

**Minutes of the  
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting  
10am – 12.30pm, Friday 16 June 2023  
at Junction 24, Market Way, North Petherton, Somerset TA6 6DF**

**Members of SRA Board:**

**Cllr Mike Stanton** - *Chair*, Somerset Council  
**Tony Bradford** - *Vice-Chair*, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB)  
**Emma Baker**, Environment Agency  
**Cllr Mike Caswell**, Somerset Council  
**Cllr Dixie Darch**, Somerset Council  
**Cllr Sarah Dyke**, Somerset Council  
**Jeff Fear**, Axe Brue IDB  
**Cllr Andrew Gilling**, Axe Brue IDB  
**Rebecca Horsington**, Parrett IDB  
**Cllr Harry Munt**, Somerset Council  
**Claire Newill**, Natural England  
**Janette Ward** - *substitute*, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee  
**Matt Wheeldon**, Wessex Water  
**Cllr Ros Wyke**, Somerset Council

**In Attendance:**

**Will Barnard**, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest  
**Dr Rachel Burden**, Environment Agency  
**Nicola Dawson**, Somerset Council  
**Caroline Dunn**, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA)  
**Ross Edwards**, Environment Agency  
**Jonathan Hudston**, SRA  
**Kirsty Larkins**, Somerset Council  
**David Mitchell**, SRA  
**Steve Mulvihill**, Somerset Council  
**John Rowlands**, SRA  
**Phil Stone**, Trees for Water  
**Iain Sturdy**, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium  
**Andrea Summers**, Environment Agency  
**Ian Tier**, Somerset Council  
**Kate Towers**, Trees for Water

**Apologies:**

**David Jenkins**, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee

**1. INTRODUCTION OF NEW BOARD MEMBERS AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Cllr Mike Stanton, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Chair, welcomed all to the meeting and introduced himself and the Vice-Chair Tony Bradford (Parrett Internal Drainage Board). Cllr Stanton noted that this was the first SRA meeting since the new Somerset Council was created. He outlined the Board's composition and welcomed new members Cllr Harry Munt and Cllr Ros Wyke from Somerset Council and Matt Wheeldon from Wessex Water. The Chair noted that Wessex Water was the only Flood Risk Management Authority that did not previously have an SRA Board representative.

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

John Rowlands, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Technical Advisor, noted that his name was on two papers as author. Mr Rowlands explained that as he worked part-time for both the SRA and the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest (FWAG SW), he got involved in SRA-funded projects in both roles.

Cllr Harry Munt (Somerset Council) recorded a family member working on Trees for Water.

Rebecca Horsington (Parrett Internal Drainage Board) said that she was now the South Western Branch director with the Association of Drainage Authorities (ADA), a position previously occupied by Tony Bradford.

## **3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 17 MARCH 2023**

Minutes of the SRA Board meeting held on 17 March 2023 were agreed as accurate.

## **4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

The SRA Chair invited David Steer to put questions to the Board. Mr Steer began by telling the Board that he had lived in Moorland since 1987, had flooded quite badly in 2014, and wanted to ask first about water overflowing from Curry Moor and North Moor. Mr Steer said that in January 2023, Curry Moor had filled and overflowed at around 30m<sup>3</sup>/s onto North Moor. He noted that the sum of permanent and temporary pumping capacity was less than half the rate of overflow and that water levels had only stabilised on North Moor on 19 January after it had stopped raining on 16 January. Mr Steer said that some properties flooded, and that water had approached other properties at a rate which prompted preparations for another evacuation. He said a combination of flows into the catchments, upstream attenuation, downstream conveyance, and diversionary capacity had all contributed to this overflowing situation. Having noted that the SRA's Management Group was required to "review key risks and issues and identify additional actions where these are insufficiently mitigated," he asked what measures the Group had identified as necessary to prevent a re-occurrence of this type of situation and when would they be implemented.

David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority Senior Manager, thanked Mr Steer for his question. He said that the SRA Management Group responsibilities referred to came from Appendix 4 to the SRA's MoU and Constitution, which set out the Terms of Reference for the SRA Management Group. Mr Mitchell agreed that the document specified that the SRA Management Group would "review key risks and issues and identify additional actions where these are insufficiently mitigated" but he added that this was "with regard to the delivery of all the SRA-funded programmes." Mr Mitchell said that the role of the SRA Management Group was to support the Board, oversee the SRA's overall programme of

projects and where necessary escalate any relevant risks and issues to the SRA Board for consideration. He said the Curry Moor issues raised by Mr Steer were outside of the SRA's remit and were operational matters for the Environment Agency and Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium as Flood Risk Management Authorities (FRMAs). Mr Mitchell said that if FRMAs identified projects or interventions that were required but were over and above business-as-usual activities, they could bring forward proposals to the SRA for funding to undertake those activities.

Mr Steer's second question concerned an SRA proposal from earlier in 2023 for a 'Flood Summit' to be held following the flooding in January 2023. Mr Steer said the SRA's expressed intention had been to review lessons learned and to discuss and agree actions that should be taken to prevent a re-occurrence. Two stages had been proposed, the first during the week of 17th March, the second during the week of 24th April or 1st May. Mr Steer said that neither had happened and the rationale for abandoning it was supposedly that the SRA feared overlap with Environment Agency lessons-learned exercises. Mr Steer said that on enquiring with the Environment Agency's Wessex Enquiries, he was informed that the Environment Agency had no intention of such engagement before the autumn. He said that it was not clear what internal activities the Environment Agency were conducting to implement actions needed.

Mr Steer asked the SRA to urgently re-consider holding a flood summit.

The Chair responded to Mr Steer's question to confirm that a flood summit was discussed, however after consideration it was decided that holding a summit would distract the Environment Agency and other authorities from their work. The Chair said that Item 7 on this meeting's agenda would include a presentation from the Environment Agency and Somerset Council about what they had done and learned so far and what exactly was being planned. He said that he was happy to reconsider holding a Flood Summit in the future once all the evidence was in and if the SRA board felt as though recovery efforts led by others were not being seriously expedited. He noted that the SRA's current view was that the necessary determined efforts were being made to reach accurate and useful conclusions, grounded in evidence and experience.

In response, Mr Steer reiterated his view that there was a limited window to implement any action, and nothing would be in place to prevent this happening again.

The Chair thanked Mr Steer for his questions and for attending the meeting.

## **5. 2023-24 MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) AND CONSTITUTION**

David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority Senior Manager, said the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) had been amended slightly due to the replacement of Somerset County Council and the four local district councils with a new Somerset Council. Wessex

Water as a new SRA Board member had also been added into the MoU. Mr Mitchell asked the Board to sign the MoU.

Janette Ward (Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee) asked whether there were any other substantive changes that she should be aware of before signing as a substitute for the Committee's usual representative.

Mr Mitchell assured her that changes to this MoU were purely practical and administrative. SRA Board members signed the MoU and constitution.

## **6. WATER STORAGE TEST AND TRIAL**

David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority Senior Manager, noted that Items 6 and 13 were related. He said that on Item 13 a decision needed to be made regarding a small amount of funding.

Will Barnard (Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest) gave a detailed presentation on the recent ambitious water storage test and trial on the Somerset Levels and Moors. Its three core backers were the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Somerset Rivers Authority and Co-Adapt.

Mr Barnard said that DEFRA was interested in the development of the process of encouraging landowners to work together to secure payment for services like water storage, as this would inform local and national plans for rolling out future Environmental Land Management schemes. He stressed that without the support and engagement of landowners, successful water storage projects would not be possible.

Points raised:

- The Chair thanked Mr Barnard and noted the importance of what was being discussed.
- Cllr Dixie Darch (Somerset Council) said that the achievement of getting so many landowners to work together should not be underestimated and the landowner engagement was incredible.
- Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium) said it had been an encouraging presentation and he agreed that bringing people together to work on mutual aims was important.
- Cllr Sarah Dyke (Somerset Council) praised the work done and welcomed the prospect of shaping future policy within DEFRA.

## 7. FLOODING RECOVERY UPDATE

Andrea Summers (Environment Agency) and Nicola Dawson and Steve Mulvihill (both Somerset Council) introduced themselves and provided an update about recovery from the flooding in early 2023.

Ms Summers said that Met Office yellow rain warnings in January had been justified as 530mm of rain fell, especially heavily between 11 - 15 January. A Major Incident was declared on 18 January on the Somerset Levels and Moors. Seven properties were flooded. Ms Summers said that 79 pumps were installed at 10 locations; 7 million cubic metres of water was pumped out to sea. Many other places across the Environment Agency's Wessex area also reported flooding.

Nicola Dawson said the declaration of a Major Incident meant enhanced multi-agency cooperation was put into place to alleviate the flooding of properties. She said that six weeks after the flooding, there was a multi-agency debrief which had also provided an opportunity to coordinate community drop-in events. Ms Dawson said the Incident had brought back a lot of memories of the 2014 flooding to residents.

Mr Mulvihill said that working groups had been set up and business interests and impacts had also been captured.

Ms Summers welcomed the fact that the Environment Agency had been able to call upon information from other organisations about the Incident; this had helped with the ten community drop-in events that were held with partners. She said it was clear that there was more training and learning to be done with partners and communities to get prepared for any future flooding events, as these types of flooding events were going to become more common. By way of example, she noted that on 9 May there was flash flooding in the east of Somerset when 130mm of rain fell in just under two hours. In six and a half hours, the River Cam rose extremely fast and peaked at a high of 2.86m, a huge increase against the previous highest record of 2.4m and it had been very fast flowing. River flooding here combined with surface water flooding: Ms Summers noted that a warning system for surface water flooding did not currently exist.

Ms Dawson said that there were big challenges after the flooding in May which differed from the flooding in January. She said that the Somerset Rivers Authority existed to provide additionality and they already funded a number of projects which helped to support communities.

Ms Summers thanked the SRA Board for the invitation to present and provide an update on recovery.

#### Points raised:

- Mr Bradford raised the importance of evacuation of water particularly during summer floods when crops die. He said there was a need to pump as much water as possible in times of emergency. The Chair said this was a fair warning; he noted there will always be flood events.
- Mr Sturdy focused on the winter flooding and said that it was a positive that damaged Environment Agency assets were being looked at. Mr Sturdy said that he would be interested in an operational review of the response to the flooding to provide better flood risk outcomes.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) said that this had been a helpful presentation: it was great to reflect and have a review after any flooding events to learn lessons.

The SRA Chair allowed David Steer also to comment as a member of the public. Mr Steer called upon organisations to think and do more about preventative measures. He again asked the SRA to reconsider holding a Flood Summit and to focus SRA funding towards flood protection. The Chair said the SRA was focused upon reducing the risks and impacts of flooding, but flooding would continue to happen, especially given the effects of climate change. He repeated his earlier declaration that the idea of a Flood Summit could be considered in future.

## **8. SRA STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN**

David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager, highlighted some of the key parts of his paper, including the current status section. He said the Board had agreed to a deadline extension but there had been challenges maintaining momentum on the project. There had been a positive meeting with the SRA Technical Group in May where lots of high-level ideas had been discussed that would inform next steps. Mr Mitchell reassured the Board that the team was pressing on with work and looking at draft documents.

Mr Mitchell said that workshops with the Board would be organised for early August, to further inform the Board about next steps and to help refine the strategy which would then be taken to stakeholders and the public. The timeline was tight but doable with the support of technical officers, which the SRA would value.

The Chair said that the SRA needed to stick to the timeline for this project and schedule a date for the August workshop.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the progress and development of the SRA Strategy and Action Plan.

## **9. SRA FINANCE REPORT**

### **9a. QUARTER 4 2022-23 FINANCE REPORT**

The Chair noted that SRA Finance Manager Ian Tier would no longer be working on SRA finance: he thanked Mr Tier for his contribution to the SRA in recent years.

Mr Tier took his paper as read while highlighting key points. He noted that the total available funding at the start of 2022-23 was £10,517k. Mr Tier said the SRA spend during Quarter Four was £1,892k. He explained the proportional spend across the different SRA workstreams. In Workstream 1 (Dredging and River Management), £3,718k was spent which is 63% of the total overall spend; £420k was spent on Workstream 2 (Land Management); £294k on Workstream 3 (Urban Water Management); £1021k was spent on Workstream 4 (Resilient Infrastructure); £115k on Workstream 5 (Building Local Resilience); £76k on SRA Core Work and Development and £246k on SRA Administration & Staffing.

Mr Tier explained that at the end of Quarter 4, 3% of funds were forecast to be spent on the administration and staffing of the SRA, 2% would be spent on SRA core work and development, 6% would be held in contingency and 89% was allocated to specific projects and activities within the SRA's Enhanced Programme of works.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the financial performance as at the end of 2022-23. The Board also approved the re-allocation of funding to contingency as per Part Two of the report.

### **9B. 2023-24 SRA FINANCE ANNUAL SUMMARY**

Mr Tier took his paper as read while highlighting key points. Mr Tier shared the future spend profile for 2023-24 onwards. He said contingency had gone down to £441k.

Points raised:

- Cllr Dyke asked how much had been carried forward and questioned if the spend forecast was optimistic. She said spending needed to be reported more clearly.
- Mr Tier said that the carry forward was £4.3million at the end of 2022-23.
- Mr Mitchell noted that the carry-over was not from a single year, as there were multiple projects that might take years to complete. He said that unclaimed funds were allocated to projects. He encouraged all partners not to be overly optimistic with their spend forecasts, be realistic.

- Cllr Ros Wyke (Somerset Council) asked for a breakdown of reserve funds and what had been included. Mr Mitchell said the confidential paper provided to Board Members gave details about projects making-up the reserve / carry forward.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the 2023-24 expenditure forecast for all SRA's current funding.

## **10. TREES FOR WATER**

David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager, introduced the paper and took it as read. He explained that the Trees for Water project had been running for three years and that the grant proposal came from the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest with Reimagining the Levels delivering the projects on the ground. Work on the ground was completed by local communities and volunteers.

Points raised:

- The Chair said that this scheme aimed to reduce flooding.
- Rebecca Horsington asked how much had been spent on the scheme to date. Phil Stone (Reimagining the Levels) said that there had been 98 schemes over the three years with 44,000 trees being planted. He said the cost had been £190,000 over three years. Ms Horsington asked if the £60,000 requested now was on top of funding already given for this financial year. Mr Mitchell said the project had not received any funding this financial year.
- Cllr Dyke thought the scheme was well thought through and had been delivered well. She said it fitted neatly with Somerset Council's new tree strategy.
- Tony Bradford said that £60,000 was a large amount of money. He did not think the scheme did anything to help with flooding. He requested evidence for this claim. Mr Stone said that this was a long-term project. He cited a similar scheme in North Wales, whose primary aim had not been flood risk reduction but providing shelter for sheep farming on the hills, but which however, in 10 years, had resulted in 60% less run-off.
- The Chair agreed that the right trees in the right places did help to reduce flooding.
- Cllr Ros Wyke said that she supported the project but had concerns about a lack of ongoing maintenance. Trees needed water and a sound, sustainable programme of maintenance. Kate Towers (Reimagining the Levels) assured Cllr Wyke that advice was given to landowners about good tree maintenance, and she contacted landowners once a year for updates. Lots of work was done with landowners to make their trees successful. Cllr Wyke asked if there could be a more structured framework put in place as this was taxpayers' money being spent. Mr Stone said that landowners had to sign terms and conditions to ensure they adhered to maintenance requirements.

- Cllr Darch said that she was fully supportive of the scheme. She agreed that it would have a long-term impact.
- Mr Bradford said that he would like to see funding available for tackling disease in trees. Cllr Dyke said that this would be part of the tree strategy that Somerset Council had adopted.
- Rebecca Horsington said that tree planting was a good thing in principle, but she would like the benefits to be monitored to see whether the funding was being spent wisely.
- Claire Newill said that it would be useful to know what other funding was being contributed.

The Chair moved matters to a vote. There were four abstentions and 10 members who approved the recommendation of an additional £60,000 of funding to continue to complete planting of trees across Somerset targeting water run-off from slopes in strategically important areas close to roads, houses, and sensitive receptors.

## **11. SRA ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23**

Jonathan Hudston, SRA Communications Manager, took his paper as read. He thanked the SRA team and SRA partners for their help in providing information for the annual report.

Points raised:

- The Chair said that this was a tremendous reminder of what the SRA's annual £3million delivering.
- Tony Bradford said that it was a well put together, comprehensive report.

As recommended, the SRA Board reviewed and provided comments on the Somerset Rivers Authority Annual Report 2022-23.

The Board also approved the publication of the Somerset Rivers Authority Annual Report 2022-23.

## **12. KEY PROJECT UPDATE – RIVER SOWY-KING'S SEDGEMOOR DRAIN ENHANCEMENTS SCHEME**

The SRA Board noted the update from the Environment Agency on completing Phase 1 outfall works.

The SRA Board also noted the update from the SRA team on exploring options to complete outstanding bank raising on the King's Sedgemoor Drain.

### **13. ALLER MOOR WATER STORAGE TEST AND TRIAL**

John Rowlands, SRA Technical Advisor, introduced the paper and particularly referred the Board to pages 3 and 4. He outlined the risks associated to agreeing and not agreeing to the funding. He said that even though the exact conditions for a trial on Aller Moor had not been met, landowners were asking for some existing funding – not new money – to be released as a goodwill gesture.

Will Barnard explained the landowners' perspective: land had been too wet to carry out a trial as originally specified, but as the point had always been to hold water, landowners in their minds felt as though they had met their obligations.

Points raised:

- Mr Bradford asked if this was funded by DEFRA. Mr Rowlands said that the funding for payments to landowners was from the SRA, but the scheme had backing from DEFRA. Mr Bradford asked why DEFRA's backing did not extend to funding. He strongly disapproved.
- The Chair suggested further discussions at the Flood Action Plan workshop in August.
- Cllr Darch said precedent was an issue, which was one of the risks to approving, but there were also risks to not approving. She said it was a relatively small amount of money to approve and she would hate to see any good work undone. Cllr Darch said she would support the payments.
- Cllr Dyke agreed with Cllr Darch. She said it was about relationship development and a level of trust with landowners.
- Iain Sturdy said that he agreed with Mr Bradford's comments, and that it was essential to look carefully at the location, administration, and practice of any future schemes of this kind. He added that it was important to keep landowners on board.
- Jeff Fear (Axe Brue IDB) asked about placing conditions on future schemes. Mr Mitchell said that this had been a test and trial to learn lessons for the future.
- Ms Horsington said she would cautiously support the recommendation.

The SRA Board approved a goodwill uplift of £5,913 to Aller Moor Association as currently there was no other compliant mechanism to release the funds.

### **14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)**

Nothing was raised by the Board.

## **15. PAPERS TO NOTE**

### **15A. BRIDGWATER TIDAL BARRIER**

There were no questions raised.

### **15B. TAUNTON STRATEGIC FLOOD ALLEVIATION IMPROVEMENTS SCHEME**

There were no questions raised.

### **15C. STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MITIGATION**

There were no questions raised.

### **15D. RIVER BRUE SCHEMES**

There were no questions raised.