

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting – 27 September 2019

THE SOMERSET RIVERS AUTHORITY BOARD

Minutes of the Board meeting of Somerset Rivers Authority held at South Somerset District Council's offices in Yeovil on Friday 27 September 2019 at 2.15pm.

PRESENT:

Cllr David Hall - Chair, Somerset County Council

Tony Bradford – Vice-Chair, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB)

Ray Adlam, Axe Brue IDB

Emma Baker, Environment Agency

Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB

John Harris, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee

Matthew Heard, Natural England

Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB

Cllr Matt Martin, Mendip District Council

Cllr Mike Stanton, South Somerset District Council

Cllr Alan Wedderkopp, Somerset West and Taunton Council

IN ATTENDANCE:

Doug Bamsey, Sedgemoor District Council

Dr Rachel Burden, Environment Agency

Roger Burge, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium

Brendan Cleere, Somerset West and Taunton Council

Gary Cutts, Environment Agency

Paula Hewitt, Somerset County Council

Jonathan Hudston, Somerset Rivers Authority

David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority

Ric Pallister, formerly SSDC Councillor and SRA Board member

Graham Quarrier, Environment Agency

Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium

Ben Thorne, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest

Joanna Uglow, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest

APOLOGIES:

Cllr Michael Caswell, Sedgemoor District Council

Michele Cusack, Somerset County Council

Paul Deal, Mendip District Council

Rebecca Hall, Somerset County Council

David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee

Cllr Mike Pullin, Somerset County Council

Cllr Federica Smith-Roberts, Somerset West and Taunton Council

Martin Woods, South Somerset District Council

MINUTE TAKER:

Sandra Newing-Griffiths, Somerset Rivers Authority

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies noted above. Ric Pallister was attending to support Cllr Mike Stanton in the absence of Martin Woods.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were two declarations of interest:

1. Cllr Stanton, for agenda item 14b (papers for noting): a large area of the proposed project will be within his Burrow Hill district council ward.
2. Tony Bradford in King's Sedgemoor Drain.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 21 JUNE 2019

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record of the meeting with one small amendment on page six. 'Sowy into the Parrett' to be changed to 'Parrett into the Sowy'.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There was one public question from Mr Graham Hill:

'During the meeting of 26th October 2016, the SRA expressed the view that there should be no wall or bund alongside the A303 that would prevent the road acting as a free-running spillway in the event of large flooding events that would threaten the Ilchester Mead properties. The SRA also stated that an assurance from Highways England to that effect was being sought. With the many changes of personnel at the SRA in the last few years, is it still the SRA's position that there should be no bund or wall alongside the A303, and have the relevant assurances to that effect been given by Highways England?'

An SRA response was emailed by SRA Senior Manager David Mitchell in advance of the meeting:

'I am unable at this stage to give you a definitive response to your question regarding the bund or wall. This is not because any discussion has taken place to revise the previous SRA statement but simply because I would like to see the outputs from Highways England modelling work and their feasibility findings. Once I have these I can discuss the matter with the SRA Chairman.

'The SRA will continue to help the Mead's residents to reach a satisfactory conclusion on this matter with Highways England. I understand you will be attending the Board Meeting on Friday; I would appreciate the chance to chat with you about this issue which precedes my time as SRA Manager.'

Following the Board meeting, Mr Mitchell spoke with Mr Hill and organised a follow-up meeting to discuss the matter further.

5. NATURAL FLOOD MANAGEMENT

Ben Thorne of the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest (FWAG SW) presented an overview of Natural Flood Management (NFM) schemes funded by the SRA. Natural Flood Management sits within the 'Land Management' workstream set out in Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan. FWAG SW leads on this workstream. It has delivered a variety of natural attenuation measures across Somerset to slow the flow of water getting to flood plains.

Most activities so far have been in the catchments of the rivers Parrett and Tone as that is where the greatest need has been. More work is planned in the Brue and the Axe this year and onwards. FWAG SW has worked with 335 farmers and delivered about 674 individual measures over three years. FWAG SW works closely with other agencies such as Somerset County Council as the Local Highways Authority.

Attention was drawn to an innovative approach that FWAG SW has helped to develop to encourage land managers to adopt better working practices which will help reduce flood risks. FWAG SW have used an online platform to run reverse auctions. This allows land managers to bid to undertake actions on their land that will help reduce flood risks; the lowest-priced bids win and land managers are funded by the SRA to deliver the necessary works. These include things like tree planting, hedge planting and better management of maize crops and harvesting to reduce water run-off. FWAG SW also works with land managers to improve soil health, which can have a significant impact on the rate of water run-off.

Joanna Uglow, also of FWAG SW, continued the presentation. FWAG SW commissioned JBA Consulting to undertake some detailed modelling of the Wellhams Brook catchment near Yeovil. The aim of the work was to review monitoring data for specific sites and attempt to understand the effect that these individual NFM measures are having at a catchment scale. The objective was to quantify flood peak reductions on a catchment scale. The Wellhams Brook catchment is 25 sq km and has a high number of natural flood management features within it, approximately 54.

The study reviewed the catchment with and without natural flood management measures. JBA studied a range of storm events from 1 in every 2 years up to 1 in 100-year events. Results showed that there is a reduction in the flood peak and a delay in the flood peak across 2, 5, 10 and 30-year events. This is demonstrating exactly what it was assumed that NFM should be doing. The greatest improvement was seen on 1 in 5-year events. The biggest effect is seen directly downstream of measures but there is still a significant reduction at the whole catchment scale.

Gordon Swindells, volunteer flood warden coordinator from Martock, talked about his role as a flood warden in the local community. Mr Swindells outlined how he and his fellow

volunteers had noticed an improvement since various NFM schemes had been installed in the Wellhams Brook catchment. He explained how flood wardens manage some of the water storage areas, releasing water – when safe to do so – to create storage space when heavy rain is expected.

FWAG SW's presentation ended with SRA Chair Cllr David Hall giving Gordon Swindells a 2018 national River Champion certificate awarded by the Rivers Restoration Centre in recognition of people who have made an outstanding contribution to improving rivers.

6. SRA JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

David Mitchell reminded the Board of the process and structure of the SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel. The Panel meets twice a year. It looks forward in one meeting and back in the other. The latest meeting held on 20 September looked back over the last 12 months.

The Panel discussed riparian responsibilities and what was being done to encourage people to act on their responsibilities and to support people in doing so. The Panel heard about the work of the SRA's Riparian Responsibilities Officer.

The Panel asked about climate change strategies and whether the SRA was taking account of those strategies. They were assured that the SRA will take account of other strategies.

The Panel encouraged the SRA to do more on social media. This is something that the SRA will continue to develop.

Progress with precepting legislation was discussed. The panel asked what would happen in the short term until legislation is passed. It was explained that the current funding arrangement would continue.

Cllr Hall asked if there were any specific recommendations for the SRA Board. Mr Mitchell advised that notes of the meeting had not yet been received. He would pass on any recommendations via the Chair.

7. SRA ANNUAL REPORT 2018-19

Jonathan Hudston introduced the SRA Annual Report. He said the report included several improvements based on suggestions from Board members; for example, the report is much more visual and accessible. In one section, Dr Andrew Pledger of Loughborough University reports on academic research into the effects of water injection dredging works funded by the SRA. This research is being publicised nationally and internationally. Mr Hudston said the report would be distributed widely. Its text would also be put onto the SRA website, making it searchable online. It is also the SRA's intention to produce interactive maps for the website. Once completed the public will be able to use the maps to find out more about what has been done where.

The following points were raised in the discussion:

- Cllr Hall expressed his thanks to Jonathan Hudston for producing a good piece of work. He said that he would like to specifically draw the report to the attention of Rebecca Pow MP and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at Defra with responsibilities for flooding.
- David Hall sought support from the Board to invite Rebecca Pow to attend a Board meeting to discuss her role and the work of the SRA with reference to the report. This was supported.
- John Harris asked what will be the outcome of the Flood Re insurance survey results mentioned on p36. Survey results have been shared with the SRA's Technical Group but have yet to be shared more widely.
- Cllr Stanton was interested in knowing more about water injection dredging and what amount of silt was completely removed and how much was re-deposited in other parts of the system. Iain Sturdy gave a brief outline. He explained that annual monitoring was undertaken to assess where silt was being deposited and this informed where maintenance dredging was then undertaken.
- Ric Pallister said he felt it was a great format for the general public. He asked if the earlier FWAG SW presentation on the Wellhams Brook catchment could be linked to the annual report on the SRA website so that people could access additional detail. David Mitchell said he would talk to FWAG SW about getting the presentation onto the website.

Recommendation

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Approve the publication of the SRA Annual Report 2018-19.

The recommendation was passed unanimously.

8. KEY PROJECT UPDATES

A – Oath to Burrowbridge

Iain Sturdy took the paper as read. He said progress and outcomes remained on track. The dredging contract had been awarded, works had started on site and the scheme was within budget. Many more water voles were found than when the site was originally surveyed but this issue was being managed. Rainfall over the last few days had meant the river was high which limited what work was possible, but this was being managed on site by the contractor and it was not expected to affect the overall programme.

David Mitchell explained that a site visit would be organised for Board Members. An invite would be circulated.

Matt Heard said that he wanted to recognise the good work of the Parrett IDB, which is delivering this project, with regards to its environmental aspects.

Recommendations

The SRA Board is asked to note the following:

1. The environmental consultation was completed successfully; contract was awarded and works mobilised in August 2019.
2. Due to recent water vole activity on the right bank the project team are working closely with Environmental Clerk of Works and partners to mitigate any project impacts and remain legally compliant.
3. The project remains within budget and on programme.

The recommendations were passed unanimously.

B – Sowy / King’s Sedgemoor Drain (KSD)

David Mitchell explained that the paper on this item (8b) had been completed after the Board’s recent technical briefing session. The paper was brought to the Board as the project team are seeking decisions from the Board about the preferred options to proceed with the scheme. The Board was taken through the paper in detail.

Mr Mitchell explained that environmental mitigation is a legal requirement which must to be delivered as part of the River Sowy and Oath to Burrowbridge project. The paper set out the scope and estimated costs for these works.

Mr Mitchell recommended that Dunball Smoothing works should be removed from Phase One of the proposed Sowy / KSD enhancements because of a high risk of non-delivery within the spending timeframe set by the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (HotSWLEP). 31 March 2021 is a ‘hard’ deadline for the use of LEP funding. Hence the importance of delivering environmental mitigations for the full Sowy scheme and progressing with channel works.

It was proposed that £150k of project funding currently allocated to Dunball smoothing works should be retained to undertake the detailed technical work that will be required to progress the scheme to a point where it is ready for delivery.

As set out in the paper, should the Board agree to postpone Dunball smoothing works this would reduce projected spend by £750k; as this is LEP funding, that must be used by March 2021, so an alternative use would have to be identified for this funding. Cllr Hall advised the Board that he had instructed officers to come to the next Board meeting with a clear plan for the use of the £750k and any other possible project underspend.

The following questions were raised:

- Cllr Stanton asked if the money could be spent on equipment like a dredging machine. Mr Mitchell said that was theoretically possible but would need LEP approval. A similar idea had been considered and rejected in the past.

- Ray Adlam was concerned that the Dunball Smoothing project might be shelved. He asked about the benefits of the Dunball works. It seemed counter-productive to leave a restriction at the bottom of the system whilst improving capacity upstream.
- Cllr Hall replied that it would not be shelved. Officers reiterated that £150k was being requested to undertake the technical work necessary to prepare to deliver the scheme when funding becomes available.
- Mr Adlam stated he supported diverting LEP funding away from Dunball smoothing for the reasons set out in the paper, but he felt that funding could be diverted from other SRA-funded projects which he felt were less urgent than Dunball works.
- Cllr Stanton supported the proposed environmental mitigation work on West Moor as parish councils had been in touch with him about flooding in this area.
- Cllr Stanton requested further information on the additional cubic metres of water that could be moved through the system if Dunball works were undertaken. Graham Quarrier explained that he had estimated that it was between 2.5 and 3 cubic metres per second which over a long flooding event equates to a very large volume of water.
- Tony Bradford said he thought the restriction to be removed during the Dunball smoothing project had been removed already as part of earlier works. He agreed that Dunball smoothing was a crucial piece of work.
- Mr Bradford also raised concerns about the scale of the environmental mitigation required as part of this project. Matt Heard said the mitigation being proposed, as explained in the paper, now covered the full scheme not just this phase of works.
- Cllr Hall said that officers must come back to the SRA Board to advise how LEP funds would be spent.

Recommendations

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Approve proceeding with commissioning delivery of the environmental mitigation package including committing funding to develop, and partner commitment to deliver, the long-term Strategic Mitigation Plan.
2. Approve proceeding with commissioning the channel works.
3. Approve the removal of the Dunball smoothing works from Phase 1 of this project given the risk of non-completion by March 2021.
4. Approve the use of £150,000 of existing Sowey/KSD local partner funds to continue to develop the detailed design for the Dunball smoothing works to enable delivery of the scheme when funding is available.

The recommendations were passed unanimously.

9. Q1 2019-20 FINANCE REPORT

David Mitchell introduced the finance report in the absence of SRA Finance Manager Rebecca Hall.

He took the paper as read, but highlighted a few key points such as some spending possibly being pushed back to the next financial year. Moves to and from contingency produced a new contingency figure of £130,000.

Cllr Stanton asked about risks related to underspend and contingency. Mr Mitchell advised that the key underspend risk related to LEP funding. As discussed under item 8b, officers had been tasked with reporting back to the next SRA Board meeting on this issue.

Recommendations

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Note the financial performance as at the end of Quarter One 2019-20.
2. Approve the re-allocation of contingency as per section three.

The recommendations were passed unanimously.

10. FLOOD ACTION PLAN REVIEW

David Mitchell spoke about updating Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan (FAP), which is overseen by the SRA. Doing this would help to prioritise future SRA activities, but Mr Mitchell said that current workloads had slowed progress. A Board workshop would be arranged to look at the FAP and discuss future SRA priorities.

11. PRECEPTING LEGISLATION

Cllr Hall read aloud a letter he had received from the Taunton MP Rebecca Pow, who had recently been appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at Defra with responsibilities for flooding.

Ms Pow thanked Cllr Hall for a letter of congratulations that he had sent to her. She shared Cllr Hall's disappointment that David Warburton's Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill had not managed to successfully complete all of its stages through Parliament. Ms Pow expressed support for the SRA. She said she that was working with colleagues in Defra to take forward legislation options. In the meantime, she advised that the SRA's current shadow precepting arrangement would continue.

In the discussion that followed, the following points were raised:

- David Mitchell noted that Wells MP James Heapey was the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, so there was another Somerset MP in an influential role.
- Tony Bradford said there was a 20-Year Flood Action Plan but only annual funding. Some work takes years to develop. Could the SRA have commitment from the councils and IDBs for a rolling three-year programme so there was certainty for three years?

- Cllr Hall confirmed that the current Somerset County Council administration was committed to the SRA and there was no appetite to remove funding from the SRA.
- Doug Bamsey said the dilemma was that if district councils stepped in to guarantee funding, it could be seen to 'let the government off the hook'.
- Cllr Stanton added that funds were ringfenced, like precepts for the fire service, and could not be used by district councils for any other purpose. Therefore authorities should be clear that if funds were not raised for the SRA then they would not be available for anything else.
- Cllr Stanton raised a query about the recommendations. Who would be involved in the discussions with Rebecca Pow?
 - Cllr Hall advised that members will have an opportunity to take part in the discussions.
- Cllr Stanton asked whether the 2nd recommendation should support the long-term future of rivers authorities generally or only the SRA?
 - Cllr Hall acknowledged the point, stated that the Board's focus should be on the SRA and that the recommendation as written would not prejudice what was pursued in future.
- Ben Thorne asked if there had been discussions with the RSPB to avoid continued opposition from them to the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill.
 - David Mitchell advised that they had met on Monday and communications were ongoing.

Recommendations

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Consider and comment on the latest position in relation to progress of the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill.
2. Approve discussions with the main political parties about including a commitment to support the long-term future of the SRA in any forthcoming General Election.

The recommendations were passed unanimously.

12. FORWARD PLAN

David Mitchell suggested that the paper be taken as read.

There was no discussion. The Chair encouraged Board members to consider items in the Forward Plan their own time.

Recommendations

The SRA Board is asked to:

1. Review the SRA Board Forward Plan
2. Consider areas of work they would like to be included in future meetings.

It was agreed that Board Members would consider the forward plan separately and report any comments back to David Mitchell.

13. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Cllr Matt Martin noted that there was a national programme of tree planting and also that trees had been removed from the upper catchments and perhaps contributed to the flooding of the levels. Could tree planting be part of the solution for Somerset?

Ben Thorne of FWAG SW replied that, while it would be great to plant trees in the upper catchment, there were several issues.

These included:

- 1) The soil in the upper catchment was very fertile and is prime food production land.
- 2) Land was privately owned and trees decrease the value of the capital asset, reducing what can be passed on to future generations.

He advised that small scale tree planting was taking place but a mass tree planting scheme would be unlikely.

Tony Bradford requested that any future tree planting should not take place too near watercourses as this could exacerbate flooding issues.

The meeting concluded at 16.15pm