

**Draft minutes of the
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting**

held at 9.45am – 13.00pm, Friday 19 January 2024

in the Sedgemoor Room, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater TA6 3AR.

Members of SRA Board:

Cllr Mike Stanton - *Chair*, Somerset Council
Tony Bradford - *Vice-Chair*, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB)
Dr Rachel Burden, Environment Agency
Cllr Mike Caswell, Somerset Council
Cllr Simon Coles, Somerset Council
Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset Council
Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB
Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB
David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee
Cllr Harry Munt, Somerset Council
Claire Newill, Natural England
Matt Wheeldon, Wessex Water
Trevor Whitcombe, Axe Brue IDB
(*substitute*)
Cllr Ros Wyke, Somerset Council

In Attendance:

Caroline Dunn, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA)
Ross Edwards, Environment Agency
Donna Gowler, Natural England
Sam Hitchcott, Somerset Council
Jonathan Hudston, SRA
Kirsty Larkins, Somerset Council
David Mitchell, SRA
John Rowlands, SRA
Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium
Andy Wallis, AW Water Engineering Ltd

Apologies for absence:

Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
Piers Hooper, Environment Agency

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllr Mike Stanton, Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Chair, welcomed all to the meeting, including Somerset's Local Democracy Reporter Daniel Mumby. The Chair introduced himself and SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford (Parrett Internal Drainage Board - IDB).

The Chair reported that he had attended a Somerset Catchment Partnership meeting for the first time and there had been interesting presentations from EnTrade, the Environment Agency and Wessex Water. Another significant meeting had been the Somerset Council Scrutiny Committee for Climate and Place where David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager, took members through the SRA's new draft Strategy which had prompted some very positive and interesting questions about swelling rivers, particularly in the Shepton Mallet area. The Chair was delighted to hear from some farmers at the Scrutiny Committee that things had recently been pretty well handled and that they were pretty satisfied with the Environment Agency getting pumps out to their areas in time.

The Chair said that he and several others had visited this month's SRA-funded Water Injection Dredging along the River Parrett and had watched a long-reach dredger move silt down from the upper bank into the river so that the Water Injection Dredging vessel could expedite its passage down to the Bristol Channel. He advised Board members that if they wanted to go to see the dredging, then they could go that afternoon.

David Mitchell read apologies from Jeff Fear (Axe Brue IDB) who could not attend for medical reasons so his substitute Trevor Whitcombe was attending instead. He said the Environment Agency's Piers Hooper was also unable to attend due to illness.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Tony Bradford said that for Item 10 he had a vested interest as an owner of land by King's Sedgemoor Drain.

Cllr Stanton said that he was a member of the Parrett IDB chaired by Tony Bradford.

Andrew Gilling (Axe Brue IDB) wished it to be noted that contrary to the agenda sent out before the meeting, he was no longer a councillor.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 3 NOVEMBER 2023

The minutes of the SRA Board meeting held on 3 November 2023 were agreed as accurate.

4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Three questions were submitted via email to the SRA Board, and they were all responded to via email as none of those asking questions were able to attend this meeting in person.

- Mr Main – River Brue Model.
- Mr and Mrs Steer – Lessons learned from previous floods.
- Mr Horsington – Westonzoyland flooding.

The questions and answers are attached to the minutes in Annexe A, starting on page 14.

5. SRA ADMINISTRATION

David Mitchell (SRA Senior Manager) said the paper for Item 5 proposed dates for SRA Board meetings in 2024-25. Once Board members confirmed they were happy with those dates, the SRA team would get them into people's diaries.

Points raised:

- Tony Bradford suggested that afternoon Board Meetings would be much more convenient than morning meetings for the farming members of the Board, who had many tasks to get through as their days began before having to drive to different venues, find parking spaces and get into meetings.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) expressed concerns at the prospect of Friday afternoon motorway driving.
- Cllr Simon Coles (Somerset Council) regretted that he had a series of Friday afternoon meetings to attend.

The Chair said that he had moved the start of today's meeting to 9.45am because there was a long agenda. In summer he suggested that meetings should start at 10am, in winter at 10:30am. He said he would try to make sure that meetings were held in places convenient for the farming members of the Board.

As recommended, the SRA Board approved the proposed meeting dates for the financial year 2024-25.

6. SRA FINANCE REPORT

Sam Hitchcott (SRA Finance Manager) reviewed the updated figures for Quarter Two. She explained the re-allocation of money from contingency, and overspends.

David Mitchell said the SRA tried to maintain about £500,000 as contingency.

Points raised:

- Cllr Ros Wyke (Somerset Council) said that as a representative of Mendip West and as the former leader of Mendip District Council, she was extremely disappointed at the discontinuation of several Mendip schemes as the area was suffering from significant flooding. She wanted to understand more about how the SRA identified and determined priorities, commissioned work, and responded to Somerset communities, because in places such as Shepton Mallet where there might not be an obvious partner for delivering works, there had to be a collective will and way to get works done.
- David Mitchell said that proposals traditionally came into the SRA primarily from SRA partners around the Board table. Proposals were reviewed, assessed and scored by SRA Technical Group members, and then reviewed by SRA Management Group members before coming to the SRA Board. A different SRA approach now being developed was to look across whole catchments, to understand issues from an SRA perspective and then encourage partners to tackle specific issues. Mr Mitchell assured Cllr Wyke that the SRA was always looking for different ways of doing things to ensure a diverse range of project proposals.

- The Chair said the SRA did not currently have enough delivery partners and ways of procuring and getting works done. He wanted officers to concentrate on getting to a point where works could more readily be done in Mendip and other areas.
- Kirsty Larkins (Somerset Council) said she would take matters up with the Council's Flood and Coastal Team, and with other parts of the Council.
- Tony Bradford suggested that since Mendip was now part of Somerset Council, whoever was delivering work in other areas should also take up work in Mendip. David Mitchell said the SRA was funding projects across Somerset, as could be demonstrated on a map, but he was concerned about SRA partners having sufficient capacity to deliver SRA-funded works.
- Caroline Dunn (SRA) said that the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest (FWAG SW) was delivering a lot of Natural Flood Management (NFM) work countywide, Mendip included, in part using funds that had previously been allocated to Mendip District Council (DC), which were still specifically earmarked for use in Mendip. FWAG SW advisers had been carrying on with various initiatives from the points they had reached when Mendip DC ceased to exist. Cllr Wyke said she was delighted to hear this. She urged FWAG SW officers to communicate with local people about these works. Ms Dunn offered to arrange a presentation for the Board by FWAG SW on NFM works done in the past year across Somerset, or in certain areas. Cllr Wyke thought such a presentation would be beneficial for the wider community not just for the Board.
- Cllr Dixie Darch (Somerset Council) thought the financial report was a helpful and accessible look at how funds had been spent. She asked whether this quarter's Workstream 1 (Dredging and River Management) spend was unusually large or typical. Mr Mitchell replied that Workstream 1 spend tended to be significant because of activities such as dredging. He said that once SRA partners had put in claims for a range of other activities then workstream spending would be more spread out.
- Cllr Coles wondered if there had been any progress at all with the Government on changing the way the SRA was funded. The Chair said there was no sign that the government would give the SRA its own council tax precept-raising powers.
- Cllr Coles also asked if money that went back into contingency still retained some link to its original intended purpose or whether it became available for other uses. Mr Mitchell said that money in contingency was not ringfenced for specific purposes, but the Board had discretion over its use.
- David Jenkins (Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee) commended Mr Mitchell's approach as the SRA needed to ensure that its money could be spent purposefully and effectively. He also commended Sam Hitchcott, Caroline Dunn and others involved for the ways in which financial information was presented.

As recommended, the Board noted the financial performance as at the end of Quarter Two of 2023-24

The Board approved the re-allocation of funds to and from contingency as per Part Two.

7. SRA 2024-25 ENHANCED PROGRAMME & BUDGET

David Mitchell presented a draft set of proposals for next year's SRA Enhanced Programme. He said these proposals could currently only be provisionally approved because the SRA was funded through council tax raised for it by Somerset Council, so the SRA's budget could not be confirmed until after Somerset Council's budget-setting meeting in February. Mr Mitchell said he expected about £3.078 million to be available in 2024-25 from the SRA's share of council tax and contributions from the Internal Drainage Boards. Approximately £300,000 would be spent on SRA staff and overheads, and £2.7 million on the Enhanced Programme. With sums from previous years being carried forward, the year's initial contingency total would be around £600,000.

For 2024-25, Mr Mitchell said that 16 proposals had been received with a total value of £3.6 million, but only 12 schemes and activities were currently proposed, including some continuations of past projects, and some new ventures. He said it was possible that some work could be done on the Sowy-King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) next financial year (Item 10B), and if that turned out not to be possible then there was a reserve list of up to five projects for funding with the money currently reserved for Sowy-KSD works. The cutoff date proposed for a decision about Sowy-KSD works in 2024-25 and the reserve list was 30 April.

Points raised:

- Cllr Harry Munt (Somerset Council) supported KSD works going ahead. He also asked if the Somerset Trees for Water Action Fund (TWAF) - which relied quite heavily on SRA funding - could be considered a priority within the reserve list or alternatively get extra funding from contingency. Cllr Munt said TWAF had historically been low-cost for the SRA, it had a delivery partner, it had slowed the flow and it had lots of other environmental benefits. He had seen first-hand that it got people involved and it built community spirit. David Mitchell said that since Trees for Water had been SRA-funded for several years, there was currently some unspent funding that could be carried over into the next financial year. He was confident that Trees for Water would continue, as quite a lot of funding sources for tree planting were currently available.
- Cllr Wyke asked about the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier. She was concerned about the SRA putting money into a project that did not have a delivery date. Dr Rachel Burden (Environment Agency) said the Environment Agency and Somerset Council had been working in partnership to deliver an operational barrier by 2027. Significant progress had been made on site. She was grateful to the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) for £2 million contributed through the SRA and to the SRA for another £1.2 million. She said that as with any other major project, there had been inflationary increases in costs: she and her team were working very closely

with the Government to get a capital programme reset so that funding shortfalls could be met. She said she was quite disappointed with the SRA's proposed contribution this year as it was significantly less than in previous years, and she was concerned that this would send the wrong message to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), HM Treasury, and the Government about local support for the project.

- David Jenkins (Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee) said the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier was now one of the largest projects in the country and the Wessex region now had a larger capital programme than all the other 11 Regional Flood & Coastal Committee areas. He said the Barrier was seen as important by the Government because it would protect Bridgwater and its surrounding areas from the growing risk of tidal surge. He said as Wessex RFFCC Chair him and the national chief executive of the Environment Agency had been urging the Government to continue funding this project, notwithstanding its growing costs, and because of the Barrier's local, regional, and national significance, they had so far been successful. He thought the more the SRA, Somerset Council, and other local funding partners demonstrated tangible support for the Barrier project, the more likely it was that the Government would continue funding it to completion, and the closer it got to completion, the less likely it was that funding would be discontinued.
- Cllr Darch said the proposed SRA contribution to the Barrier was a very small proportion of its overall budget, so the SRA should try to help ensure its continued support from central government. She felt it was important that the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier was a project looking towards longer-term problems such as sea level rise and not - as often tended to happen with current flood risk management programmes - just reacting to floods as they happened.
- Tony Bradford said that in all the meetings he had been to, support for the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier had been unwavering, but he was worried that Government funding could be stopped as had happened with HS2. He said it was critical to push for the Barrier to be completed, so as not to waste all the money that the SRA had put into it.
- Mr Jenkins said that this week the Public Accounts Committee had strongly criticised the Government for not putting enough money into capital and maintenance flood protection projects. He took some encouragement from the fact that the Government was under pressure from within Parliament to put more money, not less, into this service area, given the increasing risks.
- Rebecca Horsington (Parrett IDB) asked if the Tone and the Parrett could be remodelled as neither had been remodelled since the 2013-14 floods. Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium) was not sure that more modelling would change people's opinions about where works should in practice be targeted to get most impact.

As recommended, the SRA Board provisionally approved the proposed 2024-25 SRA Enhanced Programme and Budget subject to final approval after precept funding is confirmed in February 2024 by Somerset Council.

The Board agreed that should the River Sowey-King's Sedgemoor Drain project not be confirmed as proceeding in 2024-25 by 30 April 2024, then some of the funds allocated to this project will be re-allocated to fund the reserve projects listed in Table D.

8. SRA STRATEGY AND FLOOD ACTION PLAN

David Mitchell described the main elements and results of the public engagement period about the draft SRA Strategy and Flood Action Plan which ended on 14 January. Opportunities for Somerset people to comment on the Strategy and share their own local flood concerns had been promoted through various channels, including libraries, broadcast, social, printed and online media, and direct contacts (for example through email). There had been 10,500 visits to a specially-created SRA strategy website, on which 160 surveys were completed, a figure that Mr Mitchell would have liked to be higher. However, more people had engaged with an online interactive map where they could pinpoint local flood concerns. Four online workshops had been held about the Strategy, two for the public (both well-attended with about 45 people each time) and two smaller sessions for invited SRA stakeholders. Mr Mitchell said that he was organising a meeting on 9 February for the SRA Board, Management Group and others to discuss all the feedback that had been received and to make any changes judged necessary to the draft SRA Strategy and Flood Action Plan. He said a final version of the Strategy would be ready for the next Board meeting on 8 March.

Points raised:

- Cllr Wyke appreciated the efforts made by the SRA team and partners to get survey responses, but she believed the public was getting quite fed-up of doing surveys and being consulted. Cllr Wyke thought the interactive map results were really helpful but she was concerned about the lower response rate from the northern half of Somerset. She suggested doing some deliberate proactive exercises in both Sedgemoor and Mendip and sharing messages more broadly about the SRA and its work. Mr Mitchell concurred with the value of this: he thought the publication of the SRA's new Strategy would be a good stepping point.
- The Chair congratulated Mr Mitchell and Jonathan Hudston (SRA) on producing the draft Strategy which he noted had been through many versions.
- Prompted by talk of the northern half of Somerset, Andrew Gilling (Axe Brue IDB) asked about the temporary shelving of a scheme to improve Brocks Pill Rhyne in East Brent. Iain Sturdy said that scheme had been deferred so that the money allocated to it could be used for other more immediately deliverable projects. Mr

Sturdy assured the Board that Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium still wanted to deliver this scheme as soon as practically possible.

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

9. RIVER BRUE MODELLING

Andy Wallis (AW Water Engineering Ltd) gave a presentation about the new River Brue lowlands modelling on which he had been working with consultants WSP and which was now finished. He said there might be some things the model could not do (as it was a high flow rather than a low flow model) but it could be adjusted if need be. In the meantime, it took into account floods of recent years (such as 2014), it could be used to generate predictive flood maps, and it would enable the SRA Board and SRA partners to explore various possibilities, such as channel or pumping improvements.

John Rowlands (SRA) said that the SRA had been tasked with coming up with an improved River Brue model, and thanks to Mr Wallis and consultants WSP, such a model was now available to SRA partners to help them deliver works. Mr Rowlands said that Somerset Wildlife Trust was interested in using the model to help it fulfil some of its ambitions for the Brue catchment.

Points raised:

- Mr Bradford thanked Mr Rowlands and his team for doing this new modelling but he said he was still troubled by the state of vegetation and trees on the banks of the Brue. Although the Brue is classified as a main river, making the Environment Agency the lead body for dealing with Brue matters, Mr Bradford suggested that the SRA Board should provide funding for maintenance vegetation clearance on the Brue every year, as happened with the River Parrett. Mr Rowlands said that that the SRA would consider a grant proposal for such work, were one to be received.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) said the Government's new Environmental Land Management scheme almost doubled current payments to farmers for managing landscapes like wet grassland. She added that there were also new payments for managing grassland for flood and drought resilience at £900 / £1200 a hectare. She said this scheme had helped the Somerset Wildlife Trust to think about their landscape recovery plans and possible arrangements with landowners. Ms Newill offered to send the Board further details or to arrange a presentation.
- Cllr Wyke said she was delighted to see this work focusing on the Brue as it was within her division. However, she was disturbed about the apparent lack of partners for taking works forward. She asked if a parish council or group of parish councils could be an SRA partner? As there been a lot of flooding on main roads due to

recent storms, could the Department of Transport be a partner? David Mitchell said that parish councils were not currently set up as partners. However, he and his team were working on this issue. He hoped that when the SRA asked for proposals in summer 2024, a wider range of bodies such as parish councils, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Westcountry Rivers Trust, would be able to respond.

- John Rowlands welcomed the idea of parish councils as partners, but he was worried that complications might arise when for delivering works on main rivers or ordinary watercourses, delivery partners needed to be Risk Management Authorities with the necessary permissive powers to act.
- Cllr Wyke asked about troubling farming practices creating faster runoff. The Chair said that in his experience farmers were battling with other riparian owners who were also farmers who did not carry out necessary maintenance of ditches and culverts. He said he would welcome a discussion of this subject on a future SRA Board agenda.
- Iain Sturdy said he was pleased that this River Brue model was ready because it would help the Axe Brue IDB to easily demonstrate and justify the benefits of works they wanted to do, to other partners whose support would be needed. He asked the Board to task Messrs Rowlands, Wallis and Mitchell with setting up a workshop to identify problems and potential options using the new Brue model. Mr Mitchell said he would organise this and seek Mr Wallis's assistance.
- Cllr Wyke urged the Board to remember also the upper reaches of the Brue and the Mendip hills and the merits of rigorous assessment there.
- Dr Burden said the key thing for her was sustainability of proposed actions. The Chair hoped that Dr Burden or somebody from the Environment Agency would join the workshop to be organised by Mr Mitchell.
- Mr Wallis believed the key to getting projects delivered and unlocking funding would be to look for multiple Brue benefits, and not focus too much on just individual bits.
- The Chair thanked Mr Wallis and Mr Rowlands for their work. He asked for news of this model to be publicised, as it was the kind of thing essential for understanding a whole catchment, its hydrology, its river flows and possibilities for managing the risks and impacts of flooding.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted completion of the project to update the River Brue computer model.

10. RIVER SOWY KING'S SEDGMOOR DRAIN (KSD) UPDATE

10A. ENVIRONMENT AGENCY UPDATE ON COMPLETION OF OUTFALL WORKS

Dr Rachel Burden gave an update on works remaining to be done at two outfalls (Chedzoy Tilting Weir and KSD Back Ditch) as part of the River Sowey - King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) Enhancements Scheme (Phase 1). She said designs had been completed, consents obtained, and some materials purchased but works did not go ahead due to bad weather conditions and land access issues. Dr Burden said the landowner had asked for works to

be deferred until July but this was problematic for the Environment Agency as its own share of funding for these works had to be spent by 31 March and could not be carried forward into the next financial year. She concluded by saying that the Environment Agency could not now deliver works on these two structures.

Points raised:

- The Chair said his understanding was that the Environment Agency had intended to start work last September but it was delayed due to the availability of contractors and by January the ground was too wet to proceed.
- Dr Burden confirmed that there were a number of delays at the Environment Agency, for example to do with getting consents and then having to retender works because the Framework Contract the EA originally intended to use had been terminated. Dr Burden noted that works at Parchey Tilting Weir Outfall and at Level Rhyne Outfall had been successfully completed last summer.
- Iain Sturdy told the SRA Board that the IDB had raised concerns with the Environment Agency about the timing of works at Chedzoy Tilting Weir and KSD Back Ditch, given poor weather conditions and the risk of being unable to control water levels while these two structures were decommissioned.
- Cllr Dixie Darch talked of focusing on what had been achieved, which was quite a lot. She found it reassuring that while the two outfall works had not been finished this incompleteness would not have an impact on the flooding of properties, although she also recognised that agricultural land was a business which must be protected as well. Cllr Darch asked Dr Burden if Environment Agency funds could have been put towards outfall works before the 31 March deadline and SRA funds then used later? Dr Burden said this was not possible, and it would be very difficult to get a repeat allocation of Environment Agency funds in the next financial year, because the relevant budget was very oversubscribed.
- Cllr Darch wondered how to prevent such a situation re-occurring, whether through dialogue between Environment Agency and SRA, monitoring or more flexibility around allocated funds. The Chair said that SRA partners such as the Environment Agency and IDBs all had separate funding pots which could not be moved from one place to another. Mr Mitchell added that there were always challenges with government funding cycles, especially near financial year-ends.
- Rebecca Horsington asked Dr Burden if materials already purchased and permits already granted could be transferred to another SRA partner or to another time of year. Dr Burden said there were some materials that could be handed over.
- Ms Horsington asked why the paper presented to the Board said that delaying works at Chedzoy Tilting Weir would incur more costs. Dr Burden said this was because the Environment Agency had a contract with a contractor and a subcontractor on standby charging downtime while land could not be accessed.

- Ms Horsington asked about SRA funds being repaid since works were not completed. Dr Burden said that £150,000 had never been claimed from the SRA and that the Environment Agency would hand over completed detailed designs, materials, and any valid permits.
- Ms Horsington also asked if the Environment Agency would consider continuing the project after 31 March. Dr Burden said that would not be possible as the project team was being moved to other critical work and the contractor would not be available as the contractor was working on other projects across Somerset.
- The Chair said he wanted to put it on record that the landowner in question was the SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford and Mr Bradford had advised that he was not approached by the Environment Agency about access to his land. As a point of information, Mr Bradford then told the Board that he got a phone call and a notice of entry, but the Environment Agency never exercised its rights and permitted powers to come in and do the job. When the Environment Agency wanted to come in, Mr Bradford said they could not see the structure they had hoped to work on because it was under flood water.
- The Chair said this situation made him irritated and worried. He noted that the Environment Agency did not have access issues in September 2023: work was postponed due to contractual issues, then could not be done because of sites being underwater. He added that while the Environment Agency was now walking away, the SRA was determined to get this work done.
- Cllr Coles asked about the long-term effects and risk factors of not completing works on the two structures. The Chair said the issues remained ones of farmland being at risk of flooding but not domestic properties. Dr Burden said that the 'Further considerations' section of her paper set out the Environment Agency's thoughts about possible risks and the future operation of the Sowy. Iain Sturdy said that if these works were not finished, there would be operational risks with the Sowy and the possible dilemma of properties flooding upstream or farmlands flooding downstream.
- Cllr Coles said he would like works on these two structures to be completed soon so that the Sowy-KSD system could be operated in the best ways possible.
- Cllr Munt asked if the Environment Agency would help the next delivery organisation make completing works on these two structures as cost-effective and efficient as possible. Dr Burden agreed to provide support but stressed she could not offer project management support.

The SRA Board noted the update from the Environment Agency on recent Phase 1 works completed.

The SRA Board also noted the update from the Environment Agency on its position with regard to the remaining two outfall structures (Chedzoy Tilting Weir and KSD Back Ditch).

10B. RIVER SOWY-KING'S SEDGEMOOR DRAIN BANK RAISING UPDATE

Iain Sturdy said the Parrett IDB was willing to prepare (and perhaps then deliver) a Project Completion Plan aimed at providing a low-risk approach to getting remaining Sowy-KSD works done. Part of this job would be to get a proper understanding of how and when works on outfall structures at Chedzoy Tilting Weir and KSD Back Ditch could be completed. Mr Sturdy recognised the need for works to be legally compliant and he stressed the importance of everyone working together to make progress. He said he could not currently give the Board an exact cost for developing a Project Completion Plan.

Points raised:

- The Chair said he was confident that a plan satisfactory to all could be produced following appraisals of the situation with the two outfall structures.
- Cllr Coles agreed with Mr Sturdy that all partners must be in an agreement for this work to be completed. However, he said he was concerned about the uncertain cost. The Chair said unpredictable problems might arise, so it was difficult to be precise.
- Mr Sturdy said the IDB was a small organization with small resources, reliant upon a small internal team and half a dozen people externally. He told the Board that work on this project could not start until after dredging work was finished next week. He suggested giving regular updates to the Chair and Vice-Chair, partly so as to keep them well aware of any project cost overruns that might arise.
- Cllr Darch thanked Mr Sturdy for his efforts to come up with a pragmatic alternative to the current holdup. She felt this was good evidence of partnership working, when one partner could not deliver, another picked it up.
- The Chair thanked Mr Sturdy and the Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium.

The SRA Board approved the preparation of a Project Completion Plan to advise the SRA Board and potential delivery partners whether it is likely that the outstanding work can be completed within reasonable costs and supported by all partners and regulators.

The SRA Board authorised the Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB) to draw funding from the £100,000 allocated by the SRA in November 2023 to make an assessment and to prepare a proposal to complete the Sowy-KSD works.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

Mr Mitchell advised the Board of an opportunity to promote the SRA's work and the SRA's forthcoming Strategy and Flood Action Plan through a new Somerset Rural Life Museum exhibition of photographs by Matilda Temperley (called Under the Surface - 10 Years Since the Floods). Mr Mitchell suggested getting involved with the project through a relatively small sponsor's contribution of £2000.

Cllr Wyke said she had not known this possibility was going to be raised. She declared an interest as a trustee with the South West Heritage Trust, of which Somerset Rural Life Museum is part, and she took no part in the following debate.

Cllr Stanton - as SRA Chair - declared that Matilda Temperley had previously nominated him to serve as a South Somerset District Councillor.

Points raised:

- Cllr Dixie Darch said this would be an opportunity for some good awareness-raising: she thought Matilda Temperley's work was extraordinary.
- Cllr Coles agreed with Cllr Darch that it would be good to make the most of this opportunity and raise awareness of the SRA.

The SRA Board approved a £2000 contribution to Somerset Rural Life Museum's forthcoming exhibition of Matilda Temperley's photographs. The SRA's contribution would support the exhibition and provide opportunities for raising awareness about the work of the SRA and for promoting the SRA's new Strategy and Flood Action Plan.

After this decision was made, Cllr Wyke told the Board that as the Somerset Rural Life Museum was at Glastonbury in Mendip, this exhibition would be a very good opportunity to advertise the SRA and all of its activities. Cllr Stanton also spoke of the good work that Matilda Temperley had done with her books of photographs.

12. PAPERS TO NOTE

12A. BRIDGWATER TIDAL BARRIER

No questions were asked.

12B. TAUNTON STRATEGIC FLOOD ALLEVIATION IMPROVEMENTS SCHEME

No questions were asked.

Annexe A

Question 1

Dear Sirs,

I write as a resident and Parish Councillor of Alford, a hamlet that sits very close to the Brue just upstream of Lovington.

I note the submission already made to your consultation on behalf of Care4Cary by Helen Cleaveland (also an Alford resident) and would add the following.

The model that the SRA Board is being asked to approve suggests flooding risk in Lovington is less than 1 in 100 (i.e. unlikely to flood in the next 100 years unless I have misunderstood). It also expressly states that the purpose of the model is to help assess **lowland** Brue schemes.

- The model is already out of date as it does not take into account the January 2024 flooding in Lovington.
- If the model does not take into account the 400+ housing approved in Castle Cary that are within the Brue catchment, and as-yet only partially built, it will be further out of date very shortly. Is there a plan to adjust for such major changes in run-off risk upstream?
- Is there a plan to update the model for feedback from the strategy consultation and for major new sources of run-off? If not, out-of-date information that is likely to prejudice funds allocation to protect mid- and upland property flooding is being hardwired into decision making.
- Why does the model only deal with lowland flooding? Does this not illustrate that the public are right to be concerned that the new catchment approach will not protect the mid and upper catchment areas?

I would be grateful if these points could be raised at the SRA Board Meeting on Friday 19th January and included in forthcoming deliberations.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Main

RESPONSE

Good afternoon Mr Main,

Thank you for contacting Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA).

Your email was read at the last board meeting on 19th January 2024 and a verbal response was given by the Brue Modelling Project Manager.

The written response to your questions is as follows:

- The scope of the model did not include looking at flood risk as far upstream as Lovington. It is focusing on the sort of flood events that cause flooding to the lowland areas. It is likely that analysis of different storm durations would be required to look at flooding in Lovington area.
- Models have to be reflective of a snapshot in time and there will always be additional information that can be collected. It has looked at multiple flood events in the area as part of the model calibration.
- It is possible to update the inflows to the model to reflect any changes in the upper catchment. However, this is a 135km² catchment upstream of Lovington, with only 3% of the catchment urbanised. Any urban extension has a negligible impact on the flows reaching the lowland catchment, even if there is no onsite mitigation.
- This study was focussed on lowland flooding to allow investment decisions to be made in the lowland area. Prior to this study the modelling data was not sufficient to allow these decisions to be made. The modelling for the mid and upper catchment is already well developed. It is not really practical to have a single model that covers the whole area as it would make it too complex to use, plus different rainfall events become critical for flooding in different parts of the catchment.

As the SRA is not a Flood Risk Management Authority (FRMA) and has no powers or duties relating to managing flood risk – we look to our partners such as the Environment Agency or the Drainage Boards to manage this. They are also statutory consultees in the planning process as are Parish Councils

Should a grant funding proposal come from one of our partners to include any upstream modelling, we will let you know.

If you have concerns that further modelling is required to take account of upstream development, I would suggest contacting:

Wessex Enquiries WessexEnquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk

Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium admin@somersetdrainageboards.gov.uk

Somerset Council [Planning, buildings and land \(somerset.gov.uk\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-land)

John Rowlands, Somerset Rivers Authority

Question 2

Please can we ask the following: What lessons have been learnt from the flooding, *again*, so far this winter, the anguish suffered, and hardships endured; what changes to maintenance, proposals for use of capital funding, and changes to operations will be made as a result?

We realise the SRA is not responsible for conducting operations during flooding, but it is part of its remit to maintain an overview of such, to inform future direction and decisions, so feel it is a legitimate question to pose to the SRA (which I would expect its “partners” to be able to answer).

The SRA abandoned the flood summits proposed after the Jan 2023 flooding (a very poor decision), and the reaction of the “partners” was lamentable. Please can we also therefore ask what will the SRA now do differently to ensure there is much better focus on the causes of the flooding and that these are addressed *within* the coming year?

We look forward to the text of the SRA’s draft flood action plan, particularly its SMART objectives, which we assume will also then be circulated for public consultation before finalising and publishing.

Thanks.

Regards,

Tansy & David Steer, Moorland

RESPONSE

Dear David and Tansy,

Responses to your enquiry have been provided by the Environment Agency, Mike Stanton the SRA Chair, and David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager.

In response to the question in your first paragraph, the Environment Agency have provided the following response.

‘Our strategy evolves based upon lessons learned from each flood event. Community input helps us find the right balance, with the limited resources we and partners have and the reality of the flood risk management system we work within in this landscape.

Please rest assured, we are doing our best to manage flood risk and we encourage you to remain engaged with our activity and the SRA Flood Action Plan as it's developed.’

In response to the question in your first paragraph, Cllr Mike Stanton added.

‘You may have noticed the pilot approach to combined dredging done on a small stretch of the Parrett just downstream from Westonzoyland pumping station recently, which was

funded by the SRA. This was to assess whether it is practicable to remove silt from the upper banks by moving it down into the river stream using an excavator, then have the Water Injection Dredger (WiD) lift it into suspension for outflow to the Bristol Channel. At first sight this looks to have been a successful test: I travelled on the WiD and saw the increase in the river profile being achieved. Subject to a formal decision to continue with this process, and allocation of grant money from the SRA for it, I am hopeful that this approach will be an effective and welcomed extension to what is currently being done.'

In response to the question in your third paragraph, Mike Stanton has provided the following response.

'It was ultimately concluded by the SRA Board that as the Environment Agency was investing in a significant flood recovery programme flood summits to consider the same issues would be duplication and place extra demands on staff already working on these issues. As explained in response to your question on 3 November 2023 the view was that the necessary determined efforts were being made to reach accurate and useful conclusions, grounded in evidence about what had occurred and additional summits to discuss this would be a distraction from allowing the EA to continue with this work.

I disagree with your characterisation of the partners response to 2023 flooding as 'lamentable'. The SRA partners have responded to multiple flood events across the county this year preventing flooding where possible and responding to the aftermath of flooding where it could not be prevented. I recognise how distressing it is for those affected directly by flooding. Without the hard work of all our partner organisations the situation would have been much worse.

During and after all flood events lessons are learned. No two flood events are the same and decisions on how best to respond are taken by the Risk Management Authorities based upon operational need at the time. The Somerset Rivers Authority allows Somerset's Flood Risk Management Authorities to do more than would otherwise be possible by providing grant funding for projects. If the partners in the SRA identify suitable SRA projects, they will bring forward proposals to reduce the risks and impacts of flooding for funding in the future. The SRA does not direct the day-to-day activities of our partners.

In response to the question in your final paragraph, David Mitchell has provided the following response.

As part of the current SRA grant giving process each proposal submitted is assessed against criteria that tests how the proposal supports the SRA's objectives as set out in the current Somerset Flood Action Plan. When our new strategy and action plan is completed, we will consider what changes are required to our grant giving process to ensure future proposals are tested against how they support delivery of our new objectives. Any changes to the grant giving process will be subject to approval by the

SRA Board and considered at a public Board meeting where you will have the opportunity to comment on them. There will not be a sperate consultation on this.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Mike Stanton, SRA Chair

Question 3

1. I have farmed my land at Westonzoyland for almost 50 years. Until the last couple of years, the ground flooded just a handful of times. Now every time there is significant rainfall my floods and then stays flooded for weeks. It is not moor ground, but grade A pasture land. I know this is because more water is being diverted through the system via the Sowey. My question is twofold: -

- If you go just downstream from North Moor Pumping Station there is an obvious restriction of silt that causes a bottleneck, so why is the Parrett not dredged all the way through Bridgwater and beyond to increase conveyance of water and thus relieving the pressure on the system as a whole?
- If not, will there be any recompense to the landowners for receiving and storing this water?

2. Now it is accepted that Monksleaze is being operated differently during times of flood, surely all structures that are part of the system need to be operated differently too. The flooding on my land would be greatly relieved if the flap at Lakewall was lifted to allow water to be pumped via the Westonzoyland Pumping Station, but the EA refuse to do so because houses are not at risk, just farmland. Flood relief should not just be about houses because farmland is not only property, but also a valid place of business too.

Please can you ensure that the questions get an airing on Friday, plus a written response?

Mr Horsington

RESPONSE

Dear Mr Horsington,

The Environment Agency has provided the information below in response to the questions you submitted.

Regards,

Cllr Mike Stanton, SRA Chair

Question: If you go just downstream from North Moor Pumping Station there is an obvious restriction of silt that causes a bottleneck, so why is the Parrett not dredged all

the way through Bridgwater and beyond to increase conveyance of water and thus relieving the pressure on the system as a whole?

Answer: Targeted dredging and desilting are undertaken annually in Somerset. The most recent water injection dredging on the River Parret was completed in early 2024. Dredging and desilting are not as effective at reducing flood risk as other options, are often expensive and can be harmful to the environment. Therefore, the level of dredging and desilting has decreased in the UK over recent decades.

A link to the EA approach to dredging is here:

<https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2021/12/23/floods-and-dredging/>

Question: If not, will there be any recompense to the landowners for receiving and storing this water?

Answer: Payments for storing water for nature/flood risk management/helping reach net zero are potentially available via ELMs. You can find out more

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/funding-for-farmers>.

Question: Now it is accepted that Monksleaze is being operated differently during times of flood, surely all structures that are part of the system need to be operated differently too. The flooding on my land would be greatly relieved if the flap at Lakewall was lifted to allow water to be pumped via the Westonzoyland Pumping Station, but the EA refuse to do so because houses are not at risk, just farmland. Flood relief should not just be about houses because farmland is not only property, but also a valid place of business too.

Answer: Monksleaze is only operated differently in exceptional circumstances, the climate is changing so we anticipate these circumstances happening more frequently. Farm businesses affected by flooding have the opportunity to build resilience via the new Environmental Land Management incentives.

We invest significantly in this landscape, working very closely with farm businesses to manage the flood risk, but it is also correct that Government investment in flood risk management is weighted towards protecting homes. We do not anticipate changing how we operate Lakewall flap unless homes were at risk.