

Notification of an Urgent Executive Decision - The Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA) interim funding

Executive Portfolio Holder: Ric Pallister, Leader, Strategy and Policy
Strategic Director: Mark Williams, Chief Executive
Lead Officer: Vega Sturgess, Strategic Director (Operations and Customer Focus)
Contact Details: Vega.sturgess@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462200

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to note the urgent decision to contribute £43,750 towards the interim funding required by the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA), as identified in paragraph 3. This funding will come from the Flooding Reserve set up by District Executive in February 2014.

Forward Plan

This report did not appear on the District Executive Forward Plan – and was taken under Section 3 – 47 (4) of the council's Constitution – whereby an Urgent Decision is one that is considered by the Chief Executive to be necessary to protect the interests of, or advancing the business of, the council. All such actions in all cases are reported to the next appropriate meeting of the District Executive. The tight timescale dictated by Government has prevented us from following the usual decision making process, but District Executive members (04/12/14) and Scrutiny members (02/12/14) were informed of the funding requirements and the need for an urgent decision.

Public Interest

The flooding across a wide area of Somerset in the winter of 2013-14 brought wide spread disruption to South Somerset. Many homes were flooded for long periods and households in Muchelney were cut off for about ten weeks. During this time many roads were closed, which impacted on many more South Somerset residents and businesses meaning that significantly increased distances were driven simply to go about normal day to day business. For example, some businesses in Westover Trading Estate in Langport were closed for up to 15 weeks and trading is still being affected to this day.

Since last winter there has been concentrated work on developing a Flood Action Plan and establishing a way in which flood protection and maintenance can be better co-ordinated across the whole of Somerset. The proposals for the Somerset Rivers Authority are the mechanism by which this joining up of activity and funding will happen.

Following fast-moving work at the end of November and early December a Memorandum of Understanding has been drawn up and signed on the 8th December by all six Somerset Councils and the Secretary of the State for the Environment.

This agreement secured a package of funding for the 15-16 financial year of £2.6million to carry on additional works to reduce the impact and duration of flooding incidents across Somerset.

Recommendations

To note that, according to the provision of Section 3-47 (4) of the Constitution, the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader:

- (1) Agreed to a contribution of £43,750 as part of a £2.7million total package of funding for the 2015-16 financial year for the Somerset Rivers Authority.

Background

1. Since publication of the Executive agenda, fast moving discussions have been ongoing between the Government (Defra and DCLG), Somerset local authorities and partners about the creation of the Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA). In particular these discussions have centred on provision of interim funding to enable the new body to operate in 2015/16. These discussions reached a stage where an agreement on interim funding and establishment of the SRA became imminent.
2. This situation was reported to SSDC Scrutiny Committee on the 2nd December 2014 and District Executive Committee on the 4th December 2014.
3. The funding issue was that Government (Defra and DCLG) agreed to provide interim funding of £1.9m towards the £2.7m requested and to conduct a joint review with local partners of the long term funding of the SRA and report back to ministers in July 2015. Conditions placed on local partners are that Somerset County Council and local partners contributed the remaining £800,000 within the £2.7m and that the SRA was established by 31 January 2015.
4. Somerset County Council pledged £600,000, with the balance of £200,000 sought from local partners.
5. The longer-term funding arrangements for the proposed SRA remain unresolved and, as detailed in the main report to District Executive on 2nd December 2014, will be subject to discussion and agreement between Government and all Somerset local authorities and partners. It is reiterated within the Memorandum of Understanding, that there will be an assessment of the options for consideration by Ministers in July 2015.
6. Members will be aware that the Leader of the Council has sought the views of wider members at a portfolio holder briefing on 13 October 2014 in addition to the Scrutiny Committee on 02 December 2014 and District Executive on 4th December 2014.

Financial Implications

Of the interim funding shortfall of £800,000 the following contributions were received:

Somerset County Council	£600,000
South Somerset District Council	£43,750
Sedgemoor District Council	£43,750
Taunton Deane Borough Council	£43,750
Mendip District Council	£43,750
West Somerset Council	£5,000
Internal Drainage Boards	£20,000

The South Somerset District Council contribution of £43,750 was allocated from the Flooding Reserve set up in February 2014 at District Executive. This decision will leave £29,890 in the Flooding Reserve for future use.

Risks

If Somerset partners had not come together to fund the shortfall amount, then the £1.9m funding from Defra would have been lost.

However, there is still a risk and uncertainty over long – term funding arrangements and these issues will be dealt with in July 2015 when a review of the options available to us will be presented to Ministers and Local Partners.
