

## **Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper**

### **Upper Barle Restoration Project - Request to defer funding to 2026-27**

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board is asked to:

1. Approve the change in the use of SRA funding from the development phase to the delivery phase of the project.
2. Approve the request to defer the approved grant funding from the 2025-26 budget to the 2026-27 budget.

#### **Purpose of the item**

To request that the award of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) funding be altered to fund the delivery phase of the river restoration project instead of the development phase. This will require deferring the funding from 2025-26 to 2026-27.

#### **Background and context**

At the 7 March 2025 meeting of the SRA Board (Item 8), members awarded Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) £105,000 towards the project development phase of the Upper Barle restoration project as part of the SRA's 2025-26 Enhanced Programme. This is a nature-based solution project, within the sensitive environment of a National Park, to deliver flood risk benefits to settlements in the Barle Valley and beyond. The project aim is to reconnect an 850-metre section of the River Barle to a historic 3.5-hectare area of natural floodplain to slow the flow during high rainfall events and deliver further ecological and water quality benefits. A fuller description is provided in the appendix. The project takes forward Natural England recommendations to redress artificial straightening that was carried out within this section of the river in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The development phase requires careful consideration of environmental factors including ecology, historic environment, landscape quality and geomorphology. It is expected to be completed in 2025-26.

Adjacent areas in the Barle Valley are also being planted with trees to re-establish temperate rainforest vegetation which will also help reduce flood risk.

#### **Latest status**

Since the success of the SRA grant award, ENPA received a further offer of funding for the development phase from the Water Restoration Grant. This additional investment not only further endorses the value of the project, it more importantly allows the SRA funding to be targeted at delivery on the ground so that the benefits can be realised. Approving this

request will mean that any risks associated with the development phase of the project will be borne by Exmoor National Park. SRA funds will only be required following the detailed design stage and securing planning permission.

The development phase is now underway, and consultants are engaged in technical design and analysis. By the end of the financial year, we expect to have both detailed design and planning consent in place. Should the SRA funding be deferred to 2026-27 it will enable relatively straightforward restoration works to take place later in that year in September and October to avoid the most sensitive times for wildlife.

Tree planting in adjacent combes is planned for this financial year, for which separate funding is secured.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board is asked to:

3. Note the change in the use of SRA funding from the development phase to the delivery phase of the project.
4. Approve the request to defer the approved grant funding from the 2025-26 budget to the 2026-27 budget.

**Date:** 1 May 2025

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## Appendix

### Upper Barle catchment restoration

Total project cost: £149,000

Proposed grant: £105,000

*SRA reference: ENP01 Workstream 2*

This proposal is the first made by Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) to Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA), as a result of the SRA opening up its grant-giving process to more applicants.

It's for a study of how to reconnect part of the River Barle to its historic floodplain, so water is slowed and spread out. The site is directly south of the B3223 at Simonsbath, and a small distance downhill from part of the Two Moors Way. The Barle here was artificially straightened in the 18th century. The section being considered for restoration is 0.53 miles long (850 metres), its floodplain 3.5 hectares.

This proposal has several aims. **One:** to work out the best ways of holding back and storing water, to help reduce flood risks as far down as places such as Dulverton and Brushford, which between them have flooded 14 times since 1980. Also downstream, showing the power of the Barle in spate, the scheduled ancient monument and popular visitor spot Tarr Steps has been damaged several times by flood water, with rebuilding required in 2012, 2016, 2017 and 2023.

**Two:** to see how to bring about numerous environmental improvements in a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Park, in line with the SRA Strategy's fifth objective, which is to "conserve and enhance Somerset's special environments". A Natural England study in 2016 suggested that holding back more water could help to reduce the dispersion of non-native invasive species (especially Montbretia) during periods of spate. A less kinetic river could help riverfly numbers, and so benefit salmon, grayling and dippers. An associated study funded by the National Park Authority is also to look at ways of reintroducing water voles to the Upper Barle catchment.

**Three:** this study would be tied in with a nearby scheme to plant trees in three steep-sided combs adjacent to the Barle, using a recently developed technique known as applied nucleation to gradually create more connected temperate rainforest. Along with some leaky dams, this planting would help to slow the flow of water down to local tributaries of the Barle.

**Four:** educational and economic benefits. As the study area sits within land owned by Exmoor National Park Authority, which also includes an outdoor education centre at Pinkery, it is intended to engage with local communities, around Simonsbath and across Exmoor, and also with visitors.

**Five:** the area also sits within a Landscape Recovery scheme (Reviving Exmoor's Heartlands) that is currently in its development phase. Carrying out a feasibility study would make it possible that Landscape Recovery money could, in due course, fund or part-fund River Barle restoration works at Simonsbath.