

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting – 24 July 2020

THE SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD

Draft minutes of the Board meeting of Somerset Rivers Authority held on Microsoft Teams on Friday 24 July 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)

David Jenkins (Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee)

Cllr Matt Martin (Mendip District Council)

Cllr Mike Stanton (South Somerset District Council)

Cllr Sarah Wakefield (Somerset West and Taunton)

Cllr Norman Cavill (Somerset West and Taunton)

Rebecca Hall (Somerset County Council)

Paula Hewitt (Somerset County Council)

Jonathan Hudston (Somerset Rivers Authority)

David Mitchell (Somerset Rivers Authority)

John Rowlands (Environment Agency)

Martin Woods (South Somerset District Council)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Doug Bamsey (Sedgemoor District Council)

Dr Rachel Burden (Environment Agency)

Roger Burge (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)

APOLOGIES:

Chris Hall (Somerset West and Taunton)

Donna Gowler (Natural England)

Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium)

Rebecca Horsington (Parrett Internal Drainage Board)

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

David Mitchell, Senior Manager, Somerset Rivers Authority noted that on page 8 of the minutes under Any Other Business, there was an action to respond to a call for evidence by the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRA) committee. Mr Mitchell advised the Board that he had been unable to complete this task as a result of being redeployed to other work as part of the response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Chair instructed Mr Mitchell to follow up with Neil Parish MP, Chair of the EFRA Committee.

Cllr Matt Martin, Mendip District Council, said that item 8a noted that he had requested a non-technical summary document on the need for dredging on the River Brue. He said he had not received this. Mr Mitchell agreed to follow up with Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium colleagues on this.

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

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No public questions were submitted.

5. KEY PROJECT UPDATES

5a. RIVER PARRETT DREDGING – OATH TO BURROWBRIDGE

Roger Burge, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium, said the majority of this work had been completed by the end of November 2019, when, due to deteriorating weather and high river levels activities, were curtailed. The site was made safe and monitored over the winter by the Environment Agency and the Parrett Internal Drainage Board. Bank levelling works and fencing had been completed in May, but because of May's dry weather grass re-seeding was put off until September, when ditch restoration is also planned. Mr Burge concluded by saying that a survey had been commissioned to confirm that works had been completed as designed.

The Board had no questions for Mr Burge.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted that WM Longreach re-instatement works were carried out in May-June 2020.

2. Noted that grass seeding and mitigation works on Southlake will commence in September
3. Noted that monitoring is ongoing to determine whether any further environmental mitigations are required.

5b. Sowy-King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) Enhancement

David Mitchell took his paper as read. He emphasised how hard the Sowy-KSD project team had been working to get the final elements of design, procurement and all necessary permissions in place to start work in September. The team intended to publish the scheme's Environmental Statement in August: the consultation on this statement, and its sign off, is a key step in achieving legal compliance for the scheme.

Mr Mitchell reminded the Board that this project is part-funded by Growth Deal funding from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). LEP funds must be spent by March 2021. The LEP approached Government requesting an extension to this deadline but to date Government have not agreed an extension. All LEP projects are working hard to meet the March 2021 deadline.

Mr Mitchell said the priority actions listed in his paper focused on securing the legal compliance required for work to start on the ground. Environment Agency and Internal Drainage Board officers were working together to process Land Drainage consent and finalise a joint mitigation action plan. This plan covers both the Sowy-KSD scheme and the Oath to Burrowbridge dredge. Mr Mitchell emphasised the timeline to ensure legal compliance and get on site is very tight.

The Chair endorsed Mr Mitchell's comments about the LEP. He said the LEP had pressed the Government very hard to get an extension, but one had not been agreed.

Points raised during the discussion

- Tony Bradford said he was generally supportive of the scheme and all the work that had been done so far. He noted that there would be some impact to landowners outside of the designated areas and that there would need to be work undertaken to address their concerns. Mr Bradford requested a meeting to discuss this with Environment Agency staff.
- Dr Rachel Burden, of the Environment Agency, thanked Mr Bradford for his questions. She stressed that the project team are under immense pressure due to the time constraints. Dr Burden reminded the Board that the scope of the mitigation has previously been agreed and set. Everything being delivered is with the aim of maintaining what is already agreed in terms of water levels. Dr Burden explained that the joint mitigation plan that was drawn up by the Environment Agency, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB) and Natural England would address any mitigation needs for adverse impact on any of the landowners. She also wanted to draw attention to the fact that it was not the full scheme being delivered, it was only half of the scheme being delivered, therefore this phase will not have the same

impacts as in the modelling shown for the full scheme. Dr Burden advised that the trigger point work for deploying temporary pumps at Dunball was reviewed last winter and will not be reviewed again this winter.

- John Rowlands, Environment Agency, agreed with Dr Burden. Mr Rowlands noted that most of the points that Mr Bradford raised were already within the mitigation plan. Mr Rowlands had requested clarification from an IDB officer for some of the other outfalls that had been highlighted as he did not believe these were in the initial list that had been agreed.
- Mr Mitchell noted that Mr Bradford had requested a meeting and asked if this was still required. Dr Burden explained that she did not think there was reason for a meeting. Mr Bradford agreed that as long as the issues raised are all in hand there is no need for a meeting.

Cllr David Hall, as Chair, said the Board wanted progress to be made with this scheme.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Reviewed the latest position with the Sowey-KSD project
2. Noted the critical importance of successful completion of the priority actions in a timely manner and committed their support to help those to be delivered.

6. SRA JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

The Chair congratulated officers for the part they had played in the recent SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel meeting on 17 July, which he himself had also 'attended' virtually, and which he felt had been very positive

David Mitchell summarised the Panel's discussions. He explained first that Panel met twice a year, and that one meeting looked forward and one looked back. July's meeting had looked back. It had included well-received presentations on water injection dredging from Rob Kidson of the Parrett IDB, organised at the Panel's request; a presentation on the SRA's Annual Report from Jonathan Hudston (the SRA's Communications Manager) and on the SRA's funding of additional works to tackle road flooding problems by Neil McWilliams of Somerset County Council's Highways Department. The Panel supported water injection dredging; were pleased with the Annual Report, and reassured that the SRA had a clear process for assessing highway schemes and establishing that they are additional works.

Mr Mitchell said the Panel was frustrated that legislation to establish the SRA as a separate legal entity was not currently being taken forward by the Government. The Chair of the Scrutiny Panel recommended writing again to Rebecca Pow, Flooding Minister, to keep the issue high on her agenda.

Overall, Mr Mitchell thought the meeting was positive, with members well engaged. In conclusion, Cllr David Hall concurred. He supported the Panel's recommendation to write to Rebecca Pow again.

As recommended by the Chair the Board agreed to write to Rebecca Pow, Flooding Minister.

There were no questions.

7. Annual Report 2019-20

Jonathan Hudston, SRA Communications Manager, took his paper as read. He said that he had already received some comments about the Annual Report from Board members, since copies had first been circulated. Mr Hudston noted that the Annual Report took a long time to produce. He thanked colleagues in the SRA and at local councils, the Environment Agency, Natural England, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium and other partners for their help. He said Victoria Munday at FWAG SW had been exceptionally helpful.

Mr Hudston suggested to the Board that the SRA Annual Report is a uniquely detailed and thorough piece of work. No other body known to him did anything quite like it, but then there was no other partnership quite like the SRA.

The Chair thanked Mr Hudston and the SRA team for all the hard work that had been put into the report. He said it was an enjoyable read and requested that it should be publicised as widely as possible.

Points raised during the discussion

- Cllr Mike Stanton congratulated Mr Hudston on the production of the report. He thanked the Chair for meeting with Rebecca Pow to continue to push for legislation to enable the SRA to become a major precepting authority. Cllr Stanton was also pleased with the accurate summary in the Annual Report of the circumstances which led to the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill failing to clear the House of Lords. He asked for a geographical detail about Shoreditch on page 44 to be corrected.
- Mr Stanton also said that he and David Mitchell had visited residents of The Mead near Ilchester, close to where the A303 has flooded from time to time and where homes are also at risk of flooding. They had also visited Highways England to understand the work they are doing on a project to address A303 flooding, which residents of The Mead are concerned may increase flood risk to their homes. The SRA has been co-ordinating communications between residents and Highways England.
- Cllr Sarah Wakefield, of Somerset West and Taunton Council, noted that as a new member of the Board she found the report was fantastically informative. She said how lucky she was to join at a time when the report had just been drafted. Cllr Wakefield commented on how helpful it was to understand the work that has been done by the SRA.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Reviewed and commented on the draft Annual Report.
2. Approved the publication of the SRA Annual Report 2019-20.

8. QUARTER 4 2019-20 FINANCE REPORT

SRA Finance Manager Rebecca Hall said her report looked back over the year 2019-20. For the benefit of new members, she explained the split between the SRA's Local Partner Funding – that is, funding raised through council tax via a 'shadow precept' – and Growth deal funding from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).

Local Partner funding claims for 2019-20 were just under £1.5 million. Table B showed funds to be carried over to future years totalling £5.458 million. The majority of this was forecast to be spent over the next few years.

Going forward into 2020-21, the finance report would provide greater detail on forecast future spend, as many schemes are delivered over several years, and this would help the Board track progress.

Ms Hall said total Growth Deal claims for 2019-20 were £1.3 million. Remaining Growth Deal funding, just over £3 million, needed to be spent by the end of March 2021 to meet the LEP's deadline.

Ms Hall explained that there was a request to move £19,066 from contingency. £13,830 is required to cover additional temporary pumping costs incurred by the Environment Agency in association with the SRA-funded Oath to Burrowbridge dredge and . £5,236 is required for the Beckington surface and foul water investigation scheme requires an additional £5,236, as further work is required. There is also a request to move £173,151 back into contingency due to underspend on projects and staffing.

Recommendations

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted the financial performance as at the end of Quarter 4 of 2019-20.
2. Approved the re-allocation of contingency as per section three of Quarter 4 2019-20 Finance Report.

9. FLOOD ACTION PLAN REVIEW

David Mitchell shared the presentation first shown at the March SRA Board meeting, since when the coronavirus pandemic had disrupted the timetable that was then proposed. He outlined a revised timetable for the next 12 months.

Points raised during the discussion.

- The Chair noted that Cllr Clare Paul, his SRA substitute, was now the Somerset County Council cabinet member responsible for climate change, which might be useful when linking SRA work to councils' climate emergency work.
- Emma Baker, of the Environment Agency, said it would be worthwhile to factor in the timings of the progress of the Agriculture Bill and the

Environment Bill as they should influence the content of Flood Action Plan workshops and schedules. Mr Mitchell agreed.

- Cllr Stanton asked if these workshops would be virtual meetings or face to face. He said that because of the ongoing situation with coronavirus he would prefer them to be online workshops

There were no further comments.

10. SRA Policies and Grant Guidelines

Mr Mitchell took his paper as read. He said it related to the 'SRA policies' document which guides the SRA's grant proposal process and the allocation of money. This document was unchanged since the Board approved it in 2017. Some points now needed to be updated, and some points made clearer.

Points raised during the discussion.

- Cllr Wakefield liked the suggested revisions, but was disappointed there was no mention of climate change. She asked if this could be added at the end of 3d. Cllr Stanton also called for climate change to be included.
- Emma Baker felt the document should do more than just acknowledge climate change. The Chair agreed in principle but wanted to be cautious that all emphasis not be put on one issue.
- Tony Bradford thought that 'riparian responsibilities' should be more clearly defined. Most people would not understand the term.
- Dr Burden explained that the Environment Agency produced a document called Living on the Edge, explaining riparian responsibilities, which she could share.

As recommended, the SRA board:

1. Reviewed and commented on proposed changes to the document setting out SRA policies.
2. Approved the proposed changes but wanted a reference to be added to recognise that the SRA has a role to play in tackling climate change.

In addition, the Board requested

- Mr Mitchell revise the wording in the paper to recognise that climate change will be an important driver of action in the future.
- That a proposal be brought to the next Board meeting setting out what the SRA could do to contribute to raising awareness about riparian responsibilities.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

Dr Burden, Environment Agency, said the Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) had laid a new National Flood and

Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy before Parliament for the 40 days required by statute before publication. At the same time, Defra had published a new policy statement on flood and coastal erosion risk management. Dr Burden stressed to all SRA partners the importance of both these documents as they would provide the guiding strategy and framework for operational activities and decision-making. Dr Burden asked for a link to the published documents be shared in the minutes: it is <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-flood-and-coastal-erosion-risk-management-strategy-for-england--2>. There were no questions.

The Chair reminded Board members of the 27 August deadline for submitting bids for potential schemes in the SRA's Enhanced Programme for 2021-22.

Tony Bradford said that several landowners near the River Tone had told him that maintenance work being done by the Environment Agency was less extensive than usual because of a previous issue with birds' nests, prompting concerns that the river could silt up more quickly.

Emma Baker confirmed that a revised method of working on Haymoor was the result of concerns raised previously with the Environment Agency and the police about impacts on wildlife in internationally designated wildlife sites. Ms Baker offered to get more information about exactly what was being done and what was possible and come back to Mr Bradford, but Ms Baker emphasised that there were clear legal reasons for the approach now being taken.

Matthew Heard, Natural England, supported Ms Baker. He said that changes were a direct result of public concern and police intervention. Natural England had also had a lot of public representations.

12. PAPERS TO NOTE

12a. Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme

The paper was taken as read – no further comments.

12b. Strategic Approach to Mitigation

The paper was taken as read – no further comments.

14c. River Parrett Dredging – Oath to Burrowbridge

The paper was taken as read – no further comments.

14d. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier

The paper was taken as read – no further comments.

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

The meeting closed at 11:30am.