

Questions and Answers - The Somerset Rivers Authority

8.12.2014

The new Somerset Rivers Authority which will play a key role in flood protection for the county, is being officially signed and sealed today (*Monday December 8*) when Somerset's local leaders and Ministers from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), sign a Memorandum of Understanding in London.

The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) is a key part of the 20 Year Flood Action Plan, which was set up last winter at the Government's request. Agencies co-ordinated by Somerset County Council are undertaking a range of actions to reduce the frequency, duration and severity of a flood like that experienced in 2013/14.

Intensive work has taken place to consider various options for the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA).

What is it and what would it do? The following Questions and Answers explain:

Why do we need the SRA?

- To help identify and fund a higher standard of flood protection in Somerset than is currently provided with funding from central government to the Environment Agency
- To ensure the large number of separate flood risk management authorities in the county work together through a combined programme to maximise opportunities

What has been signed by the Government and local leaders?

The Memorandum of Understanding commits Defra and DCLG to provide £1.9m towards £2.7m interim funding needed for the SRA for the coming financial year.

Somerset County Council will contribute £600k towards the £800k costs remaining, and District Councils and Somerset Consortium of Drainage Boards will contribute £200k.

As part of conditions agreed, Defra and DCLG have asked that the SRA be established by 31 January 2015, and local partners have asked central government for a joint review of long term funding options for the SRA, with a report back to Ministers in July 2015.

What will the new SRA do?

It will:

- Be a new joint body;
- Have authority to spend the £2.7m interim funding;
- Undertake detailed planning and put in place necessary arrangements for its operations, including developing options for long-term funding and how these funds will be spent;
- Bring together the Flood Risk Management Authorities (the Environment Agency, the Internal Drainage Boards, the Lead Local Flood Authority (Somerset County Council) and the other Somerset local authorities), to provide a strategic overview of the continued delivery of the Flood Action Plan;
- Develop, agree and publish a Common Works Programme

- Identify what further work should be done, and explore and where possible secure third-party funding;
- Empower the Flood Risk Management Authorities to take on a broader role, to ensure Somerset's flood risk management activity benefits from the collective wisdom, experience and knowledge of all its members.

Its scope will include strategic planning, land management and building local resilience as key activities, with community engagement around these responsibilities.

It will not include emergency response and recovery, or coastal flood risk activities.

Does that mean existing roles would cease?

No, it would not diminish the roles, funding and responsibilities of the individual partners (nor landowners), but would improve joint working opportunities.

What is currently in place?

The Environment Agency, whose funds and investment decisions are based on national assessment and cost benefit analysis, is currently the main provider of flood risk management activities. After the flood event of 2013/14 the 20 Year Flood Action Plan was developed to achieve a long term vision for the area in which the extent and impact of flooding is reduced.

The creation of the SRA is part of this, set up to deliver greater local control and responsibility for maintaining and improving water and flood risk management on the Levels and Moors and across Somerset.

Who will maintain the parts of the rivers that were dredged this year?

The interim funding will be used for a range of flood risk management activity across all districts in Somerset, including:

- Maintaining the 2014 dredge on the Parrett & Tone;
- Additional dredging;
- Additional weed cutting and tree work;
- Channel maintenance of important watercourses in vulnerable settlements

Future monitoring and maintenance of the Rivers Parrett and Tone 8km dredge will be undertaken locally by the new SRA, which will also fund it.

Who has drawn up the proposal for the SRA?

With the endorsement of partners in the Flood Action Plan's Leaders Implementation Group, a (SRA) Project Key Partners Group was established to oversee the project.

It includes representatives from the Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs), the County and District Councils, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Environment Agency (EA), Natural England and the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (WRFCC).

Who will be responsible for it?

The SRA will be a new body with its own Board, which will include representatives from each of the following partners: the five District Councils, Somerset County Council, the Environment Agency, the Parrett/Tone and Axe/Brue IDBs, the Wessex Regional Flood & Coastal Committee, Natural England.

Who will pay for it?

Local partners in Somerset, Defra and DCLG will work together to review options for a sustainable local funding solution for the work of the SRA from 2016/17 onwards. A number of options for county wide funding are already being considered, including funding not only from households but also agricultural landowners and business rates.

The Internal Drainage Boards will continue to set budgets for their own work programmes. Existing capital funding for flood risk management (mostly central government funding through the Environment Agency) will need to continue.

(See next question too)

What levy would householders and agricultural landowners be expected to pay?

Specific figures have not yet been finalised.

Work will carry on to consider a number of options and how funding could be levied.

(Interim funding of £2.7m for this coming financial year, for example, would equal a 1% increase on household council tax bills - i.e. the total bill, including County, District, Parish and Police and Fire and Rescue charges.)

Why will the required funding be spread throughout Somerset?

Although flooding in 2013/14 directly affected homes and businesses on the Levels and Moors, flood risks exist throughout the county, and flooding affects everything from business to tourism to travel.