

The 79th Annual Conference of the Association of Drainage Authorities was held on 17 November at One Great George Street in Westminster, London. This report presents an extended summary of the Conference proceedings. The report includes Association business, Board and Committee reports, presentations and a summary of the question and answer discussion.

Welcome by Henry Cator OBE

Henry welcomed over 220 delegates to the Conference by reminding them that despite all the tumultuous changes of 2016, the fundamental reason as to why we're all here would remain. He said: "I can promise you if I stand in front of you next year, one thing will be the same, and that is our product will still be running downhill. Water. That is what we're about".

He urged delegates to refrain from getting caught up in the politics and to remember that our industry is a simple one, rooted in common sense, and that the purpose we serve is an important one. He expressed that in these unpredictable times and given the extreme climatic events of recent years, we must be prepared for the worst and try our best to avoid disaster: "what is certain is our systems of handling water, our channels, and that our rivers need to be fit for purpose in order to meet that challenge".

Henry's speech continued by addressing the topic of catchment management: "In order for us to manage these catchments efficiently we must collaboratively work with our partners, such as the EA, Natural England, wildlife groups, farmers, Lead Local Flood Authorities, IDBs etc". He was pleased to see people in the audience who represented all of those different groups and interests.

Discussing the age of those involved in the industry he urged delegates in the coming year to encourage young people to get involved in water level management. He praised the example of those who were working with schools such as North Level District IDB.

Before Henry introduced Dr Coffey he reminded delegates that we are here to work collaboratively in order to achieve a more cohesive water level management industry across the UK.

Opening address: Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Environment & Rural Opportunities

Dr Coffey started her address by expressing her appreciation for the work of the East Suffolk IDB which covers much of her parliamentary constituency and expressed strong support for the significant role IDBs play nationwide in managing drainage, water levels and flood risk and balancing these needs with those of the environment and wildlife.

She said: "You understand the needs of the local area and are uniquely placed to forge partnerships with all key organisations delivering effective action locally". Dr Coffey talked about her first-hand experience of the misery that flooding and coastal erosion had brought to people in her constituency. She was keen to raise everyone's awareness of flood risk and encourage people, businesses and communities to take action to prepare for flooding and to recognise the importance of working together. On co-operation, she was pleased to see the continuing roll-out of public sector co-operation agreements with IDBs and local authorities.

Dr Coffey also highlighted the importance of the collective voice that ADA represents to government and its agencies and its participation in the National Flood Resilience Review. In considering the review, she recognised the importance of maintenance, along with the need for all involved to take a catchment approach, looking at all the issues at play from source to sea and embracing natural flood management as part of the solution. She encouraged ADA's members to engage with their local partners and communities in developing such natural flood management schemes that can complement the work they already do. She was also keen to see more members apply for vacant posts on RFCCs across the country to bring a sense of constructive challenge to the table.

Dr Coffey said that her department was still considering proposals from the EA on transferring responsibility for various stretches of main river from the EA (de-maining) countrywide. She emphasised her keenness to ensure that such plans were undertaken in the spirit of mutual co-operation and that the EA is not seen to be palming off its responsibilities.

Dr Coffey acknowledged the challenging work ongoing around the potential expansion and creation of new IDBs, in relation to the lack of accurate ratings information. She thanked those IDB officers who were assisting Defra to understand and evaluate the impacts and benefits of using more up-to-date information supplied by the Valuations Office. She added: "We're committed to work with you and ADA to address these issues and unlock any barriers. I also want to reassure you that the funding from local authorities will continue as it is a statutory duty".

In conclusion, Dr Coffey said that she wanted to leave the natural environment in a better state than it was found and that Defra looks forward to ADA's input when it launches its framework for consultation on the Government's 25-year environment plan.

Dr Coffey kindly agreed to take a few questions from the floor following her speech. Ian Warsap (Black Sluice IDB), Cllr Gordon Bambridge (Norfolk River IDB), Peter Burton (Bluntisham IDB) and Charles Pudge (River Lugg IDB) all asked the Minister about main river maintenance and for her ongoing assistance to see that de-maining is delivered on the ground. Dr Coffey said she would be happy to look into the situations described and that she was keen to ensure a focus on local priorities and getting activities done by whoever is best placed to carry out those activities. She was mindful that whilst Defra has slightly held up the process, the delay has been to ensure that "these responsibilities are only taken on if IDB really want to do them and that assets are handed over in a reasonably fit state".

David Thomas (Middle Level Commissioners) expressed a concern that Brexit might affect the potential for investment and research and he asked what the Government was planning to maintain Britain's leading edge in the field of flood risk management. Dr Coffey said that the Chancellor had been clear that he wants to ensure that the UK continues to have future funding for research, but also for environmental based schemes where this can add value to what we achieve.

Association Business & AGM

Elections: Henry Cator was unanimously re-elected as ADA's Chairman proposed by Robert Caudwell, seconded by Charles Pudge. Lord De Ramsey was unanimously re-elected as ADA's President along with the Vice Presidents stated on page three of the Conference Handbook. Henry Cator welcomed Robert Caudwell as Vice Chairman and thanked Peter Pridgeon for his years of service in that role for ADA.

Accounts: The audited accounts for the year ending 31 December 2015 were presented to the Conference. The auditors Streets Audit LLP were reappointed as auditors of ADA's 2016 accounts. This was proposed by Frances Bowler, seconded by Peter Pridgeon, and passed unanimously.

Subscriptions: The proposed subscriptions for 2017

were presented to the Conference. There was no increase over subscriptions set for 2016.

Membership: ADA's membership in 2016 was noted as reported in Appendix D, there were 104 IDB members, 3 national authority members, 6 Welsh internal drainage district advisory group members, 12 RFCC members, 66 Commercial Associate Members and 35 Local Authorities who were Associate Members. From 2017 Local Authorities would be a distinct class of membership, separate from Associate Members which would be for those organisations that supply services and equipment to the sector. Keith Moore, (Goole & Airmyn IDB) asked a question regarding whether IDBs should be granted statutory consultee status for development within their districts. Innes Thomson responded that there was not unanimity from across IDBs that they would all welcome statutory consultee status. Following discussions the conclusion reached was that closer collaboration between planning authorities and IDBs was welcomed to ensure that IDBs were engaged with effectively on planning matters.

Reports from ADA's Board of Directors and Committees: Henry Cator presented the reports tabled in Appendix F of the Conference Handbook from ADA's Board, Policy & Finance Committee and Technical & Environmental Committee. Henry expressed his gratitude to all of ADA's Directors for their guidance and leadership of the Association. Innes Thomson highlighted the importance of ADA's Business Plan 2017-2020 that would set the direction for the Association over the coming three years. Innes welcomed comments from members so that ADA can shape a plan that reflects its members' priorities. Henry also highlighted ADA's work with EUWMA and the value of engaging at a European level and sharing knowledge and ideas. Duncan Boughton (Ransonmoor District Drainage Commissioners) asked about ADA's contribution towards eel passage research. Innes Thomson highlighted the importance of the research and collaboration achieved by contributions being made from across ADA's membership including ADA itself.

Chief Executive's report: Innes Thomson presented the report tabled in Appendix G of the Conference Handbook. Innes highlighted the new ADA website and the evolution of ADA's branding with the strap line 'Representing drainage, water level and flood risk management authorities'. Innes was encouraged by the breadth of representation in the audience from across

the Environment Agency, IDBs and local authorities and the collaboration he had seen between all three this year. Innes noted that: “The fact of the matter is we had the Minister here with us this morning. We had her predecessor with us last year. Because they recognise that ADA is able to assist with taking forward some of the policies and some of the measures that we need to take forward in this country, not least including de-manning.”

Henry Cator concluded the Association business by thanking the ADA office staff for their hard work and assistance through the past year.

Keynote addresses

Emma Howard Boyd, Chair, Environment

Agency Emma Howard Boyd began her speech by describing what her new role as the EA’s Chairperson has consisted of in recent months, explaining that she has spent time travelling the country, both to see the EA’s own work and to meet partners and people living and working in the communities they serve.

She said she had seen for herself the positive impact the EA’s work was having on people’s lives, stating: “We create better places, we think long-term about nature, we protect communities from flooding and we generate growth”. Emma placed emphasis on how the EA tackles issues, not just the outcome, and explained how she felt this positively reflected the culture of the EA as an organisation.

Emma’s speech focused on answering: “What are the EA doing to reduce the risk of flooding this winter?” She explained that the EA had spent £40 million on 660 repair projects to restore and improve defences flood hit areas impacted in 2015-2016 and cited a number of ongoing projects including the Cumbria and Calderdale Flood Action Plans and Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme.

She said that the EA had recently signed a new contract with Stobart haulage group that will enable flood defences to be transported faster to areas of need. She hoped these measures put the EA in a stronger place to face this winter’s storms. Yet she was clear that the risk from flooding can never be completely eliminated and was pleased to learn how homes and businesses were learning to adapt to the risk as well. She said the EA had also been working on simplifying flood risk communications and that their winter flood awareness campaign, aimed at 16-35 year olds this year, focused on notifying people whether they are at risk and how they should act.

Emma emphasised the importance of working together with partners and communities. Talking about the 55 PSCAs in place between the EA, IDBs and local authorities she said: “The outcomes achieved so far give us a fantastic flavour of what can be done when we work together to maximise the skills and resources available for flood risk management”.

Emma concluded by talking about the EA’s management during and following a flood incident, She recognised that this is an area where the EA needs to do more looking into the role of PSCAs. She wanted to ensure that risk management authorities are collectively making the best use of resources available, including those of contractors, sharing information and having an overall plan for incidents.

Finishing her speech Emma reiterated that collaboration and innovation are the key to finding the answers to a healthier environment and underlined that “We need to ensure that the needs of communities, farmers, business and wildlife are at the forefront of everything we do”.

Minette Batters, Deputy President, National Farmers’ Union of England & Wales:

Minette discussed the emerging picture for British agriculture following the referendum to leave the European Union. She reported that the NFU had recently consulted its members which understandably found that future trading relationships were its members’ number one priority; and whilst the Norwegian-EU arrangement was the most favoured, a larger number were looking for a new bespoke UK deal to gain full, unrestricted access to the single market.

She felt it was essential that we change our language around farm support payments to make it clear to the public that these are “a public investment for which in return we will continue to get safe, quality, affordable food, healthy soils, quality water, a priceless, treasured and beautiful landscape, not forgetting measures to address market failure to help the industry increase productivity, become more competitive, and to market and promote our products both here and abroad”.

She said that: “Regulation must be outcome focused, evidence based and be established on sound science avoiding emotion and national politics”. Whilst we remain in the European Union she encouraged organisations like ADA and the NFU to influence positive changes to EU legislation as this is likely to be the starting point for UK legislation into the next decade.

Minette outlined the issues the NFU would like to address in the upcoming review of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) by the EU in 2019 which included the 'one-out-all-out' principle of waterbody condition assessment, which she said "seems like an unfair assessment of water status that may not reflect the view of water users or the general public's experience of our waterways". She also encouraged us to think beyond WFD's deadline for achieving good ecological status by 2027 in order to ensure we plan for realistic and achievable goals.

Moving on to IDBs, she praised the work she had seen by North Level District Drainage Board and its close working between the EA, Natural England, the RSPB, and landowners to achieve common water management aims. She praised those boards who were working with the EA to deliver more on main river maintenance through PSCAs.

Reflecting on the floods following Storm Desmond last year, she said that many farmers were still recovering from its impact 12 months on. She said that the NFU's Flood Manifesto would be published early in the new year, in which the NFU would set out the clear policy asks and actions that it would like to see the Government and others to take to mitigate flood risk in the future.

She said: "Our preferred approach is for government to establish a long term strategic plan for flood and coastal risk management. Our manifesto sets out that this plan must be designed to cope with extreme events and take a whole catchment approach to management and intervention". She went on: "Where farmers provide a service of mitigating flood risk to help protect others, this must be coherently planned component for catchment management for which farmers must be fairly compensated".

Minette was clear that, in setting its flood management policy, the Government must not overlook the importance and contribution of our food and farming sectors to the economy. She said: "We have some of the most productive and highest value agricultural land in the flood plain or coastal regions, most vulnerable to flooding and this deserves to be protected".

Concluding her speech she said that: "As farmers, we've got to look at how we find more innovative ways of working with government and the EA and how we could collectively do things better. For too long, I believe we focused our energies on what's not working,

rather than what is. We must make sure that we work together to overcome whatever legislative, historical or practical hurdles prevent us from making improvements on the way that we manage water".

Question Time

The 79th Annual Conference's Question Time session continued the enthusiastic debate and discussion, considering a breadth of subjects including: SuDS maintenance, resource management, badgers and Brexit. On this year's panel sat: John Curtin (Executive Director of Flood & Coastal risk management, EA), David Cooper (Deputy Director Flood Management, Defra), Steve Willis (Chief Operating Officer, Lincolnshire County Council) and Innes Thomson (Chief Executive, ADA).

Brexit: The discussion started with Phil Holms (Axe Brue IDB) raising the topic of subsidy in the agriculture industry post-Brexit. He asked what opportunities the panel saw for developing a different approach to supporting farmers based on public benefits, specifically, to support flood management and restore soils.

David Cooper approached the topic by stating that the UK's withdrawal from the EU presented a big opportunity to thinking about agricultural policy in the round. David explained that the Government will be seeking our views with the publication of a framework document on farming and agriculture to kick start this discussion.

John Curtin felt that ADA, the EA, NFU and IDBs shared a lot in common in this area and should be working on having a better collective voice on what we feel the opportunities are around natural flood management.

Sustainable Drainage Systems: Jane Burch (Suffolk County Council) and Iain Smith (Middle Level Commissioners) asked what the panel thought should happen to overcome the potential future flood risk posed by unmaintained sustainable drainage systems?

Steve Willis recognising the frustration regarding SuDS said: "I think it's fair to say that I thought we'd got a solution [in Schedule 3 of the Flood & Water Management Act], but there was a late call by Government to go in a different direction."

He welcomed a potential review of SuDS and the planning system led by the Department of Communities and Local Government next year and felt

it was a good time to discuss this issue and also look at the cost to lead local flood authorities in carrying out their statutory surface water flood risk management obligations.

Innes highlighted that ADA was starting to work with colleagues at ADEPT and at Water UK who had similar views. He felt we all needed to help Defra take a driving position on this issue in order to give a firm direction that was backed by the industry.

Badgers: Giles Crust (Lindsey Marsh Drainage Board) raised the topic of neglected river maintenance, specifically the River Steeping, which he said had not been dredged for 35 years due to a lack of finances in the EA. He was concerned about the cost of works by the EA to manage badger setts found in the river's banks and asked the panel what weighting they thought should be given to water management versus wildlife in our budgets?

John Curtin answered by explaining that: "Badgers are protected by a certain legal status. We all in this room have to balance flood risk needs with the law. We've moved to be as efficient as we can in that legal framework, so Natural England has given ourselves a single [organisational] license so we don't have to keep going back. As it stands, we're trying to be as efficient as we can and stay within the law".

Steve Willis reiterated this point by saying: "We have the same issues when we try and build bypasses. You find things you possibly don't expect to find shall we say you have to deal with those things as they crop up" – "We need to find the balance between abiding by the law and also not preventing things happening at the pace we want them too".

Lunchtime speakers

Dr Laura Nola, Associazione Nazionale Bonifiche Irrigazioni (ANBI): It was a great pleasure to be able to welcome Dr Laura Nola from Italy to this year's conference and in particular for her to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the European Union of Water Management Associations (EUWMA) with us.

Making warm reference to ADA as founding members, Laura thanked David Riddington and David Noble for their foresight in helping to set up EUWMA on 21st May 1996. Laura went on to highlight the success of the nine countries today which form EUWMA's

membership base. Laura welcomed ADA's continued membership of EUWMA, despite the UK's vote to leave the EU.

Laura concluded her speech: "We [EUWMA] are a technical organisation, we discuss innovation, basic knowledge, common issues and we exchange visits. So, we have no absolute borders. A pumping station is a pumping station. Inside or outside the EU I think that we, people of drainage, can't have political borders because the only borders we know and respect are catchment areas".

Neil Parish, Chair House of Commons Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Select Committee:

Neil Parish began by talking about the politics of flooding. He said that he had had it described to him that: "If a flood lasts a day, it's an act of God, but if it lasts longer it's an act of the government or rather the inaction of the government".

He explained that it is the role of his select committee is to scrutinise the work of government in this area, to challenge and come forward with structural ideas to improve delivery. He talked about his committee's investigations in preparing its report on Future Flood Prevention visiting both Somerset and the Netherlands.

Drawing on his knowledge from Somerset, (he was once a member of the Paulton District Drainage Board), he talked about the need for the careful dredging of rivers to maintain their capacity, and even the possibility of a barrage across the River Parrett in the future. However, he was clear to distinguish that: "If you're upstream and you speed up the river you're going to go down and flood the next village faster... so it's not such a good idea to increase the speed of the flow". Therefore, his committee had shown a particular interest in measures to attenuate flows upstream such as leaky dams.

He said that the Committee were struck by the clear line-of-sight in the Netherlands, where they have a commissioner who is answerable to their parliament and then down through the Rijkswaterstaat, water boards, and right down to the local level. This was why they had made similar proposals in their report. However, he said the main priority at present should be making sure that the Government are: "devolving powers down from the top, down to drainage boards and not just devolving powers, but devolving money; making sure that on the ground you can actually do things through contracts and through local people".