because of a shortage of Government funding, but how structures such as bridges had been built bigger to allow for improvements in the future. Now that a new phase of Sowey enhancements was soon to begin, Mr Maltby urged the SRA to do a good job, as this winter had shown again the Sowey's usefulness.

The Chair said it was a pleasure to see Mr Maltby and thanked him for his contribution.

5. MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) AND CONSTITUTION

David Mitchell, Senior Manager of Somerset Rivers Authority, said there had been one small change to the MoU and Constitution since its presentation at the January Board meeting, an addition to point 2.9.13. This covered Board members being reimbursed for activities undertaken as an SRA representative.

Reimbursement would follow Somerset County Council's policy on expenses as the county council is the SRA's host authority. Mr Mitchell asked the Board for their views.

David Jenkins proposed to adopt this change, seconded by Cllr Matt Martin. The Board voted for the change. The Chair asked Board members to stay behind after the meeting to sign the MoU in order not to disrupt the meeting now.

6. SRA JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

David Mitchell gave a brief summary of discussions at the last SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel meeting which took place on 31 January. He said the meeting had been about looking forward, so the bulk of the agenda was focused on the SRA's Enhanced Programme for 2020-21. At the beginning of the meeting Cllr Simon Coles had been re-elected as chair and Cllr John Hunt was nominated as Vice-Chair. Cllr Hunt was not at the meeting but had since confirmed that he was happy to continue as Vice-Chair.

During discussions about the SRA's finances, the Panel asked for SRA officers to provide more details about when funding allocated for future years would be spent. Mr Mitchell explained that this issue had been previously considered by the SRA's Management Group and that work had started to get a more detailed breakdown of funding in future years from the SRA's delivery partners.

The Panel also asked about the process and timescales for payment of SRA grant funding. Mr Mitchell explained that as grant funds were paid in arrears there could often be a delay between the completion of work and the claiming of funds from the SRA by delivery partners.

The Scrutiny Panel suggested that partners should claim as regularly as possible. This would lead to greater accuracy in reporting.

On key projects, Mr Mitchell said the Panel was very supportive of the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier going ahead. Members asked if they could see representations made as part of the Barrier's recent Transport & Works Act Order consultation process.

Recent Oath to Burrowbridge pioneer dredging was discussed and supported by the Panel, and members were also very supportive of water injection dredging (WID), due to its lower cost and lower environmental impacts. Members reiterated the need for regular funding to enable maintenance dredging to be undertaken where the need is identified. The Panel was keen for maintenance dredging to be publicised wherever possible. Cllr Coles in particular, having been on a site visit to see the WID, was very enthusiastic about it.

The Panel also asked about riparian responsibilities, an issue that members had raised before. Mr Mitchell said the Panel had asked several questions about what the SRA was doing to encourage people to fulfil their riparian responsibilities, and about whether the SRA could do things that are technically the responsibility of riparian owners. For example, clearing out ditches between roads and farmers' fields.

Tony Bradford agreed that there needed to be more clarity about riparian responsibilities and about permissions and permits required before work could be undertaken.

The last update from the SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel concerned the Enhanced Programme, of which the Panel was broadly supportive. Mr Mitchell said the issues raised by the Panel were different to those brought up at the previous SRA

Board meeting. For example, on highway flooding there was positive feedback about the importance of extra maintenance. The Panel wanted more details about how the SRA decided which highway schemes to invest in.

7. QUARTER 3 2019-20 FINANCE REPORT

SRA Finance Manager Rebecca Hall took her paper as read. She explained that the total funding available to the SRA at the beginning of the 2019-20 financial year was £11.9million. This was split between SRA Local Partner funding and Growth Deal funding. At the end of Quarter 3 (December 2019) the SRA had paid 7% (£523,000) of the total available Local Partner Funding (£7.093million) to delivery partners. Looking forward to the end of the financial year, the SRA was positive about receiving additional claims that would increase this percentage to 32%. Ms Hall said that remaining funds would be carried forward to future years.

Ms Hall told the Board that the SRA had received Growth Deal funding claims for just over £1 million, representing 21% of the total available Growth Deal funding (£4.849million). All remaining Growth Deal funding would be carried forward.

The majority of claims paid to date related to Workstream 1A (Dredging and River Management).

The forecast for 2020-21 was that just over £8million would be available to the SRA.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted the financial performance as at the end of Quarter 3 of 2019-20.
2. Approved the re-allocation of contingency as per section three of Quarter 3 2019-20 Finance Report.

8. KEY PROJECT UPDATES

8a. RIVER SOWY / KING'S SEDGMOOR DRAIN (KSD)

Dr Rachel Burden, Environment Agency, reminded the Board that remaining Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding needed to be spent by March 2021. Dr Burden said that in September 2019 the Board had unanimously voted to proceed with phase one of Sowy-KSD work. This included environmental mitigation, lower Sowy floodplain restoration work and the detailed design for Dunball smoothing work.

Dr Burden updated the Board on each project element. She said the Environment Agency project team had met 35 farmers and landowners who will be impacted by the scheme. So far there had been general support for it.

Dr Burden added that several public information events in February had been well attended. The project team had also attended parish council meetings, which generated useful and informative discussion. Preparation for in-channel works had been making progress: works were planned to start in late summer. The environmental mitigation package was progressing well. The Dunball smoothing project team was progressing with a detailed design and would report back to the Board later in the year. Dr Burden asked all partners to continue to provide ongoing support so that projects can be delivered smoothly and effectively.

The Chair suggested that it would be worthwhile to arrange an informal visit for the new LEP Chair to visit key schemes so that he is aware of the importance of the work being undertaken.

Ray Adlam thanked the Environmental Agency for their work.

8b. BRUE CATCHMENT SCHEMES

Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium, took his paper as read, and spoke briefly on what had been achieved since the last SRA Board meeting in January. He outlined three different projects currently looking at the Brue: firstly, the Brue action plan, being led by the Somerset Catchment Partnership; secondly, the Environment Agency's Brue catchment project which would ensure that various EA teams and functions were joined up and would consider the catchment as a whole; thirdly, the Environment Agency's priority catchment project focused on abstraction and water resource issues.

Mr Sturdy said that he planned to proceed with developing a proposal for dredging on the River Brue, which could then be considered by the Environment Agency and Natural England. He would also continue to engage with partners to identify opportunities to link projects.

- Tony Bradford said he was keen that something should be done on the Brue and it was essential that this project was started. He suggested that a project manager be appointed to take this forward.
- Ray Adlam welcomed this project moving forward and said that there needed to be a common project goal for all to benefit and the project to move forward efficiently.
- Cllr Martin welcomed the paper from Mr Sturdy and said that it was excellent to see this progressing. He requested a non-technical summary document explaining issues on the Brue and what was proposed to address them.
- David Jenkins endorsed Ray Adlam's point and strongly supported the approach.

9. 2020-21 SRA BUDGET AND ENHANCED PROGRAMME

David Mitchell said the information in this item was identical to that presented at January's SRA Board meeting for members' provisional approval. Mr Mitchell added that partners had confirmed funding for the SRA at budget setting meetings in February.

There were no questions or comments from the Board.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Approved the proposed SRA Budget for 2021
2. Approved the proposed 2021 Enhanced Programme

10. FLOOD ACTION PLAN REVIEW

The Chair introduced this as an important item about the way the SRA would operate in future.

David Mitchell presented a plan for a series of seminars to the Board. Mr Mitchell explained that these sessions would be facilitated to support positive and constructive discussion. Workshops would be themed around 'taking stock', 'what does the future look like' and 'shaping the new strategy'. A first workshop was planned for April, a second in July.

Workshop 1 would consider what the SRA had achieved to date; review its purpose and governance (what was the SRA set up to do and how it is achieved?); consider external drivers for change (climate change, government policy); review SRA objectives – are they still the right ones?; and review the works programme and how projects are prioritised. Workshop 1 would generate lots of questions.

Workshop 2 planned for July would look in more detail at the questions raised in Workshop 1 and be themed on 'what does the future look like?'. This workshop would consider what the SRA's future priorities should be, for the short, medium and long term. It would also consider how SRA projects could be delivered in the future.

Workshop 3, taking place around November, would consider a draft strategy based upon the previous workshops.

- Cllr Hall reminded the Board that this was an important review because it was about learning lessons from the past and moving forward as a strong and effective partnership.
- Tony Bradford said the first workshop should not be overcomplicated. It should consider what the SRA's goals were when it started, what it had achieved, and what was left to achieve. There should be a particular focus on what (if any) remaining actions needed to be taken out and what now

- needed to go in. Priorities should be judged according to where the SRA had come from, where it was now and where it wanted to be in the future.
- David Jenkins welcomed the proposals. He suggested seeking input from Environment Agency headquarters and Defra as part of the review given those bodies' central role in providing funding for flood risk management. Mr Jenkins cited pumping stations in Somerset coming to the end of their design life. If it was the case that central government funding was not going to be made available for maintaining these assets, this needed to be heard and addressed. Knowing what central funding was going to be available would help the SRA to plan where it wished to target its funding.
 - Emma Baker thanked Mr Mitchell and the SRA Management Group for their work and supported the need to be thinking strategically and tactically. Ms Baker said the Environment Agency was working hard with Defra and HM Treasury about the next six-year capital programme and there was also a live debate with Defra about what revenue funding would be available for the maintenance of assets. Ms Baker offered to keep the SRA apprised of these discussions.

11. PRECEPTING LEGISLATION

On Monday 24 February, Cllr David Hall, Tony Bradford, Paula Hewitt (Chair of the SRA's Management Group and Somerset County Council's Lead Director for Economic and Community Infrastructure & Director of Commissioning) and David Mitchell met Taunton Deane MP Rebecca Pow, who is Parliamentary Under Secretary of State with responsibility for flooding at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Cllr Hall said that Ms Pow had reiterated her strong support for the work of the SRA. Ms Pow gave a clear undertaking on behalf of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that the SRA's 'shadow precept' arrangements would remain in place: she felt this was very important to ensure that the good work of the SRA continues. She also instructed her officials that they needed to look to find a way to move the SRA forward to a permanent legal status where it could raise its own funding.

Ms Pow explained that as Defra was taking forward two major bills – the Agriculture Bill and the Environment Bill – there was no government time available in Parliament to currently progress legislation to create rivers authorities.

The SRA delegation also met the Somerset-based Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Cathy Bakewell. Cllr Hall said that she could not have been more helpful. She would do as much as she could to help legislation benefitting the SRA through the House of Lords.

A final meeting was held with Neil Parish MP, Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Cllr Hall said that Mr Parish was extremely

supportive of the SRA and that although Mr Parish has no direct authority to intervene he said that he would do what he could behind the scenes.

Cllr Mike Stanton asked whether the SRA should work with interested parties from other areas of the country to get rivers authorities moving. Cllr Hall said that he understood the principle behind what Cllr Stanton was saying but in his personal opinion the SRA would be wise to leave matters to the politicians to find the best way forward.

Cllr Hall summed up by saying that he had come away disappointed from the meeting with the Minister. However, he had confidence in the good work of the SRA, so it was important to keep liaising with politicians and to keep pressing for legislation as opportunities arose.

Tony Bradford noted that everyone met on the day was very supportive of what the SRA was doing.

12. SRA REPRESENTATION ON THE SOMERSET LOCAL NATURE PARTNERSHIP

David Mitchell explained that Georgia Stokes, Chief Executive of Somerset Wildlife Trust, had contacted the SRA, Internal Drainage Boards and Somerset Catchment Partnership to seek representatives for the Board of the soon-to-be relaunched Somerset Local Nature Partnership (LNP). Mr Mitchell said he had circulated the LNP's terms of reference for information.

Tony Bradford proposed that the Chair of the SRA should sit on the Somerset LNP Board as a representative of the SRA, David Jenkins seconded this.

Recommendation

As recommended the SRA Board:

Approved the request for the SRA Chair to sit on the Board of the Somerset Local Nature Partnership and represent the interests of the SRA.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

13a. David Mitchell said that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee chaired by Neil Parish MP was holding an inquiry into recent flooding and had called for evidence to be submitted by 17 April.

Mr Mitchell proposed that an SRA response should be submitted. He suggested working with colleagues and partners to draft this.

Recommendation

As recommended, the SRA Board:

Approved the submission of evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's Floods Inquiry.

13b. Emma Baker updated the Board on the Environment Agency's ongoing response to the prolonged wet weather. She covered the winter, current conditions, and the next 7-10 days. Ms Baker thanked her team for working tirelessly since the end of November and thanked the IDB particularly for its support in how the Environment Agency had operated the River Sowy.

Firstly, Ms Baker said there had been less rain than in 2013-14 and the rainfall had been in a different pattern. Unlike 2013-14 there had been dry periods to enable the Environment Agency to 'reset' the moors ready for the next wet spell. She said that Oath to Burrowbridge dredging had had an impact and been helpful locally. Monk's Lease Clyce had been operated earlier and for longer than before, to good effect. Ms Baker explained that operating the Sowy created space in the Parrett and allowed for earlier and longer pumping. She said it was great to hear how the Board appreciated and recognised the impact that the Sowy had had over the winter.

As regards the current situation, the Environment Agency continued to maximise the Sowy. Pumps had been operating whenever and wherever possible. Additional pumps had been deployed at Curry Moor and Haymoor and continued to be used. Ms Baker said that bigger pumps had not been brought in this year; instead six to eight smaller pumps provided more flexibility.

Over the next seven to ten days, the Environment Agency would continue to maximise the use of the River Sowy until spillways run, and it would pump whenever possible. Haymoor was currently 90% full but most other moors were 20% or less full. Ms Baker said that as bands of rain came through pumping might have to stop. High tides were also due, and this would also necessitate the suspension of pumping from two hours before – and until two hours after – high tide.

Ms Baker reassured the Board that the Environment Agency team was being very proactive in managing the situation.

- David Hall passed on the thanks of the whole SRA Board to the Environment Agency for its hard work over the previous months.
- David Jenkins said the information was very useful. Mr Jenkins highlighted that in some national media the impression had been given that the reason Somerset had not seen the same impacts as other areas was only due to additional dredging. Mr Jenkins said this was misleading. There was a whole range of complex factors and measures taken to protect Somerset communities.
- Ray Adlam said that Emma Baker's account of recent operations showed the importance of pumps and the need for them to be maintained and replaced when they did wear out.

14. PAPERS TO NOTE

14a. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier

Paper was taken as read – no further comments.

14b. Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme

Paper was taken as read.

Tony Bradford reiterated his concern that this scheme could potentially push more water downstream to areas such as Currymoor. Mr Bradford asked about the possibility of creating a connection between Currymoor and Northmoor so that when Currymoor is under severe pressure water can be transferred to Northmoor to ease the pressure. Mr Bradford requested that officers start to investigate such a scheme. Dr Rachel Burden said the Environment Agency had investigated this idea in the past and that it could be 'pulled off the shelf' for further work, however it was an expensive scheme and it would rely on many landowners being supportive.

14c. River Parrett Dredging – Oath to Burrowbridge

Paper was taken as read – no further comments.

14d. Strategic Approach to Mitigation

Paper was taken as read – no further comments.

The Chair thanked the Board for a positive and constructive meeting.

The meeting closed at 12:15pm.