

# Somerset Flooding Summit

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**A Summary of Findings from the Somerset Flooding Scrutiny Event**

**May 2013**

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## Chairman's Introduction

### Introduction

Somerset suffered two particularly bad periods of flooding in April and December 2012. The flooding affected all areas of the County, with the Somerset Levels and Moors perhaps bearing the brunt.

In the weeks immediately following the December floods, it became apparent that various local groups and agencies were keen to hold meetings with key bodies such as the Environment Agency (EA) and the County Council (SCC) to explore the issues around flood prevention, flood management and flood recovery.

It was quickly realised that those key agencies would struggle to attend numerous meetings on the same topic and that such an approach would not represent an effective use of already limited resources. It was therefore agreed to establish a joint countywide Scrutiny approach that would bring as many of the key people together at the same time in the same place.

In this way, Scrutiny played a crucial community leadership role in bringing together a range of agencies and the public in order to deliver real and measurable outcomes that would in time benefit the residents of Somerset.

All the Somerset authorities (both district and County) agreed to this joint approach and established a Joint Steering Group with elected member representation from all 6 authorities. Conducting the review in this manner represented the best use of limited Scrutiny resources and provided the relevant agencies and the public with a single point of contact. By joining together, it was hoped that Somerset would be able to speak cohesively and convincingly at a national level and input more effectively into any subsequent national reviews which may occur in the aftermath of the recent floods.

As a Steering Group we decided that an evidence gathering event would be a good starting point for this project – they therefore planned the Somerset Flooding Summit 2013. The Summit was designed to learn lessons from the recent flooding and identify potential measures to improve things in the future. By its very nature, much flood management work can only be a paper or simulated exercise so when faced with a real time event, it makes sense to review the effectiveness of the relevant policies and practices.

From the outset, we have been very clear on two important points:

Firstly, this exercise was not about apportioning blame to any one agency for their perceived role in the flooding incidents. The process planned to look at success stories as well as areas for future improvement. The Steering Group wished to use the Summit as an opportunity to gather evidence upon which to base further work or recommendations and to build an informed picture as possible of the flooding facts affecting Somerset.

Secondly, the Steering Group had realistic expectations as to what could be achieved by one event on one day – the members were aware that they would not and could not answer

all the points raised, but that the Summit was the start of the process and would provide an evidential framework for further work.

This report sets out areas for further work as well as some specific recommendations for improvements in all aspects of flood management in Somerset.

## **The Somerset Flooding Summit**

The Flooding Summit was intended to be the start of the review process – an evidence gathering opportunity. To this end, from the outset, the Steering Group was keen to ensure that a wide range of delegates were invited to attend, and that the event should not be 'local authority centric'.

There were several key agencies whose attendance was vital to the success of the event:

Environment Agency;

Somerset County Council as Lead Flood Authority ( as well as Highways authority and Lead Civil Contingencies authority)

Internal Drainage Board

Wessex Water

Avon and Somerset Police

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue

County Landowners Association

These agencies were approached first, and the premise of the Summit explained to them – without exception they were all happy to participate, quickly realising the potential of such a jointly organised event to maximise the use of their resources. Once these key agencies had agreed to attend, we were able to look at the wider delegate list and the following confirmed their attendance:

Jeremy Browne MP

Tessa Munt MP

Ian Liddell-Grainger MP

Somerset Chamber of Commerce

Federation of Small Businesses

Insurance Industry

National Farmers Union

In addition to these agencies, we recognised the need to involve members of the community and Parish Councils. However, we also realised the need to keep numbers attending manageable. In terms of public engagement, each local authority issued a press release

outlining the aims and objectives of the review and inviting members of the public to contact us via a dedicated [flooding@southsomerset.gov.uk](mailto:flooding@southsomerset.gov.uk) e-mail address. They were asked to detail their personal flooding experiences as well as suggestions for future improvements – we received over 150 responses and undertook to keep all responders informed of progress.

All responses were collated and analysed and the key messages used to inform the Summit Programme.

Somerset as a county has hundreds of Parish Councils, all of whom make a valuable contribution to local democracy and many of whom were affected by the flooding. However, it simply was not logistically practical for each parish to be represented at the Summit, so it was agreed that each district would nominate the five most appropriate parishes from their area to attend – these parishes were identified based on local intelligence.

We were aware that many of these agencies and individuals had significant pressure on their resources and so wanted to make sure that the Summit was the best use of their time. In advance of the Summit, each delegate was asked to identify the top five issues they would wish the Summit to address – their responses were collated and used as basis for the Summit Programme in addition to the public responses identified in the paragraph above.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of delegates identified the need for clarification on the roles and responsibilities of all the agencies involved in Flood Management. The information we gathered indicated that at a time of crisis it was difficult to know who to contact in various situations.

Bearing this in mind, the morning session of the Summit consisted of a number of presentations covering the key Flood Management roles and responsibilities as well as presentation from the Met Office to give some context. Copies of the presentations will be made available in due course.

The presentations were:

Robbie Williams - Environment Agency

Dr Sarah Jackson – Met Office

Paula Hewitt – Somerset County Council

Roger Meecham – South Somerset District Council

Refreshments – served in the main Conference Room

Nick Stevens – Chief Executive, Somerset Internal Drainage Board

Paul Oaten – Head of Sewerage Services – Wessex Water

Graham Clarke – Country Land and Business Association - the Role of Riparian Owners

Prior to the event, we were aware that this was a very emotive subject – understandably so, with many people dramatically affected. However, we wanted to make sure that the Summit was a productive event, looking to learn lessons for the future rather than attribute blame. To help facilitate this, we were very fortunate in securing the services of Lord Cameron of Dillington as an independent Chairman. In addition, we agreed to include a Meeting Etiquette Guide in the Delegate pack (attached at Appendix B to this report) to reinforce the positive intentions of the Somerset Flooding Summit.

The afternoon session of the Summit consisted of four workshops- each one designed to address the issues raised by delegates in advance. Each delegate was assigned to a workshop based on the information they provided beforehand.

In order to try and maintain a focus to the discussions, each workshop was asked to identify at least one local ( Somerset level) action to address the issues raised and one national action that can be taken further following the Summit. The workshops were organised as follows and notes from the workshops can be found at Appendix C to this report.

### Community resilience

Issues for the workshop to consider:

- What could/ should communities be doing to help themselves?
- What support from other agencies do they need and what is available?
- What examples of 'good' community resilience are available and how can these experiences be shared?

Desired outcomes from this Workshop:

- Delegates are more aware of what they can do to support their own communities
- Better understanding of what support is available to them
- Agencies are aware of what support they need to provide and to communicate with such communities
- At least one local action to move things forward
- At least one higher level action to be taken forward.

### Economic Impact

Issues for the workshop to consider:

- What are the issues around the economic impact / business impact / impact on agricultural communities?
- What work is currently going on to investigate the impact of the flooding, including the closure of the A361?
- Are there any suggestions for improvements / actions?

- How can we work with insurers and government to make sure that no premises on the Somerset levels are uninsurable?
- What support is available to support businesses?

Desired outcomes from this workshop:

- What can be done across Somerset to better support businesses in terms of flood recovery?
- What can businesses do for themselves?
- What could be done nationally (i.e. Insurers) to support the economy of Somerset following flooding?
- Consideration of Somerset's vulnerable infrastructure and potential improvements.

### Flood Management / Prevention

Issues for this workshop to consider:

- Extension of discussion on roles and responsibilities
- How can everyone work together to achieve tangible outcomes? NO BLAME
- What are the barriers / issues and how can they be overcome?
- Who and how is it decided when to use the pumping station network that already exists?
- In the modelling of the spatial planning, what consideration is given to the secondary effect of deliberately flooding premises on the Somerset Levels?
- What funding arrangements are in place to support flood management and are there any potential additional funding streams that could be better exploited? Potential use of CIL funding?
- Tidal exclusion barrier on the River Parrett in Bridgwater
- Gully clearing and maintenance.
- What is the way forward in areas where challenges are particularly severe e.g. Somerset Levels?
- How can we make an effective case to MEP/ DEFRA? Central Government for more adequate funding?
- What are the agreed water management priorities particularly for the levels and moors?
- Role of planning authorities and developing on flood plains
- Water storage for future use
- Scope for Internal Drainage Boards to take on responsibility for dredging / channel clearance on main rivers in places where it would improve land drainage but EA are unable to for whatever reason.

Desired outcomes from this workshop:

- Who is responsible for what in terms of Flood Prevention?
- What can be done at Somerset level to improve Flood Prevention?
- What message(s) need to be communicated on a national level re; Flood prevention.

### Interagency Working

Issues for this workshop to consider:

- How can we work better with others in the South West to make important infrastructure more resilient?
- How do we work together to help communities and businesses recover better from flooding?
- How do we make sure that everyone is better informed about their roles and responsibilities – notably Riparian Owners?
- Can we improve how we work together to co-ordinate resources to submit bids for prevention schemes?
- How can we get better at:
  - o Sharing information
  - o Sharing resources
  - o Co-ordinated sandbag response – avoid sandbag postcode lottery
- Simplify flood related communications to the general public
- Greater ability to enable communities and other agencies to close roads to stop vehicles becoming trapped and requiring rescuing / recovery.
- Greater co-ordination of shared information between services prior to events occurring to ensure tactical level receive up to date information during an event.
- Managing public expectations
- Create a shared database of flood defence assets (including maintenance regimes)

Desired outcomes from this workshop:

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- What can be done at a Somerset level to improve frontline flood response inter-agency working?
- Potential for a single point of information that everyone feeds into?
- What support is needed nationally to support better inter-agency working?

## Recommendations

In terms of process, the Joint Steering Group is not a formally constituted committee of any of the authorities taking part in this review. Consequently, all recommendations will need endorsing through each authority's own decision making processes. This may appear a rather lengthy and cumbersome process but it is there are no statutory provisions for Joint Scrutiny Committees. That said, many of the recommendations contained in this report suggest further areas of work to ensure that this project is a worthwhile exercise with tangible outcomes. In order to reduce the risk of creating an overly bureaucratic process, we recommend that the Joint Steering Group is retained with its current membership of 2 elected members from each authority. The Steering Group will then agree how best to proceed in terms of monitoring progress against our recommendations and securing the best possible outcomes.

Our recommendations have been formed based on the evidence and information gathered via the Flood Summit. As was intended, the Summit generated a number of areas for further consideration and exploration and consequently a number of these recommendations require further, more detailed work. However, members of the Steering Group are keen to maintain the momentum of this project and are aware that for those affected by flooding issues, a timely response is critical. To this end, the Steering Group have allocated a time frame for each recommendation and the Steering Group will retain an overview of progress against each recommendation.

The outcomes/recommendations fall broadly into two categories; those which can be actioned locally at a Somerset level and those which need to be taken forward at a more national level.

### *Economic Impact and improved infrastructure*

Nationally the emphasis is on the economic case for improved flood management arrangements. Several examples were given at the Flood Summit of the need for improved infrastructure in the County from main roads to main train lines. Delegates at the Summit were informed that SCC are currently preparing a study of the economic impact of the December Flooding – this empirical data will hopefully support the anecdotal evidence given at the Summit of the significant economic impact of the flooding and further support calls for additional flood management funding.

**We recommend that discussions with the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) are initiated to look at the contribution the business community across the region can make to improving the infrastructure - it was not only Somerset that was adversely affected when the mainline train route was compromised by flooding around Curry Moor / Lyng and Burrowbridge and that national bodies such as Network Rail should be actively involved in these solution based discussions.**

**In addition, we recommend that all opportunities to secure Partnership Funding are actively pursued.** In May 2011, DeFRA announced a new approach to funding capital projects that reduce flood risks – Flood and Coastal Erosion Resilience Partnership Funding ( Partnership Funding). This policy allows risk management authorities to apply for grant in



aid and encourages them to secure funding from other sources. The main purpose behind introducing Partnership funding was to:

- Make sure that investment is not constrained by what government alone can afford to do;
- Increase certainty and transparency over the level of DeFRA funding for each project;
- Leverage further investment towards worthwhile projects;
- Allow a greater level of local ownership and choice;
- Encourage more cost-effective solutions; and
- Better target Defra funding towards areas at significant risk.

We feel that any project to protect and improve Somerset's Infrastructure would meet this criteria.

### *Insurance Industry*

Although the Summit was very well attended by a wide range of bodies, representatives from the insurance industry were notable by their absence – despite repeated requests for them to attend. Many of the agricultural, business and community delegates attending the Summit raised a number of questions relating to securing adequate insurance in the future and the role of the insurance industry in flood prevention work. Due to the importance of this issue, the **Steering Group recommend that further work is undertaken to engage with the Insurance industry both at a county level and nationally.** The Steering Group are aware of the ongoing national discussions between the Government and Insurance industry and would urge the Somerset MPs who attended the Summit to represent the interests of Somerset businesses and communities in these on-going discussions. **At a county level, we recommend that the Insurance Industry are asked to participate in the wider economic impact discussions outlined in recommendation ....of this report.**

### *Media Coverage*

Delegates at the Summit stated that the flooding attracted a significant amount of local and national media coverage, and whilst most of the reporting was an accurate reflection of events, there was some sensationalist coverage which some feel has had a negative economic impact (tourists cancelling bookings because they don't think Somerset is 'open for business' etc.). Additionally, other businesses have said that clients have cancelled orders because of mis-reporting (wedding venues etc.).

The information given to the Steering Group seems to indicate that this issue could be somewhat improved if the number of information sources was reduced. This would naturally occur anyway if the co-ordination of information proposed by the single Somerset Flooding Information Point (see recommendation ..... ) is introduced. **The Steering Group recommend that a press protocol is devised, advising those dealing with media enquiries how to respond effectively.** Such a protocol would direct all enquires to the single information point to ensure consistent information is given – this will of course rely on the full commitment of all the relevant agencies to accurately maintain the single information point. In addition to this, all those in contact with the media will be briefed on the need to reinforce positive messages about those areas which remain accessible and the positive steps being taken to actively manage the flooding situation.

## **Lead Flood Authority role and responsibilities.**

The Flooding events of 2012 reminded us that flooding is a serious on-going risk for Somerset Communities. The Flood and Water Management Act 2012 implemented many of the recommendations of the Pitt Review into the 2007 floods. The Act clarified the roles and responsibilities for the management of flooding and introduced some new duties.

The Steering Group recommend that further work is undertaken to fully understand what progress has been made in Somerset towards implementing the full range of duties and responsibilities included in the Act.

One such duty is the preparation of the local flood risk management strategy. Such a strategy should describe the flood risk in an area and set out the actions that will be taken to manage it. Local strategies will help prioritise investment decisions and provide information on how flood risk will be managed. They provide a starting point for Lead Flood Authorities to engage with communities. Guidance from Defra and the Local Government Association states that local strategies are expected to take between 12-18 months to complete. According to the most current Environment Agency data, Somerset County Council's strategy preparations are *'in progress'*.

The Flood and Water Management Act was enacted in October 2010. In a recent letter to all Lead Flood Authorities, the Minister for Natural Environment – Richard Benyon MP, stated that whilst flooding events of 2012 may have diverted some resources away from policy preparation, he would encourage '...Lead Flood Authorities to get your strategies into the public sphere by Autumn 2013 so that communities can see the local arrangements in place for tackling flooding and what they can do to help themselves'.

In terms of funding flood management work -DeFRA figures state that in 2013-14 Somerset as a Lead Flood Authority will receive £461,000 – **we recommend that further work is undertaken to look at how this money is committed and what accountability measures are in place? Also, how is this figure calculated and is it adequate based on the risks /actions identified in the Somerset local flood risk management strategy?**

**We recommend that in order to support the Lead Flood Authority in preparing the necessary strategy and policy documents, drafts are submitted to the Steering Group for consideration at an appropriate stage. This will ensure effective consultation with the constituent district authorities and that the pertinent issues already identified by this review are reflected in the emerging strategies.**

## *Flood Mapping*

As part of this review of the roles and responsibilities of the Lead Flood authority, **we recommend that the Steering Group considers the information that the Environment Agency and the Lead Flood Authority have been doing to generate a new generation of surface water flood maps for England in compliance with the Flood Risk Regulations 2009.** DeFRA are keen that this information is shared with district authorities to ensure all local knowledge is effectively captured and this can be achieved by reporting through this Steering Group.

## *Dredging*

Prior to the Summit, the Steering Group felt that one issue would perhaps dominate – that of dredging the rivers Parrett and Tone, as there had been a significant amount of coverage of this issue in the local and national media. As mentioned in the main body of this report, great care was taken to ensure that this issue did not overshadow any other equally as pertinent issues. However, on the day of the Summit, the Environment Agency opened their presentation by saying that they appreciated the value of dredging ( a change from their previous stance on this issue) and that now efforts needed to be concentrated on sourcing adequate funding.

The Steering Group are of the opinion that there is no value in looking at the historical reason behind dredging, or lack thereof, but that in order to secure the best outcomes for our communities in the future, we should in effect accept that ‘ we are where we are’.

**To this end, the Steering Group recommend that discussions are had as soon as possible to identify practical and innovative sources of funding.** The Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee has recently identified some funding to ‘kick start’ a dredging fund and this now needs to be built upon. We recommend that all potential partnership funding sources are fully explored and progress is regularly reported to the Steering Group.

As part of the continuation of the Joint Steering Group’s work, **we recommend that further work is carried out to ascertain the exact cost of dredging and realistic funding options. Such discussions would move beyond the more familiar territory of who should pay for dredging to who actually can pay. Discussions on this topic should look at contributions from Statutory Flood Management agencies ( EA, IDB’s, Local authorities etc) as well as the business sector and community enterprises.**

## *Disaggregation of Drainage Levy*

District or Unitary Council’s pay a levy to Internal Drainage Boards (IDB’s), funded from Council Tax. The scale of the levy is determined by the IDB and at present and Councils are obliged to pay this levy.

This aggregation creates difficulty for Council’s, as any increase of IDB levy would need to be funded within the limit of increase permitted to Council Tax without referendum (this limit was formerly imposed by way of a ‘cap’). This issue is compounded where a need exists for Council’s to increase Council Tax for their own requirements.

There is potential that Government may introduce a requirement that IDB’s gain the agreement of Council’s on any proposed increase in the drainage levy, but in reality this would not overcome the difficulties described above, as many Council’s would be reluctant to decline requests from IDB’s for an increase.

It would be preferable for the IDB levy to be disaggregated, and for IDB’s to be permitted to precept for the funds they require. This would provide a greater degree of transparency for tax payers and enable Council’s and IDB’s an appropriate degree of financial independence.

### *Somerset recommendations*

More locally, the Steering Group received considerable positive feedback from those attending the event about the presentations given in the morning session of the Summit. As detailed in this report, these presentations outlined the main roles and responsibilities of the key flood management agencies. Feedback from delegates asked if this information could be reproduced in an easy to understand format and made publicly available. In addition, numerous delegates raised concerns that whilst all the information is undoubtedly available, it is hard to know where to find it, especially at a time of crisis.

**We recommend that a single 'Somerset Flooding Website' is created, to be hosted by the Lead Flood Authority to ensure effective consistent advice and information is given across the County.**

### *Community Resilience*

The Community Resilience Workshop was well attended and very positive – delegates were keen to learn what they could do to help their own communities. The Steering Group feel it is important that this enthusiasm and positivity is maintained and **that a higher profile is given to the recently formed Community Resilience in Somerset Project to ensure that as many communities as possible are supported.** Two parishes have already been included in the programme as a result of the Somerset Flood Summit and this could be expanded.

There were a number of issues raised during this workshop that we would like to see addressed as a matter of some urgency. Once answered, the information could usefully form a self- help guide for communities and **we recommend that a further information event is held for Parish Councils and communities, facilitated by Avon and Somerset Police, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue and Somerset County Council covering the following points:**

- Public Liability - what can the public be empowered to do in times of flood and how is this achieved ( road closures, flood alleviation etc)
- What resources can be provided to communities – signage etc
- Advice on the use of vehicles in flood water – 4x4 community response vehicles etc
- Definitive information on Road Closures – and what happens if signage is ignored.

Unfortunately, Somerset was not chosen to be part of the DeFRA funded Flood resilience Community Pathfinder Scheme. Participation in this scheme would have addressed many of the issues identified by the Flood Summit. **Every effort must now be made to ensure that the information produced by the thirteen local authorities who were chosen is carefully monitored and appropriately applied to Somerset.**

## Summary of recommendations

The Joint Flooding Steering Group recommends that:

1. That the report on the economic impact of the 2012 flooding events is reported to the Steering Group as soon as is practicable.
2. Discussions with the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) are initiated to look at its contribution to improving the infrastructure - it was not only Somerset that was adversely affected when the mainline train route was compromised by flooding around Curry Moor / Lyng and Burrowbridge and that national bodies such as Network Rail should be actively involved in these solution based discussions.
3. In addition, we recommend that all opportunities to secure Partnership Funding (under the Defra Flood and Coastal Erosion Resilience Partnership Funding initiative) are actively pursued.
4. That Somerset is actively represented by all agencies, including our MPs in government level discussions to ensure that insurance against flooding remains widely available and affordable and the Insurance industry is encouraged to positively engage in flood management discussions to ensure better flood prevention.
5. That a press protocol is devised, advising those dealing with media enquiries how to respond effectively and to promote the 'Somerset is open for business' message at times of flooding.
6. That in order to support the Lead Flood Authority in preparing the necessary strategy and policy documents as required by the Flood and Water Management Act, drafts of key documents are submitted to the Steering Group for consideration at an appropriate stage. This will ensure effective consultation with the constituent district authorities and that the pertinent issues already identified by this review are reflected in the emerging strategies.
7. That further work is undertaken to look at how the £ 461,000 allocated by Defra to Somerset County Council as a Lead Flood authority money is committed and what accountability measures are in place? Also, how is this figure calculated and is it adequate based on the risks /actions identified in the Somerset local flood risk management strategy?
8. That the Steering Group considers the work that the Environment Agency and the Lead Flood Authority(SCC) have been doing to generate a new generation of surface water flood maps for England in compliance with the Flood Risk Regulations 2009.

9. That discussions are had as soon as possible to identify practical and innovative sources of funding for a renewed programme of dredging in Somerset and that further work is carried out to ascertain the exact cost of dredging and realistic funding options. Such discussions would move beyond the more familiar territory of who should pay for dredging to who actually can pay. Discussions on this topic should look at contributions from Statutory Flood Management agencies ( EA, IDB's, Local authorities ) as well as the business sector and community enterprises
10. That a single 'Somerset Flooding Website' is created, to be hosted by the Lead Flood Authority to ensure effective consistent advice and information is given across the County.
11. That a higher profile is given to the recently formed Community Resilience in Somerset Project to ensure that it supports as many communities as possible and that the Lead Flood Authority can use the project as a basis for implementing a more sustainable model similar to those operated in other areas such as North Somerset.
12. That a further information event is held for Parish Councils and communities, facilitated by Avon and Somerset Police, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue and Somerset County Council covering the following points:
  - Public Liability - what can the public be empowered to do in times of flood and how is this achieved ( road closures, flood alleviation etc)
  - What resources can be provided to communities – signage etc
  - Advice on the use of vehicles in flood water – 4x4 community response vehicles etc
  - Definitive information on Road Closures – and what happens if signage is ignored.
13. That the Lead Flood Authority leads the preparation of a Riparian Owners Information Sheet to be made available to land owners and householders, containing information about Riparian responsibilities and sources of guidance or support.
14. That consideration is given by the Somerset Water Management Partnership (SWMP) to incorporating within its constitution the need for it to take a strategic overview of the issues raised at the Flooding Summit and in this report.