

## **Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper (to note)**

### **Quarterly Key Project Update – River Brue Dredging**

#### **Purpose of the item**

This paper summarises the current status of proposals for dredging work on the River Brue.

#### **Background and context**

As previously reported, in 2015 the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) allocated £500,000 of its Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Growth Deal funding towards delivering dredging on the River Brue. The deadline for claiming LEP funding was set as March 2021. The project was being led by the Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board (IDB). Progress was difficult, in part due to the environmentally sensitive nature of the area of works.

In March 2019 it was proposed that the SRA's Local Partner funding should instead be used to progress this project, to remove the risk associated with not spending LEP funding by the March 2021 deadline. This approach was confirmed at the June 2019 SRA Board meeting. £225k of SRA Local Partner funding is now allocated for project development.

This change in funding enabled the Axe Brue IDB to continue to manage the project, supported by a Senior Officer Group from SRA partners, to develop a proposal for dredging in the River Brue.

#### **Current Status**

A Senior Officer Group meeting was convened on 27 January 2021 to develop the project scope attended by representatives from SRA, Environment Agency, Natural England and Internal Drainage Board.

There are many sensitivities around working on the Brue, including: flood risk, protected species, agricultural practices, water quality and Environmental Land Management Scheme opportunities (ELMS). Other initiatives also have a focus on the Brue with Somerset Catchment Partnership (SCP) and the Environment Agency's new River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) all having an interest and bearing on a Brue dredging proposal.

The Group acknowledged the legislative constraints (Environmental Impact assessment, Habitats Regulation Assessment, Water Framework Directive) that would be applicable and considered the evidence base that would be required in order to develop a legally compliant capital dredging project. It was recognised that producing

the evidence would be time-consuming and costly, particularly in respect of flow modelling.

An alternative approach was mooted whereby modifications could be made to ongoing channel maintenance operations to include removal of accumulated silt and still achieve increased channel conveyance. Work could proceed largely within existing consents and incur only modest increases in cost. It was agreed that further investigation should be carried out to determine the regulatory implications and whether there would be sufficient capacity available within Environment Agency maintenance operations for this to be a viable option. However, it has since been reported that the Environment Agency is not in a position to change its current maintenance procedures on the Brue, due to resource implications and other maintenance priorities. Alternative options for taking the project forward will now need to be investigated.

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