

Somerset Rivers Authority Board Paper

Step Change for the Riparian System

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. Note the progress of the initiative as updated in this paper.
2. Endorse and support the completion of the Riparian Theory of Change development process as planned.
3. Enable and empower relevant staff in your organisation to engage with the next Riparian Theory of Change workshop, especially strategists, decision-makers, programme managers and representation from associated business areas which are identified in the project design as having a role to play in delivery.

Purpose of the item

Against the backdrop of a highly inconsistent approach to riparian maintenance across Somerset, the Riparian Theory of Change process began with conversations at the SRA's Technical Group and is being brought before the Board to inform them of progress so far, including the development of a draft project plan, to outline next steps and to seek Board endorsement and support for the process.

Background and context

The SRA's Community Team report that riparian maintenance issues are the most popular topic of conversation during their interactions with communities. Field visits frequently reveal that a lack of maintenance is commonplace, whilst Riparian Ownership workshops given in various communities have revealed widespread confusion and misinformation on the topic.

Manifold reasons are given for such a disjointed approach. In many cases, owners are simply unaware that they have responsibilities, or lack the knowledge to carry them out. Some point to confusion inherent in the system, with different permitting regimes applying to different watercourses and with those regimes often being complex and hard to navigate. Any maintenance work that does occur is often piecemeal and may even increase local flood risk in some circumstances. At the same time, declining resource means support for - and enforcement of - this system has weakened.

Discussing this, the SRA Technical Group felt it was worthwhile exploring how to enhance the riparian system, recognising that it needed a wholesale step change. A Theory of Change process was, therefore, begun. A Theory of Change is a comprehensive framework which describes how to move from the current situation to a desired state. An initial workshop, held in January, was supported by a number of partners and other relevant external agencies as well as staff from the SRA core team.

Through this workshop, the group determined that it wanted to see “*Healthy, biodiverse and functioning catchments across Somerset with empowered, informed and confident riparian owners who are willing to take actions for the benefit of the community and the environment*”. In order to achieve this, eight preconditions were identified, ranging from agencies developing streamlined services, communications and support to fostering the development of knowledgeable local sub-catchment groups, where communities are able to coordinate maintenance using best practices.

Subsequent to the workshop, participants were also invited to continue to work on the emerging project plan through an online process, adding in actions that would be required, the stakeholders who would need to be involved and the timescales in which each element might be achieved.

Current Status

The initiative now has a draft project plan, designed to deliver the goal for the riparian system mentioned above. A second larger workshop is planned (perhaps in November, but Board suggestions are welcome) to refine the project plan and help ensure that it will achieve its goal without encountering unforeseen risks or delivering unforeseen negative consequences.

Recommendations

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