

MINUTES of the FORTY SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE
of the RIVER GREAT OUSE BRANCH of the
ASSOCIATION OF DRAINAGE AUTHORITIES

Held at Prickwillow Village Hall, Main Street, Prickwillow on Tuesday 1st March 2022 at 2.00pm

Present

M Heading in the Chair

D Beckett	Burnt Fen IDB
A Blanchfield	Stringside IDB
J Brown	Middle Level Commissioners
J Chrisp	Ramsey IDB
J Graves	Swaffham IDB
J Harrison	Burnt Fen IDB
J Heading	Ely Group/Downham Market Group of IDBs
P Hirons	Bedford Group
P Hulme	EA
B Jarman	Middenhall IDB
J W Lloyd	Cawdle Fen
S Lloyd	ADA
B Lowe	Kings Lynn Internal Drainage Board
A Macloughlan	EA
D McMurdo	Bedford Group
Lorna McShane	Middle Level Commissioners
A Morbey	Ely Group
A Newton	Middle Fen & Mere IDB
B Norman	Mildenhall IDB
N Scott	Stoke Ferry IDB
B Steward	EA/Chair of RFCC
D C Thomas	Middle Level Commissioners
K Wilderspin	Swavesey Internal Drainage Board
C Wilson	Lakenheath IDB

1. Election of Chairman

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

2. Election of Vice Chairman

It was proposed and seconded that Mr Doug McMurdo be elected Vice Chairman of the Branch for the ensuing year.

3. Election of the Executive Committee

The Members of the Executive Committee were elected en bloc and are;

H Raby, M Heading, J Fenn, J Brown, W P T Legge, A A D Morbey, D McMurdo, P Hirons, T Matkin, J Heading and B Long.

4. Apologies for Absence

J Fenn, I Thompson, J Heading, S Romsey, P Duffield

5. Minutes of the Forty-First AGM held remotely on 2nd March 2021

The minutes of the Forty First Annual Conference held on 2nd March 2021 were presented as circulated and approved.

6. Matters Arising

At the last meeting it was recommended and approved that the Branch Chairman would sit on the RFCC as an EA appointee. It was considered that this new appointment, which had been proposed by Brian Steward (RFCC Chair), would help strengthen the link between the Great Ouse and the Environment Agency. Marc Heading was now attending meetings of the RFCC as Branch representative.

7. Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman stated that he had attended three virtual meetings of the RFCC on behalf of ADA and was looking forward to attending his first actual meeting.

8. Reports from ADA

Sofi Lloyd, Technical Officer for ADA, attended the meeting to represent the Association.

- i) Sofi summarised the work currently being carried out by ADA on behalf of its members.

Discussions were progressing on the red diesel issue. The Minister and Defra are listening and being supportive. Further discussions are taking place with HMRC and ADA will provide an update when the issue is clarified.

- ii) Two new members have been welcomed onto the ADA Board: Brian Stewart and Ian Hodge from the Environment Agency.
- iii) Defra had invited ADA to liaise on the implementation of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act.
- iv) ADA are to join the Strategic Group for ELMS.
- v) ***All Party Parliamentary Group for Sustainable Flood and Drainage Management***
This has been well supported with forty members attending. There had been some discussion about how to address the current Revenue/Capital Funding imbalance, which was helpful. Andrew McGill had made a very good presentation on this from a procurement point of view.

Doug McMurdo commented on the All Party Parliamentary Group which was a group of MPs in Parliament who had a common interest in a topic and he considered that it was important that they tapped into ADA's expertise.

It was also considered important that the correct MPs were on this group especially those which represent Drainage Boards areas and flood risk areas. The All Party Parliamentary Group will be formally registered with its own logo etc.

There was another All Party Parliamentary Group on water management and flooding but this is primarily looking at insurance issues.

David Thomas stated that he had attended an All Party Parliamentary Group on navigation and the experience was like leap frogging layers of bureaucracy to get access to those who set policy direction.

Sofi was asked about the time frame for the resolution of the red diesel issue and would there be an answer before 1st April.

In response Sofi stated that a Counsel's opinion had been received by ADA and that this will be disseminated to the members of ADA and the Technical and Policy and Finance Committees of ADA.

A Memorandum of Understanding was being prepared by HMRC and there was to be an amendment to the Excise Notice 75 about the definition of agriculture – importantly the words “solely” to “mainly” were to be changed.

A new ADA webpage for all events had been set up and there were links in it allowing users to book for an event.

11. Reports from the Environment Agency

i) Brian Stewart, Chair of the RFCC

Brian stated he thought it very useful to have the Branch Chairman on the RFCC and Brian himself had been appointed to the ADA Board on behalf of all the twelve Chairs of the RFCCs nationwide.

With the introduction of the new 6-year Capital Programme it was important that schemes were delivered on time and on budget – although we have to accept the current inflation in construction materials will have an impact on what can be delivered within the funds currently available. It is therefore hoped that the current 6-year programme can be recalibrated to provide additional funding to ensure the original linked target can be met.

The increase in precept had been set at 3% for Local Authorities and 2% for Internal Drainage Boards and it was intended that 2% be the base level increase for both Local Government and Internal Drainage Boards for the following two years unless there were special circumstances.

Stuart advised that many Section 19 Reports had been prepared following the previous flooding events and we should be able to learn from these and look at opportunities for funding to address problems which contributed to the flooding.

Brian Stewart also commented on the red diesel issue which impacted on the EA and the RFCC and acknowledging the value of the lobbying that had been carried out by ADA to resolve this matter for Internal Drainage Boards.

ii) *Philippa Hulme EA*

Phil Hulme introduced herself as the new “Paul Burrows” and stated that she had been in post since last summer.

iii) *Amanda Macloughlan EA*

Amanda Macloughlan also introduced herself, as the new Operations Manager and advised that she had been in post since October, having previously been Asset Performance Manager in the Thames area.

Phil and Amanda reported that following the flood event of 2020/21, a lot of interest had been generated in flooding and a number of communities were taking action in their own area which had required considerable engagement with them.

As far as the flooding event was concerned the EA were still in recovery mode and were getting additional funding and using external resources to inspect assets and undertake repairs. Eleven projects have been completed and five scoped and designated and in other cases contingency plans had been put in place, and improvements had been made to flood warning.

Jonathan Brown asked how many assets needed to be repaired.

Amanda advised that there were five outstanding assets to be repaired, but in the meantime contingency plans had been put in place for interim protection.

Phil Hulme advised that there had been a lot of internal change in terms of staffing at the Environment Agency which was an additional challenge. There were currently thirty rounds of recruitment taking place in their teams, but they were retaining experience in different roles within the organisation and acknowledging that they needed more engagement with other stakeholders going forward.

Amanda advised that this situation within staffing and recruitment was mirrored across the industry and it was very much the case of having to grow your own expertise within the organisation. One of the new proposals was for an Internal Drainage Board facing officer at the EA who could work on Internal Drainage Board matters including Public Sector Co-operation Agreements (PSCAs). PSCAs are working well and are an efficient route for delivery.

It was observed that the Capital Programme has doubled for the next six years and this had created a lot of additional work. Also, that a Partnership Funding gap had been identified in The Fens and £100m was needed to keep the current assets at design standard. A Partnership Funding expert was to be appointed to assist with project business case delivery.

The issue of carbon had not yet been grappled with. The EA were reviewing their carbon footprint and they currently had external consultants employed to advise on what could be done to meet the carbon neutral target.

On a positive note, there had been significant delivery in the region eg Islington Pumping Station and the King’s Ditch Scheme in the Bedford Group area, the Middle Level Commissioners’ Bank Raising Scheme which were all very good examples of Partnership working.

The Internal Drainage Boards’ Fen’s Baseline Report had now been published on the ADA website.

This year’s Revenue Budget was £5.3m which was £1.4m more than last year, but factors to consider were construction inflation and the issue of red diesel.

Growth is an important issue for the catchment and the development of the Oxcam Arc would produce a large growth corridor.

The winter floods of 2020/21 had illustrated how important communication was for the EA and how much of a challenge it presented. The whole volume of different strategies and Agencies involved in the Flood Risk World is a challenge.

David Thomas commented on the delivery programme and that any scheme above £0.5m needs to be supported by a catchment model. This takes considerable time and adds a year to the process of scheme development and he requested that the EA try and streamline the approval process.

David Thomas also asked for an update on the Great Ouse Dredging Pilot, and on the subject of Net Zero was any grant available to switch to electric plant from diesel and finally would it be possible to have a chart showing the new staffing structure and roles at the EA.

Brian Stewart agreed that grant application processes needed to be simplified and that work should be carried out on a trusted partnership basis.

Phil Hulme commented on the trial for agitation of silt. Expert evidence had been obtained which suggested that although silt would be moved by this process it would return with the tides and hence this was not proceeding at the moment.

A comment was made from the floor that there had been no communication on the silt trial to Parish Councils in the area.

Doug McMurdo suggested that dredging would be a good issue for the All Party Parliamentary Group to consider.

Dredging had taken place on the Somerset Levels as a trial and ADA had published the results of this work.

A member stated that dredging was carried out on the Great Ouse in the 1960s. There was a need for traditional dredging to be re-introduced as no work on this had been carried out for sixty years. It was a very simple process and not rocket science to dredge and also to add clay on the banks to protect them from leaking.

Dredging had occurred on the River Lark eight years ago. It had made 1 metre difference in level and this was considered successful.

Jonathan Brown asked a question on water quality downstream from sewerage treatment works and water pumps/assets that are being used to mitigate water quality issues. It was advised that this process was sometimes better than filtration towers.

The Chairman thanked the EA for their contribution and attendance at the meeting.

10. Approval of Branch Accounts To 31st March 2020

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.

11. Forthcoming Subscriptions for 2022/2023

It was recommended that there be no change to the subscription this year as there were sufficient resources in the budget to reflect the workload of the Branch, however it was proposed and approved to increase the retainer payable to the Middle Level Commissioners from £700 to £850 for the work undertaken on behalf of the Branch.

12. Date and Venue of Next Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 7th March 2023 at Prickwillow Village Hall.

13. Any Other Business

David Thomas advised that the Water Resources East plan was currently out for consultation. The Plan deals with the challenges for water in the East of England. There were many challenges including growth in the region, climate change, government targets. He also noted that Internal Drainage Boards have a wet network of water and that all of the Biodiversity Plans need water for them to be delivered.

It was important to work with WRE on how they delivered their Plan. Reservoirs will only deliver about 50% of the water needed.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting and to the Speakers for their contributions.