

## ITEM 10

### **Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Paper**

#### **Transition of Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) funded Community Engagement roles from fixed term contracts to permanent contracts**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

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

1. Approve converting SRA Community Engagement Officer Roles from fixed term contract roles to permanent contracts.

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

To seek approval from the SRA Board to fund the two SRA Community Engagement officer roles as permanent members of SRA staff instead of funding the roles as fixed-term contracts through annual or bi-annual grant funding applications.

#### **Background and context**

Somerset Rivers Authority has funded at least one community engagement officer since its inception. The focus of the original role was on providing support to Somerset Levels and Moors communities as they recovered from the impact of the 2013-14 flooding. This post was hosted by Somerset Council within Somerset Council's Civil Contingencies Team. When the officer in this role left, the requirements of the role were reviewed. It was concluded that what was needed now was focus on providing inspiration, support, advice, information and practical help to communities, households, businesses, and landowners across Somerset to encourage and enable them to become more resilient. In 2018 funding was secured for two community engagement roles with a focus on increasing community resilience. These roles have been funded in the same way as other SRA-funded projects i.e. by the submission of a grant application as part of the SRA's grant giving process. This approach has the inherent disadvantage of a lack of long-term job security for employees and concerns about long-term staff retention in these roles.

Two of the three core principles in the SRA Strategy 2024-34 are "working together" and "acting on local priorities". The community engagement officer roles are fundamental to understanding and communicating the issues and needs of local communities into the SRA partnership to shape the projects that are funded.

The SRA-funded community engagement offer has always been very well regarded and highly valued by those that work with or are supported through it. SRA Annual Reports contain a multitude of examples of the positive impacts of these roles across Somerset.

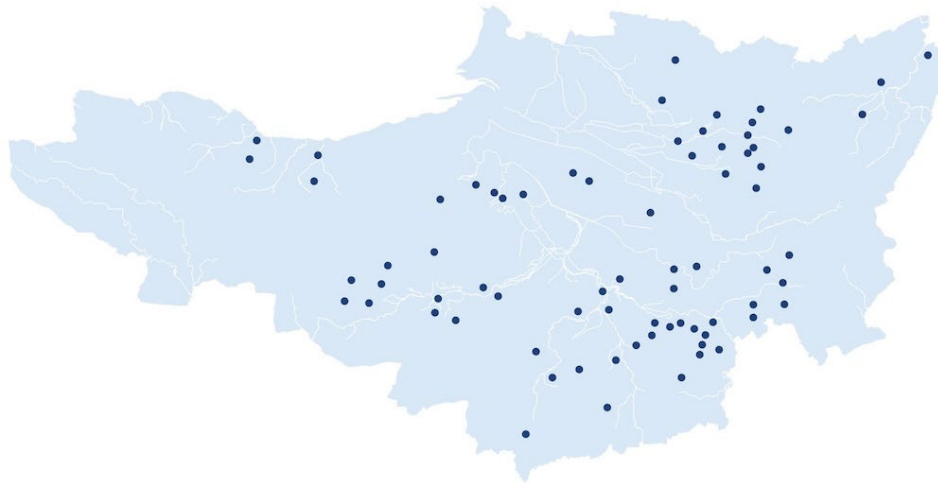
During 2024-25 alone 74 different communities were supported (see map below) in a variety of ways:

- Advice and guidance for 65 flood wardens, and networks of catchment-focused community flood groups are being built
- Five Somerset Prepared Community events supported over 300 community representatives to learn more about flood resilience.
- Telemetry installed to provide very localised information on river conditions to inform community action and community engagement support given to other SRA-funded projects
- Parish emergency plan workshops held resulting in the creation of flood and emergency plans for numerous communities
- Workshops held to raise awareness about riparian rights and responsibilities
- Flood cafes run to support the wellbeing of those affected by or worried about flooding.
- 1,175 primary school pupils took part in interactive sessions and secondary school workshops now being developed in response to demand

Details on all these examples, and more, can be found on the SRA website: [Building Local Resilience 2024-25 - Somerset Rivers Authority](#)

In addition, through conversations with communities, the SRA Community Engagement Officers are also leading on the development of pilot initiatives such as a road closure initiative to protect homes and business from flooding caused by moving traffic, a new website of flood information, and mapping and analysis to identify communities who are most vulnerable to all different types of flooding.

Figure 1: Locations of Community Engagement activities 2024-25



SRA funding since 2015 has allowed for a consistent source of support for communities at risk of flooding. Stability of funding and staff allows new relationships to be developed and reinforced over time. Research<sup>1</sup> tells us that this type of ongoing and consistent support is important in helping a community move through different stages of recovery to resilience following flooding incidents, and becoming more prepared before flood waters even arrive.

### **Current Status**

Somerset Council, the SRA's Host Authority, has been through an extensive restructure in the past 18 months. One outcome of this is that SRA community engagement roles are now hosted within the SRA Partnership Team reporting directly to the SRA Senior Manager. All other members of the SRA Partnership Team are on permanent Somerset Council contracts.

The SRA is funded directly by a small charge per household through council tax. While these funds have to be confirmed annually through council budget setting, for all intents and purposes, the SRA Board and Somerset Council are assuming that these funds will be raised each year and a portion of it will be used to fund permanent SRA staff roles. The Board is being asked to extend this approach to the funding of the community engagement officer roles.

### **Costs**

- Current SRA Partnership Team salary costs (full time equivalent x 4) = £213,000
- % of total precept = 6.8%
- Community Engagement Officer salary costs (full time equivalent x 2) = £91,000
- Future SRA Partnership Team salary costs = £304,000

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<sup>1</sup> Nsobya et al. 2024; Van Krieken and Pathirage 2019

- Revised % of total precept = 9.7%

The Community Engagement Roles are already funded from the SRA precept. This proposal will not increase the cost to the SRA of the roles. If approved, it will create an increase in the SRA's 'pre-commitment' to salary costs, i.e. this amount will be 'top-sliced' from the precept each year before any grants are allocated to projects.

**Somerset Council decision required:** As the Host Authority, Somerset Council will need to agree to converting the current contracts to permanent. As the employer, Somerset Council takes on all legal responsibility for employed staff. Whilst there is limited financial risk to the council as the SRA will fund the roles there is potential risk for the council should there be any employment-related matters. As the current employer under fixed term contracts, there will be negligible change in the risk profile to Somerset Council given fixed term contract employees inherit the same rights as permanent employees after four years of continuous service. Somerset Council will need confirmation of the SRA Board's commitment to the long-term funding of these posts if it is to convert the roles to permanent contracts.

Making the roles permanent contracts will provide both the SRA and the employees with certainty on the future of these roles. Building successful and effective community engagement and support networks requires consistency of effort and building of trust. Making these roles a permanent part of the SRA Partnership team will show a commitment to the principle of working with communities as a key part of how we respond to flood risk now and in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

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

1. Approve converting SRA Community Engagement Officer Roles from fixed term contract roles to permanent contracts.

**Date:** 3 September 2025

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