

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper to note

Quarterly Key Project Update: Strategic Approach to Mitigation

Purpose of the item

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

Background and context

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board commissioned Natural England to coordinate the development and implementation of a Strategic Approach to Mitigation for the environmental impact of SRA works. The aims of the Strategic Approach to Mitigation are:

- 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 the River Sowey – King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) Enhancements Scheme 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 designated sites and associated Functionally Linked Land.

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.

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 projected, 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 fewer 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 clearly to 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 have potential for mitigation.

Progress and Next Steps

Natural England presented the Strategic Mitigation proposals to both the SRA Management Group and SRA Board in December 2020, where Natural England gained commitment from the SRA to continue to support this approach.

Natural England has submitted a grant proposal request to enable the implementation of the Strategic Mitigation proposals. A decision on this request will be taken at the SRA Board meeting on 5 March.

Natural England has been carrying out Functionally Linked Land survey work to assess the suitability of land outside the Somerset Levels designation for wintering birds.

Date: 5 February 2021

Author: Donna Gowler, Natural England