

The 78th Annual Conference of the Association of Drainage Authorities was held on 11 November at One Great George Street in Westminster, London. This report presents an extended summary of the Conference. The report includes Association business, Board and Committee Reports, presentations and a summary of the Question Time Panel.

Welcome by Henry Cator OBE

In his welcome to delegates attending ADA's 78th Annual Conference Henry remarked on the importance of the UK developing a sustainable economy as a place to invest, and a place where business can grow. He said that in order for that to happen the catchments within which they sit needed to be maintained and looked after.

Henry said that whilst many challenges are national or global, they have a local impact, and choices can therefore often be made best by local people. He highlighted that East Norfolk now receives a similar annual rainfall to Jerusalem. He felt that the answer to these challenges must all come out of collaboration, by team work and by working together. He cited PSCAs as a positive example and implored authorities of all sizes to retain and bring on staff who have or could grow the knowledge and expertise in water management that we need, despite the pressures of funding cut backs.

Before introducing the minister Henry concluded with a plea for the Government to invest in watercourse maintenance, "because in times of economic hardship you don't put an extension on your house, you don't build a new conservatory, but you do still clean out the gutters and there is a parallel there of course for the systems that we look after".

Opening Address: Rory Stewart MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment and Rural Affairs

Rory Stewart MP started by speaking about the Waver Wampool catchment within part of his Cumbrian constituency. He had once spent three days walking through catchment studying the work that had been done initially by Cistercian monks in the 12th century to turn what was originally a combination of saltmarsh and lowland mire into fantastic agricultural land. He said: "I was walking alongside 800 year old drainage ditches. I was meeting people who had been working for 60 or 70 years on maintaining those ditches. People who had laid field drains back in the 1950s and who, in particular cases, had taken 1000 acres of marsh, which previously only supported sphagnum moss and if we were lucky maybe a little bit of bog myrtle, and transformed it into milk to support 100,000 families. This is repeated up and down the United Kingdom." He had recently visited Denver Sluice in the Cambridgeshire Fens and seen the extraordinary agricultural landscape that has emerged from such work.

He was interested in the modern-day work of ADA's members. He highlighted three conversations he had had with delegates whilst looking round the Conference exhibition that morning. The first was with the Bedford Group of IDBs and how their work is intimately connected with new housing and business development around Bedford, and how that affects the Upper Ouse catchment. The second was about Somerset and how best to fund future maintenance. He said "you are dealing with one of the most complex fresh water drainage systems in the world". The third referred to maintaining sea walls along the Essex coast and the importance of being able to respond rapidly before a small hole becomes a larger breach costing many thousands of pounds to repair. He felt that whilst no single common theme came out of this it served to highlight that solutions could often be best served locally: "This is incredibly local and what works in Essex doesn't necessarily work in Somerset, doesn't necessarily work in Cumbria and doesn't necessarily work in Bedford".

However, he cautioned that: "it would be a mistake to take away from that a general conclusion that the answer is that there isn't a place for the government because of course when we look at Somerset you have people saying actually they are quite concerned to make sure that the Environment Agency remains engaged".

He recognised the challenging financial situation for public expenditure where costs were rising across health and education, and with pensions as our population was getting older. He said: "So we have to begin with the basic common sense recognition that there isn't perhaps as much money as we'd like and we need to do an enormous number of different things and that involves the government in dealing with water management in many, many different areas". However he highlighted that the Government had committed to £2.3 billion capital investment programme in flood defences over the period of this government, about twice the entire core budget of the Foreign Office.

Before taking comments and questions, Rory Stewart concluded his speech by saying: "I really believe that you, local people, generally know more, can do more and often care more than distant officials and it is your knowledge, your local knowledge, your local drive that is going to solve this problem. So thank you for the work you have done. We're standing by as a government to provide as much intelligent support and engagement

with you as we possibly can”.

Rory Stewart answered a range of questions on the spending review and the democratic challenge of seeking a long term settlement on maintenance, noting that “getting a six year commitment out of the Treasury on capital spend was very very difficult”. He also took part in a discussion with delegates including Gordon Bambridge from Norfolk Rivers IDB, John Oldfield from the Bedford Group of IDBs, Matt Jeffes from the NFU and Tim Farr regarding how to support greater local involvement, and transition of the maintenance of certain assets from the Environment Agency to others, including the de-maining of main rivers.

Association Business & AGM

Elections: Henry Cator was unanimously re-elected as ADA’s Chairman. Lord De Ramsey was unanimously re-elected as ADA’s President along with the Vice Presidents stated on page three of the Conference Handbook, proposed by Andrew Morritt, seconded by Ian Thornton. Henry announced that John Grogan had stepped down as Vice President of ADA and that Dr Jean Venables had been awarded the position of Vice President following her retirement from the position of Chief Executive. Tony Bradford, Chairman of ADA’s South Western Branch presented Jean with a gift on behalf of the Branch for all her work and effort over the past ten years. Henry reported that the ADA Board had approved for ADA to begin the process of appointing a new Vice Chairman in 2016.

Accounts: The audited accounts for the year ending 31 December 2014 were presented to the Conference. The auditors Streets Audit LLP were reappointed as auditors of ADA’s 2015 accounts. This was proposed by Trevor Purllant, seconded by Michael Watson, and passed unanimously.

Subscriptions: The proposed subscriptions for 2016 were presented to the Conference. These represented an increase of 5% on those for 2015.

Membership: Innes Thomson summarised ADA’s membership in 2015, noting that there were currently 109 IDB members, 12 RFCC members, 60 Commercial Associate Members and 41 Local Authorities who were Associate Members. Innes explained that the reduction of IDB members was a direct result of IDD’s in Wales becoming managed by Natural Resources Wales. Innes was pleased to announce that NRW had become members in 2015 with the formation of an ADA Cymru Branch.

Amendment to Article 56(g) of the

Memorandum & Articles of Association: The Conference unanimously approved the change to ADA’s memorandum and articles of association set out on page 26 of the Conference Handbook. Proposed by David Thomas and seconded by Frances Bowler.

Reports from ADA’s Board of Directors and Committees: Henry Cator presented the reports tabled in Appendix G of the Conference Handbook from ADA’s Board, Policy & Finance Committee and Technical & Environmental Committee. Henry was grateful to the staff at Surbiton for aiding the handover to ADA’s new offices, and welcomed the new team at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire. Henry highlighted ongoing work to look at ADA’s future identity and encouraged delegates to express their views via a short questionnaire that would be given to delegates at lunch.

Chief Executive’s report: Innes Thomson presented the report tabled in Appendix H of the Conference Handbook. Innes was appreciative of the support the ADA offices had had from the wider membership that had enabled such a smooth transition. Innes said that work to improve the functionality of the ADA website would be a priority for 2016. Innes encouraged members to support the Floodex 2016 event that ADA would be involved with in May 2016 at the Peterborough Arena. He also encouraged delegates to engage with ADA’s Committees, either by putting themselves forward to become a member of either Committee (a proportion of each Committee’s membership is renewed every year), or by highlighting key topics to existing Committee members.

Finishing on the topic of ADA’s identity and membership Innes said that he was keen to find ways to broaden ADA’s membership base across the entire water level management industry. He reported that he had already had discussions with water authorities and other existing groups of local authorities. He said it was incumbent upon ADA and its existing members to explain what the values of ADA are, and what value the association can bring to local authorities.

Keynote Address: Sir Philip Dille, Chair, Environment Agency

Sir Philip Dille described the breadth of the work he had seen around the country since he started as Chairman last year and the many partner organisations, collaborators and stakeholders he had met on those travels. He was delighted to hear of examples on the growing strength in the relationship between IDBs and the Environment Agency through collaborations, involving Public Sector Cooperation Agreements and

joint working to carry out repairs following the 2013/14 floods and tidal surge. He felt the EA was evolving down a route of greater collaboration, and that this wasn't just during times of austerity but would become the new normal. He said: "I think that a good measure of our future success will indeed be that ability to foster new productive relationships between both public and private stakeholders and, of course, the relationship between the Environment Agency and the IDBs is probably one of the oldest and most important relationships we hold. We've got a very constructive history together of working with many people here today representing the IDBs across the country and it's that work we do together that benefits people, businesses and wildlife which, of course, is the mission of the Environment Agency".

He talked about his regular discussions with the Secretary of State about the future of the environments of the UK. He said that "She has set out a very clear vision for ensuring that Britain has the best environment and sustainable economy in the world. The two are not in conflict and it's a sustainable economy that works for everybody".

He also talked about the river maintenance pilots that the EA ran in nine catchments across England, born out of the floods in 2012. He said that these pilots had "offered farmers, landowners and community groups a greater opportunity to be involved in decisions about maintaining rivers, flood defences and the water environment in their areas". On the Bottesford Beck, North Lincolnshire he had heard how partnership working had helped achieve improved water quality as well as facilitating river maintenance undertaken by the local authority and consumer groups.

He explained that the EA was now working with Defra colleagues to make sure that the guidance and regulation is correct in this area, with the EA's flood defence consents proposed to be moved into the Environmental Permitting Regime. He would do everything he could to make sure that it comes out as soon as possible next year and that there is a positive outcome.

Talking about the learning and feedback from the pilots he said: "We've learnt that regulation was not as big a barrier as perceived by those who wanted to carry out their own maintenance work and that the process of determining where and how maintenance is carried out is most effective when discussed at a local level. Not surprisingly local people know more about the nature of those local tributaries. We know that we need to be more active in sharing our maintenance plans and communicating with farmers and landowners, especially when reducing

or stopping maintenance. We now understand that farmers and landowners are more interested in joining together to carry out maintenance across a whole river catchment rather than individuals carrying out work in their own areas. This is quite obvious because if farmer B carries out the work but farmer A and C doesn't, then you just transfer the problem. So we will feed this advice into future thinking".

Sir Philip concluded by looking forward to future close working between the EA and the range of other organisations represented in the room.

Technical Address: Dr Emyr Roberts, Chief Executive, Natural Resources Wales

Emyr Roberts, provided the technical address for this year's Conference. He described how the management of internal drainage districts had changed in Wales over the past 12 months.

Emyr started with the creation of Natural Resources Wales two and a half years ago when it took over the functions of the former Environment Agency Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Forestry Commission in Wales together with some functions from the Welsh Government as well. He said: "Our purpose is to ensure that the environment and the natural resources in Wales are sustainably maintained, enhanced and used now and in the future. A central principal of our organisation is a joined up approach to how natural resources are managed for the benefit of people, the environment and the economy of Wales". Emyr felt this fitted well with NRW's philosophy towards their work with the former IDBs.

The changes to the IDBs in Wales followed a Welsh ministerial decision in November 2013 to transfer the Caldicot & Wentlooge Levels, the Lower Wye and Powysland IDBs into NRW. This was in addition to the eleven North and Mid Wales IDD's that were already administered by NRW and previously EA Wales. Emyr highlighted concerns at the time from representatives on the then IDBs that "the decision making would be moved away from them and the NRW would no longer be accountable to the local landowners and rate payers." He went on: "I have to say from a personal point of view as Chief Executive I had concerns as well. The changes were happening very shortly after NRW was created and we had an awful lot to do".

But he said the transition had happened very smoothly, and on time: "My concerns have been completely dispelled through this process and I would like to take this opportunity to convey my great thanks to all of those

involved including the IDBs themselves, their staff and staff from NRW?”

So what is different now? Emyr described the separate advisory groups for each of the former IDBs and for the 11 smaller legacy IDD's for which NRW has created cluster advisory groups. The Gwynedd & Meirionnydd Advisory Group has been in existence for about 12 months now and it will advise NRW on rates and levies for four of the smaller districts for the first time this autumn. Two further advisory groups in Dolgellau and Bangor were set to start later in November covering the seven remaining NRW internal drainage districts in Mid and North Wales and their advice will come to the NRW board for the first time this January. The Farmers Union of Wales and NFU Cymru are also working with NRW to establish the new advisory groups.

Each group is facilitated and attended by NRW IDD staff but are independently chaired and made up of local authority nominated councillors representatives from the ratepayer community from across the district and co-opted experts. NRW have invited other officers from local authorities, highways, trunk roads and partners in England on cross boarder IDD's if there is an issue they can help us to resolve.

The Advisory groups have two major functions. Firstly to agree the work plan and the budget for the district and secondly to advise the NRW board on what level the rates and levy's should be set at to recover the cost of the work within the district. There is a senior operational NRW manager present at the meetings and this means that the majority of the decisions needed can be made by the advisory groups themselves. But the whole point of bringing the administration of internal drainage within the remit of NRW is to create synergies with the other work that we are doing in these communities.

Emyr thanked those who had been involved in the transition including Matt Bajowski the NRW's engineer on Caldicot & Wentlooge Levels. Turning to NRW's relationship with ADA he said: “We are not working alone on IDD's and we have been very impressed by the professional and technical support that ADA provided to its members. Our relationship with ADA is a very beneficial one to us. We have technical challenges ahead which we want to solve and we want to contribute to and learn from the sharing of best practice not just across Wales but across the UK and Europe.” Emyr was grateful for the establishment of the ADA Cymru Branch to share knowledge between the IDD Advisory Groups. Finally Emyr noted an upcoming change in Wales in the Environment Bill going through the Cymru Parliament

at the moment which will establish a flood and coastal erosion committee to replace the current Flood Risk Management Wales Committee. This will remove any conflicts in existing legislation so that the new committee can provide a wider advisory role directly to the Minister for Natural Resources in Wales.

Question Time

The 78th Annual Conference's Question Time panel took questions over a breadth of subjects affecting the industry including: planning, funding, channel and asset maintenance and prioritisation, public sector cooperation, and the Somerset Rivers Authority. The panel consisted of Alison Baptiste (Director of FCERM Strategy & Investment, Environment Agency), David Hickman (Environment Commissioner, Lincolnshire County Council), Neil Hornby (Deputy Director, Flood Risk Management, Defra), Dr Emyr Roberts (Chief Executive, Natural Resources Wales) and Innes Thomson (Chief Executive, ADA). The following is a summary of some of the key remarks and questions.

Planning: Keith Moore, Vice Chairman, Goole & Airmyn IDB opened the discussion with a question regarding the status of IDBs in the consideration of planning applications and whether IDBs should be made statutory consultees. Keith drew on an example of the Board's advice not being regarded by the planning authority and the resulting residential developments later becoming flooded. Neil Hornby explained that there had been a consultation about the status of various statutory consultees in the previous year, the point arose about the merits of IDBs being a statutory consultee and the decision was taken to not make IDBs statutory consultee. Neil stated that this was Defra's viewpoint for the time being. He furthered this by explaining that whether you are a statutory consultee or not the decision still rests with the local authorities and representations may be made.

David Hickman explained that Lincolnshire had found a solution to this. An agreement was made that relevant IDBs are consulted automatically as part of the process when planning applications come in from the local planning authority. He expressed that there has been a friendly working relationship between both parties as a result and therefore felt that changes to the existing legislation was not necessary. To conclude this, Innes Thomson wrapped up this point by asking members to take away the subject, mull it over, and come back to ADA with their views so that ADA can then follow up with their relevant authorities on this issue.

Public Sector Cooperation Agreements: Next, John Hoyles MBE, Chairman of North Level District IDB

spoke positively about the application of PSCAs to unlock getting essential maintenance work to flood defences and watercourses completed. Addressing other IDBs in the room he highlighted the investment being made with the Environment Agency in his area and encouraged others to not be afraid and get stuck in.

Local Enterprise Partnerships: Andrew Morritt, Chief Executive of Ouse & Humber Drainage Board asked about how to unlock funding for water level management from LEPs. David Hickman said that the Greater Lincolnshire LEP was an interesting example as they had set agri-food as one of their key priorities. As a result the LEP had become very interested in not only FRM, but in water level management more broadly. He said that the Great Lincolnshire LEP was seeking to put in place a fairly high level plan to link some key elements of flood risk management with wider approaches to water, including drought. He said that the LEP hoped that as a result they would open the door to a wider range of funding sources than those that were available in the past.

Somerset Rivers Authority: The final question came from Ray Adlam, a Board Member from Axe Brue IDB, who asked the panel about its views on the future funding of the newly formed Somerset Rivers Authority. Neil Hornby responded by saying that, the Board of the SRA had recently written to Government ministers outlining their preference for a precept to be put in place through legislation. Neil said that Defra would be talking to the SRA's Board about how that is taken forward.

Henry Cator brought the question time session to a close and thanked delegates and panel members for their contributions.

Guest speaker: Ross Murray, President, Country Land & Business Association

At lunch, Ross Murray, who became President of the Country Land & Business Association (CLA) on 12th November, addressed delegates in the Great Hall.

Opening his address, Ross talked about his home and the importance of managing water levels in the Usk Valley which he said “in the summer we call it ‘Uscany’, but in the winter it is more like the Ganges when the Brecon Beacons flood us.” He recognised the essential work of ADA’s members “as without water level management much prime farm land, infrastructure, people’s homes and environmentally sensitive areas would of course be under water.” He went on: “It is really important that you are thanked and acknowledged for often difficult, unglamorous work, working within internal drainage boards, and it needs to be acknowledged as incredibly important”.

Ross reflected on the speeches and discussion from the morning’s Conference. He identified with Rory Stewart’s comment that “local people, they know more, they can do more, and they care more”. Ross said “I think that’s a really interesting political message to us all that we can take away”. On Sir Philip Dillely talking about the transfer of responsibilities he said: “Well I think that should be music to your ears, you should play on that and work with the Environment Agency to make a case for it”. He was also interested in the contrasting political system in Wales and its more centralised decision making that gives some challenges in trying to understand what is happening on certain land management decisions.

Ross highlighted the broader costs of flooding in 2013-14. He said that the Federation for Small Businesses had estimated a cost of those floods of £830 million to business, which he felt may well have been an underestimate, and that Visit Somerset estimated that there was a £2 million loss in tourism revenue to the county.

In recognising these costs, Ross highlighted the role the CLA is playing in arguing for appropriate incentives and rewards to the farmers and landowners to invest in capital flood defence works as well as for income tax relief for ongoing maintenance. He cautioned against creating new political bodies which assume tax raising powers, but contrasted that IDBs have always used their expertise to implement pragmatic solutions.

Concluding, Ross encouraged ADA and its members to work closely with the Rivers Trusts, for which Ross is a trustee, and emphasised the importance of collaborative working across a range of issues and organisations.

President’s address: Lord De Ramsey gave a warm welcome to all the attendees and guests and thanked speakers and panel members for their contributions. He spoke about engaging in democracy and highlighted IDBs as a strong example of democratically elected citizens spending money raised local for the benefit of their local communities. He noted that he had become a member of the Benwick IDB and Ramsey First District IDB at the age of 19 and encouraged delegates to consider how to inspire a new younger generation of members to become involved in IDBs. He concluded his speech by toasting ADA guests.