

Somerset flooding update

Covering Note

This 'for information' briefing for ministers (submission) has been released further to a Decision Notice issued by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) on 20 August 2015. The ICO incorrectly stated this was a briefing written by the Environment Agency whereas it was from a Defra official.

The name of the paper's author has been redacted under section 40(2) and (3)(a)(i) of the Freedom of Information Act (2000). No other material has been removed.

The full submission is made up of three (3) pages.

Since 2014, the Government has given more than £20m towards flood defences in Somerset, including dredging 8km of the Parrett and Tone, and we are committing £15.5m to flood defences in Somerset to better protect over 7,000 homes in the area over the next 6 years.

Dredging alone is not the answer and that is why we have set up, and invested in, the Somerset Rivers Authority to give local people real power to manage flood risk in the long term.

The Somerset Rivers Authority was established in January 2014 to give local people control and responsibility for flood risk management. Defra and local partners provided £2.7m funding for 2015/16. Together with ministers, the SRA are considering options for the future long-term funding for its work.

22 September 2015

SOMERSET FLOODING UPDATE

From:

Date: 8 March 2013

Programme: Flood Management

Tel:

To: Richard Benyon

cc: See email

Issue

1. Update on progress in addressing the flooding of Somerset Moors and Levels. This submission should be read alongside the wider advice we have provided previously on the wider issues around the EA's maintenance and dredging work.

Recommendation

2. That you:
- Note the information in this submission, including the potential for a request for special funding being made to Defra following the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee meeting in April, and the need to manage local expectations.
 - Discuss at the meeting with Chris Smith and officials on Monday 11 March

Timing

3. Urgent – this is to help inform your discussion with the Environment Agency on Monday.

Background

4. You requested an update on developments in Somerset, including on any provision of additional resource by the Environment Agency.

Current Situation Report

5. Since last April Somerset has experienced repeated heavy rainfall events which, in combination with saturated ground conditions and high tides, has led to consistently high river levels and floods across the Moors and Levels. There have been some short periods where the river levels have dropped sufficiently to allow pumping operations to remove some of the water, but throughout this time there has not, until very recently, been a long enough dry period to evacuate all of the water from all of the Moors.

6. Since 21 November there have been over 85 days when Curry Moor has been flooded. However, as a result of the recent dry spell all the water has now been evacuated across the Moors and Levels, apart from that remaining on 'bowl shaped' fields. Pumping has now stopped and ditch levels are at or below winter levels. Further rainfall is expected in the South West over the weekend which may result in raised river levels and the potential for Curry Moor to be flooded once again.

Funding and future flood management options

7. Between April 2012 and January 2013 the Agency has so far spent £1,930,000 of revenue funding on watercourse maintenance and operation of pumping stations across the Somerset Moors and Levels (that excludes all EA's coastal work adjacent to the Levels). EA and Natural England have also been very active in engaging with local communities across the Moors and Levels during this period, with the Agency hosting regular meetings with local farmers and communities including a series of flood surgeries. EA are working with the National Flood Forum and local authorities to encourage the establishment of local flood groups and a flood warden scheme across Somerset. You have previously discussed with Chris Smith and Paul Leinster the scale of costs the EA has been incurring in areas of the country (e.g. Cumbria) where they are withdrawing from the maintenance of uneconomic assets.

8. Other local partners have also made a contribution, which is welcome. In particular Somerset County Council has recently announced that it is setting aside £200,000 to help local landowners and residents tackle the flooding through clearing their roadside gullies and ditches. Farmers also of course continue to benefit from income from High Level Stewardship agreements (there are 31 such agreements on Curry and Hay Moors) and payments under Pillar 1 of the CAP.

9. Since last summer EA has been working with the local drainage boards and a range of other stakeholders to assess the costs and benefits of various options to better manage future floodwater on Curry Moor, including an option to dredge 4km upstream and downstream of the junctions of the Rivers Tone and Parrett. Recent remodelling work by the Agency indicates that this dredging option is likely to be the most effective of those under consideration. This modelling has shown that dredging an eight kilometre stretch of the rivers to approximately the 1960s design profile could reduce, based on the 2012 floods, the duration of the summer flooding on Curry Moor from approximately 25 days to approximately 15 days, though it would not prevent flooding from occurring. However, the total capital cost for the initial dredge has been costed at approximately £2-3 million, subject to further analysis. In addition, retaining channel capacity would require frequent dredging (possibly annually) and on-going maintenance which would cost approximately £200k per annum.

The work would only deliver benefits estimated at around £2-3 million. The whole life costs of this activity are less than the benefits, and EA therefore cannot economically justify this maintenance activity in terms of its

contribution to flood risk management. Therefore, even if the capital scheme was to go ahead, it is not clear how this ongoing maintenance work would be funded

10. The cost benefit assessment for dredging is currently being further refined by Somerset County Council, in particular to reflect the full range of local impacts and financial losses associated with the closure of the A361. However, this is unlikely to affect the fundamental conclusion above. The outcome of this latest investigation and updating of the business case will be presented to the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC) meeting on 22 April, where it may be considered as a special funding case for submission to Defra. It is also open to the RFCC to raise local levy to fund

11. Indications from the EA's Area Team are that local expectations about the potential for additional Defra/EA financial support for dredging in Somerset are rising, and may be further bolstered by a local authority led 'Somerset Flood Summit' planned for 15 March, which will be attended by local MPs. It would be helpful to discuss with you what action should be taken to manage these expectations ahead of the RFCC meeting in April and your planned visit to Somerset in the Spring.

Somerset Moors and Levels Task Force

12. Under the direction of Somerset County Council a group of key partners including EA, Natural England, RSPB, NFU and CLA attended a roundtable meeting in November to discuss the future of the Somerset Moors and Levels. It was agreed that a Task Force should be established to articulate a vision for the Area and develop a 'road map' to take it forward.

13. The Agency agreed to make a contribution towards the £20k requested by the Somerset Water Management Partnership to support the work of the Task Force, providing other partners also contributed (an approach confirmed in your recent reply to Anthony Gibson at the Partnership). This offer still stands, but we are not aware that other partners have so far offered to contribute. The Partnership is meeting on 11 March to consider the next steps in moving forward the Task Force's work. The RSPB have drafted an outline vision for the Somerset Moors and Levels which has been circulated for comment to members of the Partnership.