

**Minutes of the
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting
10.00am – 1.00pm, Friday 8 March 2024**

at the Somerset Council offices in Cannard's Grave Road, Shepton Mallet BA4 5BT

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 Simon Coles, Somerset Council
Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset Council
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
Cllr Tony Grimes (*substitute*), Somerset Council
Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB
Cllr Harry Munt, Somerset Council
Cllr Tessa Munt (*temporary substitute*), Somerset Council
Claire Newill, Natural England
Matt Wheeldon, Wessex Water
Trevor Whitcombe (*substitute*), Axe Brue IDB

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
Ian Withers, Environment Agency

Apologies for absence:

Cllr Mike Caswell, Somerset Council
Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB
David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee
Cllr Ros Wyke, Somerset Council

CHAIR'S INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON UPDATE ON RECENT FLOODING

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Chair Cllr Mike Stanton welcomed people to the meeting. Reflecting upon recent flooding in Somerset, Cllr Stanton gave a potted history of thinking and events related to climate change over the last 50 years, such as the big speech given around 35 years ago by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and the Paris Agreement of 2015. Whatever its causes, the Chair said that climate change was happening, and its effects were being seen in Somerset. One vulnerable area was the Somerset Levels and Moors, whose history as a manmade system developed over the last 800 years the Chair also outlined.

Dr Rachel Burden (Environment Agency) said the Axe and Brue through the Somerset Levels and Moors had seen the wettest winter since records began. She said the Environment Agency and its partners – the Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs), Somerset Council as Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) and Highways Authority, the SRA – were all

working together to mitigate flood risks across the Axe Brue catchment, with a particular focus on the River Sheppey. Last week, Dr Burden said she and her team had been to a public drop-in session in Shepton Mallet. On 18 March, there was going to be a drop-in Godney to meet local people.

Dr Burden asked councillors to encourage their constituents to report property flooding because accurate information was always important, and the commissioning of Section 19 investigations depended upon numbers of houses flooded.

Following drop-in sessions and multi-agency partnership meetings, Dr Burden said she would update communities on what could and could not be done to stop or minimise flooding.

Cllr Simon Coles (Somerset Council) asked about reports of pump failures at North Drain Pumping Station (PS). Dr Burden acknowledged that there had been pump failures this winter, but she assured the Board that the Environment Agency had supplied North Drain PS with temporary pumps providing the same capacity as the permanent pumps that had been out of action. She said the Environment Agency had a programme to replace the pumps on the Levels and Moors in the next few years.

Dr Burden mentioned that at the last SRA Board Meeting, all partners had agreed to take part in a workshop to discuss the recently updated River Brue Model. She hoped this work would allow her team to review current management plans and operational triggers on the River Brue.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Mike Caswell (Somerset Council), at this meeting replaced by his substitute Cllr Tony Grimes (Somerset Council); Andrew Gilling (Axe Brue IDB), replaced by his substitute Trevor Whitcombe; Cllr Ros Wyke (Somerset Council), replaced by Cllr Tessa Munt (Somerset Council) as a temporary substitute; and David Jenkins (Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee), whose substitute Janette Ward could not attend either.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford said that for Item 13 he had a vested interest as an owner of land by King's Sedgemoor Drain.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 19 JANUARY 2024

Members agreed the minutes were accurate: no alterations were suggested.

4. 2024-25 SRA MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) AND CONSTITUTION

SRA Board members agreed and signed the 2024-25 SRA Memorandum of Understanding and Constitution.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Six questions were submitted via email to the SRA Board, and they were responded to via email and in person at the Board meeting. Questioners and subjects were:

- Graham Hill and Brian Masters – Flood modelling of the Ilchester Mead area
- Helen Cleaveland – SRA Strategy and Flood Action Plan
- Mark Main – River Brue modelling
- Michael Churches – Multi-agency meeting request - Godney area
- Neil Clist - Flood incidents affecting Inaura School Outdoor Learning Facility
- Simon Shimmin - Requesting a study of the causes of flooding in North Wootton

The questions and answers are attached to these minutes in Annexe A, starting on page 13.

6. SRA NEWS

Jonathan Hudston (Somerset Rivers Authority Communications Manager) gave a short presentation about some recent SRA-funded activities making a difference across Somerset. Examples included:

- Workstream 1 (Dredging and River Management): the Wellington Waterways / Tonedale Feasibility Study, investigating how a historic mill complex of 63 acres owned by Somerset Council might be used to help slow the flow of water down towards Taunton.
- Workstream 2 (Land Management including Natural Flood Management - NFM): 17 NFM schemes had so far been approved in 2023-24 and 27 Trees for Water schemes.
- Workstream 3 (Urban Water Management): 74 water butts had so far been supplied to residents in strategically important areas of Chard as part of a pilot scheme to help reduce flooding.
- Workstream 4 (Resilient Infrastructure): culvert design works completed for part of North Petherton's Mill Stream prone to flooding.

Workstream 5 (Building Local Resilience) was covered by the SRA's two community engagement officers, Dr Bel Deering, and Dr Paul Elliston, both busy in many places across Somerset that had flooded, including North Wootton, Isle Brewers and Greinton. Projects funded or part-funded by the SRA included the installation by the Environment Agency of

very localised early warning telemetry systems, and Community Emergency Plan Development Workshops with Local Community Networks (LCNs). Other activities ongoing or in development included workshops about riparian rights and responsibilities, a property / business resilience project, a schools project about emergency resilience, flooding awareness and safety, flood cafes for people who had experienced flooding and wanted to share their experiences (held in conjunction with the SRA's sponsorship of the Somerset Rural Life Museum's exhibition of Matilda Temperley's renowned flooding photos), and the annual Somerset community resilience event, this year to be held at Bridgwater Rugby Club on 6 November. SRA Chair Cllr Mike Stanton thanked Bel Deering and Paul Elliston for their well-regarded work.

Points raised:

- Cllr Dixie Darch (Somerset Council) said that visiting LCN meetings she regularly met Bel Deering, Paul Elliston, or Nicola Dawson (Somerset Council's Service Manager for Civil Contingencies). Cllr Darch spoke of how communities had been badly affected by flooding, and how climate change unfortunately made it even more impossible to prevent every aspect of flooding. She felt that one result of this was that it became even more important for people and organisations to work together, including on schemes and activities that might seem insignificant, but cumulatively made a difference (for example, encouraging the domestic use of water butts).

6. SRA FINANCE REPORT

Sam Hitchcott (SRA Finance Manager) took the Board through the Quarter Three finance update, explaining monies re-allocated to and from contingency, overspends, and movements in the forecasts between estimated and actual spends so far during 2023-24.

Points raised:

- SRA Chair Cllr Stanton declared an interest as a member of the Parrett IDB. He noted that more than half of the SRA's budget was spent on Workstream 1: Dredging and River Management.
- Cllr Tessa Munt (Somerset Council) asked how much the SRA had spent on the Axe and Brue compared to the River Tone and River Parrett over the last 10 years, and what were the relative percentages. She requested answers in writing.
- Cllr Tessa Munt wondered why last year's council tax bills had not separately showed the SRA's share of the precept. SRA Senior Manager David Mitchell said that Jonathan Hudston had been in touch with the bill's creators about this oversight and that next year's bills were expected once again to mention the SRA.
- Cllr Coles wondered how the SRA could get more done. The Chair said that SRA funding equated to 1.25% of 2016-17 council tax, about £3 million a year, now worth a lot less than it was in real terms due to inflation. Cllr Stanton said the two Drainage

Boards' contribution of £10,000 each to the SRA had also stayed the same since 2016. As SRA Chair, Cllr Stanton said he would investigate what could be done to increase the funding available to the SRA.

- Trevor Whitcombe (Axe Brue IDB) wondered whether IDB boundaries could be extended to get more money from landowners higher up in catchments (for example, up on hills). Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium) said that IDB income came from drainage rates paid by landowners in low-lying areas and from a levy on Somerset Council raised through council tax, so that all council taxpayers did already contribute. Mr Sturdy thought boundary extensions unlikely.

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

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

7. RIVER SOWY-KING'S SEDGEMOOR DRAIN (KSD)

Iain Sturdy gave a verbal update on progress towards completing bank raising on the King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD). Mr Sturdy said he hoped to present a project completion plan to the Board later in the year. To help inform decisions and next steps, the IDB had been carrying out site inspections with consultants and engaging with contractors experienced in this type of work. He and his team had been reviewing information provided by the Environment Agency, the previous lead body for delivering Sowy-KSD works. The IDB was now investigating different approaches to construction from those originally proposed that could result in savings while achieving similar outcomes. He appealed to all SRA partners to support the IDB in this work so that progress could be made quickly. Mr Sturdy said it was very unlikely that work on bank raising could commence in July this year, therefore in his view the optimal start date for bank works was currently July 2025. Mr Sturdy also explained that the IDB was investigating what work was required to complete the installation of two outfalls on the KSD that it had not been previously possible for the Environment Agency to deliver as planned in January. Depending on the results of these investigations, Mr Sturdy thought it might be feasible to start this work in July 2024. He concluded by saying that the IDB could not commit at this stage to being the SRA's delivery partner for these works until more detail was available on costs and risks.

Points raised:

- The Chair said he was pleased with progress on the outfall works. He expressed trust in Mr Sturdy and his team to get all these works done in the next 18 months or so.
- Mr Bradford appreciated the good work being done by the IDB to complete the installation of outfalls this year but was disappointed about the delayed bank-raising which he believed would cause severe problems for landowners adjacent to the Sowy-King's Sedgemoor Drain as they had been seriously disadvantaged with

floodwater on their land since October. Mr Bradford said that landowners were threatening not to pay their drainage rates this year because they believed that previous works had made matters worse, not better. Mr Bradford said it was more important to protect houses than land, but land was a business for landowners which must also be protected.

- Cllr Darch asked whether the delay to starting bank-raising works this year was because of a lack of contractors willing to take on the work or a general skills shortage. Mr Sturdy said the delay had nothing to do with contractors' availability. He thought it would be better to plan for bank raising work in July 2025 as time was now too short for getting preliminary works done ready for starting physical works in July 2024.
- Rebecca Horsington (Parrett IDB) stressed the need to support the optimal use of the Sowy system in a way that did not disadvantage people downstream. To achieve this, she suggested that local structures needed to be operated slightly differently. She thought the IDB would get a lot more favourable attitudes from landowners in that area if they felt they were being helped.
- Dr Burden said this winter the Environment Agency had operated Monk's Leaze Clyse in agreement with established procedures, which in times of managed flow included rest periods in the Sowy-KSD system. Dr Burden noted that Rebecca Horsington had a long-standing issue regarding Lake Wall but said that making her situation better might make someone else's situation worse, hence Dr Burden was unsure about a solution.
- Mr Mitchell asked Mr Sturdy if he was in a position today to confirm to the Board that there would no physical works taking place in relation to KSD bank raising this year. Mr Mitchell explained that a decision about this would affect what other projects could be funded as part of the 2024-25 SRA Enhanced Programme. Mr Sturdy confirmed that the IDB would not be undertaking bank raising works this year.

8. SRA STRATEGY AND FLOOD ACTION PLAN

David Mitchell said the SRA's new Strategy had been in development for about two years. It was about setting future parameters for the SRA, with its purpose, principles, and objectives made clear. Mr Mitchell thanked everyone involved: partners, stakeholders, public. He said he had hoped to have an Action Plan ready as well, but he was happy with the methodology and timeline set out in his paper for developing a Plan of Action.

Points raised:

- The Chair was delighted with the Strategy's completion as it was a starting point for the next 10 years and beyond.
- Cllr Tessa Munt said that she would like to feel very confident that SRA funding and SRA priorities were to be focused on other parts of Somerset than had hitherto been the SRA's priorities, particularly now the Brue. The Chair said that it was flooding in

the lower parts of the Parret which had triggered the setting up of the SRA, hence its original focus, but the SRA's remit was to cover the whole of Somerset. Cllr Stanton agreed that more attention should now be given to the Axe Brue catchment, but he said the SRA could only give grants when and where delivery partners came forward with proposals.

- Cllr Tessa Munt recalled earlier serious flooding events in the Axe valley and the Brue valley and thought it was time to sort problems out.
- Mr Bradford said he felt embarrassed that more had not been done in the Axe-Brue catchments, but he agreed with the Chair that SRA funds could only be allocated if and when people proposed schemes and activities.
- Ross Edwards (Environment Agency) asked about the SRA changing its name as it was not actually an Authority. The Chair acknowledged that legislative ambitions to establish the SRA as a separate legal entity, as was originally intended, had not yet come to fruition. He suggested that the SRA's Management Group, in consultation with Board Members, should come back with a proposal to assess at a later date. Personally, he said that if the word Authority were to be replaced, he would prefer Partnership to Board.
- Mr Bradford said that he felt a bit nervous about changing the SRA's name. He had heard that name-changing might require various government processes to be gone through. He thought it would be wiser for the SRA just to get on with its work and be judged by what it achieved.
- Cllr Tessa Munt asked about the role of Wessex Water on the SRA Board. The Chair noted that Wessex Water had only been invited to join in 2023.
- Matt Wheeldon (Wessex Water) said that questions of rainwater management and its links to surface water flooding were of particular interest to Wessex Water as a partner in the SRA. Rainwater needed to be more holistically managed, and Wessex Water welcomed the chance to contribute to the SRA, as many issues (such as run-off, treatment works and flooding) overlapped. He thought it would be good to have a future discussion about factors hindering developments in rainwater management and what could be done to address those.
- Mr Mitchell noted that while Mr Wheeldon was a relatively new member of the Board, his Wessex Water colleague Vicky Farwig had long been a member of the SRA's Technical Group.
- Mr Edwards mentioned new water company initiatives called Drainage and Waste Management Plans (DWMPs) which all water companies had a responsibility to produce. DWMPs set out priorities for water companies and what they would do. He encouraged Board members to engage with these and understand what they included.

As recommended, the Board reviewed and approved the SRA Strategy 2024-2034 for publication.

The Board noted the proposed approach to preparing a Flood Action Plan to accompany the Strategy.

9. HILLS TO LEVELS PRESENTATION

Amanda Gallacher (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest - FWAG SW) introduced herself and FWAG SW, a charity working with farmers on wildlife conservation measures well matched with modern agricultural techniques and needs.

Ms Gallacher said that FWAG SW had been involved with the production of Somerset's 20 Year Flood Action Plan in 2014 and had been working with the SRA since its launch. FWAG SW had a pool of 22 advisors working across Somerset that it could call upon for involvement in SRA projects as need be.

Mutual aims were to engage with landowners and farmers, to Slow the Flow and join up catchments. Ms Gallacher said that FWAG SW currently had three projects running as part of – or in conjunction with – the SRA's Land Management and Natural Flood Management (NFM) workstream. These all directly helped Somerset's response to climate change by increasing resilience and encouraging adaptation while supporting biodiversity needs.

These three projects are:

A. Adaptation of the Levels

A project to encourage and help collaboration, for example through Moor Associations, and to explore possible ways of moving to some different kinds of farming and payments. So, for example, as previously reported to the SRA Board, because this scheme had been part-funded by the SRA, FWAG SW had worked with 55 farmers across 550 hectares on Curry Moor and Aller Moor on 'test and trial' flood water storage projects. These projects were pilots for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Environmental Land Management (ELM) initiatives. Ms Gallacher noted that in January there had been an increase in payment terms to £1400 per hectare for storage of water within floodplains.

B. Community NFM Officers funded by the SRA

Ms Gallacher said that Hugo van Dorssen and Tom Shopland had started work as part-time NFM Community Advisors in January 2024. They were working with 17 different communities across Somerset, often also collaborating closely with the SRA's community engagement officers. A typical approach taken by Mr van Dorssen and Mr Shopland, to begin with, was to discuss various flood-related matters (through engagement with communities, flood wardens and landowners), do walkovers to understand areas (looking at flooding hotspots, preparing flow pathway maps to understand where water goes, looking at existing and historic features and gaining local knowledge from residents, organisations, and councils). Next steps might include helping communities to develop schemes and

activities to reduce flood risks and signposting people to other relevant organisations who could help.

C. Hills to Levels

Since 2015, Ms Gallacher said the Hills to Levels project had installed 756 natural flood management (NFM) measures to reduce flood water volumes at around 386 sites, affecting 3000 hectares. In 2023-24, she said FWAG had been involved with 16 SRA-funded or part-funded schemes, three so far completed, 13 ongoing.

Points raised:

- Tony Bradford said the new payments for storing water seemed quite attractive, but he would like a commitment from the Environment Agency that they would not stop river maintenance if and because landowners agreed to hold water for longer. Continued maintenance was, he believed, of paramount importance in getting rid of water more quickly. NFM could not and should not replace proper main river maintenance: but the two should work together. Mr Bradford said upon reading the small print for some of the grants available he did not think they were as attractive as they were made out to be.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) said she was pleased to hear about the often behind-the-scenes collaborative works being done across catchments with bodies such as with Highways and other SRA partners, and she thanked FWAG for their work.
- Cllr Darch also thanked FWAG. She said there were a lot of problems with water run-off onto roads, and she believed that small NFM actions did make a difference, so were needed alongside the bigger projects spoken of by Mr Bradford. Cllr Darch also agreed with Matt Wheeldon's earlier points about the need for better rainwater management; reducing the volumes of water getting into drainage systems could help to stop them being overwhelmed. Cllr Darch asked Somerset Council members to look at water management matters holistically: to advocate still for their own patches, but also be prepared to look beyond local borders.
- Rebecca Horsington said she thought that paying farmers to store water was positive, as it was compensation for matters such as damage to their land and loss of production. She believed that because of climate change, the maintenance and desilting of all waterways was more critical than ever.

The SRA Chair concluded by thanking Amanda Gallacher and all the members of FWAG for their work.

11. SRA 2024-25 ENHANCED PROGRAMME & BUDGET

David Mitchell said his paper was almost exactly the same as that given to the Board in January when the programme was provisionally approved. Now that Somerset Council at its budget setting meeting in February 2024 had agreed to raise the SRA's shadow precept

for 2024-25, the Board could approve the SRA programme and budget for 2024-25. Mr Mitchell said a list of proposed works was in the paper, a fuller description was in the appendix.

Points raised:

- Tony Bradford said he was fully supportive of the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier (BTB), but he would like this year's SRA contribution to be held back until the government gave it the go ahead.
- Dr Burden said the Environment Agency believed that in the past the SRA Board had notionally agreed to put up to £1million towards the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier and she wanted to put on record the Environment Agency's disappointment with the size of the SRA's proposed contribution this year. She thought the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier was strategically one of the most important projects in Somerset and one of the key actions in the 2014 Flood Action Plan. Dr Burden stated that they were on site building with a fully engaged contractor. She explained that with international events causing inflation, construction costs had increased so there was a funding shortfall. The Environment Agency nationally was working to free up money for big major projects, including the Barrier which was top of that list. The Secretary of State had agreed to a resetting of £150million from within the Environment Agency's national £5.2billion budget for capital projects and Dr Burden said she was expecting to hear if the Barrier would get some of this reset funding in April 2024. Dr Burden said that she appreciated every contribution from the SRA (the more the better) as it showed local support for the project and sent a very powerful message to the government (which had asked the Environment Agency to keep looking for more partnership funding).
- As an aside, Dr Burden wondered about the maintenance and monitoring of earlier SRA-funded dredging works between Oath and Burrowbridge. Tony Bradford replied that this dredging had been delivered by the IDB as a way to offset some expected impacts of the Sowey-KSD scheme. He suggested that if the Environment Agency wanted the IDB to do some maintenance of the Oath to Burrowbridge dredge then perhaps the SRA might fund it. Mr Bradford thought the dredge had been value for money because it had helped to alleviate detrimental effects downstream. He said all should play their part in alleviating flood risks upstream and downstream. Rebecca Horsington said she had seen some build-up in the part of the river referred to by Dr Burden. Water Injection Dredging (WID) could not be used there because WID vessels could not get under the bridge at Burrowbridge. She felt that work in this area needed to be given a higher priority and discussions held about who might deliver it.
- Returning to Bridgwater, the SRA Chair said he was disappointed that the Treasury had not yet come up with funding for the Tidal Barrier when it had been expected 18 months ago. He said he shared concerns that the SRA funds contributed so far might be wasted if the Barrier was not completed. He said the SRA supported the

Barrier and the government should recognise that. The SRA's contribution was only a tiny proportion of the Barrier's full cost, still the SRA needed to be sure that money was going to come from government to complete it.

- Cllr Tessa Munt asked about the current cost of the Barrier. She said that government funding was actually taxpayers' money and as there might be a new government this year, priorities could change. Cllr Munt was very concerned about the idea of losing more money to the Barrier, were it not to be completed, so she asked whether the SRA's contribution of £50,000 could be held in reserve until the government confirmed that it was going to fund the shortfall. As Cllr Tessa Munt is not officially part of the SRA Board, her suggestion for ringfencing was formally made by Cllr Harry Munt.
- Dr Burden said the cost of the Barrier was now £249 million. She said the Barrier would be in construction for the next four to five years. She conceded that no project was ever certain: even if funding was allocated tomorrow, it could be withdrawn at any stage, but she was confident the Barrier would go ahead. In conversations with Kirsty Larkins [Somerset Council Service Director for Climate, Environment and Sustainability and Chair of the SRA's Management Group], Dr Burden said she had asked if the SRA could make arrangements to commit funds to the Barrier over the next four to five years. Cllr Stanton said that it was neither normal or good practise for organisations to commit future members of a Board to such financial decisions.
- Cllr Darch gave her 100% support to the Barrier project. She was concerned that the Environment Agency might need the SRA money that it was being proposed should be held back. The Chair said that if what was proposed was agreed, the money would have to wait until government funding came through.
- Cllr Stanton asked Dr Burden exactly what response the Environment Agency was waiting for from the government in relation to Bridgwater Tidal Barrier funding. Dr Burden said what was expected in April was an indicative allocation to show that following the Agency's national capital budget reset the Barrier's shortfall would be met, so the Agency could tell HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office that there now was a fully funded business case which could be signed off by September. She said that the Environment Agency had already invested tens of millions in the Barrier and next year it was projected to spend around £30 million.
- Mr Bradford said he hoped that the government would not look at his suggestion and get the wrong message. He said he wished that David Jenkins could have been in this meeting, as he had always been very wise and knowledgeable about the Barrier and would have helped to guide the Board.
- Ian Withers (Environment Agency) said that while the SRA's commitment had been noted, more funding would be seen to demonstrate more commitment.

As recommended, the Board approved the 2024-25 SRA Enhanced Programme and Budget.

The Board agreed that as the River Sowey- King's Sedgemoor Drain bank raising will not now be proceeding to construction during 2024-25 the reserve projects listed in Table D will now be included as part of the 2024-25 Enhanced Programme.

The Board agreed the SRA contribution to the Bridgwater Tidal Barrier (BTB) will be released following HM Treasury approval of the Final Business Case.

12. RISK REPORT

Mr Mitchell took the paper as read. He explained that at least once a year the risk register is brought to the Board for review.

The Chair, Cllr Mike Stanton was happy with it. Nobody raised any points.

As recommended, the Board reviewed the current risk log.

The Board did not give any recommendations, additions, or amendments to the strategic risk log.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

David Mitchell circulated a paper asking for a letter of support from the SRA Board for a Somerset Council bid to Defra's Forest for the Nation competition. Mr Mitchell said there was no financial commitment being sought and the project would undoubtedly deliver Slow the Flow benefits.

As recommended, the Board Reviewed the request for a letter of support.

The Board approved and delegated the drafting of the letter of support to the SRA Senior Manager, Mr Mitchell, in consultation with the SRA Chair, Cllr Mike Stanton.

Mr Mitchell then spoke about the exhibition of Matilda Temperley's flood photographs at the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury, partly sponsored by the SRA: this had launched last Friday, and Mr Mitchell had been pleased to see some Board Members at the launch. Mr Mitchell mentioned that an evening of SRA-related talks called The Future of Water was also going to be hosted at the museum. More details would be released once available.

Points raised:

- Cllr Stanton urged those who had not been to the exhibition to attend; he said it was a very good museum.
- Cllr Coles asked when the exhibition ended, Mr Mitchell said 19 May 2024.

Annexe A

Question 1

Dear Chairman and Members of the Board,

During the last meeting we noted with interest that the Environment Agency had just completed modelling of the river Brue catchment area.

In 2014 Highways England and the EA carried out a flood events modelling exercise of the Ilchester Mead area with the purpose of informing the scheme design for a solution to the A303 flooding problem there. However, the modelled output from this exercise gave a very poor comparison to reality when compared to the flood event of Christmas Eve 2013. The mechanics of the flooding were incorrect and there was, in general, a large underestimation of the water flows into the Mead area. This resulted in very low confidence amongst residents that the agencies had even a basic grasp of flooding in this area.

A review of the modelling with a team of independent consultants followed in 2015 and the modelling exercise was subsequently deemed to be not fit for purpose. During that review, the Ilchester Mead residents provided the agencies with a large amount of data in the hope that it would be used to improve the modelling in the near future. We have heard nothing back since. As a result, confidence in the flood modelling of this area remains very low among residents, and renewed interest by National Highways in the A303 following recent events are a growing cause for concern.

The question is, therefore, has the flood modelling of the Ilchester Mead area been redone since 2014, either by the EA or National Highways, and can we see it in order to assist in its validation? We make this request with a view to raising the resident's confidence in the agencies understanding of flooding in the Ilchester Mead area.

Yours Sincerely,

Graham Hill and Brian Masters on behalf of the residents of Ilchester Mead.

RESPONSE

Cllr Stanton said it was the responsibility of National Highways, but they were not on this Board.

Mr Edwards said that leaders at the Environment Agency met National Highways two weeks ago but did not discuss the details of the A303. He advised Mr Hill to contact Christopher Pierce at National Highways directly.

Question 2

Good afternoon,

I hope to be able to attend the SRA Board meeting on 8 March to put the following question and comment to the meeting in person (and thank you for affording me the opportunity to do so).

My question relates to Item 8 of your agenda for the 8 March 2024 (SRA Strategy and Flood Action Plan). As context I would like to note that I believe we are lucky to have the SRA as a coordinating body in Somerset. My comments are not by way of objection to the proposed SRA strategy but relate to an important point of record. I attended one of the [well attended] public consultation meetings on the draft SRA strategy and, in the public feedback portion of that meeting, two topics were raised by multiple members of the public attending. There was no push back on the points raised, but neither topic seems to be expressly referred to in the final form of the strategy or consultation summary circulated for agenda item 8:

- The first topic was concern at the increasing and evident local impact of surface water runoff, both agricultural and hard surface run off. The concern was to ensure that better management of run off should fall within the strategy priorities.
- The second was concern that the catchment approach to fund allocation would, in practice, disadvantage the contributing ratepayers in the upper and middle catchment areas who also face increasing flooding concerns – especially in the absence of any analysis or comparison with historic fund allocation in the consultation materials, and coupled with the lack of any specific principles to explain how “balance” will be achieved in practice.

The strategy is couched in very generic terms, as were the set feedback questions used in the consultation. The only consultation responses summarised in your board papers are the set answers to those very generic questions. In reality, and based on the meeting I attended, there was a substantial amount of other specific feedback given, which is important given the very wide scope for interpretation of the generic Strategy. It may be that there is an intention to reflect the specific public consultation feedback (including the points summarised above) in the manner in which the strategy is operationally implemented. But equally there is a real risk the specific feedback, which is not expressly included in the written strategy, nor even the consultation summary tabled, will be forgotten and will not inform SRA operational decision making. Institutional memory tends to be more fragile these days and I therefore ask if you would please formally record these two widely supported points raised by the public in the consultation meeting I attended?

If I am unable to attend in person after all, please would you treat this as an email question.

With thanks, Helen Cleaveland

RESPONSE

The Chair thought the SRA was good at transparency and he urged everyone to look at the SRA website managed by Mr Hudston. Cllr Stanton said the SRA website had excellent records of everything from the last 10 years and even before, such as annual reports and project details. The Chair assured everyone that the SRA aimed to be open and transparent.

Mr Mitchell thanked Helen Cleaveland for her question and taking part in the strategy stakeholder workshop. He assured her that everything that was said during the strategy consultation was fully recorded. The SRA Team combed through pages of transcripts and considered all the feedback for the strategy document. Mr Mitchell said the aim of the strategy was to establish the parameters within which the SRA would work in future, so it clearly set out to define the SRA's purpose, principles, and objectives. Mr Mitchell clarified that the strategy did not prioritise one kind of flood risk over another, as that type of information would come in the Flood Action Plan. He said the SRA's catchment approach would build a better understanding of the various issues across the catchments and one of the issues that had come up from recent flooding events was surface water runoff. Mr Mitchell hoped that people would bring proposals to the SRA for funding efforts to mitigate this. He reassured Helen Cleaveland that surface water runoff not being specifically referenced in the Strategy document did not mean that it was not important.

On her second concern, about the equity of contributions and benefits received from the SRA, Mr Mitchell said the catchment approach was about identifying issues where the SRA could have the greatest impact. He said the driving force of where the SRA spent money was where it could get the best outcomes and the greatest benefits rather than equal distribution. Mr Mitchell emphasised that the SRA had funded projects right across the county from the lower catchments to the upper catchments since its inception and that would not change. He acknowledged that sometimes works might not instantly produce obvious benefits.

Question 3

Good afternoon,

Thank you for recording my comments at your last Board meeting (19th January) and your email in response. I have some queries on that response which, if appropriate, can be raised at the forthcoming Board meeting this week (which I regret I am unable to attend) and/or we could take offline from the Board meeting, though you may want to record there is an on-going dialogue.

My comments are made against the background of considerable flooding in the upper Brue catchment, only some of which was referred to in the Brue-Axe paper published by the SRA last week. In the most recent flooding event, houses flooded in January in Lovington were

re-flooded and many roads were impassable along the River Alham tributary of the Brue around Evercreech, Prestleigh, and Alhampton.

I understand from your response that the Brue model approved at the last meeting only relates to the lowland areas (though that was not very clear from the paper attached at the last meeting). But I am confused as to the status of modelling in the Brue catchment at and above Lovington. Your fourth bullet refers to "The modelling for the mid and upper catchment is already well developed." But you also state later in the response that "Should any grant funding proposal come from one of our partners to include any upstream modelling, we will let you know." This suggests one outcome may be no upstream modelling to support upstream investment and I am not clear where that leaves us. Will it not disadvantage the upland catchment when investment is prioritised?

The river Alham is a substantial waterway. I am concerned that the impact of high flows in that waterway (which joins the Brue just above Lovington) are overlooked because it is not adequately monitored. How are flood surges on the Alham monitored? Please would you let me know how we can obtain height and flow statistics for the Alham to monitor any changes against the historic record (and ideally to help monitor imminent flood risk).

I am concerned about the response on run-off in your third bullet. The local impact of run-off is very clearly visible locally but appears not to matter as it does not impact lowland areas. Surely local impact matters? Run off can be managed but the response suggests it is not a priority to manage it because lowland areas are not impacted. But large developments on formerly rural sites do have a significant local run-off impact which we believe merit a high standard of surface water management. If there are studies showing that local flooding impacts from run-off are not significant, I am happy to review them but, in the meantime, we have to believe the evidence of our own eyes and would welcome confirmation that surface water management on new areas of run-off remains a priority.

Lastly, you were clear that the SRA is not an FRMA. How then are concerns such as these relayed to the EA or the Drainage Boards as part of their deliberations and (hopefully urgent, funded) modelling/planning? Or is that up to me as an individual?

Best wishes,

Mark Main

RESPONSE emailed on 6th June 2024

Dear Mr Main,

Please accept my apologies for you not having received an answer to your email of the 4th of March. This has been oversight on my part.

I will require input from technical colleagues in some of the SRA Partner organisations to answer all your queries.

I will provide you with a more detailed response by 17 June.

David Mitchell
Senior Manager, Somerset Rivers Authority
Email: david.mitchell@somerset.gov.uk
www.somersetiversauthority.org.uk

Question 4

Dear SRA Board,

Having suffered many years of land flooded and trying to farm on the Somerset Levels, it has come to a stage now that if no plans are put in place for the long term future, then all the years spent farming (6 generations) alongside the abundance of wildlife we also share will be lost for good.

Simple answer and solution is:

Slow the flow down upstream around Bruton and Shepton Mallet, increase the capacity in the rivers and build up the banks by desilting the Division Rhyne, the Sheppey, and North Drain and desilting and clearing debris from the river Brue from Highbridge back to Glastonbury.

Question is:

Why are you wasting money having impact assessments and habit reports when the wildlife is wiped out under three feet of water, a collaborative approach from all parties funding a small amount to fund this and put it back on the maintenance program. When is the work going to start? There are no obstructions on the division Rhyne and our road has been closed for 17 weeks since the beginning of November 2023.

Regards,

Michael Churches

RESPONSE

- Mr Mitchell explained that money is spent on impact assessments because they are legally required before works can be undertaken.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) said that one piece of SRA-funded work they completed last year was to help streamline impact assessments and her team presented a paper to the SRA Board at the end of last year titled Strategic Approach to Mitigation. She said that she and her team were committed to finding solutions and helping others to deliver schemes that did not have adverse environmental impacts.

- Given the devastating flooding this winter, Dr Burden reiterated that the best way for any progress to be made was for all partners to work together. At the last SRA Board Meeting, she said that partners had made a commitment to use the new SRA-funded Brue Modelling to help determine issues, constraints, opportunities, quick wins for the Axe, Brue, and River Sheppey. Dr Burden was concerned about attracting funding in the Brue's lowland catchment because, for the Environment Agency, funding criteria were based on numbers of properties affected. She remarked that Somerset was very fortunate to have Somerset Rivers Authority to help with flood mitigation.
- SRA Chair Cllr Stanton said that the Environment Agency had had its funding reduced by the government for the last few years and so maintenance funding was a real big problem.
- Mr Churches said the amount of carbon stored within the Somerset Levels was enormous and he suggested that significant funding could be drawn into the area through carbon-related schemes, perhaps enough to fund a collaborative approach from Highways, Environment Agency, SRA, Natural England, to help tackle flooding and benefit wildlife for the next 20 years.
- Tony Bradford said that some months ago he had gone to an environmental event in Peterborough where he had met a man called Chris Maning, whom he described as a very educated and strong environmentalist, and who told him that it was imperative that Somerset should stop flooding, as flooding knocked nature recovery back 10 years. Mr Bradford said that he would like Mr Manning to present at an SRA Board meeting. He personally believed that better maintenance of rivers would alleviate a lot of flooding.
- Claire Newill (Natural England) recognised there were impacts on the environment from flooding although her organisation had conducted some studies after the 2014 floods and the landscape had been found to be more resilient than expected. She said there were important carbon stores in the Somerset landscape. She believed there was a huge opportunity for new government funding through Environmental Land Management (ELM) agreements and Natural England was definitely keen to be involved.
- The Chair informed the Board that both Vice Chair Tony Bradford and Cllr Tessa Munt engaged in farming.
- Iain Sturdy thanked Mr Churches for coming and raising this issue. He also asked for a copy of the drone video that Mr Churches had emailed to the SRA which showed the extent of flooding in the Godney area. Mr Sturdy said the Drainage Board had put drones up over the area, but their records were not as comprehensive as Mr Churches' records. Mr Sturdy urged all partners and organisations that had powers to do work to recognise there was a need for it and so bid for funds from the SRA to do work that they could not otherwise afford to do. He said such work might not be short term, quick or easy but the SRA could and should be asked for additional

funding. Mr Sturdy said it was his understanding that government funding for Environment Agency maintenance activities had fallen considerably short.

- Rebecca Horsington said that earlier this week she had been to an Association of Drainage Authorities (ADA) meeting in London and had had a conversation with an Environment Agency officer who had suggested capitalising some maintenance projects to help ease the pressure on Environment Agency funding. On the Brue, thinking of past difficulties, Ms Horsington said the Board needed to make sure it had delivery partners who could and would do work.
- Mr Churches thanked the Board for the opportunity to meet everybody. He said he believed that collaboration was the only way forward for the long term because the problem of flooding would not go away. Cllr Stanton agreed with the central importance of more money and collaboration.
- Mr Bradford asked about reports that Defra was going to double funding for maintenance (including dredging) and that this extra money had specifically to be spent on operations. Ian Withers said the Environment Agency was awaiting details and could not confirm anything for now.
- Cllr Tessa Munt said when she attended Somerset Council meetings, questions were read out or summarised by a Democratic Services Officer and answers were given at the time. She said bearing in mind that a number of people were at this meeting, she did not want Mr Main's question to be skipped and just noted in the minutes but answered now. Cllr Stanton explained that due to time it would be acceptable to give Mr Main a written answer.

Question 5

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am the Health & Safety Officer & Premises Manager for Inaura school, we are a small school working 1 to 1 with students with SEND MH needs.

We have a site on Lewis drove, Lower Godney, Wells, Somerset, BA51PT.

As part of my role and the school leadership teams desire for answers to the following questions.

Inaura school leadership team ask:

- What has changed to raise our sites flood risk to such an extent we have now flooded for a 4th time since November 2022?
- Do the SRA have any information to the causes of these flood incidents?
- What your immediate actions have been and your future plans to mitigate flood risks for this area?

Each incident where we have suffered floods the water level has increased dramatically and despite having classrooms on raised platforms the water has in the latest flood incident been high enough to enter classrooms.

I have been asked to attend your next meeting to see if there will be any information to the causes of these flood incidents and your immediate actions and future plans to mitigate flood risks for this area.

I look forward to hearing your strategies to tackle the issues faced by local homeowners, businesses, farms, and our school site. I hope the plans and actions will be sufficient that Inaura school do not have to relocate from a site I believe is remarkable in its affect for our student body.

I have also included our Head teacher Ian Norton's impact statement which was issued to the Godney parish council at their meeting to discuss the flood events affecting the area.

Sincerely,

Neil Clist

RESPONSE

Citing additional rainfall, the Chair felt that Mr Clist's questions were more for SRA partners than the SRA itself as a funding body.

Dr Rachel Burden (Environment Agency) said that rainfall in February 2024 alone was 200 to 300% more than the long-term average and if this rainfall pattern continued, given the location of Inaura school, flooding might happen more and more. She suggested that SRA partners and collaborative works could best help this community come up with a medium to long term plan, rather than just one body. Dr Burden told Mr Clist that the Environment Agency was organising a Godney drop-in on 18 March 2024. She also offered to have a colleague visit the school to discuss its location and future local possibilities and plans.

Question 6

Good afternoon,

My name is Simon Shimmin and I am the chairman of North Wootton Parish Council.

Yesterday evening during the public session at a Parish Council meeting we had a discussion about flooding in the village. This follows increasingly serious flooding of roads and domestic properties in the village, particularly following Storm Henk on 4th January and again in on Sunday 18th February. Whilst several houses were flooded on both these days, we did not quite reach the threshold of 10 flooded homes to trigger an automatic review of the reason for the flooding, but we think that is what is needed. Road blockages due to flood water affecting all the routes in and out of the village are a regular problem in the village. There is understandable public concern about what is happening as evidenced by the presence of around 50 villagers at yesterday's meeting.

We were grateful that a number of the authorities involved in the issue, including Bel Deering from SRA and Iain Sturdy from the IDB, responded to my invitation to send

representatives to our meeting night. Bel had visited the village the previous Friday to see for herself what has been happening and we were provided with a good deal of helpful information. We are now considering what to do next.

Specifically, Bel and Iain suggested that I attempt to raise the issue in the public session at Friday's SRA Board Meeting, though the published deadline for requesting to speak has passed.

I should therefore be grateful if you would accept this late request to speak to request a proper study of the causes of flooding in North Wootton and proposals for measures to reduce the risks which are no longer tolerable.

As I will need to cancel other arrangements to attend on Friday, I should be grateful for quick advice on whether or not I may attend.

Thank you in anticipation.

Simon Shimmin

RESPONSE

- Cllr Stanton explained to Mr Shimmin that the SRA needed project applications to be able to offer grants, and modifications were underway to allow Parish Councils to apply directly for grants.
- Empathising with Mr Shimmin, Dr Rachel Burden said that SRA partners needed to come together to work out what they could and could not do, what funding sources they could tap into, what were the quick wins and how they could support North Wootton. Dr Burden said that partners would then to come back to North Wootton parish council to say what they could and could not do.
- Iain Sturdy said the North Wootton meeting night had been really good. Members of the community had been very helpful (in terms of what they said) and very polite (considering what they had been through). However, Mr Sturdy observed that among the organisations that had powers to do works, nobody had picked up the challenge of dealing with flood issues in the community. As it was a difficult location and involved a number of organisations, Mr Sturdy asked SRA partners to avoid what he called 'passive ping pong'. If an organisation had the power to do works but could not proceed within existing funding streams, then he would like to see proposals put to the SRA (for example, for a study or investigation to work out quick wins). Mr Sturdy said North Wootton was outside the Drainage Board's area so it did not have the powers, but it would be happy to collaborate and offer technical knowledge.
- Amanda Gallacher said FWAG SW had some funding from the SRA for Community Engagement Advisors, who would come to meet Mr Shimmin and offer some immediate help and support such as land management advice and NFM measures.
- Cllr Tessa Munt asked the Environment Agency how long a report or study / assessment was valid for. Over the years, she said she had heard of reports written

in 2012-2013 about the Axe and the Brue Valley and in 2013 -14 across Somerset, so she hoped everything did not have to be assessed all over again. Dr Burden replied that in Croscombe, the Environment Agency drew on reports from 2015, 2017 and 2020. She said that as long as there was no need for an update, a lot of the same data could be used and that is why they had been so quick with Croscombe.

- Iain Sturdy agreed that reports and studies were valid until something changed. He said local quick wins were possible when a day or two could be spent on site with an experienced flood risk hydrologist and engineer to identify most of the issues within a catchment and tabulate who had the powers to undertake remedial action. He gave an example of recent work the IDB had done in Knole (inside the Drainage Board's area) which had taken a couple of days to write up. In Mr Sturdy's view, it had to be the organisation with the powers or the responsibility to spearhead an action plan. He was disappointed North Wootton did not meet the criteria for a Section 19 report just because nine properties instead of an arbitrary 10 flooded.
- The Chair introduced Kirsty Larkins as the director responsible for Section 19 reports at Somerset Council. Ms Larkins said that the LLFA's threshold was 10 properties, but her team were keen to be proactive, and to support and work with partners on long-term solutions. She said she was aware of the devastation caused by flooding, in the east of the county especially, with many properties flooding twice in less than a month. She did not think a new feasibility study was required for North Wootton as there was a lot of data and expertise across the various partners. She also supported looking at quick wins for the area as Dr Burden had suggested. She thought the Environment Agency and the LLFA needed to lead together in partnership, with the resources they had available.
- Dr Burden agreed it was a joint responsibility in North Wootton and she hoped things would work as well as they did in Croscombe. In Croscombe, the Environment Agency and the LLFA were going to survey all the culverts through the main street by the end of financial year and they were working with FWAG SW in upstream Shepton Mallet.
- Cllr Tessa Munt urged getting rid of "silly" thresholds and sorting out flooding issues for people.
- Trevor Whitcombe said that people and organisations all needed to work together on better arrangements for winter and summer pens. Mr Whitcombe wanted all groups at this Board Meeting to take responsibility, be proactive and not reactive.
- Mr Sturdy said the summer and winter pens operated typically from 1 April to 1 December and some of the areas included weirs with flexible or different dates. He said putting in summer or winter pen was always done in response to a lot of work with the Environment Agency on pumping stations' trigger points in the catchments. Mr Sturdy said improvements had been made in terms of when pumps started and that is potentially something that could be done in the Axe Brue as well.