Somerset Rivers Authority
County Hall
Taunton, TA1 4DY

Draft Minutes of the
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting
10.00am – 13.00pm, Friday 14 June 2024
at Somerset Council offices, Brympton Way, Yeovil, BA20 2HT

Members of SRA Board:

Cllr Mike Stanton - Chair, Somerset Council
Tony Bradford - Vice-Chair, Parrett Internal Drainage Board
Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB
Claire Newill, Natural England
Cllr Claire Sully, Somerset Council
Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset Council
Cllr Harry Munt, Somerset Council
Cllr Tony Grimes, Somerset Council
David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee
Ian Withers, Environment Agency
Trevor Whitcombe, Axe Brue IDB
Mark Heywood, Parrett IDB

In Attendance:

Bel Deering, Somerset Rivers Authority
Caroline Dunn, Somerset Rivers Authority
David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority
Donna Gowler, Natural England
Dr Rachel Burden, Environment Agency
Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium
John Rowlands, Somerset Rivers Authority
Jonathan Hudston, Somerset Rivers Authority
Kirsty Larkins, Somerset Council
Paul Elliston, Somerset Rivers Authority
Ross Edwards, Environment Agency
Sam Hitchcott, Somerset Council
Sean Papworth, Somerset Council

Apologies:
Cllr Mike Caswell, Somerset Council
Cllr Ros Wyke, Somerset Council
Cllr Simon Coles, Somerset Council
Matt Wheeldon, Wessex Water
Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB
Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Chair Cllr Mike Stanton apologised for the late start due to microphone issues for recording.

Cllr Stanton commented on the current pre-election period during which there were strict rules about conducting business for public sector organisations. He mentioned that Natural England and the Environment Agency, in particular, were required to follow civil service guidance stating that public servants cannot respond to questions about future government policy or matters of public controversy. The Chair requested attendees understanding if officers were unable to answer as they might usually do.

Cllr Stanton informed attendees that this would be David Jenkins' last SRA meeting as he would be stepping down in August after 10 years as Chair of the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee (WRFCC). At his first SRA Board Meeting in

June 2019, the Chair remembered being impressed with Mr Jenkins' ability to constantly keep everyone on the straight and narrow. He said that Mr Jenkins had written an excellent report for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) titled *Report of a review of the arrangements for determining responsibility for surface water and drainage assets* and that he had campaigned actively against the government's underfunding of waterway maintenance. The Chair thanked Mr Jenkins for all his contributions.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Mike Caswell (Somerset Council), at this meeting replaced by Cllr Tony Grimes (Somerset Council); Cllr Ros Wyke (Somerset Council), replaced by her substitute Cllr Claire Sully (Somerset Council); Rebecca Horsington, Parrett Internal Drainage Board (IDB), replaced by her substitute Mark Heywood; and Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB, replaced by Trevor Whitcombe as substitute. Matt Wheeldon (Wessex Water) and Cllr Simon Coles (Somerset Council) also sent apologies: no substitutes attended on their behalf.

2. ELECTION OF CHAIR & VICE CHAIR

David Mitchell, SRA Senior Manager, said that elections for the roles of Chair and Vice Chair for the SRA had to be held every two years and it was now time to hold an election. Inviting nominations for Chair, Mr Mitchell said he had received one nomination before the meeting from David Jenkins for Cllr Stanton. Vice Chair Tony Bradford seconded this nomination. No other nominations were made. Cllr Stanton was re-elected as Chair.

Cllr Stanton thanked everybody for their confidence and sought nominations for Vice Chair. He said he had already received a nomination from Mr Jenkins for Mr Bradford, and he seconded this. There were no other nominations for Vice Chair. Mr Bradford was duly elected.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford declared an interest in Item 10b as an owner of land by King's Sedgemoor Drain.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 8 MARCH 2024

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

5. SRA NEWS

Jonathan Hudston, SRA Communications Manager, gave a short presentation about some recent SRA-funded activities making a difference across Somerset. Mr Hudston provided examples across the first four of the SRA's workstreams. Workstream 5 (Building Local Resilience) was covered by the SRA's two Community Engagement Officers, Dr Bel Deering, and Dr Paul Elliston.

Dr Elliston gave an overview of what his and Dr Deering's roles entailed; they were not just about engagement but also community resilience. According to the UK Government's 2019 Community Resilience Development Framework, community resilience was about the public being supported to harness local resources and expertise to help themselves and their communities. This should be done in a way that complements the activity of emergency response organisations to ensure the future prosperity and resilience of communities.

Dr Elliston said that his and Dr Deering's roles accorded with this framework, and their vision was to see every community and parish in Somerset be resilient. For him, that meant communities could take actions to mitigate risks, and plan for and respond to emergencies, particularly flooding, to reduce their impacts.

A copy of the presentation is available on the SRA website.

Points raised:

- The Chair felt the Community Engagement Officers were the two most important jobs funded by the SRA as they worked close to communities, and he believed that handling flooding risks and building resilience were activities that should be at parish level.
- Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset Council, testified to the effectiveness of the work that Dr Deering and Dr Elliston had been doing. She said that feedback from community members and town councils had been really positive. She thought it was important that the SRA went out into communities rather than expecting them to come to us. Cllr Darch said she had noticed among her councillor colleagues a greater awareness of the need than there had been a couple of years ago for emergency plans and being more prepared. She also thanked Mr Hudston for the presentation on the SRA-funded projects.

SRA Chair Cllr Mike Stanton thanked Mr Hudston, Dr Deering, and Dr Elliston for their work in communities.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Three questions were submitted via email to the SRA Board, the last question was responded to via email and the first two were in person at the Board Meeting. Questioners and subjects were:

William Smart on behalf of Wedmore Parish Council and the Blakeway Flood Resilience Group – River Brue Dredging
Rob Mather on behalf of Knole Flood Prevention Group (KFPG) - Bridging the Gap
Michael Churches – Multi-Agency Meeting Request - Godney Area

The questions and answers are attached to these minutes in Annexe A, starting on page 19.

7. FINANCE REPORT
a. 2023-24 Annual Finance Update

Sam Hitchcott, SRA Finance Manager, took the finance paper as read. She said there was only £1,900 movement from contingencies and £3.8 million was spent in the different SRA workstreams in 2023-24.

David Mitchell said that spending of £6 million had been forecast for 2023-24: much of the difference between that figure and the actual £3.8 million related to the incompletion of River Sowy - King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) works. Caroline Dunn, SRA Project and Performance Officer, said another reason for the difference was that SRA partners had not yet put in claims for other works that had been delivered.

Mr Mitchell noted that £3.8 million was more than the £3 million raised each year for the SRA through council tax.

Cllr Stanton asked Ms Hitchcott if she was happy with the level of contingency: she replied that a starting figure of £597,000 for 2024-25 was well above the guideline amount needed.

As recommended, the Board noted the financial performance as at the end of 2023-24. The Board also approved the re-allocation of funds to and from contingency as per Part Two.

b. Finance Update – 2024-25 Budget Spending Profiles

Sam Hitchcott took as read her paper outlining the financial position of the SRA as of 1 April 2024.

The Chair said he was pleased with how well managed and secure the SRA's financial position was, and he thanked Sam Hitchcott, Ms Dunn, and Mr Mitchell.

As recommended, the Board noted the 2024-25 expenditure forecast for all the SRA's current funding.

8. SUSTAINABLE URBAN DRAINAGE SYSTEMS (SUDS) MONITORING, INSPECTIONS & MAPPING

Sean Papworth, Somerset Council's Head of Resilience & Adaptation, said that he would speak about this item as Neil Ogilvie, Somerset Council's Service Manager for Flood & Coastal Management, could not attend in person. Mr Papworth said a request was being made for £42,000 to enable the continuation in 2024-25 of a long-running SRA-funded programme of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) monitoring, inspections, and mapping. This programme is important because it checks up on flood-related infrastructure and builds up greater knowledge and understanding of its whereabouts and functions. He said it had been expected by Somerset Council that such SuDS-related activities would be covered by the long-awaited implementation of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act

(2010), but as that move was being delayed until after the General Election, extra SRA funding now would help the council to bridge the gap.

Points raised:

- The SRA Chair said he believed this was a really important activity: SuDS installed when new developments were built needed to be monitored.
- Cllr Darch asked if housing developers had to present evidence of regular checks and maintenance of SuDs and if so, to whom? Mr Papworth said reports produced of SUDs features not performing well could be used as a basis for proactive conversation with management companies / developers to improve future installations. At the moment the council is not required to do this so does what it can.
- Mr Jenkins said that Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act (2010) had not yet been brought into effect largely because the government was fearful of the additional costs it would put on Lead Local Flood Authorities at a time when local authorities were under financial pressure. Mr Jenkins added that the government had announced a year ago that it would undertake a public consultation exercise before bringing Schedule 3 of the Act into effect, but that public consultation exercise had never been done and no one knew what the new government would do. Mr Jenkins therefore encouraged the Board to do whatever was possible to ensure that surface water from new developments was better managed, as this would be a fundamentally important contribution. He concluded by commending the principle of partners seeking to collaboratively manage where water went in the first place, rather than waiting for things to go wrong then trying to remedy a crisis.
- Cllr Stanton agreed with Mr Jenkins and thanked him for his knowledge and wisdom.

The SRA Board approved continuation of the Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) Inspections Monitoring & Mapping Programme for the remainder of the 2024-25 financial year at a further cost of £42,000.

9. SRA POTENTIAL PROJECT PIPELINE AND 2025-26 PROGRAMME

David Mitchell said he would take his paper as read but would like to highlight a few points. He began by reminding the Board that as the SRA's funding through council tax was never guaranteed for more than a year ahead, it had always been recognised that producing an Action Plan requiring long-term funding commitments was a difficult endeavour. Therefore, what was now being developed, with the help of technical experts in SRA partner organisations, was a dynamic process called a Project Pipeline of Ideas. Mr Mitchell said an SRA Technical Group workshop was planned for 25 June where technical experts from various organisations would come together to identify flooding issues upon which SRA funding could have the greatest impacts, in line with the SRA Strategy 2024-34. Mr Mitchell said he would report back to the Board in September with a first iteration of the Pipeline of Ideas, which he hoped would influence proposals for 2025-26 SRA funding.

Mr Mitchell also discussed opening the SRA's main grant-giving process to organisations beyond SRA partners. To allow more time for updating grant application paperwork and processes, and Pipeline developing, he asked if the 6 December 2024 Board Meeting could be moved to 24 January 2025.

Mr Mitchell also outlined a proposed small SRA grant-giving process, with a pot of money set aside each year for smaller awards of around £15,000. He thought these would be likely to appeal to parish councils and small organisations wanting to do relatively straightforward activities. If supported by the Board, a small grants process could start funding projects from 1 April 2025.

Points raised:

- Cllr Darch thought that a small grants process was a terrific move because parish councillors and local communities knew what needed to be done in their areas. She asked about the application process: whether schemes would need to be 'oven ready', would there be support for communities to help them put in successful applications, how long would it take to apply, would funds be made available before or after works were done? She was concerned that not all parishes and community groups would be able to pay for works upfront.
- Mr Mitchell said that proposals would be reviewed and approved by a small technical team. If decisions about proposals could not be taken straightforwardly, the consensus from discussions across the SRA was that such proposals were probably not appropriate for 'small schemes'. He added that the SRA was currently set up to pay funding in arrears, but in occasional special situations it had advanced money. For this to happen more generally, he said he would need to take more advice about putting safeguards in place to avoid any risks of having to claw back funding. Mr Mitchell said that small grants could be made available all year round, or at least until funds were all allocated. Cllr Darch said she was happy to hear of potential year-round access. The SRA Chair concurred.
- Ross Edwards, Environment Agency, suggested focusing not just on parish councils, but also Local Community Networks (LCNs).
- Cllr Stanton said flexibility is required to allow consortiums of parishes to be formed, for instance his division has 33 parishes.
- Vice Chair Tony Bradford asked when parish councils would be notified about the availability of small grants, and he urged that proposals should be dealt with speedily and efficiently. Cllr Stanton also called for maximised responsiveness and minimised bureaucracy.
- Mr Mitchell reiterated his wish for a quick, simple process. He said parish councils would be informed once specific details and dates had been finalised.
- Sean Papworth hoped that a small technical team would be delegated the powers needed to make decisions on proposals and move them forward, instead of having to wait for Board meetings to proceed. He suggested that studies and reports previously funded by the SRA could inspire applicants.

As recommended, the Board noted progress in implementing the catchment approach and potential project pipeline.

The Board agreed to move the proposed December 2024 SRA Board Meeting to January 2025.

The Board agreed to the development of a small grants process for 2025-26.

As recommended, the Board delegated final decisions on the details of the revised 'full-grant' giving process to Management Group in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair

10. PROJECT UPDATES

Water Injection Dredging with Enhanced Shoulder Works

Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium, reported on a trial in January 2024 of an innovative way of dealing with silt build-ups on the upper banks of the River Parrett, involving both Water Injection Dredging (WID) and traditional excavators pushing material down into the WID vessel's path. Generally, Mr Sturdy said things went very smoothly and visitors were interested and encouraged by what they saw. One outcome clearly appeared to be a better overall river cross-section, wider with rougher banks and less vegetation (trees gone, for example), much closer to what was achieved by the Environment Agency's major post-flood dredge in 2014. Mr Sturdy added that a full post-dredge survey had only recently been completed, so results had not yet been fully analysed, but SRA Board members would be given more detailed information at their next meeting in September. Lessons would be learned, and modifications introduced where need be for a proposed further round of this combined method of dredging in January 2025. In particular, Mr Sturdy said that an operating protocol would need to be agreed with regulators, so that works would remain legally compliant. Accordingly, he went through the 'Planned Next Steps' in his paper.

Points raised:

- The Chair said he was pleased with the progress made. He asked Iain Sturdy if this work got the river profile back to where it needs to be? Mr Sturdy replied that January's Water Injection Dredging (WID) did not return the river to the same cross section as achieved by the pioneer dredge of 2014. He wants to target this trial approach in the right places to deal with the most silted up locations to counteract the general slow decline in the cross section.
- SRA Vice Chair Tony Bradford said he thought it was a fantastic project. He asked if there was going to be any extra work done to remove reeds, otherwise they would grow again in the silt on the shoulders of the river banks. Mr Sturdy said reeds growing higher up on river banks did not necessarily affect the success of water injection dredging as a technique, because it is focused on the centre bottom of the river's channel. However, water injection methodology was about keeping sediments moving, and reeds slowing the flow would be likely to have an effect on a river viewed overall. Mr Sturdy suggested that cutting reeds every two years would reduce the likelihood of sediments dropping out. He said he would like to see the

Environment Agency doing more routine maintenance, if it could afford to do so, and such work was judged to be environmentally acceptable.

- Ian Withers, Environment Agency, agreed with Mr Sturdy, saying he did not dispute that routine maintenance would be beneficial. Mr Withers informed the Board that the Environment Agency was currently determining its budgets for the next year so could not comment too much on what it would do. He stressed he recognised the importance of what was being discussed.
- Mr Mitchell asked if the IDB hoped to do a longer trial section of shoulder work in January 2025. Mr Sturdy said that silt monitoring in October would be crucial in determining target sections. January's trial had shown success could be attained, and the IDB now wanted to deliver more meaningful lengths of work, while being careful to remain compliant with environmental requirements.
- David Jenkins informed the Board that Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC) chairs had met in Manchester earlier this week, and they had agreed to put together a full list of priority asks for an incoming government, in relation to water management. At the top of this list was the imbalance between money for new projects and money for maintenance. On a month-by-month basis, Mr Jenkins said the Environment Agency's own figures showed that the condition of assets in Flood and Coastal Risk Management was getting worse. Mr Jenkins said he had also learned that Environment Agency Board members were preparing their own short list of priority actions, and the need for more maintenance funding was at the top of their list too. However, Mr Jenkins added that given the pressures on revenue spending for whatever government was elected on 4 July, it was hard to say when these asks would be fulfilled.
- Cllr Stanton encouraged people to go out on the water injection dredging vessel when trips were offered to see the process in action, as it was very interesting.

As recommended, the Board noted the report on January's River Parrett Water Injection Dredging with Enhanced Shoulder Works.

Sowy – King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) Phase 1 Project Completion Plan

The SRA Chair began by saying that a change in Recommendation 2 was needed, due to the landowner's interest declared by the Vice Chair. Recommendation 2 had proposed delegating a decision to the SRA Chair and Vice Chair but as the Vice Chair could not be involved, the Chair suggested that a decision could be delegated just to the Chair. The Chair stressed that in this situation he would also take advice from Cllrs Darch and Wyke as they were Somerset Council Executive Members with a keen interest in SRA financial matters, as representatives of the SRA's Host Authority (Somerset Council).

Iain Sturdy then outlined his paper. He said the IDB had previously agreed to investigate options for completing 1.8 kilometres of KSD bank raising work not yet done as part of the River Sowy – King's Sedgemoor Drain Enhancements Scheme Phase 1. The IDB's aim, simply put, was to come up with an affordable, effective, acceptable method for doing this work. Mr Sturdy said that geotechnical experts

were investigating whether banks could be raised more cost-effectively using site-won material. He reminded the Board that bank raising work should not be expected to start before July 2025: starting work late in 2024 could result in delays due to winter coming.

Mr Sturdy also spoke optimistically about works on two outfalls still to be done. He said he and his team were working with the consultants who had originally designed these outfalls for the Environment Agency to clarify several matters. Once the outfall jobs had gone out to tender, Mr Sturdy said he would come back to the SRA Board / Chairman for confirmation to proceed with the award agreements.

Points raised:

- The Chair asked when the IDB would have tender prices. Mr Sturdy said in about one month.
- The Chair also asked about site-won material: its composition, where exactly it would come from. Mr Sturdy explained that along the KSD there were wide spoil banks made up of peat, formed when the Drain's channel was originally dug out. Not formal flood banks and only so wide because so much material was taken out of the Drain's channel. Mr Sturdy said that flood banks would not normally be built using such material but here it was already partly consolidated on site, and it could potentially be reprofiled. Cllr Stanton asked if site-won material dug out years ago has lost all its carbon? No, replied Mr Sturdy, adding that as material would not be removed from site, and would be quickly covered in grass, major carbon loss was unlikely.
- Claire Newill, Natural England, said it would be better not to remove peat from the site. She encouraged Mr Sturdy to have a conversation with Natural England about the proposals.
- David Mitchell said the delegated decision that could potentially be taken in the next few weeks was in relation to the works on the two outfalls. Mr Sturdy reiterated that once the IDB had got tendered costs from contractors for outfall works, it would like to get a swift decision about awarding contracts
- Mr Mitchell said he was also keen to talk to Mr Sturdy about timescales for KSD bank raising works to consider how funds needed could affect the shaping of the SRA's 2025-26 Enhanced Programme.
- Mr Sturdy repeated that the intended start date for bank works was July 2025. He said the SRA Board had approved £100,000 for developing a Sowy-KSD Project Completion Plan. He thought that development costs would be much less, but if more money was needed, he would come back to the SRA Board.

The Chair thanked Mr Sturdy and the IDB for all their work with this project and the Environment Agency for cooperating and passing on all their knowledge and investigations.

As recommended, the SRA Board gave its continued support of this initial phase for which funding is approved and noted the intention to include the two remaining outfall structures in this stage of the project.

As per the revised recommendation outlined initially by the Chair, the Board delegated confirmation of the IDB as delivery partner for completion of the two remaining outfalls, and confirmed SRA grant funding towards the project, to the Chair, as per the scheme of delegation so that, if necessary, contracts could be let before the next SRA Board meeting.

Brue modelling project next steps

John Rowlands, SRA Technical Advisor, briefly summarised his paper describing this project's background and future. He said a recent Brue Modelling Optioneering Workshop had been very useful and positive. In particular, Neil Ogilvie, Service Manager of Somerset Council's Flood and Coastal Management team, had agreed that a member of his team could lead this project's next phase of activities, actually using the new Brue modelling to see what Brue works it would be good to do. Mr Rowlands said he believed the new Brue modelling could supply the evidence and data needed for venturing into physical works on the ground. He thought there could be some 'quick wins', which would not require huge investigations or trials to be done beforehand.

An extended discussion followed, circling repeatedly around ways and means of making progress.

Points raised:

- The SRA Chair began by saying he was excited at the prospect of converting the new Brue modelling into a series of specific improvements that could reduce flood risks in the catchments of the River Brue and (he hoped) the River Sheppey. He asked about next steps.
- John Rowlands said the modelling could (for example) be used to figure out what was coming into the lower Brue, especially from the River Sheppey and other watercourses, and so help to work out flood risk management and land drainage impacts. He explained that while the modelling was focused on the lower catchment of the Brue, with some engagement and appetite it could be extended to cover the upper catchment.
- Referring back to the recent workshop about possible Brue options, Iain Sturdy recalled talks about the need to get the balance right between theorising and delivering. He said he would like to see the modelling being used for testing 'quick wins' or 'no brainers' such as dredging/desilting the River Brue now, while ideas about things like reducing pumping, sending water in different directions, and reducing carbon could come later. Mr Sturdy believed the SRA Board should put money towards actions with the quickest and greatest impacts. He said he would also like to use the modelling to test the impacts should asset failures occur. Mr Sturdy summed up by saying that the modelling should first be used to test things that people were seeing and saying that they wanted to get done figuring out how to manage water levels more effectively in the whole Brue catchment would take longer to work out and deliver.

- Ross Edwards, Environment Agency, agreed with focusing on flood risks, but he also cited other big catchment developments, such as the Agratas development, major Landscape Recovery schemes and the Government's ambitions for peatlands. Mr Edwards argued that seeking to align locally with what central government wanted to fund would over time help to get the best for the whole Brue catchment. Mr Sturdy concurred.
- William Smart, invited by the Chair to speak as a member of the public, asked how much money the SRA still had ringfenced for Brue works, and he requested that a representative group of local parish councils should be consulted before any decisions about Brue works were made.

Mr Mitchell said that a few years ago around £279,000 had been ringfenced for Brue works, and some of that money has been used for the modelling. John Rowlands said a good percentage was still left, but he cautioned that works had got more expensive. Mr Rowlands welcomed the idea of hearing from stakeholders, regulators, landowners and residents. The SRA Chair encouraged Mr Smart to form a consortium of local parish councils to speak with one voice. Iain Sturdy outlined a range of ways in which IDBS sought to engage with communities and understand their frustrations. He did not want people to feel left out. The Chair added that people's experiences of flooding were very important and should be taken into account.

- SRA Vice Chair Tony Bradford asked if some 'no brainers' could be run through the modelling to get some 'quick wins' done and alleviate flooding. Mr Rowlands said he could not give a timeline for this as Mr Ogilvie's Somerset Council team was under pressure to deliver on several other projects. Mr Sturdy acknowledged that modelling tests could be a bit time consuming, but as first steps he recommended tests of desilting the Brue, restoring banks, and removing vegetation.
- Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB, asked whether a watching brief was being kept on National Grid activities. He mentioned some concerns about pylons and culverts. Mr Sturdy said he would take these up with Mr Gilling outside of the Board meeting.
- Trevor Whitcombe, Axe Brue IDB, said that his family farmed land along the Brue. He told the Board that a walk along the riverbank would show actions that could so obviously be taken - such as desilting and straightening the riverbanks – that he believed modelling for these would not be needed.
- Dr Rachel Burden, Environment Agency, restated Ian Withers' earlier point about the Environment Agency still finalising its budget. She said the Environment Agency would do maintenance with the money it had in the places where it could afford to do it. The SRA Chair said he was worried about the adequacy of the sums the Environment Agency might have for maintenance. Mr Sturdy urged the Environment Agency to look at every opportunity it could for getting external funding to top up its allocation from central government. He also urged the Environment Agency to share with its leaders and executives the fact that the money available for maintenance was not enough, as David Jenkins had been doing as chair of the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee.

- Mr Sturdy then suggested revising the recommendation for this Item (10c) to spell out that the Board wanted specific issues ('no brainers') to be tested as soon as possible, so that proposals could be produced for pieces of work. This generated a debate about what those pieces of work might be and who should pick them. Tony Bradford suggested a meeting between the Environment Agency and the IDB; Sean Papworth argued that the SRA Technical Group had the technical capabilities to determine which potential scenarios could reap the most benefits; Mr Sturdy replied that as there was no Technical Group consensus about which Brue works should be done, he would like the Board to give some guidance; John Rowlands acknowledged that there were differences of opinion, for example about the benefits of desilting versus other options; the Chair asked Mr Rowlands to submit a list of three or five projects that could be moved forward immediately by next week; Mr Rowlands said he had already discussed such matters with Iain Sturdy and other experts, and the Environment Agency was closely aligned; Ross Edwards and Sean Papworth expressed their faith in the abilities of the Somerset Council team; Cllr Dixie Darch, Somerset Council, said it seemed to her reasonable that Mr Sturdy should want to prioritise modelling on 'quick wins' and not simply just rush out and do work; Mr Rowlands said he believed that some pieces of work did not need modelling.
- Iain Sturdy said the new Brue modelling had been developed for the purposes of proving to SRA partners that certain works were necessary, and to understand their impacts. This was why he preferred that the hydraulic impacts of potential project proposals to the SRA Board should be understood by all. As regulatory processes involved several organisations, the impacts and the benefits of works had to be proven in a satisfactory way. Mr Sturdy argued that modelling was a golden key to unlock long-standing difficulties: it would demonstrate the benefits and impacts of doing works, it would help people to understand the interactions of different interventions in the wider Brue catchment, it could be used to figure out which sections of the River Brue should have silt removed.,
- The SRA Chair asked Mr Sturdy if he was worried that the Environment Agency would slow getting works done. Mr Sturdy declined to offer a view on this.
- Dr Rachel Burden said she had not been involved in Brue meetings, but an Environment Agency colleague in the Operations Department had come up with a list of very 'quick wins' that he had shared with the SRA's core team, such as jetting flaps, removing vegetation and desilting under bridges. She said she agreed with Mr Sturdy that modelling was needed to demonstrate the relative benefits of different options (for example, of desilting different lengths of river), to make sure that flood risks would not be worsened downstream, and that all environmental requirements would be satisfied.
- Mr Mitchell said that as Board members had not been given information in advance to enable them to consider the pros and cons of what works should or should not be done, he felt they were not in position to decide upon such matters today. Instead, Mr Mitchell said he would ask the officer working group to meet quickly and come back to the Board with an actual specific set of things they would like to do. If officers can't agree on what should be done, then the Board can consider the options fully.

- Mr Sturdy suggested the Board consider a recommendation of 'priority should be given to testing specific actions to improve the condition and performance of channels and assets'. Mr Mitchell said in his view the officer working group is already empowered to decide this. Mr Mitchell said he understood Mr Sturdy's frustration but felt the task was better left to technical officers to handle in the next two or three weeks.
- Sean Papworth suggested prioritising or modelling ideas that could potentially be funded this year rather the spending time on things that can't be funded this year: John Rowlands reminded the Board that partners would be needed to deliver works.
- The Chair brought the discussion to an end by saying he would proceed with David Mitchell's recommendation that the officer group sort this out.

As recommended, the (SRA) Board noted the update on the River Brue computer model project and got Board support for the proposed next steps.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Cllr Darch said that any flood mitigation taking place needed to have Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) built in. She added that Somerset Council had encountered challenges progressing projects because they were not allowed to assess BNG impacts of their own projects. Cllr Darch said a collaborative agreement has now been arranged with the Dorset and Devon Councils which will address this.

Mr Jenkins was delighted to see the SRA Strategy booklet after a long and painful gestation period. He praised those involved in its production.

12. PAPER TO NOTE

a. Bridgwater Tidal Barrier

The Chair informed the Board that government funding would not be confirmed until after the General Election. Dr Burden confirmed this.

Somerset Rivers Authority
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Annexe A
Question 1

In 2015 it was identified that the river Brue was in significant need of dredging as flooding of the Brue Valley was becoming a more frequent and severe occurrence. The SRA eventually allocated £279k for the work and the Consortium of Drainage Boards were the 'willing partner' prepared to undertake the work. For reasons uncertain (to the writer) agreement about the work could not be achieved and eventually in 2021 the CDB returned the money to the SRA.

Subsequently the SRA undertook a hydrological survey of the river which apparently means that most of the previous objections can be addressed. At a 'drop in' at Godney on the 18th March, Mr. John Rowlands of the SRA confirmed that the money (and possibly more) could be made available again (subject to other demands) whilst Mr. Iain Sturdy of the CDB was of the opinion that if a request was made jointly by Parish Councils affected by the extreme flooding of February/March 2024 then the CDB would be prepared to undertake the work probably employing water injection technology. Wedmore Parish Council has now taken the lead to obtain a joint request of local Parish Councils and hope to have a joint letter to this effect signed off by the end of June.

The request to the SRA at this juncture is to ensure that sufficient funding is made available once the letter is received.

William Smart
On behalf of Wedmore Parish Council and the Blakeway Flood Resilience Group

RESPONSE
John Rowlands, Technical Advisor at Somerset Rivers Authority read out his written response:
I understand that Iain Sturdy, IDB CEO, has contacted you directly with some clarifications as to your recollections of your discussions with him.

There is a long history to the proposal to dredge the River Brue which we can discuss in more detail outside of this meeting. Any dredging must be assessed for the impacts it will have, both positive and negative.

The hydrological model that Mr. Smart refers to will not in itself remove what are described in the question as 'objections'. What the modelling will do is help in assessing what the impacts might be of dredging, and of other possible interventions, which in turn will help to secure the legal permissions needed for dredging or other interventions. As explained in Item 10c, further modelling is recommended to test certain scenarios that may reduce flooding, including desilting works in the Lower Brue. Any further modelling works will depend upon their being funding for such modelling. You will see from the paper provided for Item 10c that a project group has been established to progress this project and it will establish what scenarios to test and how much this will cost.

The project group is also considering whether there are ‘smaller / simpler’ pieces of work that could potentially go ahead without the need for detailed modelling like the scenario testing described above.

Our funding for 2024-25 is already almost fully committed but we will of course take account of the seriousness of the Godney flooding and work required should a grant proposal for actions on the Brue be submitted in the future. We will be seeking grant proposals later in the summer. We appreciate the efforts the parish council is making. Any grant proposal will need to be assessed against other competing applications for our limited funds.

Question 2

Question based upon a phone call with Mr. Mather, exact wording may be slightly different on the day.

How do we as the Knole Flood Prevention Group of flooded Knole residents bridge the gap between theoretical reports and spades in the ground? For example, do we need to organize engineering reports and plans? If we do who de we ask for these? How should we get estimates for costs for works? Is there an organisation that can do these things for us.

This question is prompted by the fact that we have had lots of people from different organisations out to see us, with various ideas, but no money to actually make things happen. The group is very capable but needs advice on guidance on what the solution might be to making things happen.

Rob Mather of Knole Flood Prevention Group (KFPG)

RESPONSE

David Mitchell, SRA Manager read out his response:

I’m glad to hear that the community of Knole has received support and advice from many of the SRA partner organisations. Bel Deering that has worked with the group is here today.

The SRA has recognised in the past that there is a gap in the provision of technical support and advice for communities who are organised and motivated to take action but may lack the knowledge and skills to know exactly what action to take and how to take it in a safe and legal way. This is why the SRA has funded FWAG SW’s two sub-catchment community support officers whose role is to work with communities to help them take action. I understand one of the advisors has been working with your group and that FWAG are now taking forward some actions as a result of this. However, I appreciate that FWAG can only advise on issues within their area of expertise and there remains a gap in where groups like yours can go for the type of help and support you are asking for.

We are, as the SRA, working to capture information on the types of issues your community has. I have set out under Item 9 how we plan to develop a pipeline of project ideas that may subsequently be developed into proposals for SRA funding. I will ensure that information that has been shared with us about Knole will be captured in our pipeline of project ideas. The SRA Board is also being asked today to consider setting up a 'small grants' process for 205-26 that will be accessible to parish councils and other suitably constituted groups that wish to take action themselves.

I appreciate that our future plans will not help Knole straight away. However, you are already in contact with several of the SRA partner organisations. I would encourage you to continue to work with them as it may be that one of these organisations will see an opportunity for submitting a grant proposal to the SRA as part of our normal grant giving process that will be seeking submissions later in the summer.

I am happy to speak with you outside the meeting to understand in more detail what challenges the group is facing and discuss ways we may be able to help.

Points raised:

Iain Sturdy said he had noticed across the county that when small communities had a flood problem, they were unaware which organisation had the *powers*, not necessarily the responsibilities, to sort those problems out. He therefore suggested that as Knole's flood problems were spread across a couple of organisations, the SRA Board could help to identify which organisations had the necessary powers and help then find the resources required to act, bearing in mind that a core principle of the SRA was doing extra.
David Mitchell said that as the SRA relies on technical expert organisations, he would speak to them and come back to Mr Mather with a response.
Cllr Claire Sully suggested to Mr Mather that Knole should engage with other communities in similar positions, such as Croscombe, and see what models they had taken forward. She said that Croscombe had put some good resilience measures in place, and she offered to put Mr Mather in touch with people.
Mr Mather said he hoped to figure out what works were required and how much they would cost so his community could start saving up for them.
The SRA Chair suggested the SRA's forthcoming small grants process could perhaps be useful. He said that he had visited Croscombe and seen problems there with the clearance of culverts, warehouses built on floodplains 100 years ago and ditches that appeared to have no owners.
Tony Bradford asked the Board to commission an organisation to investigate problems in Knole, and find out how much it would cost to resolve them, and then if that organisation could not afford the necessary works, submit a bid to the SRA. He urged that this should be done quickly.
Mr Sturdy said the organisation with the powers to undertake works was the LLFA because Knole was mostly outside the IDB's area. He encouraged Mr Mather to apply to the SRA's small grants fund when it became available, and he offered to put Mr Mather back in touch with Calm Engineering and Caroline Murray to pick up on work that they had done recently for the IDB in Knole.

Kirsty Larkins, Somerset Council Service Director for Climate, Environment and Sustainability and Chair of the SRA's Management Group said that to solve problems in Knole and other areas, she believed a multi-agency approach was required to deliver quick wins before next winter. Though the LLFA had the powers to do works, she said her team was small, it was doing a lot, but it did not have the resources required to deal with the levels of flooding seen across Somerset. She too mentioned the SRA's proposed small grants scheme and suggested that her team might ask for funding support from the SRA. In the meantime, she said she had noted down Mr Mather's query and would try and get back in touch with him.

Question 3

Please can this letter be presented to the meeting as per the Public Question time.

Firstly, my apologies for not being able to attend in person to your meeting on Friday 14th June 2024 as at present my workload is full, trying to salvage some forage for the cattle on my farm. After attending your last meeting on the 8th March, the hot topic was the severe flooding that we are we all experiencing and a long-term plan looking forward to alleviating it. My drone footage that I sent in gave a good visual insight as to what we were experiencing.

Fast forward three months, attending many meetings, the formation of Flood focus groups in Villages and towns , and the collaboration of many communities all striving for remedial work to be carried out on the rivers that feed the River Brue as well as the Brue Itself , so we do not experience the same devastation as we have this year affecting many businesses, farms, and residents (where the road into the village alone was closed for over 17 weeks) not to mention the sheer destruction to all the wildlife that has be wiped out .

A large proportion of my land is still under water and like a dessert with mass compaction, no wildlife, and no productive grass, as can be seen by the picture taken yesterday 11th June 2024. My neighbour and many other landowners along this river are also having the same issues.

This is caused by the division Rhyne, the capacity is severely limited and the outlets from the ditches is now under the silt that lies in the river so none of the ditches can drain into it. See attached pictures. We have now had water lying in these fields since November. We have obtained quotations to carry out work as suggested by EA and other bodies during the drop-in meeting we have held / been to. The work is to reinstate the river to its former capacity, so the clappers and sluices work to allow the ditches to empty. This would also prevent the road from being flooded and closed as it banks up in the fields where it cannot get back in the river. We understand the process from the EA and have been sent the FRAPS Guidelines, but please can you tell us if there is any way that this process can be processed quicker as time is the essence. We are now half way through the summer and if the normal process of obtaining permits to carry out the work is 12 weeks then by the time the council apply for funding this could take three to four weeks it will be November and too late to do any work as the silt that is removed would not dry out, or be able to reseed it for grass to grow and the roots to stabilise the soil. It is also unfair to expect

contractors to give a price to do some work then eight months later expect them to do it for the same price.

The price we have sourced from three contractors (who have large machines and undertake IDB work already) to carry out the work on half the riverbed, the secondary bank at the bottom and levelling the soil on top for a length of 3 miles from the higher side of Batch Farm to James Weir is £15000, this is extremely small in comparison to some EA estimations.

Under the guidelines it does state: You can act without applying for a permit to manage the impacts when there's an imminent risk of serious:
flooding
damage to or preventing land drainage
harm to the environment

Although this states imminent, all three of the above bear relevance to our issues. One storm of rain and all three are imminent. Please may we have your thoughts.

The government farm recovery fund that has been implemented does not cover our area at present, the cost to reseed and get my land back to some form of productivity is currently £22,750.00, let alone other landowners' costs. This seems ridicules considering the preventive measure is only 15k.

Our flood focus group in collaboration with the Godney Parish Council were hoping to apply for funding to cover the cost of reinstating the division Rhyne to its former capacity.

We would love to hear your response and thoughts on this issue of permits we require as a matter of urgency as time is very limited to have any productive yield from these fields.

Regards,

Michael Churches
GODNEY
WELLS

See Photos Below

Somerset Rivers Authority
County Hall
Taunton, TA1 4DY

Somerset Rivers Authority
County Hall
Taunton, TA1 4DY

Somerset Rivers Authority
County Hall
Taunton, TA1 4DY

RESPONSE emailed on 18th June 2024

Dear Mr Churches,

The question you submitted to the SRA Board was read to the Board at the meeting on 14 June. Please find your response below:

Your question in relation to the process and timescale for securing permits to do work is one for the relevant Risk Management Authority that issues the permits, so I have referred to the Environment Agency for a response on this. I have been advised that there is no formal process to seek a quicker resolution on FRAP applications. If you are not already in contact with them, please liaise with the relevant EA team by emailing bridgwater.frap@environment-agency.gov.uk. Pre-application advice is available to help applicants make the right decisions and this also helps the EA to process the applications within the published timescales. The guidelines the Environment Agency have issued are hopefully clear, it's down to the applicant to interpret them for their unique situation. The Environment Agency may be able to offer further support as part of the pre-application advice.

Environment Agency colleagues also recommended that you visit the following website - Farming Recovery Fund expanded - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) – as the farm recovery fund was recently expanded so it may be worth double checking whether your farm will now be eligible.

With regards to a request for funding, this could be considered by the SRA once sufficient information is available to assess whether it conforms with the SRA's funding criteria. Under our current arrangements, information will need to be brought to the SRA Technical Group for it to consider the technical merits of what is proposed. Technical Group can then decide on whether to recommend the project to the Board for funding. New works up to a value of £20,000 proposed by the Technical Group can be added to the SRA's Enhanced Programme during the course of a year. It would be the responsibility of the organisation leading the project to obtain all necessary permissions before starting any work.

Once the Parish Council has the details on costs and permits etc., please contact me at sra@somerset.gov.uk and we can discuss next steps

Regards,

David Mitchell
Somerset Rivers Authority Manager