

**Draft minutes of
Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Meeting**
held on 7 March 2025
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 (IDB)
Cllr Mike Caswell, Somerset Council
Cllr Nick Cottle, Somerset Council
Vicky Farwig, Wessex Water (*substitute*)
Rebecca Horsington, Parrett IDB
David Jenkins, Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee
Claire Newill, Natural England
Cllr Nick O'Donnell, Somerset Council
Wendy Welland, Axe Brue IDB (*substitute*)
Ian Withers, Environment Agency
Cllr Ros Wyke, Somerset Council
Trevor Whitcombe, Axe Brue IDB (*substitute*)

In Attendance:

Damon Bridge, RSPB
James Divall, Somerset Council
Caroline Dunn, Somerset Rivers Authority
Ross Edwards, Environment Agency
Sam Hitchcott, Somerset Council
Piers Hooper, Environment Agency
Jonathan Hudston, Somerset Rivers Authority
David Mitchell, Somerset Rivers Authority
John Rowlands, Somerset Rivers Authority
Iain Sturdy, Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium

Apologies:

Jeff Fear, Axe Brue IDB
Andrew Gilling, Axe Brue IDB
Donna Gowler, Natural England
Cllr Harry Munt, Somerset Council
Sean Papworth, Somerset Council
Matt Wheeldon, Wessex Water

ITEM 1 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

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Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Chair Cllr Mike Stanton welcomed SRA Board members and members of the public to the meeting.

The Chair highlighted that this would be the last SRA meeting for John Rowlands, (SRA Technical Advisor) as he would soon be stepping down from his role. The Chair thanked Mr Rowlands for all his work for the SRA, said his knowledge would be missed and wished him well.

Mr Rowlands shared his decision to reduce his working by stepping down from his role as Technical Advisor for Somerset Rivers Authority. He said that he was grateful to Somerset Rivers Authority and the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest (FWAG SW) for offering him work when he moved on from his job with the

Environment Agency. He highlighted the fact that the SRA was unique and said it would be a sad day if the SRA was to diminish its role. He said that the SRA relied heavily on the partner organisations in the room. Mr Rowlands explained he would continue to work on flooding issues in Somerset through his consultancy work.

Apologies were received from Matt Wheeldon (Wessex Water), Andrew Gilling (Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board), Jeff Fear (Axe Brue Internal Drainage Board), Cllr Harry Munt (Somerset Council) and Officers Donna Gowler (Natural England) and Sean Papworth (Somerset Council). The Chair introduced James Divall from Somerset Council, its new Head of Climate and Natural Environment.

ITEM 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford declared an interest in anything that was related to the King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) as he owns land on both sides of the KSD.

ITEM 3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING 20 SEPTEMBER 2024

The minutes were agreed as accurate.

Matters arising from the minutes:

Cllr Ros Wyke (Somerset Council) requested a copy of the report for item 7b. David Mitchell said that Neil Ogilvie had sent the report to Cllr Wyke however it was not cleared for circulation to the general public.

Cllr Wyke also requested an amendment to the recommendation on item 7b. Mr Mitchell said that he would like to come back to this when item 7b was discussed.

ITEM 4 2025-26 SRA MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) AND CONSTITUTION

The Chair explained the SRA Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has to be re-signed each year by all Board members. He invited David Mitchell (SRA Senior Manager) to say more.

Mr Mitchell explained that he had circulated two versions of the MoU and Constitution, one that was a 'clean version' and one that highlighted all the proposed changes. He noted that the changes were mostly minor. Mr Mitchell drew attention to

one change that was more significant, in the delegation section. He said the existing MoU delegated authority to the Chair and Vice Chair for decisions up to a value of £500,000. However, as £500,000 is equal to the total contingency usually held, it was felt that the delegation amount should be lowered to £200,000. He explained that the changes to the MoU and Constitution had been considered by the SRA's Management Group.

No points were raised. Board members signed the MoU.

ITEM 5 RECENT FLOODING UPDATE

Updates were provided about recent flooding events and the recovery process from the Flood Risk Management Authorities.

Following the flooding in South Petherton, the Chair explained that he had worked with South Petherton Parish Council to set up a flood group, which the parish did not have before. He said there were now 16 members, doing great work. He noted that he had resigned from the flood group after the first meeting due to a potential conflict of interest with his role as a Member of the SRA Board.

Nicola Dawson (Somerset Council's Civil Contingency service manager) said that on Sunday 26 January there had been heavy rainfall across parts of Somerset which particularly impacted parts of Chard, Ilminster, South Petherton and Charlton Mackrell. She said she would like to pay tribute to Chard Town Council for setting up a place of safety for residents and Ilminster Parish Council who were also developing a local resilience planning scheme. She noted that it was a very busy night with a lot of work going on since to support affected communities. Ms Dawson said that Community Drop-in sessions had been very well received with a steady stream of 30-50 people at each: she thanked colleagues at the Environment Agency and Wessex Water for attending. Ms Dawson said that there was a real difficulty in getting residents to report that they had been flooded. A key concern for people was the fear that it could affect their insurance and the resale value of their property. She said it was really important that residents should report flooding and she asked that all SRA partners helped to encourage this.

Ms Dawson noted that Chard Town Council and Ilminster Town Council had requested a multi-agency debrief about the flood event. She said that her Emergency Planning and Environment Agency colleagues would provide a debrief.

James Divall (Somerset Council) said he would like to reiterate his thanks to partners for their support, not only in the drop-ins but also events that were held with Members of Parliament. He said that there was a lot of work still ongoing in terms of the recovery process and investigations. He agreed that the reporting of flooding to risk management authorities was really important and that message was being communicated. He said that they were now working to find local solutions to these problems, investigating things like earlier warnings and building resilience withing local communities.

Piers Hooper (Environment Agency) said that he was on duty that weekend along with other colleagues, and it was a surprising event with the highest ever rainfall recorded in Donyatt and the River Isle in a short space of time. He said that on the morning of 26 January the teams were not concerned about the level of rainfall, however by early evening a Major Incident was declared. He said that there was a lot of pressure on the Environment Agency over that weekend to provide information for areas that they did not hold a lot of data on. Mr Hooper noted that they were pushed to the limits.

ITEM 6 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

ITEM 7 FINANCE REPORT AND ENHANCED PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE MONITORING.

ITEM 7a QUARTER 3 2024-25 FINANCE REPORT

Sam Hitchcott (SRA Finance Manager) introduced the paper. She explained that at the start of the year the total available funds were £6,932,000, and of this amount £3,853,000 was carried forward from 2023-24, and £3,079,000 was raised in the 2024-25 precept. Ms Hitchcott said that at the end of Quarter 3, 5% of funds were forecast to be spent on administration and staffing of the SRA, 1% on core work and development, 12% would be held in contingency and 82% allocated to specific projects and activities within the Enhanced Programme. She said that expenditure during Quarter 2 of 2024-25 was £303,000.

Referring to Chart E, David Mitchell said that part of the reason for the actual spend being lower than forecast spend was that even though some work had taken place,

no claim had yet been submitted to the SRA. He encouraged partners to claim regularly, and be realistic about the claim forecasts they provided, to support more accurate reporting to the Board.

Mr Mitchell explained that the appendix to the finance paper which used to be classed as confidential information no longer needed to be confidential. This change was as a result of taking advice from Somerset Council's Democratic Services Team as part of an SRA-related decision that had to be taken by Somerset Council's Executive.

Points raised:

- The Chair noted that at the council's recent Executive meeting the SRA's work was commented on positively by Executive Members and other attendees.

There were no further questions.

As recommended, the Board noted the financial performance as at the end of Quarter 3 of 2024-25.

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

ITEM 7b Quarter 3 2024-25 Enhanced Programme Performance Monitoring Report.

Caroline Dunn (SRA Project and Performance Officer) introduced the paper. Ms Dunn said that the report was for Quarter 3 including data from October to December and provided an overview of projects being delivered. Ms Dunn explained that Part One of the paper summarised how projects were progressing compared to the milestones set at the start of these projects. There were approximately 59 'live' projects. Ms Dunn said the majority of completed project milestones were completed as planned, and most of the milestones yet to be completed were on track. However, there were some projects that are behind schedule for a number of reasons. For example, delays with the contractors submitting claims, delays with procurement process, lack of staff resource. Ms Dunn added that of the projects showing as being a long way behind schedule these were mostly projects the Board would have received update papers on e.g. the Taunton Strategic Flood Alleviation Improvements Scheme.

Ms Dunn said that between October and December, five projects were completed. For SRA reporting purposes, a project was complete once a final claim had been submitted to the SRA for payment. On occasions this could result in a delay between works being completed on the ground and a project being marked as complete for reporting purposes.

Ms Dunn drew the Board's attention to the outputs table in the paper. She emphasised how much activity was taking place and the many outputs that resulted from SRA-funded work. Ms Dunn reported that there was a lot of data sitting behind the outputs table and she could share that with Board Members if they would like to see it.

David Mitchell described work that was underway to provide the project and performance reporting information as an online Power BI report to the Board. This would allow the Board to interrogate data directly. The report would ultimately contain much more data than just project outputs e.g. grant allocation, spend forecasts, milestone progress etc. Mr Mitchell showed an example of the work in progress and committed to bringing a more complete version to the next Board meeting.

Points raised:

- Cllr Wyke said she was delighted to see progress towards providing more detailed information to Board members and she looked forward to seeing June's report. Cllr Wyke explained that it could be frustrating to be in meetings and not know the details of what was being discussed, this made it difficult to meaningfully contribute.
- The Chair supported Cllr Wyke's comments and added that SRA Board meetings was the only place all the partner organisations came together in public to discuss flooding issues on behalf of Somerset. The interchange of information and ideas here was very important.

The Chair thanked Ms Dunn for her work reporting all the detail. Caroline Dunn thanked all the partners for providing the update information to her.

There were no further questions.

As recommended, the Board noted the overall delivery status of the schemes and activities within the current SRA Enhanced Programme.

8. SRA 2025-26 ENHANCED PROGRAMME AND BUDGET

David Mitchell reminded the Board that a draft Enhanced Programme was provisionally approved in January 2025. Provisionally approved until such time as the SRA's 2025-26 funding was confirmed as part of Somerset Council's council tax setting. SRA funding was confirmed at Somerset's Full Council on 5 March. Mr Mitchell explained that the Enhanced Programme presented was the same as the one provisionally approved. He added that the only change in the paper was that the proposed starting contingency set out in the budget had increased since January.

Mr Mitchell notified the Board of a change to the make-up of the SRA partnership team. The current partnership team was SRA Manager, Senior Administration Officer, Communications Manager, Project and Performance Officer and Technical Advisor (part-time). He explained that from 1 April, Paul Elliston and Bel Deering, SRA Community Engagement Officers, would be part of the SRA partnership team. This was a result of a restructure at Somerset Council. Up until this point, the community engagement officer roles had been as fixed term contracts sat within Somerset Council's Emergency Planning Response and Recovery (EPRR) team led by Nicola Dawson. Mr Mitchell said that Dr Deering and Dr Elliston would still work closely with the EPRR team. Mr Mitchell said that he would like to propose that the two community engagement officer roles should become full-time permanent staff members of the SRA partnership team rather than fixed term roles so that there was certainty of employment for both roles. Mr Mitchell said he would bring this issue to the Board at a later date for a decision.

Mr Mitchell asked the Board to formally approve the Enhanced Programme and budget.

Points raised:

- SRA Vice-Chair Tony Bradford said that the Water Injection Dredging had been a huge success again this year and the addition of removing material from the shoulders of the bank meant it was even more effective. He asked about the impact of vegetation such as reeds on how much silt builds up. Mr Bradford suggested a 12-month trial where a section of river has the reeds flailed and another section doesn't for comparison. Mr Bradford's view was

that if less time had to be spent removing silt caught in the reeds then more could be removed from the river itself for the same cost. Mr Bradford asked if the Environment Agency could undertake the suggested reed cutting.

- Iain Sturdy (Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium) said all these works made incremental improvements and he was glad to hear that people felt the work carried out so far was making a difference. He said it would not be a bad thing to trial extra reed cutting from a conveyance perspective. He suggested that this work might be best suited for the Environment Agency as part of its routine works, rather than funded by the SRA as additional work.
- Ian Withers (Environment Agency) said that the points Mr Bradford and Mr Sturdy made were very interesting and he was open to the principle of it. However, it was not one single piece of work that would make the difference, it would be lots of works all needed to make a difference. He said it would come down to what could be afforded. He offered to discuss this further outside of the meeting.
- The Chair informed the Board that while the dredger was on site two residents of Moorland had the chance to see it in operation and were impressed with the effectiveness of it.
- Cllr Wyke asked if research on the impacts of vegetation and silt build up had already been done by others, saying there was no need to reinvent the wheel. She also recommended that if investigatory work were to be done it should include broader issues such as environmental impacts. Mr Sturdy confirmed that work had been done in the past to understand silt build up and environmental impacts but the difficulty was that it had not been done for a very long time.
- Cllr O'Donnell (Somerset Council) asked whether the ecological impact of cutting the reeds had been considered. Claire Newill (Natural England) confirmed that with all works undertaken on these watercourses, the environmental impact would need to be considered, to determine (for example) if there were protected species living in them.
- Mr Sturdy reminded the Board that the River Parret was extensively dredged 10 years ago so the science was well understood. He agreed that it would be sensible to re-establish the knowledge from this work as many staff involved had moved on. Piers Hopper agreed with Mr Sturdy that the science had been done and there was no need to redo it.
- James Divall said that he would welcome both Community Engagement Officers being part of the SRA core partnership team. He said it would be good to look at the forward plan for the partnership team, consider how the SRA was evolving and what the team requirements might be in the future.

There were no further questions.

Cllr Wyke abstained from voting on the recommendation. She explained that she did not feel she had been provided with a full understanding of the detail of the Enhanced Programme and how projects were identified and funded. Cllr Wyke said she would like more detail on this and to see the process refreshed to reassure herself that the most effective actions were being funded.

As recommended, the SRA Board approved the proposed 2025-26 SRA Enhanced Programme and Budget.

9. RSPB PRESENTATION

Damon Bridge (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – RSPB) introduced himself. He shared a presentation on the Development Phase of the Greater Sedgemoor Landscape Recovery project. He explained that three years ago the RSPB had worked with FWAG SW to submit a proposal to the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) for £750,000 of development funding for this project. He noted that they had been successful at securing the funding. He said that they were now one year into the development phase. He said that Landscape Recovery was the new highest tier of Defra's Environmental Land Management Scheme. The project was all about finding a resilient way forward for landowners. The Greater Sedgemoor project had 120 landowners signed up to this development phase. Across these 120 landowners, there were 2500+ separate land parcels and 5000 hectares of land, with the majority on floodplains. Mr Bridge highlighted the key objectives of the scheme, which were enhancing and buffering protected sites; increasing resilience to impacts of climate change; provide long-term resilience for farm businesses; creating more and better quality habitats; supporting transition to 'Net Zero' carbon emissions; and enhancing access to, and connection with, nature for local communities. The project would result in landowners being paid for benefits they provided such as storing water to reduce flood risks elsewhere.

Mr Bridge explained that at the end of this development phase landowners would have the option to sign-up to a 20 year agreement with Defra for Landscape Recovery. It was not mandatory to sign-up. The 20-year agreement would have significant funding support attached to it to deliver the agreed outcomes. If the scheme proceeded, it is hoped it would be running by April 2026.

Points raised:

- Jonathan Hudston reminded the Board of the SRA-funded Strategic Approach to Mitigation which focused on the Levels and Moors. The work was done by Natural England. He asked if this work had informed the RSPB project. Mr Bridge confirmed the work had been referenced and that he worked closely with Natural England.
- Claire Newill said that this was a big ambitious innovative scheme, one of the biggest in the country. She noted that this project was trying to address some of the challenges that were spoken about at every SRA Board meeting. She said that this was one of five landscape recovery projects in Somerset. There was another on the Levels and Moors and three on Exmoor. Ms Newill noted that Natural England provided liaison support for all Landscape Recovery projects. She said that the Board should welcome the approach that this project is taking to working with landowners.
- Trevor Whitcombe (Axe Brue IDB) asked if the £1500-£2000 per hectare was over a 20 year period and if it was index-linked. Mr Bridge confirmed that this would be per year and the intention is that it would be index-linked. Mr Whitcombe raised a concern about whether by retaining higher water levels year round this would reduce capacity to store flood water when required.
- Tony Bradford thought the presentation was misguided. He believed that most people who joined these schemes, joined for financial gain rather than for environmental benefit. He said that if landowners were going to be storing water, then they would also be storing phosphates.
- Mr Bradford was concerned that the Moors could not hold enough water now so raised water levels would make this worse. He also believed poor maintenance was damaging the environment. Water could get on the moors but could not drain away. Mr Bradford stated that he believe there was more wildlife before Raised Water Level Areas were introduced. He cited work in Peterborough as a good example of the way things could be done better. He noted that what the Landscape Recovery project was trying to achieve was admirable but the way it was trying to be achieved was wrong.
- Mr Bridge responded to Mr Bradford's point about less wildlife by stating that the RSPB holds monitoring data that shows the Raised Water Level Areas are effective.
- Ben Thorne (previously of FWAG SW) agreed with Mr Bradford that what was needed was a system that paid farmers to manage the land the way we want.

However, Defra set the policy on what would be funded, and if we wanted that funding in Somerset, we had to design schemes to fit.

- Iain Sturdy commented that this work had potential to bring huge change to the Levels and Moors and at this stage it was not clear whether it would be good or bad change. He said his organisation must engage with the process.
- Cllr Wyke made the point that this presentation had referred to 'the Levels and Moors' when in fact it only related to a limited area of them. She said it was important to be clear on details like this.

The Chair said that this was a long-standing debate about what worked and what did not work on the Levels and Moors. Ultimately it would come down to the 120 landowners to decide on whether to proceed with the Landscape Recovery project. He stated that compromise would be required. He thanked Mr Bridge for his presentation. He said that this would need to be revisited regularly at future Board meetings where members should hear different perspectives.

10. COMMUNITY FLOOD ACTION FUND

David Mitchell said that he had circulated a short paper for this item. He explained that the deadline for the first round of submissions was 25 February, just a couple of days before Board papers had to be published. Since the paper was published the applications had been assessed in more detail. This had resulted in the total number of eligible applications now being lower than reported in the paper. Approximately 13 or 14 applications would proceed to assessment rather than the 22 cited in the paper.

Mr Mitchell said even though it was early days there were already lessons being learned from the first round of applications. For example, about clarity of application guidance; impact on partner organisations as a result of applicants seeking advice; whether £200k annually would be enough; etc.

Mr Mitchell said that the first meeting of the review panel would be on 1 April where a decision would be made on which applications should be funded. He added that the next deadline for applications would be 27 May.

The Chair summed up by saying that it was a positive start. So positive that the Board might wish to consider allocating more funds towards CFAF if the first tranche of funding was fully used in rounds one or two of applications.

Points raised:

- Claire Newill said that it was great to see this level of interest in CFAF which confirmed the Board's decision to launch it. She was looking forward to learning about the detail of the applications. She asked if the Review Panel took the decisions, then simply reported back to the Board. Mr Mitchell confirmed this was the approach that the Board had approved.
- Mr Bradford thought there would be a steady flow of applications from Parish Councils and he hoped this would continue year after year.

As recommended, the SRA Board noted the update on applications submitted to the Community Flood Action Fund.

11. RIVER SOWY – KING'S SEDGEMOOR DRAIN (KSD) ENHANCEMENT SCHEME

Iain Sturdy provided members with a verbal update. He said that there were two pieces of work to be completed on the River Sowy–King's Sedgemoor Drain (KSD) project. The first was improvements to two outfalls on the KSD. Tenders had been awarded, and contracts had been signed for these works. He said that work was due to start at the end of March. The second piece of work was 1.8km of bank raising which would close a gap in the work done previously by the Environment Agency. Mr Sturdy said that the IDB had committed to producing a project completion plan (PCP) for the bank raising. This PCP would be prepared and shared with partners. It was a positive piece of work that had not identified any 'showstoppers' to the bank work. Mr Sturdy said that the IDB was on track to update the Board at the June meeting with contract values for the work and if the Board was in agreement to fund the work, then the IDB would commit to delivering the project with a start date of the end of June / beginning of July.

The chair thanked Mr Sturdy and said he was delighted to hear that the work would be starting soon.

There were no further questions.

12. RIVER BRUE MODELLING

David Mitchell provided a brief verbal update as there was little progress to report since the most recent SRA Board meeting was at the end of January. He said that modelling work was progressing as planned. It had been hoped that a steering group meeting would have taken place but this had not been possible. Outputs would be reported to the steering group as they become available and then reported to the Board. Mr Mitchell said that the Technical Project Manager Andy Wallis was very positive about the WSP team (modelling consultants) and about meeting the project timeline.

There were no questions.

13. SOUTH WEST AUDIT PARTNERSHIP (SWAP) AUDIT

David Mitchell noted that the South West Audit Partnership audit report into the SRA had been circulated to Board members before this meeting. He quoted the executive summary: 'the review highlighted a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. We identified some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement which may put at risk the achievement of objectives'.

Mr Mitchell said the report stated that the SRA did not have a process in place for its Main Grants and Community Flood Action Fund. In response, he said that detailed flow charts and procedures and guidelines had been or were being prepared for both. He noted that there had been processes in place for several years, however these had not been fully written down. The revised Main Grants process and new CFAF process did now have written guidelines. Mr Mitchell said that he was therefore confident that this process issue was on its way to being resolved.

Mr Mitchell said that one of the other findings was that the SRA did not currently report on interest accrued on SRA funds held by Somerset Council, despite this being listed in the MoU and Constitution as required. He said that he was in discussion with the SRA finance manager and colleagues to get exact figures so that these could be reported to the Board. He said that from Quarter 1 of 2025, the amount of interest would be included in the finance report.

Mr Mitchell said that the auditors misunderstood the core SRA team's role, when they suggested that the team should provide a technical oversight of SRA-funded projects. He said he did not propose any actions based on this finding because the technical expertise and oversight came from SRA partner organisations.

Points raised:

- Cllr Wyke said that the report seemed to be very process driven. It did not feel as though the auditors addressed the bigger issue around how work was commissioned and how support and resources were received from partners. She thought that the SRA as an organisation needed to look at this again. Cllr Wyke thought this audit was a missed opportunity for an external body to have a broader look at the SRA. Mr Mitchell said that as the SRA is hosted by Somerset Council, certain services are chosen for the audit, which came from the perspective of the risks of hosting the SRA to Somerset Council.
- Mr Sturdy asked if there was any progress with the SRA being represented at Somerset Council's scrutiny panel. The Chair said that the SRA was scrutinised by Somerset Council. Mr Mitchell confirmed that Somerset Council's Climate and Place Scrutiny did get the SRA to attend once a year. He noted that at the next Scrutiny meeting, he would ask if Board members wanted to attend. James Divall said that if there was anything that the Board wanted on the scrutiny panel agenda, then this could be added.

There were no further questions.

14 ANY OTHER BUSINESS (AOB)

There was nothing raised for this item.

15 TAUNTON STRATEGIC FLOOD ALLEVIATION SCHEMES

The SRA Chair Cllr Mike Stanton requested that James Divall kept this project on his radar.

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance including the public for their questions. The meeting closed at 12:54pm