

3rd March 2020

**MINUTES of the FORTIETH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
of the RIVER GREAT OUSE BRANCH of the
ASSOCIATION OF DRAINAGE AUTHORITIES**

held at Prickwillow Village Hall, Prickwillow, near Ely on Tuesday 3rd March 2020 at 2.30pm

Present

H. Raby in the Chair

P Beckenham	Middle Level
J L Brown	Middle Level
P Burrows	Environment Agency
M Church	Haddenham Level
F Dunne	Old West
J.H. Fenn	Middle Level
M Gilbert	Littleport & Downham
J J F Graves	Old West/Swaffham
J Harrison	Burnt Fen
J E Heading	Manea & Welney
M E Heading	Middle Level
P. Hirons	Bedford Group
C Holman	Southery/Burnt Fen
J W Lloyd	Cawdle Fen
B Long	Kings Lynn
L McShane	Middle Level
R Means	Downham & Stow/Nordelph/Upwell
S Moncaster	Water Resources East
A A D Morbey	Ely Group/Middle Fen & Mere
A Newton	Ely Group/Downham Market Group
B Norman	Mildenhall
N Pratt	Stoke Ferry/Downham Market Group
E P Rice	Padnal & Waterden
C Rose	Churchfield & Plawfield/Needham & Laddus/ Upwell/East of Ouse, Polver & Nar (BCKLWN)
B Stewart	RFCC (Central)
W Sutton	Middle Level (FDC)
D C Thomas	Middle Level
I Thomson	ADA
K Wilderspin	Swavesey
C Wilson	Lakenheath
J Woodward	Environment Agency
A Yarrow	Haddenham/Littleport & Downham

David Thomas welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Great Ouse Branch AGM and commented on the successful morning of workshops which had been held prior to the AGM which consisted of sessions on Biodiversity, Communication and Water Resources. The sessions had been led by Jen Woodward, Customer Engagement Team Leader, Environment Agency, Steve Moncaster, Technical Director at Water Resources East and Peter Beckenham, Conservation Officer, Middle Level Commissioners.

Chairman

It was proposed and seconded that Mr Harry Raby be elected Chairman of the Branch for the ensuing year.

Vice Chairman

It was proposed and seconded that Mr Marc Heading be elected Vice Chairman of the branch for the ensuing year.

Apologies

B Agass (Bedford Group), J Chrisp (Ramsey IDB), M Davenport (Old West IDB), R Dean (Swaffham), S Hawkins (Environment Agency), Mrs J E Heading (Ely Group), D McMurdo (Bedfordshire & River Ivel), J Oldfield (Bedford Group), C Wright (East Harling)

Minutes/Matters Arising

The minutes of the Fortieth Annual Conference held on 12th March 2019 were presented as circulated and approved.

There were no matters arising.

Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman thanked David Thomas for organising a successful morning session which had been very informative and allowed discussion of matters of importance to board members. He also recorded his thanks for the excellent lunch that had been provided. The Chairman reported that the Executive had met since the last meeting of the AGM and this had proved useful as part of the move to make the Branch more pro-active and relevant to members of the Great Ouse Branch.

ADA-Mr Innes Thomson

Innes Thomson thanked the Branch for the opportunity to speak at the meeting. He thought that the workshop sessions had been successful and were important in developing boards skill set and in particular commented on the communication sessions which had explored the importance of communication on the use of flood water management to the public. He was pleased to see so many different members of ADA in attendance at the sessions and AGM and stated this was a good example of the collaborative approach with the Environment Agency, the RFCC and Local Authorities which continued to evolve.

Innes Thomason commented on the Environment Bill, which would be primary legislation, noting that it included in it that Internal Drainage Boards would be able in future to extend their districts and that there was also to be a mechanism for calculating the value of newly included land for rating purposes as very few records of land values existed and this was creating difficulties for IDBs

He noted that it was proposed by ADA to provide an Environmental version of the Good Governance Guide and work on this was proceeding. Its aim was to provide governance on environmental plans and actions and work on this was being funded through a grant from Defra.

Innes Thomson commented on the Special Levy and Local Authority Council Tax rises being currently capped at 2% and there was a proposal to remove Rates from capping and he commented that ADA would like to see drainage rates recorded as a separate line on the council tax bill to draw rate payer's attention to the work undertaken by IDBs.

He then commented on the conveyance of water and general management of watercourses and how it was important to look at this on a scientific basis to assess how long it was taking water to get from flooded areas back to where it should be.

On events the room was advised that it was proposed to hold a summit on the 30th March 2021 at Stoneleigh Park which would include representatives from the board, John Curtin (Director of Environment Agency), Sally Randall (Director of Defra) and Stuart Roberts (Deputy President of National Farmers Union).

In regard to Floodex – Peterborough 2021 it was proposed that this should be the last of the current form of the Floodex events which had been held annually for some years and that in 2022 there should be a live demonstration event similar to those which had occurred in Yorkshire/Humberside. The EA flood and coastal conference was currently planned to be at Telford starting on the 23rd June and a policy strategy on what will happen on this in future years was under considered.

Innes Thomson finally commented that ADA continued to work on lobbying the Government and Defra on its views especially the seven key point plan which had been developed at the annual conference.

Health and Safety Audit

An advice note had been provided from ADA on health and safety matters based on the survey conducted by ADA. The main message from this being that responsibility for health and safety remained with the Boards and it was important that a leadership role should be developed within individual Boards for responsibility for health and safety and that ADA would provide future guidance on health and safety matters for the Boards.

It was proposed and hoped that a seminar on health and safety/welfare matters could be developed and worked up at the end of 2020/beginning of 2021.

On EA revenue and the maintenance spend, ADA had continued to talk to Defra and Government on this, as there seemed to be some difficulty in getting them to acknowledge the value and returns that adequate investment in this area will deliver. Flooding has been getting a very high profile in the press at the current time and this may influence the Government and Defra in the future. The Government is being very tight lipped on its thinking on funding but hopefully this would be a consideration during the period of this Parliament. There did seem to be a tendency to concentrate on capital spending and what is 'new and shiny' and there had therefore been an ongoing lack of funding on maintenance, and it was not clear if Treasury was listening to those who were repeatedly calling for more secure and appropriate funding for this.

Water Resources East -Mr Steve Moncaster

Mr Moncaster explained that Water Resources East was one of five regional planning groups set up to look at water resources. These were the East of England, South East, West country, Yorkshire and Severn Trent area. Water Resources East is different from the others which tend to be made of water companies. Water Resources East is an independent multi-sector company not only representing water companies but also agricultural abstractors, drainage authorities and environmental experts.

The focus of Water Resources East is on drought and water supply and there is a massive link between water supply and flood risk management. The two are linked by storage and in the regional plan they are currently looking at two new reservoirs to serve the area. There can be benefits from the integrated approach working towards a draft plan which is to be produced by August 2021 which will allow for a year's consultation and then a final draft would be produced in August 2022. Anglian Water are looking at a site location study for the Ouse area which imports a lot of water to the catchment. Water Resources East were also working with the Environment Agency on abstraction management and control of storage and believe storage of water would become a very important issue.

Mr Moncaster stated that there was an increasing demand for water from housing, agriculture and business. Agriculture is the biggest user of water in this area and there was potential for growth in the Fens area and therefore there was an urgent need to look at water available for food production.

Innes Thomson, ADA, thanked the IDBs for the support given to WRE and reminded the meeting that ADA were represented on the Water Resources East Board.

Environment Agency – Mr Brian Stewart And Mr Paul Burrows

Mr Brian Stewart – Chair RFCC - ADA

Mr Stewart said he was optimistic about the budget and the next capital settlement. There were resources challenges especially for local authorities, lead flood authorities and planning authorities who would find it difficult to cope with the amount of future growth predicted. He also felt that this could result in some assets being transferred.

His view on the recent response to the flooding incidences was that the Government needs to grasp the nettle and clearly define who is responsible for dealing with flooding incidents as this currently lacks the clarity needed.

There were questions from the floor to Brian Stewart from Jonathan Brown and David Thomas.

Mr Brown asked if £250 million is needed just to stand still what were the long-term choices that would have to be considered for the Fens. Mr Stewart explained that further engineering solutions for the Fens needed to be explored and how to best deliver them in a sustainable way for each area needed to be fully understood.

Mr Thomas stated there were two choices. Planning for the future or wait for the assets to fail. Mr Stewart referred to the flooding events of 1947 and 1953. These were both major events post war and the government managed to find sufficient funding to carry out the work needed. Mr Stewart stated that pressure needed to be put on Ministers about funding for flooding and flood risk management and he referred to an excellent paper that the National Farmers Union had produced. There was a legacy of structures that are maintained by the Environment Agency that do not provide benefit and this also needs to be addressed. A lot of drainage pumps were built over 30 years ago

and as they have a life span of about 50 years many of them will soon be at the stage where they needed to be replaced and this would become a major problem in terms of funding.

Mr Paul Burrows

Mr Burrows commented that this was the first meeting without John Martin in the audience. Mr Burrows wished to record the excellent advice and guidance he had received from John over the years.

It is wet! Mr Burrows commented that the area was extremely wet and only the river Cam was currently below its normal level. He went on to state that it had been the wettest February since records began! However, the Ouse Washes infrastructure had protected this area and that the tidal river and silt flushing was improving at Denver. Pilot agitation dredging plans for this were being developed which would form part of the 15 year hold the line strategy.

Mr Burrows said that there were significant challenges facing the Environment Agency, very dry weather followed by very wet weather and there were resources issues also. The Environment Agency had recently lost a lot of good experienced staff and there was uncertainty linked with Brexit and he hoped that the future would be brighter for the Agency.

The new programme for the Agency would be about resilience and protection of homes. Progress had been made this year, including the opening of the Wolverton pumping station at Kings Lynn Internal Drainage Board which had been opened officially by the Queen.

Mr Burrows reported that the revenue maintenance budget was £6 million per annum with £4.3 million of grant aid funding.

Mr Burrows said that some fantastic work had been carried out by IDBs on the public sector co-operation agreements and the scheme at Swavesey had gone particularly well. It had been a massive year politically with lots of big ambitions particularly the programme of work on future climate change and the Environment Agency carbon zero pledge. The new spending revenue would be set in the autumn for maintenance and that this would also include staffing arrangements. It was hoped that potential changing views on funding will enable more funding for drainage projects. Mr Burrows commented that £270 million was needed over the next 15 years just to stand still. Other challenges were growth in the upper catchment, the A14/East West Rail and working more closely with IDBs to achieve the best for them and the EA out of this work.

Accounts To 31st March 2019

It was proposed and seconded that the accounts of the Branch be accepted and approved by Members, as presented and circulated. This was carried unanimously.

Subscriptions For 2020/2021

It was recommended that there be no change to the subscription this year as there was sufficient funds in the balances but that it should be expected that the costs will increase in future years to reflect the additional work being undertaken by the branch.

Date of next annual general meeting

Tuesday 2nd March 2021 at Prickwillow Village Hall.

The meeting to be in the same format with the morning session followed by the AGM in the afternoon.

Any other business

None.