

**Minutes of the meeting of the Association of Drainage Authorities – South East Branch
held online via Zoom on Tuesday 14th September 2021**

1a. Welcome and Introductions:

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited all to introduce themselves.

1b. Present:

L Cooke (Chairman) N Botting (Branch Secretary), D Chalcroft, Cllr H Craske, Cllr D Crow-Brown, P Dowling, N Dyas, P Hazelhurst, R Kinsela, R Monje, Cllr H Rogers, Cllr G Sparks, I Thompson, J Williamson.

1c. Apologies for absence:

Cllr M Burgess, N Claxton, Cllr A Clifton-Holt, O Pantrey, G Steed, M Tapp.

2. Election of Branch Chairman:

The Branch Secretary took the Chair and invited nominations for the position of Branch Chairman. It was proposed by N Botting, seconded by P Dowling and agreed by all that Mr Larry Cooke be reappointed as the Branch Chairman. Mr Cooke informed the meeting that, whilst happy to remain Chairman for the next year, this would be his last as he intends to step-down at next year's meeting.

3. Election of Vice Chairman:

The Chairman then invited nominations for the position of Branch Vice-Chairman. With there being no nominations, this position remained vacant – to be appointed at the next meeting.

4. Election of Branch Secretary:

Mr N Botting stated that having served for 10 years he also wished to stand-down from the position of Branch Secretary. He then proposed P Dowling for the position, which was seconded by the Chairman and agreed by all – that Mr Peter Dowling be appointed as the Branch Secretary.

5. Election of Branch Director for ADA Board:

The newly appointed Branch Secretary invited nominations for Branch Director, to represent the South East Branch on the ADA Board. It was proposed by N Botting, seconded by the Chairman and agreed by all that Ms P Hazelhurst be reappointed Branch Director for the ADA Board.

6. Minutes of the previous Branch Meeting:

The minutes of the Branch Meeting, held on 25th April 2019, were received. It was proposed by P Hazelhurst, seconded by the Chairman and agreed by all to be a correct record of the previous meeting.

7. Matters arising from minutes:

Good Governance – I Thompson stated that, following Defra's report into IDB Membership, he was pleased to report that attendance at IDB meetings had improved, and encouraged efforts to maintain and improve attendance further.

Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill – I Thompson reported that the Bill had been through the Commons and was now in the later stages of the Lords, prior to seeking Royal Assent. He added that there is some concern that the many suggested minor changes could cause further delays.

De-Maining of Main Rivers – P Dowling reported that the Stour IDB had been involved in one of the pilots and adopted 37km of Main Rivers with 12 water level control assets. Although a lengthy process, these transfers are considered to have been worthwhile, and maintenance of these

watercourses has been improved. I Thompson agreed that the process had been unnecessarily bureaucratic and reported that Defra and the EA are looking to streamline this for the future, possibly through a 'Machinery of Government' change.

Abstraction/Transfer Licensing – The Chairman suggested that there is still confusion around when and where licences are required. I Thompson agreed and recommended that we wait for further guidance from the EA.

8. Matters raised for discussion:

a. ADA – General Update (I Thompson)

ADA has maintained a full service throughout the pandemic, and now have a good balance of office and home working.

An Environmental Good Governance Guide has been produced by ADA, funded by Defra, and will be made available to all IDBs at the next ADA Conference.

Health, Safety & Welfare training modules are now available on the ADA website. These are intended to provide all IDB Members and staff with information and guidance to help manage HS&W risks, so all IDBs are encouraged to make use of them.

Numerous Government Consultations are taking place, with substantial ADA input to the next Spending Review. ADA's major push has been in support of the EA receiving more funding and support for routine maintenance activities, not a sole focus on capital works.

ADA is comfortable with the clauses in the Environment Bill which will enable IDBs to extend their IDs, but good environmental standards will be key.

Pressures are increasing regarding Carbon Reduction, and ADA is seeking improved funding to help progress with asset replacements.

Concerns have been raised in respect of some clauses in the proposed Planning Bill, which are in line with concerns already raised by the EA.

Concern has also been raised with Defra and the EA regarding possible changes to abstraction and transfer licensing.

The next ADA Conference and AGM will take place on 10th November 2021. Unfortunately, due to ongoing concerns over Covid, this will again be held online.

The next ADA Demonstration is being planned for Summer 2023 – details to follow.

A Technical Seminar has been arranged to take place on 20th October 2021, which is predominantly for IDB Officers to discuss Treasury Management, Biometrics and Insurances, among other routine matters.

b. ADA – Changes to the use of Red Diesel (I Thompson)

The Chairman stated that the proposed changes to the use of red diesel, if they go ahead as planned, will substantially increase IDB and other RMA costs and must be resisted. I Thompson reported that strong representations have been raised with HM Treasury regarding this and unfortunately their position is firm, at least in relation to the continued use of red diesel for

diesel pumps. However, he was encouraged that the request to continue to use red diesel for routine watercourse maintenance seemed to be open to further discussion. ADA has pointed out the potential impact on some IDB contractors, and had been asked to provide further information regarding this, so they will be seeking support from IDBs. It appears that where work can be solely attributed to agriculture, the continued use of red diesel may be possible. P Dowling questioned the practicability of using both red and white diesel. N Botting raised the increased risks of security – theft of white diesel from remote locations, which will have cost implications and also increase pollution risks.

I Thompson agreed that this is a very difficult situation and encouraged all IDBs and other RMAs to raise their concerns with local MPs. The Chairman agreed, and thanked Mr Thompson for his update.

c. North Kent Marshes IDB – North Kent Marshes WLMP (P Hazelhurst)

P Hazelhurst reported that the North Kent Marshes Water Level Management Plan was produced in 1999, and whilst a review was started in 2017 there has been little progress since. The North Kent Marshes IDB has now obtained some funding (unused Precept returned by the EA) to carry out some more detailed monitoring of water levels to help inform a wider review. Now this monitoring and review has started, the RSPB has applied for £100k of Heritage Lottery Funding to expand this work and in the long-term to contribute towards the Government's Nature Recovery Network project. The IDB will be looking to reduce leakage at structures, including tidal outfalls which are allowing saltwater ingress, which both affect local land use.

P Dowling asked if the intention is to follow the format of the original WLMP, or to start afresh? P Hazelhurst replied that they are still at the early stages of this project, so nothing has been decided yet, but it is hoped that the review will provide more detailed actions (than the more high-level actions in the original Plan). This will likely achieve greater buy-in by other stakeholders, and therefore potentially increase funding for further improvements.

d. Stour IDB – Consultation on the Reintroduction of Beavers (P Dowling)

P Dowling summarised the Stour IDB's recent experience of beavers in the lowland areas of the Stour catchment, where a licence was issued some years ago by Natural England for the release of beavers into a secure enclosure. The licence was subject to a number of conditions: that the site must be kept secure; that the licensee must capture and return any escaped beavers; that all beavers must be tagged prior to release; and that any young must be captured and tagged. Unfortunately, despite the licensee's best efforts, none of these conditions could be met. Beavers have escaped and it has proved impossible to recapture them. The beavers in the enclosure have produced young, which have also been impossible to capture, so it has not been possible to tag them. It is not clear how many beavers are still in the enclosed area, but more escapes are considered likely.

A number of problems have been experienced: beavers burrowed from a high-level feed system to a low-level drainage system within a SSSI, which resulted in the higher level system being drained to the lower level system, so neither had the correct water levels for a time. Material from a beaver dam was drawn into a pumping station, which caused substantial and expensive damage. More recently, beavers have burrowed into the raised embankment of a pumped channel, and whilst this isn't yet a problem, it is probably only a matter of time before the embankment is breached. Many trees have also been felled.

P Dowling reminded all present that a Government Consultation “Approach to beaver reintroduction and management in England” opened on 25th August and will run until 17th November, and encouraged all other IDBs, EA, other RMAs and other interested parties to respond. It should be noted that Defra has stated “It is the responsibility of landowners to cover the costs of wild animals on their land. In line with this, Defra will not provide direct payments or pay compensation”. He reiterated that the Stour IDB is not opposed to the release of beavers, but only if they are in the right locations and if RMAs are given the ability and funding to help manage some of the negative impacts on water level management and flood risk.

I Thompson confirmed that ADA will be responding to the consultation, stressing the importance of protecting and managing all flood risk assets, and encouraged all IDBs to make their own representations.

N Dyas commented that due to problems experienced in Scotland, beaver control licences have been issued to help quickly address problems affecting water level management interests in low-lying areas, and suggested that IDBs and others should be issued with a licence. I Thompson agreed that all RMAs need to get ahead of any problems and expects them to be issued with a Class Licence. N Botting stated that anyone ‘controlling’ beavers will have to deal with negative press, which is evident from experience in Scotland.

R Monje commented that the greatest risk is likely to be from unlicensed releases, which are actively encouraged in the press, and which effectively ‘greenwash’ over any negative impacts. However, there are some negative impacts and not only to drainage and flood risk – anything which affects water level management in heavily managed lowland areas will have a potential to affect the habitats they support. The ability to appropriately control beaver activity will be essential.

9. Date of next meeting:

It was agreed that the next meeting, likely to be in September 2022, will be arranged via email nearer the time.

10. Any other business:

I Thompson thanked everyone for their involvement in the South East Branch, especially N Botting for his time as Branch Secretary.

With there being no further business, the Chairman thanked everyone again for their attendance and expressed a wish for next year’s meeting to be in person.