

## ITEM 6

### Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper

### Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Enhanced Programme Development 2024-25

#### RECOMMENDATION

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

1. Approve extending invitations for proposals for SRA funding for the 2024-25 Enhanced Programme beyond just the SRA partners.

#### Purpose of the item

To consider the potential benefits of extending invitations for proposals for Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) funds to a wider group of organisations than just the SRA partners and to seek approval from the SRA Board to accept proposals from these organisations.

#### Background and context

Every March, the SRA Board is asked to give its final approval to a carefully-assembled selection of activities to add to the SRA's overall Enhanced Programme of works. These activities are funded using money raised annually for the SRA through council tax and contributions from the Axe Brue and Parrett Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs). Their purpose is to benefit the people, businesses and environment of Somerset, in accordance with the objectives of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan (FAP).

The process culminates in March but it starts much earlier in the financial year, with discussions at the SRA's Technical Group about needs, ideas and local priorities. One aim is to make good use of the time this allows for strengthening proposals, for example by taking advantage of the SRA's unique partnership structure to look at flooding problems from different angles and seeking to combine different approaches. Early on, Expressions of Interest can be asked for or submitted to help SRA Technical Group members assess possibilities and suggest ways they could be improved. Formal proposals are put in for consideration in late August. The SRA team and SRA Technical Group members score these proposals in line with criteria relating to the FAP's six main objectives. The SRA Board then gets presented with a draft programme for provisional approval in December.

Proposals for SRA funding currently have to be submitted by an SRA partner. That is, each organisation represented on the SRA Board plus the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest (FWAG SW). Each SRA partner has a Strategic Grant Agreement (SGA) with

the SRA<sup>1</sup>. SGAs set out the general conditions under which SRA funds can be used and they provide for remedies in the event of issues with project delivery. Separate grant agreements for individual projects set out the details of what each SRA grant will be used for.

## **Current Status**

A non-SRA partner organisation can bring forward a proposal for SRA funding by working with an SRA partner. If a proposal is approved, the required SRA grant agreement has to be signed by the SRA partner that agreed to bring it forward. This arrangement has previously allowed a small number of non-SRA partners to suggest activities for SRA funding and to get funding. This arrangement has strengths, for example as a filtering mechanism, but it also has weaknesses. It can put an SRA partner in the difficult position of being 'responsible' for a project that is actually being delivered by another organisation, so staff resource is required to oversee it. Many organisations, including SRA partners, are currently experiencing significant pressures in terms of staff resources and capacity to deliver projects. In practice, therefore, good opportunities for SRA projects can be missed if an SRA partner is unable or unwilling to sponsor a proposal for another organisation.

Since its inception in January 2015, SRA enabling of extra partnership working has been one of its most important strengths. It is good for Somerset to have a body that connects different people, organisations, places, measures, ideas and sources of funding in ways that complement and add to the work undertaken by SRA partner organisations. With the forthcoming creation of a new Somerset Council, the number of partners formally involved in the SRA will shrink, but a foundational principle of the new council is that new means should be developed to involve communities and stakeholders. Hence the plan to establish Local Community Networks (LCNs) across the county. The SRA-led review of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan is also clear about the need to fulfil local priorities with vigour.

Many fit and proper organisations that are not formal SRA partners are working in Somerset, for example, Westcountry Rivers Trust, Wessex Water, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Yeovil Rivers Community Trust, to name a few. Parish and town councils could propose to deliver projects. Making it easier for such bodies to get involved with the SRA could increase the number of multi-benefit projects being carried out in accordance with FAP objectives.

Should the SRA Board support the principle of inviting more organisations to propose projects for SRA funding, advice would be sought from Somerset Council's legal and procurement teams about the implementation of this move. Appropriate criteria would be established to ensure that any organisation seeking funding is fit and proper, with suitable

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<sup>1</sup> The grant agreement is formally with Somerset County Council as the host authority for the SRA.

financial controls and governance arrangements to manage any funding secured from the SRA.

Final details setting out exactly how the process would run will be developed in consultation with SRA Technical Group, Management Group and stakeholders before being presented to the Board for final approval.

### **Recommendation**

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

1. Approve extending invitations for proposals for SRA funding for the 2024-25 Enhanced Programme beyond just the SRA partners.

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