

ITEM 11c

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper (for information)

Strategic Approach to Mitigation

Purpose of the item

This paper summarises the current status of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation project.

Background and context

Somerset Rivers Authority 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 flood risk 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 project 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.

Flood Management projects such as dredging and Sowby/King's Sedgemoor Drain improvements will result in the reduction in extent and duration of water on the floodplain. Dredging may enable pumps to be started earlier and change the speed at which moors can have floodwater removed. Low level flood events are essential for the health of the Somerset wetlands especially for providing the ongoing conditions for winter bird populations. Reduction of these low level near natural flood events reduces feeding habitat for winter waterfowl both within the designated sites and associated ¹Functionally Linked Land.

Natural England have identified the following initial Strategic Mitigation actions that are required to be funded and implemented over the next two years to ensure compliance of SRA projects delivered and future projects.

Develop a robust and long-term monitoring programme. This programme should clearly demonstrate compliance with environmental legislation and maintenance of designated areas. This is required to ensure that there are no detrimental impacts to the Somerset Levels Special Protection Area (SPA) condition by SRA flood management projects (already delivered and future projects). This requires a funding mechanism to take action if monitoring shows an impact

Review and update of all Water Level Management Plans (WLMPs). All WLMPs are out of date and require updating. This is required to ensure that there is agreement and

clear process to follow to operate the system in such a way that ensures conditions required are being met without effecting homes or infrastructure. A review of each moor is required to look at options to manage into the future for example managing the moor with less structures to reduce costs and create a less managed system.

Introduce Operational Protocols. Establish Environmental Trigger Points clearly and set out procedures following winter and summer flood events. These protocols should ensure that wetland conditions remain suitable for wintering and breeding waterfowl without effecting homes and infrastructure. The operational protocols should be linked to the water level management plans. For example, reduction of pumping in the winter period.

Identification and mapping of areas outside of designated sites. Project to identify land outside designated sites that is critical to wintering bird populations (Functional Linked Land). This improved environmental mapping will be able to clearly show areas of land that will need to be considered through habitats regulations as functional linked land (and areas that do not). It will also show areas that has potential for mitigation. Natural England has started working on this project.

Progress and Next Steps

The draft Strategic Mitigation plan has been shared with officers from the Environment Agency and Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium and feedback so far has been positive. Natural England will then be consulting wider with conservational bodies for their input.

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¹ Functionally Linked Land describes areas of land or sea occurring outside of a designated site which nonetheless are considered to be critical to or necessary for the ecological or behavioural functioning in a relevant season of a qualifying feature for which that site has been designated.