

ITEM 9b

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper River Brue Dredging Key Project Update

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board is asked to:

1. Note the challenges in delivering dredging activity on the River Brue.
2. Note that the Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board are releasing a total of £279k of funds allocated to them for River Brue dredging back to the SRA.
3. Consider ringfencing the £279k for future use in the River Brue once a suitable project and delivery partner is identified.

Purpose of the item

To summarise 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. In addition to the £225,000 mentioned above, £30,000 was allocated in 2017-18 and £27,000 was allocated in 2018-19 from Local Partner funds to desilting / dredging the River Brue. These funds were allocated as match funding when Brue dredging was originally to be funded using Heart of the SW LEP Growth Deal funding. £54,000 of these funds remain and these will also be re-allocated to contingency.

Current Status

A Senior Officer Group meeting was convened on 27 January 2021 to develop the project scope attended by representatives from the 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. 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.

IDB Members are strongly of the view that river dredging and maintenance is required on the Brue. However, IDB Members, having worked closely with partners and regulators over a number of years, see little prospect of successfully delivering a dredge given the sensitivities and complexities of working on the River Brue. The IDB recommends that the £279k of SRA funds currently allocated to the Axe Brue IDB for the River Brue dredge are released so that the SRA Board can re-allocate them. The Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board requests that the funds are ringfenced for work on the River Brue once a suitable project and delivery partner is identified.

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