

Area North Committee – 26 June 2013

10. Somerset Levels & Moors Task Force (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the report is for councillors to consider a request for a financial contribution towards the proposed Somerset Levels & Moors Task Force, and to nominate a councillor for appointment to the future executive board.

A briefing note on the issues faced by the Somerset Levels and Moors which helped to establish the remit and role of the Task Force is attached in Appendix A.

(NB: the report will be presented to the committee by Teresa Oulds, Neighbourhood Development Officer (North))

Public Interest

A Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force has been proposed by a wide range of local interest groups to develop a shared sense of purpose and direction for the Levels and Moors with effective agreements on managing the often complex relationships between people, land and water.

Recommendations

Councillors are asked to:

- a) Confirm a contribution of £1000 to Somerset County Council, (as accountable body for the Somerset Water Management Partnership and Levels and Moors Task Force) towards the administrative costs of the Levels and Moors Task Force allocated from the Area North Reserve.
- b) Nominate a District Councillor for appointment to the Executive Board of the Levels and Moors Task Force, adding this to the list of Area North appointments to Outside Bodies.
- c) Request an update report to be presented once the Task Force is formally established and the draft vision document is available, and added to the Area North Forward Plan.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Somerset Levels and Moors is a special place – for wildlife, for farming and not least, for people. The whole area forms the largest lowland grazing marsh system in Britain and is, consequently, of outstanding environmental interest. Prolonged summer flooding in 2012 caused serious damage to internationally important wildlife sites and farmers' livelihoods alike, and has reactivated interest in what could happen to the Levels and Moors if the relationship between people, land and water is not, as far as possible, a managed one.

- 1.2. It is widely understood that sustaining the unique character of the Levels and Moors is highly vulnerable to changes in the natural and public policy environments – and that its future depends upon a well-managed relationship between people, land and water.
- 1.3. There is strong evidence from local residents, businesses, environmental bodies, farmers and public agencies that seeking long-term solutions to the particular social, economic and environmental ‘challenges’ of the Levels and Moors is long overdue requiring a concerted effort and a strategic approach.
- 1.4. A map to show the main area of the Somerset Levels and Moors is below (Source: <http://www.parrettcatchment.info/where-we-work/>)



2. The Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force

- 2.1. SSDC is a member of the Somerset Water Management Partnership which has recognised the need for a dedicated programme of work, led by a dedicated Task Force. The purpose of the Task Force is to establish a shared sense of purpose and direction for the Levels and Moors with new forms of leadership, governance and collaboration, and which inspires people to get more involved in shaping its future.
- 2.2. The need for the Task Force has been explained as follows, by the Chairman of the Somerset Water Management Partnership (Anthony Gibson) in his 2012 letter to the Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries (Richard Benyon MP). *“The delicate and complex nature of the balance between water management, conservation and farming on the Somerset Levels and Moors is widely recognised. The tragedy is that all three of those key interests are now being constrained by current circumstances, a context which is magnified by a general, widely-felt sense of drift, where current policies and programmes and unhelpful funding choices, all seem to be working against maintain and improving this balance across the floodplains.”*

2.3. With the positive support of the Minister, and full involvement of the various partners and interest groups, a 'roundtable' event took place in November 2012. Conclusions from the event were that a small working party be set up to prepare a draft vision for submission to the Task Force. The working party would be expected to consult with local people and review past work (notably that of the **Parrett Catchment Project**) already carried out.

2.4. Further communication with the Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries gained the following statement of support for the future role of the task force:- *"I am keen that the Environment Agency and Natural England should continue to work closely with the Task Force to support its work in articulating the vision that was discussed at the [roundtable event], and finding the means to deliver it on the ground as quickly and effectively as possible."*

2.5. The **Levels and Moors Task Force** will consist of the following:

- An Executive Board (made up from organisations providing funding). The Board will define and shape the overall strategy.
- A Steering Committee (representing the main stakeholders) to draw up and implement an action plan to deliver the vision.
- A Forum. This will be the main source of a local mandate for the strategy and actions of the Task Force.
- Working Groups who will be given specific tasks by the Steering Committee.

3. Resources for the Task Force

3.1. Consultation and communication will require commitment from representatives of the various groups to help articulate a common vision of the area, review previous initiatives (eg the Parrett Catchment Project), identify progress and any outstanding actions, and map out the next steps. Finance is required to provide secretarial support to the Task Force (for 6-8 months) together with an officer to coordinate and link up the different partners involved.

3.2. Funding sources are shown below:

Organisation	Amount £	Status
Environmental Agency	7k	Agreed
Somerset County Council	7k	Agreed
RSPB	1k	Agreed
Committed	15k	
South Somerset District Council	1k	Awaiting decision
National Farmers Union	1k	Awaiting decision
Taunton Deane Borough Council	1k	Awaiting decision
Natural England	1k	Awaiting decision
Somerset Waterways Trust	1k	Awaiting decision
Wessex Water	1k	Awaiting decision
Sedgemoor District Council	1k	Awaiting decision
Mendip District Council	1k	Awaiting decision
Possible	8k	Awaiting decision

4. Summary and recommendation

4.1. The contribution of £1000 requested is considered to offer good value for money, when combined with other match funding contributions, together with the

involvement of an SSDC councillor on the Executive Board. Without a dedicated officer resource to support the task Force and ensure the draft vision is prepared, and consulted, it is likely that momentum will be lost.

4.2. Detailed consideration has been given to the best next steps, and the suggested way forward has the strong support of many different interest groups at national and local level. The remit of the working group includes looking back at past work – including the Parrett Catchment Project – which reflects the Area North Committee's own recommendation.

4.3. ***It is recommended the funding request of £1000 is approved as assistance to the next stage of the Task Force's work, to indicate SSDC support and secure involvement in future decisions.***

Financial implications

There is £16,600 available as unallocated in the Area North Revenue Reserve. If recommendation agreed, £15,600 will remain for future years.

Council Plan implications

Supporting the Somerset Levels and Moors Task Force will contribute to the Council Plan areas of focus on minimising flood risk, supporting strong and resilient communities, and promoting the sustainability of the local economy and environment.

Members will also note that the Area North Committee agreed 'Flood and Water Management' to be an Area North priority for 2013-14, noting support towards the Levels & Moors Task Force and encouraging the use of prior work such as the Parrett Catchment Project to inform future planning.

Carbon emissions & adapting to climate change implications

Adaptation to climate change will be fundamental to the vision and future governance for the Levels and Moors.

Equality and diversity implications

At the heart of the council's approach is working with partner organisations in a fair and equitable way to improve the quality of life for residents through the Council Plan and Equality Objectives. The council specifically recognises the needs of people affected by the nature of rural areas.

Background papers: *Copies of correspondence between Somerset Water Management Partnership and Richard Benyon MP; notes from the 'roundtable' event Nov 12.*

More information on the work of the Somerset Water Management Partnership is published at:

<http://www.somerset.gov.uk/irj/public/services/directory/service?rid=/wpccontent/Sites/SCC/Web%20Pages/Services/Services/Environment/Somerset%20Water%20Management%20Partnership>