



January 12<sup>th</sup> 2024

## **Bridgewater Town Council**

Bridgewater Town Council response to the Somerset Rivers Authority, Strategy and Flood Action Plan 2023/34c consultative document.

The SRA was set up as a joint agency with members from the Somerset District Councils, the County Council, the Internal Drainage Boards, the Environment Agency, and Natural England. The SRA was originally intended to be a statutory body authorised by parliamentary legislation. The SRA for a variety of reasons did not receive parliamentary support. It now operates by agreement of the constituent members through the Somerset Council. The District Councils no longer exist and there is no mechanism in place for reporting and consultation in flood risk areas.

### **Communication with Town and Parish Councils:**

The SRA should communicate with Bridgewater Town Council regarding urban flood risks, planned maintenance work and developments relating to the River Parrett Barrier. Priorities for urban flooding and urgent works should be shared with urban areas such as Bridgewater. The SRA is funded through the council tax from Somerset Council, which also scrutinises the SRA, an internal body.

The Consultation Document page 11 suggests that there are 5 SRA workstreams will be affected by inflation and the financial position of Somerset Council. This will also have an impact on the EA and other relevant organisations. Increased investment will be needed to avoid flooding, because of climate change, and the financial consequence of flooding has been well understood since 2014 and before. In 2014 when the Government and EA introduced dredging of the river Parrett. In Bridgewater there has been no significant dredging, and the river flow has been restricted by the build-up of reed banks and silt, which has decreased the width of the river. At the same time the silt has been detrimental to the use of the river for inland boating and the Port of Bridgewater has become unattractive to local people and visitors.

### **Urban Water Management:**

The SUDs programmes need to be controlled effectively and monitored as part of the Planning Authority as part of the control and consent processes. At times of exceptional rainfall there is a danger of flooding in Bridgewater without the Parrett Barrier to control tides, this will also hamper the flow of water pumped into the river to protect surrounding areas of Bridgewater. It is therefore important for the Barrier to be built sooner than planned as the original target date will not be achieved of 2026. Large scale development in flood plain 3 areas of Bridgewater, have been allowed to happen, because of the Parrett Barrier being built.



### **Funding and investment:**

The climate change challenges are going to be almost impossible to cope with in areas like Somerset, unless there is change in national funding and investment policies. In the SRA strategy there needs to be clear assessment of what needs to be achieved, because of climate change and severe weather changes.

All the issues in the SRA workstreams, and the identified climate change risks for Somerset, cannot be coped with under the current funding mechanisms. A reduction in the Wessex area EA budget for 2023/24 from £11.2mn to £8mn and a further EA budget cut of 11% in the Autumn 2023 statement will, it is suggested, make it unlikely that even the current levels of EA and SRA maintenance to river and drainage systems can continue. The current Somerset Council financial crisis can only exacerbate the situation, as mentioned before.

It is necessary to ask with the budgetary limitations on the SRA, whether it is meaningful to carry out a consultation exercise. What can be achieved apart from learning that even fewer projects or less work will be done in the years. There needs to be a real identification of priorities needed to avoid the risks of flooding in Bridgwater and surrounding catchment area. The problem is that no additional SRA activity is going to be possible unless there is to be a significant increase in planned funding over the strategy period to 2034.

### **Recommendations:**

1 The Bridgwater Town Council recognises the value of a single Somerset Body, such as the SRA, to manage the rivers and drainage systems in Somerset, with increased investment to manage priorities, including all agencies involved in flooding.

2 This council supports the SRA with a recommendation that it receives statutory recognition and appropriate funding to fulfil the 2014 expectation, that there should be a single body to manage effectively rivers and drainage in the Somerset.

3 With the change to unitary government, there also should be proper communication established with Town/Parish Councils in predominantly flood risk areas.

4 An independent scrutiny committee should be established to oversee the work of the Somerset Rivers Authority.

5 SRA reporting should account for projects outlined in the action plan, to show achievements and what has not been completed. Including the EA trigger points for flood risks.

Cllr Mick Lerry  
Bridgwater Town Council