

Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board Paper.

Motion in relation to reduction in Main River maintenance

RECOMMENDATION

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) Board is asked to approve the following motion:

The SRA Board calls on the Environment Agency (EA) to reverse its recent letters to landowners announcing the withdrawal of EA maintenance of watercourses, particularly main rivers, in Somerset and requests reinstatement of full maintenance. This reinstatement of maintenance to remain until:

- They have completed a formal impact assessment
- Statutory consultation obligations are fulfilled
- A joint working group with the Internal Drainage Boards has agreed a sustainable forward plan.

Purpose of the item

To review a motion passed at the recent South West Association of Drainage Authorities (SWADA) meeting in relation to an announced reduction in the extent of Main River maintenance and consider whether the SRA should pass a similar motion. This motion will raise awareness of the shortfall in the funding settlement for the maintenance of flood risk assets in Somerset and recognise the difficult position that the Environment Agency is in.

Background and context

All Risk Management Authorities are suffering from increasing pressures on funding and staffing, i.e. works are costing more while public sector organisations are also struggling to recruit and retain staff with the expertise to deliver works.

At the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee meeting on 17 July 2025 the Environment Agency reported that it would be prioritising “the locations in which it will be carrying out maintenance work this financial year to ensure we are reducing flood risk to the maximum number of people and properties with the resources available to us”. The practical impact of this is that the Environment Agency has informed landowners that it will stop or reduce maintenance on sections of main rivers across its Wessex Area whereupon it has historically used its permissive powers to undertake maintenance work. The Environment Agency has written to landowners to inform them if the Environment Agency will no longer be maintaining stretches of river on their land. The affected Somerset locations are set out in the table below:

Land Yeo Upper	Lox Yeo	Chedzoy	Drove Ryne
Blind Pill Ryne	Congresbury Yeo	Panborough Drain	Rhynemoor Rhyne
Red Lake	Division Ryne	Kenn Lower	White Lake
Hartlake	River Cary	Barton and Lydford Mill Stream	Baltonsborough
Cockhill	Wickmoor Rhyne	Kingsmoor Main drain	North Street Langport
Tank Rhine	Pill River	Priorswood Stream	Hopwood Stream Minehead
West Somerset Streams including River Avill, River Aller, Horner Water, Hawcombe Stream, Washford River, Traphole Stream, Monksilver Stream, Doniford Stream, Pill River, Timberscombe		Taunton Streams including Kingston Stream, Norton Brook and Halsewater, Lyngford Stream Mill Lease, Dyers Brook, Allens Brook, Maidenbrook stream, Black Brook, Sherford Stream, Galmington Stream, Westford Stream	

On 8 August 2025, the Association of Drainage Authorities' Chief Executive wrote to the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency requesting that the decision to stop maintenance be "reversed to allow time for discussions with local partners and community groups to explore options for handing over assets and maintenance responsibilities to others who may wish to take them".

SWADA called an Extraordinary Meeting on 18 August to discuss the situation. The outcome of the meeting was that the following motion was passed (after it was proposed by Cllr Peter Burden of North Somerset Council and seconded by me, Cllr Mike Stanton):

"Given the governance gap created, and the clear operational risks and environmental sensitivities involved, the EA must reverse all withdrawal decisions relating to Main River maintenance in Somerset and reinstate full maintenance. This reinstatement of maintenance is to remain in place until:

- They have completed a formal impact assessment
- Statutory consultation obligations are fulfilled
- A joint working group has agreed a sustainable forward plan"

Current Status

As the Chair of the Somerset Rivers Authority and a Director of the Association of Drainage Authorities I have attended several meetings where this matter has been discussed. The pressures being faced by the Environment Agency are nationally driven by a lack of funding

across the public sector. As a result of these pressures, Somerset's Main Rivers risk seeing a reduction in the level of maintenance they receive. Whilst a motion being passed by this Board will not solve the bigger issue, it is important – as a partnership whose primary objective is to reduce the risks and impacts of flooding – that we formally register our concerns and pass a similar motion to that of SWADA. We must use all means possible to encourage national decision makers to pause and work with stakeholders and partnerships such as ours to develop a sustainable model for the funding of maintenance of flood risk assets that is fair and equitable.

Recommendation

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