

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2022 REPORT

ADA's 85th Annual Conference took place on Wednesday 9 November 2022 in Lincolnshire at The Hive, near Nocton. After two years of virtual conferencing as a result of the COVID pandemic, a more compact, lower cost-risk venue enabled ADA to re-instate a face-to-face meeting, despite the underlying concerns of continued Covid pressures and on-the-day disruption to train travel nationally. A full-capacity turnout of 81 members and ADA staff were in attendance and 33 additional members joined the event online.

The Conference attendees received presentations from our three guest speakers. A welcome additional feature of this conference after the morning's agenda was the opportunity for delegates to visit the nearby Dunston Beck Improvement Project, delivered by Dyson Farming Ltd.

SPEAKERS

HAZEL DURANT - HEAD OF RESILIENCE AND FLOOD INNOVATION POLICY, DEFRA

Hazel described the current priorities for Defra's Flood and Waterways Team. She said that the focus of ministers remained on delivery for communities on the ground. She went on to talk about the importance of maintaining existing assets, and not just limited to hard engineered assets, but the wider range of flood management assets used throughout our catchments. She recognised that making sure gullies, culverts and drains are kept clear throughout the year might not grab the headlines. As she addressed ADA members present from IDBs, local authorities and Environment Agency, Hazel was keen to stress that Defra really appreciate the work being carried out locally to help communities with water level and flood risk management. Appreciating that many flood risk assets are now close to their design life or life-expired, Hazel said

that Defra was working up the detail for an FCERM asset replacement allowance for the Environment Agency to help them address the replacement of life-expired assets. She recognised that other risk management authorities also had assets that would be better off replaced with more efficient solutions, rather than be allowed to fail with the unpredictable cost of an emergency . and said that Defra would be looking at how they might be able to support a broadening of the asset replacement allowance.

Defra had also ring fenced a hundred million pounds to help boost projects for communities suffering repeated flooding. Applications to the new frequently flooded properties allowance were being assessed by the Environment Agency, with the first beneficiaries expected to be announced soon.

An asset review was ongoing looking at which delivery bodies and riparian owners owned and managed which assets, whether they knew that they owned them, and the legislative framework around managing those assets. The study was planned to report in 2024.

Hazel concluded her speech by taking the time to thank ADA for the work that it had undertaken with Defra and she added that members should be proud of what they do

and how ADA strongly represents them at a national level. Hazel went on to say that all of the Defra team recognise the efficiency, quality and dedication to delivering work which benefits a wide range of local communities and local economies. She finished by calling upon Internal Drainage Boards to do more to proudly advertise their work and tell their local communities about the essential work they do.

**CLLR MATTHEW RIDDLE - CHAIR,
LOWER SEVERN IDB & COUNCILLOR,
SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE
COUNCIL**

Cllr Matthew Riddle's online presentation focused on making the case for reforms to the special levy charged by IDBs annually to local authorities. Alongside drainage rates, special levies contribute towards the funding of the flood and water level management work undertaken by IDBs on behalf of non-agricultural property within each drainage district.

He started with the background to the special levy, explaining that, prior to its existence, IDBs directly billed households and non-agricultural businesses within their area. Councils bringing in the special levy therefore made sense given that they were already collecting precepts on behalf of other bodies.

However, the problem for some special levy paying councils is that the precept is absorbed into their general expenses and that the special levy for smaller district councils may be a substantial proportion of the council's expenditure. This also had the effect of spreading the payment across a bigger area and to all ratepayers

in the council area, because those areas are normally much larger than the internal drainage district area.

Cllr Riddle went on to say that Eric Pickles, when he was Secretary State for communities and housing, had introduced a further complexity, the council tax rate cap, which included the special levy. He said that this means that any increase in the costs of an IDB has a direct effect on how much a local district or borough council can put their council tax up by.

Cllr Riddle argued that the answer to these challenges was obvious, to disaggregate the special levy and put another line on council tax bills to show the amount of money being collected on behalf of the IDB. There is already precedence for this in Somerset where, under a notional settlement from HM Treasury, an additional levy is raised to fund the activities of the Somerset Rivers Authority.

He concluded that this change would bring greater transparency to local government finance, ensuring residents understand what they were contributing to, and raising awareness of the flood and water level management works being undertaken by IDBs.

**LUZETTE KROON - CHAIR,
WETTERSKIP FRYSLÂN WATER
BOARD & BOARD MEMBER FOR
INNOVATION & INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS, DUTCH WATER
AUTHORITIES**

Luzette Kroon described the Dutch water management system and the role of the Netherlands' 21 water boards who manage

and maintain dikes, treat all the wastewater from Dutch households and businesses, and regulate the water levels across the country. The water boards' work is funded by a wastewater tax on households and a special taxation to manage the watercourses, dikes and water system as a whole.

Centuries of water drainage practices had made it possible to use almost every free centimetre to build houses, to intensify farmlands or to create nature. However, Luzette explained that the water system is progressively reaching its physical limit.

Increasingly, saltwater intrusion and oxidation of the soil is necessitating adaptation of water management in the Netherlands to conserve soil and peatlands. Luzette explained that action was needed rapidly owing to climate change, with an integrated approach of changing water management agreed between water boards, government and stakeholders. Building resilience to deal with the increasingly extreme weather conditions would mean nature-based solutions are needed alongside asset management and sufficient financial capacity for investments in pumping stations and the creation of water retention areas to prevent harm from flood damage and water shortages. This would mean working closely with the zonal planning system.

In Friesland, Luzette's water board had made a start in small areas by raising the water table by making agreements with farmers and investigating future business cases for them. This had already brought benefits during recent prolonged dry weather, with farmers requesting higher water levels to keep the grass growing.

Luzette concluded by saying that continuing to work together across our national boundaries was very important as we prepare for the future towards a climate resilient water management model and a strong water management governance.

OPEN DISCUSSION FORUM

A panel of Innes Thomson (ADA), Luzette Kroon (WF-NL), Ian Hodge (EA), Hazel Durant (Defra) and David Thomas (MLC) answered a variety of questions from delegates covering a wide range of topics.

Of particular concern to attendees was the question of energy costs and the potential consequences to IDBs if we experience a wet winter and abnormally high demands on pumps. Many IDBs expressed concern that they might simply run out of funds to pay for the pumping.

Water resources were discussed and various speakers expressed opinion that IDBs need to become a more integral part of water resources distribution and the licensing process, through a properly integrated water strategy, rather than the process being applied to them. Such a move might require legislative change which, in the current parliamentary climate could take some time.

ADA was asked about its communications strategy and attendees were told that ADA is giving more attention to getting information to politicians and other government departments. The creating of the All Party Parliamentary Group of Sustainable Flood & Drought Management is expected to help drive this approach.

SITE VISIT

Around the conference buffet lunch, delegates were split into two groups to visit the nearby Dunston Beck Improvement Project. Dyson Farming's Environmental Coordinator, Ian Willoughby, explained how the project had sought to recreate a meandering river system with a mosaic of wetland habitats, for the wider benefit of the environment and with direct positive influence on their business.