

SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD MEETING – 21 June 2019

THE SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD

Minutes of a meeting of the Board of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) held at Somerset West and Taunton Council's offices in Taunton on Friday 21 June 2019 at 10am.

PRESENT:

Cllr David Hall, SCC (Chair)
Tony Bradford, Parrett IDB (Vice-Chair)
Ray Adlam, Axe Brue IDB
Emma Baker, EA
Cllr Michael Caswell, SDC
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
David Jenkins, WRFCC
Matthew Heard, NE
Mark Heywood, Parrett IDB
Cllr Matt Martin, MDC
Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts, SWTC
Cllr Mike Stanton, SSDC

APOLOGIES:

Doug Bamsey, SDC
Paula Hewitt, SCC
Cllr Mike Pullin, SCC

IN ATTENDANCE:

Dr Rachel Burden, EA
Roger Burge, SDBC
Dave Coles, SDC
Michele Cusack, SCC
Paul Deal, MDC
David Mitchell, SRA
Chris Hall, SWTC
Rebecca Hall, SCC
Jonathan Hudston, SRA
Ann Rhodes, SWTC
Iain Sturdy, SDBC
Cllr Alan Wedderkopp, SWTC
Martin Woods, SSDC

MINUTE TAKER:

Sandra Newing-Griffiths, SRA

1. ELECTION OF THE CHAIR AND VICE-CHAIR

Following District Council elections in May there were some changes to Board representation. As a result of these changes elections for Chair and Vice Chair were held.

Cllr David Hall was nominated as Chair by Tony Bradford, Cllr Mike Stanton seconded this. There were no other nominations; Cllr David Hall was therefore declared Chair.

The current Vice-Chair, Tony Bradford, was nominated by Ray Adlam, Jeff Fear seconded this. There were no other nominations; Tony Bradford was declared Vice-Chair.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies noted above.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 1 MARCH 2019

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

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

6. MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

The Board agreed to the updated Memorandum of Understanding and unanimously approved it. The SRA Board organisation representatives signed the document.

7. 2018-19 REVIEW AND LOOKING TO 2019-20 AND BEYOND

David Mitchell and Jonathan Hudston delivered a presentation on the work of the SRA to date, the plans for this year and future plans and made the following points:

- SRA set up to do extra not instead.
- There are 5 workstreams: dredging and river management; land management; urban water management; resilient infrastructure; and local resilience.
- To date 126 projects approved.
- Water injection dredging is cheaper and better for the environment – although not suitable everywhere.
- Examples of infrastructure projects include rebuilding riverbanks, repairs to flood relief channels, repairs to North Drain Pumping Station
- A good example of collaboration was Moorland surface water flooding research project.
- An example, of innovation is the Online Natural Flood Management auctions
- Copies of the presentation were circulated after the meeting.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Board asked what happens to the silt during water injection dredging. Iain Sturdy (SDBC) explained that the silt from dredging joins other sediment in suspension in the river water and flows away from the site that has been dredged.
- The Board debated the mix of projects currently being funded and considered whether the balance of priorities is correct or whether the SRA was straying too far from its original purpose. The Chair advised that SRA priorities are the responsibility of the Board to set. Rachel Burden of the Environment Agency (EA) said that it is important to do work that addresses issues now but also considers what is required in the future.

- David Jenkins (WRFCC) highlighted that the current Flood Action Plan (FAP) is due to be updated and that this presents the opportunity and correct mechanism to consider future priorities. It had been agreed at the last Board meeting to make the FAP review a standing agenda item. SRA officers committed to working with Board members to review the FAP.
- The Board stated they were impressed with how much was being achieved. The Board went on to discuss the level of publicity generated around the work of the SRA and suggested more should be done to inform the wider public about the good work of the SRA.
- The Vice-Chair suggested that new members have a full-day of site visits as part of their induction to the SRA.

8. Q4 2018-19 FINANCE REPORT

Rebecca Hall (SCC) presented the paper and made the following points:

- The paper summarised the financial position at the end of the 2018-19 financial year (FY).
- At the start of the FY £12.8 million was available and allocated to SRA projects.
- SRA expenditure in 2018-9 totalled £3,815k; 44% (£1,693) related to Growth Deal funded actions including Bridgwater Tidal Barrier, delivery of 'Slow the Flow' Capital Grant Schemes; the Sowby/KSD Enhancement Scheme and Pioneer Dredging; 51% (£1,952) related to Enhanced Programme works (funded from Local Partners funding); and 5% (£170k) relates to administration and staffing.
- Majority of expenditure (£1.7m) was for Workstream 1 works.
- There is £220,000 in the contingency fund.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Board noted the figure of 5% for SRA administration and overheads and suggested it is noted as a target figure for the future once the SRA becomes a Major Precepting and Risk Management Authority. The Chair agreed that a lean organisation should be the aim whilst acknowledging there is a balance to be struck between being lean and having appropriate funding to do the job properly.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted:

1. The financial performance as at the end of quarter four of 2018-19.
2. The re-allocation of contingency as per section three.

9. PRECEPTING LEGISLATION

David Mitchell (SRA) presented the paper and made the following points:

- The Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage (RALD) Bill has now passed its Second Reading in the House of Lords.

- The Bill was to go to Committee Stage on 14 June but this has been delayed as a result of a report by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee (DPRRC). The committee questioned whether a Private Members Bill is the appropriate legislative method for the types of powers and responsibilities contained within the RALD Bill. The Committee questioned whether the Bill would be subject to enough parliamentary scrutiny, whether those affected by the Bill would have enough opportunity to comment and whether too many powers were being delegated to the Secretary of State (SoS). The committee only considered whether the correct legislative approach was being used it did not pass comment on the merits or otherwise of the purpose of the Bill.
- No new date had yet been set for the Committee Stage.
- On the assumption that the RALD Bill will eventually pass, the Board was advised there is significant preparatory work required before a formal proposal could be put to the SoS for the SRA to be made a major precepting authority. The Board was asked to approve up to £100,000 of funding to commission necessary work in 2019/20.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Chair encouraged the Board to stay focused on the end goal and not be disheartened by setbacks. The SRA is serious and committed about seeing legislation passed and it will happen. The Chair supported the proposal for funding to be allocated to allow work to start to take this forward.
- Cllr Smith-Roberts (SWTC) asked if the funding was a realistic budget for the work to be done and asked how the figure had been arrived at. Mr Mitchell advised the requested allocation is to enable the start of more detailed work; this is an initial estimate of what may be required until the end of 2019/20 rather than an actual cost. It is likely that further funds will be required to take all the actions necessary to set the SRA up as a major precepting and risk management authority. Mr Mitchell also agreed to bring more detailed costings to the Board once he has taken further advice.
- The Chair sought assurance that the funding would not be spent on abortive work. Mr Mitchell confirmed only work deemed necessary at the current time will be taken forward. The Board will be kept informed on how the funds are being spent.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Considered and commented on the latest position in relation to progress of the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill.
2. Approved the allocation of up to £100,000 of funding for use in 2019-20 to commission the expertise required to prepare a proposal for submission to the Secretary of State for the creation of a Rivers Authority in Somerset.

10 KEY PROJECT UPDATES

10A. TAUNTON STRATEGIC FLOOD ALLEVIATION IMPROVEMENTS SCHEME

Ann Rhodes (SWTC) presented the paper and made the following points:

- Since the paper was submitted there is further detailed information available. Five schemes have been prioritised from the eight in the paper.
- They are Bradford on Tone Storage Area; raised or new flood defences in Taunton Town Centre; Vivary Park / Sherford Stream Improvements; Raising bridges on Mill Stream by Castle Street; and, optimisation of Long Run meadow storage, upstream of French Weir and a pumping station at Bathpool.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Vice-Chair asked whether funding is secured for the eight schemes. The Board was advised that costings and whole-life costs are being worked on jointly by SWTC and the EA. There are two of the short-term options that funding has been provisionally allocated to from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). They are raising the flood defences in Taunton and the optimisation of Longrun Meadow. It was acknowledged there were some funding challenges for the other schemes.
- The Vice-Chair queried whether these schemes could increase flood risk downstream. The Board was reassured that modelling to date showed these interventions have little impact downstream of the M5.

As recommended, the SRA Board considered and commented on the contents of the report and progress made on Phase 2 of the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme (TSFAIS).

10B. OATH TO BURROWBRIDGE

Iain Sturdy (SDBC) presented the paper and made the following points:

- Advised the project was making good progress with partners on shared objectives and outcomes.
- Consultation feedback was overwhelmingly positive and this has given the confidence to go ahead with publishing the environmental statement.
- Working with Natural England areas needing mitigation had been identified. The project is promoting mitigation solutions through revised water level management protocols.
- Wished to emphasise that the aim of mitigation is to ensure there is no loss of the existing environmental conditions i.e. the outcome is neutral.
- Hope to publish Environmental Statement on 1 July for one month. The tender process will run concurrently to meet project timeline.
- Tender would be awarded mid-August and main dredge will begin September.
- There are links to the Sowey project. Assessments of flood risk and environmental risk from both projects considered together.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Cllr Stanton requested clarification that the dredge would be done from the North Bank and the wet material is deposited on the bank temporarily for water to drain out and then move the dry soil elsewhere. Mr Sturdy confirmed this is the case. The material is not moved – it will then be shaped to form a wider bank. It is important not to change the crest height of the bank as that may create problems elsewhere. There is no hauling of material around the countryside; no double-handling so costs are tightly controlled.
- The Vice-Chair asked that any concerns / queries about this project should be raised as soon as possible with the project team. It is very important this project is not delayed.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the following;

1. The project is being developed in tandem with the EA managed Sowy Enhancement Scheme. Unlike previous dredging projects, the in-combination effects of both of these projects must be assessed and the details of any necessary environmental mitigation agreed before the schemes can be accepted as legally compliant.
2. On 1st May 2019, an informal consultation exercise commenced, which ended on 31st May. Two public 'drop' in events were held, one at Burrowbridge, the other in Langport. In addition, the project has been covered in local newspapers, websites and on local radio.
3. Further work will now take place to complete the Environmental Statement (ES) such that it can be advertised on 1st July with a 30-day statutory consultation exercise running until 31st July.
4. Tender documents are being issued during week commencing 17th June and are due to be returned on 15th July.

10C. Sowy / King's Sedgemoor Drain

Rachel Burden (Environment Agency) asked that the paper be taken as read and opened the discussion to questions where the following points were raised:

- The Vice-Chair advised he had some detailed observations that would be channelled through Technical Group and Management Group.
- Cllr Stanton raised a concern whether existing spillways would be maintained. Dr Burden confirmed the spillways from the Parrett into the Sowy will be maintained. It was highlighted that there is some debate about whether the spillways are at the correct height. It was suggested that this is a detailed discussion best held outside the meeting and possibly during a site visit.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted progress with development of the design for further enhancement of the Sowy-King's Sedgemoor Drain system.

2. Agreed to support key partners and stakeholders to come together to deliver the revised Water Level Management Plan (WLMP) and reach a consensus on the control structures required for ecological mitigation.

10D. STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MITIGATION

Matthew Heard (NE) presented the paper and made the following points:

- The work the Internal Drainage Board has done on modelling on the levels has been excellent and shows the areas affected by the combination of both the Sowy and Oath to Burrowbridge schemes; the Strategic Approach to Mitigation will address these areas.
- Important to emphasise that if the projects are to meet their timelines there will be difficult discussions required to solve mitigation challenges, but we can work together to develop good projects without delays with goodwill from all concerned.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Vice-Chair advised that concerns need to be raised early.
- The key issue to be addressed is about water level management. There is a need to seek agreement on where water will be held and at what level. Natural England (NE) are being flexible in not insisting that mitigations are delivered before works go ahead but must have confidence and clarity that they will be delivered at some stage during the scheme.
- Mr Sturdy said they have worked closely with NE colleagues and have agreed schedules of locations and potential solutions; an IDB sub-committee will go through these. They are expected to be deliverable.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted:

1. The outputs of the modelling of the combined full schemes (Sowly & Oath to Burrowbridge dredge)
2. Partners are in the process of finalising the impacts of current schemes and priorities for strategic mitigation.
3. Delivery requires ongoing commitment from SRA partners to maintain the special characteristics of the Somerset Levels and Moors.

10E. RIVER BRUE CATCHMENT UPDATE

David Mitchell (SRA) presented the paper and asked that the paper be taken as read. He also made the following points:

- The last Board meeting requested that a sub-group discuss the way forward. This update paper to the Board presents the outcome of those discussions.
- Deliverable projects within the Brue catchment have been identified. Funding sources for the Brue dredge project have been changed which removes financial risk to the Axe-Brue Drainage Board.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Ray Adlam said that he just wanted to see action on this.
- Jeff Fear said that hopefully the lessons learned from the Oath to Burrowbridge scheme will assist moving forward the Brue plans, especially with mitigation.

As recommended, the SRA Board reviewed and commented on the latest position with projects in the Brue catchment.

10F. BRIDGWATER TIDAL BARRIER

Rachel Burden suggested the paper be taken as read on progress over the last couple of months and asked for questions or observations. During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Chair enquired about the current funding position. Dr Burden said the EA was confident as can be that the funding would be secured but explained that EA funding allocations for the next 6-year capital programme are yet to be confirmed. Additional sources of funding are being sought.
- The Vice-Chair suggested a way to save money would be to use dredged material from the next section of the Parrett (from North Moor pumping station to the motorway bridge) by pumping it to site rather than excavating from borrow pits. The Board was advised that this suggestion had been looked at in detail and was not cost effective.
- The Chair suggested that a meeting be set up between EA and IDB engineers so that all parties understand what has been considered and can report back to their respective organisations.
- Mr Heard asked about funding for environmental enhancements. Dr Burden explained that Defra funding is not used explicitly for environmental enhancements only mitigation. Currently looking for alternative funding to deliver enhancements.
- Mr Heard advised the Board should be mindful that the government is seeking to bring in mandatory net gains for projects through the Environment Bill so it will be our duty to deliver better rather than 'not damage'.
- Cllr Stanton asked about the possibility of tidal power generation in the barrier project. The Board was advised that tidal power was not part of the project and had been considered in the past.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted:

1. We have secured Large Project Review Group's (LPRG) technical assurance of the Outline Business Case (OBC).
2. OBC assurance by Defra and Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) will be suspended until after a decision is reached on the Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO).
3. Somerset CC/Sedgemoor DC submitted an application to the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) in March.

4. We will meet with Chilton Trinity Parish Council and explore the option to set up a liaison group.
5. Undertake additional ground investigations at the barrier site this summer / autumn.
6. We are on programme to complete the Environmental Impact Assessment, Environmental Statement and TWAO documents and submit these to the Secretary of State for the Environment before the end of the year.
7. SRA Board is asked to consider additional funding opportunities for scheme enhancements

11. DRAFT NATIONAL FLOOD AND COASTAL EROSION RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Rachel Burden (EA) delivered a verbal report about the strategy consultation and made the following points:

- It is a great opportunity to comment on how government thinks about the future and thinks differently about how we adapt to the future. It is bold and innovative.
- It raises questions on climate change, resilience and adaptation. Questions how we facilitate growth and where we build new infrastructure.
- The importance for the Board is in planning for the future. The SRA remit should not solely be about works. There is a need to consider whether any works will be sustainable in 30, 50 years' time?
- Requested that the SRA Board put forward a response as it will enhance its reputation if seen to be responding to these types of consultations.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- The Chair said the document is very important and the Board is being asked if we want to submit a response and asked if David Mitchell could comment on the capacity for the SRA to do this.
- Mr Mitchell said he was confident a draft could be circulated in time for comment and submission.
- The Vice-Chair asked if it was appropriate for the SRA to make a response when the SRA was made up of organisations who would each be making a response.
- David Jenkins felt it was important that the SRA make a response if it is to be taken seriously as an organisation.
- The Chair agreed that the SRA as an organisation should take a view.
- Cllr Smith-Roberts said that our view would be sought as the norm in the future and to be taken seriously we should start providing that view now.

The SRA Board agreed that the Senior Manager of the SRA, David Mitchell, would draft a response for circulation and comment by the following week.

12. FORWARD PLAN

David Mitchell (SRA) suggested this be a standing item to discuss key pieces of work in the future. He made the following points:

- The key issue raised was the Flood Action Plan review. He apologised that the FAP review has not been progressed but that he had a timeline of the next nine months. Additional resource would be bought to move the FAP review forward. At September Board meeting there would be a fuller update.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Matthew Heard raised a concern about the size of the task and potentially difficult discussions that will be needed and suggested a time to get together before September to work on this.
- Rachel Burden (EA) said we have done the quick wins and need to look forward to the future. There is a need a whole vision for Somerset and it is important that a revised FAP is not just a 'shopping list' of individual schemes.
- The Vice-Chair noted that as we only have annual funding we should not look too far ahead. The Chair suggested a strategy can look beyond the existing funding period.
- Mr Sturdy said that he had just spent three days at the Flood and Coast Conference and was struck by the climate change emergency presentations. A plan for the SRA needs to be broken into at least two parts – one for tomorrow, next week, next year and we also have to plan for the next 50 years.
- Mr Mitchell acknowledged the desire of the Board to be involved early in discussion on the FAP review and proposed to start these discussions before the September Board meeting.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were two items of other business raised by David Mitchell, SRA:

1. An induction for new SRA Board Members, but open to all Board Members, will be organised prior to the next SRA Board Meeting.
2. An email from the outgoing Chair, John Osman, had been received wishing the SRA Board well.

The meeting concluded at 12.10pm

Acronyms:

EA:	Environment Agency
FAP:	Flood Action Plan
IDB:	Internal Drainage Boards (Parrett and Axe-Brue)
MDC:	Mendip District Council
NE:	Natural England
RALD:	Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage
SCC:	Somerset County Council
SDBC:	Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium
SDC:	Sedgemoor District Council
SoS:	Secretary of State
SRA:	Somerset Rivers Authority
SSDC:	South Somerset District Council
SWTC:	Somerset West and Taunton Council
WR FCC:	Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee