

**Minutes of the
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting
held on Friday 22 July 2022
at South Somerset District Council's headquarters in Yeovil.**

Members of SRA Board:

Cllr Mike Stanton – *Chair*, Somerset County Council (SCC)
Tony Bradford - *Vice-Chair*, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB)
Emma Baker, Environment Agency (EA)
Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset West & Taunton Council (SWTC)
Cllr Sarah Dyke, South Somerset District Council (SSDC)
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
Cllr Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB
David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee
Cllr Matt Martin, Mendip District Council (MDC)
Pat Lehain, Natural England

In Attendance:

Gary Cutts, EA
Michele Cusack, SCC
Jonathan Hudston, SRA
Kate Murdoch, SWTC
David Mitchell, SRA
Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium
Ian Tier, SCC
Peter Paddon, SSSC

Minutes:

Jennie Channing, SRA

Apologies:

Cllr Mike Caswell, SDC
Claire Newill, Natural England
Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB

The meeting started at 10:22am.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Senior Manager, led proceedings for the election of a new SRA Chair. He asked if there were any nominations for Chair. Tony Bradford (Parrett Internal Drainage Board - IDB), nominated Cllr Mike Stanton to be Chair of the SRA Board, and Cllr Sarah Dyke (South Somerset District Council), seconded this. There were no other nominations for Chair. Cllr Stanton was duly elected as Chair of the SRA Board with immediate effect.

Cllr Stanton said that it is a great pleasure to become Chair and looks forward to working closely with Mr Bradford as Vice-Chair. He explained that the SRA matters to him as he represents Muchelney and Thorney which is an area that has been seriously affected by flooding in recent years. He said that he is interested to see how the council and other Board members can work together. He thanked all officers

who worked hard to get the papers ready. The Chair noted that there is a constant unknown and there will be another big flood event in the near future so the SRA are here to minimise the damage caused in previous years.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chair reported apologies from Board members Cllr Michael Caswell (Sedgemoor District Council), Claire Newill (Natural England) and Rebecca Horsington (Parrett IDB).

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 4 MARCH 2022

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

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME.

There were no public questions.

6. SRA JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL

Mr Mitchell took his paper as read. He explained that at the SRA Joint Scrutiny meeting held on 8 July 2022, the Panel was not quorate and therefore was unable to make any recommendations. However, the Panel did wish to pass on several points for consideration and these were set out in the paper.

These were:

- The need for Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDs) should be a high priority for local planning authorities (LPAs) and the SRA should encourage LPAs to do more to require this in new housing developments.
- The SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel recommend that SuDs Guide is a very important piece of work and should be published and adopted by all councils. The SRA Joint Scrutiny Panel recommend that SuDS requirements should be captured on Regulation 123 lists 1 and the SRA Board should encourage LPAs to do this.
- There is insufficient reference to the urgency of, and the need to address, the climate and ecological emergency within the draft SRA annual report. The Panel made the point that language is very important and opportunities for emphasising the climate emergency should always be taken.

- The Panel commented that more should be done to encourage Parish and Town Councils and local communities to contact the SRA directly with their recommendations for local projects to tackle flooding.
- The Chair reiterated the importance of securing the necessary legislation to make the SRA a Precepting Authority and advocated for a lobbying campaign to achieve this.

There were no questions from the Board.

7. EXCESSIVE PHOSPHATES ON THE LEVELS AND MOORS

Kate Murdoch (Somerset West and Taunton Council) gave a presentation about 'Phosphates on the Somerset Levels and Moors' to the Board. Ms Murdoch said that phosphates is affecting the vast majority of Somerset. She discussed the principal sources of phosphates, the economic impact on Somerset, the affected catchment area and shared the current risks and future opportunities. Ms Murdoch noted that Somerset is in a unique position due to having the SRA and key partners. She said that she believes the SRA will play a role in strengthening Somerset's request for help from Government.

Key points raised

- Mr Bradford said that he had attended the Somerset Water Forum where a professor gave a presentation on phosphates. He said that these presentations are not correct. The four sites that were tested by Natural England are all Raised Water Level Areas. Mr Bradford suggested that these sites were atypical and that to get an accurate picture of phosphate levels more data from areas outside the Raised Water Level Areas is required.
- Ms Murdoch explained that the data included in the presentation has been sent from Natural England and the Environment Agency.
- Cllr Matt Martin requested a summary document regarding the phosphates issue that could be handed to the public if they are concerned and have questions regarding phosphates.
- Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium) said that he sees some good crossover with work already being done on the Levels and Moors.
- Cllr Dixie Darch (Somerset West and Taunton Council) agreed with Mr Bradford that further testing needed to be done. She said that there needs to be a collaborative approach taken towards the issue of phosphates as it is not the sole responsibility of the SRA.

- Cllr Sarah Dyke said that it is crucial that the SRA and partners have a role in tackling the phosphates issue.
- The Chair requested that this item should be discussed at the next SRA Board meeting in September.

8. SRA FINANCE REPORT

8A. QUARTER 4 2021-2022 FINANCE REPORT AND ANNUAL SUMMARY

Ian Tier, SRA Finance Manager, took his paper as read. He outlined the SRA's financial position at the end of Quarter 4. £3.071 million of the £10.388 million that the SRA had available was spent in the first four quarters of 2021-22, with a balance of £7.317million to be spent in 2022-23 onwards.

Mr Tier said that the SRA spend during Quarter Four 2021-22 totalled £994k. He explained the proportional spend between the different workstreams. In workstream 1 (Dredging & River Management), £306,000 was spent on the bank raising as part of the River Sowey – King's Sedgemoor Drain Enhancements Scheme, £245,000 on the Parrett and Tone annual maintenance dredging and £120,000 towards the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme. He noted the remaining £323,000 was spent delivering natural flood management schemes across the county, Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) Inspections and building local resilience in communities. He noted that of the £2,831k expenditure in the financial year, 8% of funds were spent on administration and staffing of the SRA, 1% on SRA core work and development and 92% on specific projects and activities within the Enhanced Programme.

Mr Tier highlighted the Quarter 4 2021-22 spend profile was originally estimated to be £3,420k as forecast at the end of Quarter 4 2020-21, however the actual spend in Quarter 4 was £994k.

Mr Tier noted that if the re-allocations proposed in the recommendation were approved, then contingency reserves would increase from £668k to £928k.

Points raised:

- Ms Baker asked whether the £7million that was being carried over into the 2022-23 financial year was available. Mr Mitchell explained that the funding, except contingency, had been allocated to projects.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted the financial performance for Q4 2021-22 and the annual summary.
2. Approved the re-allocation of £240k of funding to contingency.

8B. 2022-2023 BUDGET SPENDING PROFILE

Mr Tier took his paper as read and noted that the paper provides an overview of the financial position of the SRA as at 1 April 2022.

He explained that the balance of unclaimed funds at the end of 2021-22 when added to the £3,889k total additional funding in 2022-23 means a total of £10,684k is now allocated. Mr Tier said it is forecast that £8,520k will be spent in 2022-23, with the remaining £2,164k covering expenditure in 2023-24 onwards.

Mr Mitchell noted that the extra paper was an overview of the starting predictions of this financial year (2022-23).

Points raised:

- The Chair asked whether the £496k contingency would be enough for the year ahead?
- Mr Mitchell said that as well as contingency there are options to pause projects that will not be claiming funds until future years to release funding from them. He said that the reason the SRA are content with moving forward with this contingency is because of the £10m of unclaimed funding.
- Ms Baker asked if the funding allocated to the Enhanced Programme forecast to be spent this year would be spent. Mr Mitchell explained that the information received from partners shows all funding allocated to the enhanced programme would be spent.

As recommended, the SRA Board:

1. Noted the expenditure forecast for all SRA's current funding.

9. ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

Jonathan Hudston, SRA Communications Manager, took his paper as read. He noted that this was the 7th annual report. Mr Hudston thanked all SRA partners for their contribution. He said that the report was produced for two reasons, to give the people of Somerset an accurate representation of what work has been done and to show what the SRA do.

Points raised:

- Mr Bradford said that Mr Hudston should be congratulated on producing the report. He said the content and presentation is excellent.

- Cllr Dyke said that the report was robust and a good read. She noted that there was no specific mention of climate change.
- Mr Hudston said that the inclusion of climate change was raised by the vice-chair at the last Joint Scrutiny Panel. He said that a reference to climate change was added at the beginning of the report. Mr Hudston explained that as climate change is not explicitly referenced as a key focus of the SRA in the current Flood Action Plan it is not explicitly referenced in annual reports.
- Cllr Dyke said the importance of climate change needed to be made explicit.
- The Chair said that climate change and how it impacts what the SRA does will need to be discussed at the next Flood Action Plan workshop.
- Cllr Andrew Gilling (Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board) suggested reading the ecological emergency plan written by Somerset West and Taunton Council and Sedgemoor District Council. Cllr Darch said that she could share this with members.
- Cllr Darch asked Mr Hudston how he responded to the Scrutiny Panel comments. She asked if the reference to climate change was added as a result of comments made by the Scrutiny Panel.
- Mr Mitchell said that it is important to recognise the function of the annual report which is to be a factual record of project activity during the last financial year. A better place to capture the SRA's position on climate change will be the revised Flood Action Plan.
- Michel Cusack (Somerset County Council) said that the Flood Action Plan review is where climate change needs to be discussed and tackled. Mr Sturdy agreed with Ms Cusack
- Mr Mitchell asked if the Board required any further changes to the annual report in relation to climate change. The Board confirmed no changes are required.

Recommendation:

1. As recommended the Board reviewed and provided comments on the draft Annual Report.
2. The Board approved the publication of the SRA Annual Report 2021-22.

10. FUNDING REQUEST - Rode and Beckington Funding Request

The Rode Flood Management project and Beckington Drainage Works have reached a key point in delivery and the project team now request the Board to approve

additional funding so that infrastructure improvement works can be completed in a cost-effective way this autumn.

The Board deferred the decision as further information is required before a decision can be taken.

11. KEY PROJECT UPDATES

River Sowy – King’s Sedgemoor Drain Enhancements Scheme

This paper was presented to the Board to provide an update on the progress of the River Sowy and King’s Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) Enhancement Scheme. The SRA Board previously approved phase 1 of the Sowy-KSD scheme which comprises of raising low spots in banks, forming new banks where they don’t exist at present, some excavating to the riverbanks and upgrade works to outfall structures on the side streams.

Gary Cutts (Environment Agency) took his paper as read and covered key points.

He said that contractors had taken advantage of the drier weather and remobilised on site earlier than originally planned. He noted that the biggest risk remains with the industry wide shortage of resources and material, the team has been working with the supply chain to secure earthworks plants, drivers and ordering outstanding materials early to mitigate this risk.

He explained that in March 2022 the SRA Board approved £200k for design of three outfalls downstream of Parchey Bridge. He said that the Environment Agency had identified an alternative framework contract they could use that might deliver the work more cost effectively than originally planned. He said that the project team is now recommending an alternative proposal to procure the works via a design and build approach and the current forecast estimate for all three structures is £350k.

He said that the current forecasted total for Phase 1 scheme is £8,349m. Based upon current forecast costs to complete the scheme this would result in a £603k shortfall of funding to complete Phase 1 of the scheme. The Environment Agency requested that this shortfall be covered using SRA funds.

Points raised:

- Cllr Dyke said that she has concerns that the Board has not had enough time to consider the implications of this request and if these implications are significant. She said she thinks there needs to be an options paper to consider the risks going forward as she fears this may not be the last funding request from the project. Ms Cusack supported the need for options and more time.

- The Chair noted that he found the paper difficult to follow and is still not clear regarding all elements of the request.
- Mr Sturdy said that the Board need a full understanding of the scheme to modify the Sowy. He explained that if components are reduced or taken out to reduce the costs then the project will no longer be effective in the way it was supposed to be.
- Mr Bradford explained that he has been involved with the scheme since the beginning. He said that this must be completed as it was originally billed as the SRAs single most important scheme. If this is not completed then future flooding could be much worse. He expressed his concern for the reputation of the SRA if this scheme is not finished.
- Jeff Fear (Axe Brue IDB) said that the improvement of the Sowy was proposed in 2016 and should have been completed before the dredging of the River Parrett. He suggested that the funds should be taken out of the following year's budget.
- Mr Jenkins said that this scheme has been top priority for the Board since the beginning. He expressed his reluctance to shelve the project given cost inflation is likely to continue and a delay is likely to also have a considerable cost.
- Ms Cusack raised a question about future phases of the Sowy-KSD project. She asked if there are any implications for today's decision if Phase 2 of the project will not go ahead.
- Ms Baker said that further work needs to be done to understand what any future phases of the Sowy-KSD will include because lots has changed since the original project was proposed. Ms Baker explained that the Flood Action Plan stated the Environment Agency would deliver Phase 1 of the Sowy-KSD and build Bridgwater Tidal Barrier. She noted that she personally wants to deliver Phase 1 and there is a huge cost in demobilising and remobilisation if it is delayed. Ms Baker reminded the Board that completion of phase 1 would enable the system to take 20-21 cumecs which is an increase.
- Mr Mitchell sought confirmation that once phase 1 is complete it will be possible to us the full 21 cumecs through Monk's Leaze Clyse. Mr Cutts confirmed yes, with the agreement of partners.
- Mr Mitchell said that he does not think the Flood Action Plan states the Sowy-KSD scheme will be delivered in phases. The assumption in the plan when written was that the full scheme would be delivered, breaking it into phases came later.

- The Chair said that there was a lot of conflicting information and the amount being asked for is more than the contingency that is available.
- Ms Baker put forward a recommendation for funding the underspend to the Board. The SRA allocated £490k to the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier for 2022-23, this funding has not yet been claimed; Ms Baker proposed the Environment Agency use the £490k for the Sowey-KSD project this year instead. She also said this must be contingent on the SRA Board confirming that the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier funds are refunded to the project from next year's SRA precept. Ms Baker emphasised that the Environment Agency would be taking on a significant financial risk to allow this to happen. The £490k plus the £120k from the proposed stopping of further Environment Agency work on Dunball smoothing will cover the current Sowey-KSD shortfall.
- The Chair sought clarification as to whether with Ms Baker's proposal, a decision could be taken at the meeting.
- Mr Mitchell recommended that because a proposal had been put forward which identified funding from projects that the Environment Agency is in control of, the Board could approve the recommendation of £603,000 without further steps.
- Mr Jenkins supported what Ms Baker said and agreed that the Environment Agency are taking risks. He highlighted the importance of the SRA Board confirming that the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier contribution would be refunded as local partnership contributions are key to the project proceeding.
- Mr Bradford proposed that the SRA Technical Group look at what schemes could be put on hold as they are not critical to free up funding for this project. Ms Baker supported this proposal.
- Cllr Matt Martin requested a paper explaining the options for Dunball smoothing.
- The SRA Board accepted Ms Baker's recommendation and confirmed that the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier contribution would be replaced at the start of the new financial year from the 2023-24 precept.

Recommendations:

1. As recommended the Board noted the progress made and that outstanding channel works are currently underway and currently on track for completion by November 2022.
2. As recommended the Board approved the £603k increase in funding to cover the forecast shortfall.

3. The Board also approved the alternative proposal to procure and deliver the 3 outfalls using a 'Design & Build' approach.

12. ENHANCED PROGRAMME 2023-24

The Board agreed to remove this item from the agenda.

13. FLOOD ACTION PLAN REVIEW

Mr Mitchell said the next Flood Action Plan Review workshop would take place on Friday 5 August.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

No points were raised

15. PAPERS TO NOTE

15a. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier

No points were raised.

15b. Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme

No points were raised.

15c. Strategic Approach to Mitigation

No points were raised.

12d. River Brue Schemes

No points were raised

The Chair thanked the Board for attending in person.

The meeting closed at 12.25pm