

Our Ref: NWS/PM

Your Ref:

Date: 26 February 2013

Mr I Liddell-Grainger MP
Houses of Parliament
Westminster
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Liddell-Grainger

WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE ON ENVIRONMENT AGENCY - MAKING THE CASE FOR SOMERSET

In advance of the Westminster Hall debate on the Environment Agency called by Ian Liddell-Grainger MP for Wednesday, February 27, I thought it might be helpful if I briefed you on where we are with the issue of dredging the rivers running through the Somerset Levels and Moors in order to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding, and suggested some areas where MPs may be able to help.

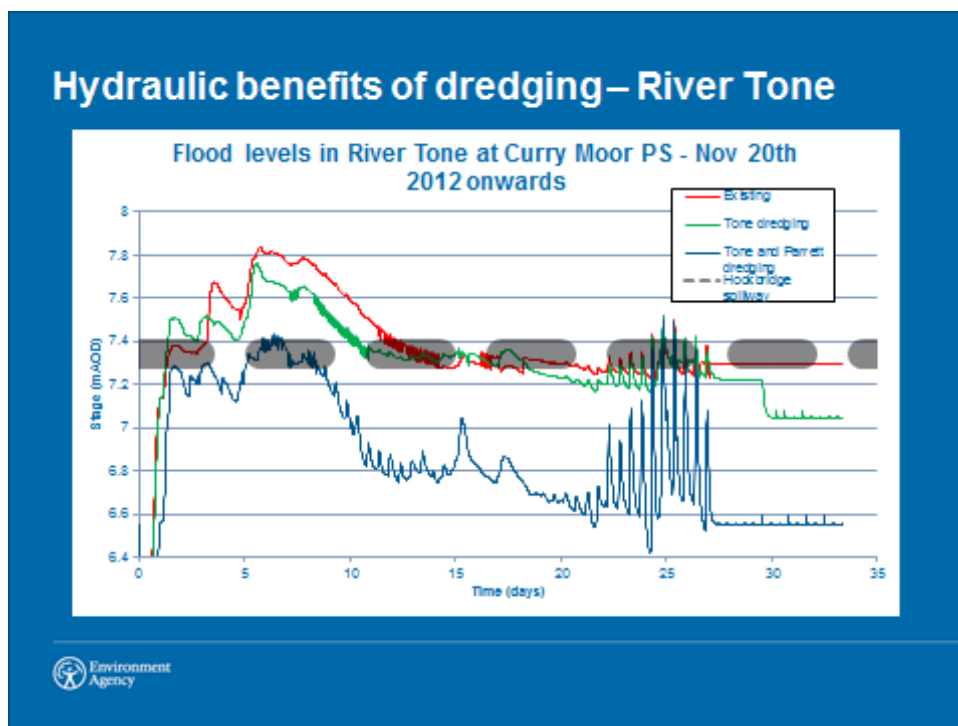
1. The benefits of dredging

The key point to be made is that the Environment Agency has now accepted that dredging - in the sense of de-silting and re-profiling - would make a very significant difference to the duration of flood events, and thus to their impact on people, property, agriculture and the environment.

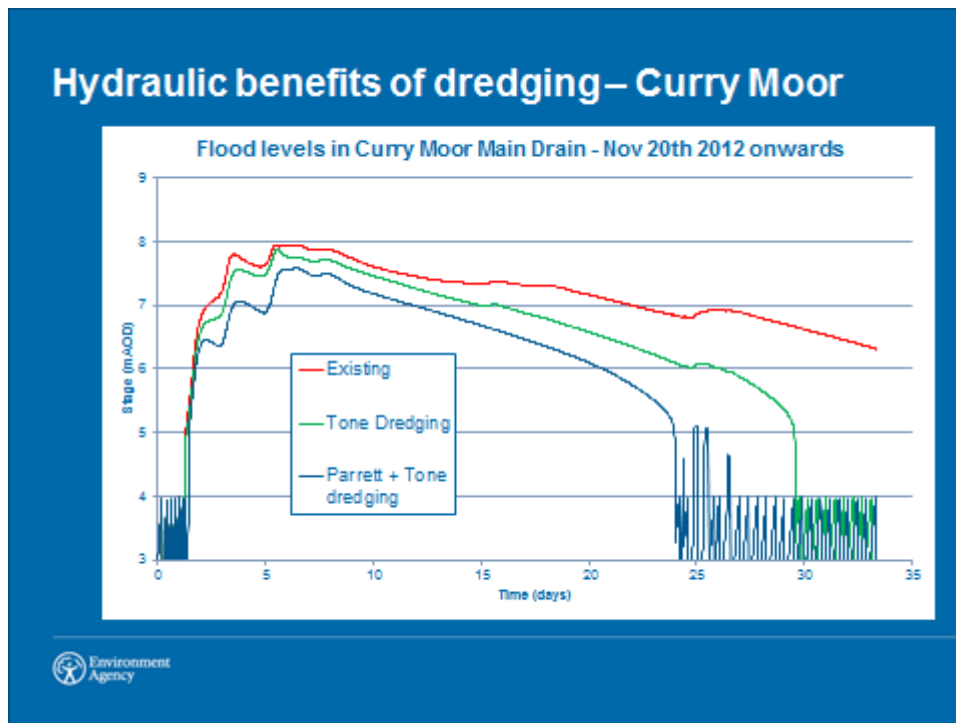
EA investigations in the wake of the 2012 flooding have shown that the capacity of the River Tone (from Hook Bridge spillway to the confluence with the River Parrett) and of the River Parrett (from the confluence with the Tone to North Moor Pumping Station) has been reduced by siltation to only around 65% of the capacity as designed in the 1960 Tone Valley Scheme.

EA computer modelling has demonstrated that restoring the capacity of these two lengths of river to 85-90% of their 1960 design would "significantly reduce the duration and depth of flooding in Curry, Hay, Salt and North Moors, based on the 2012 floods"..

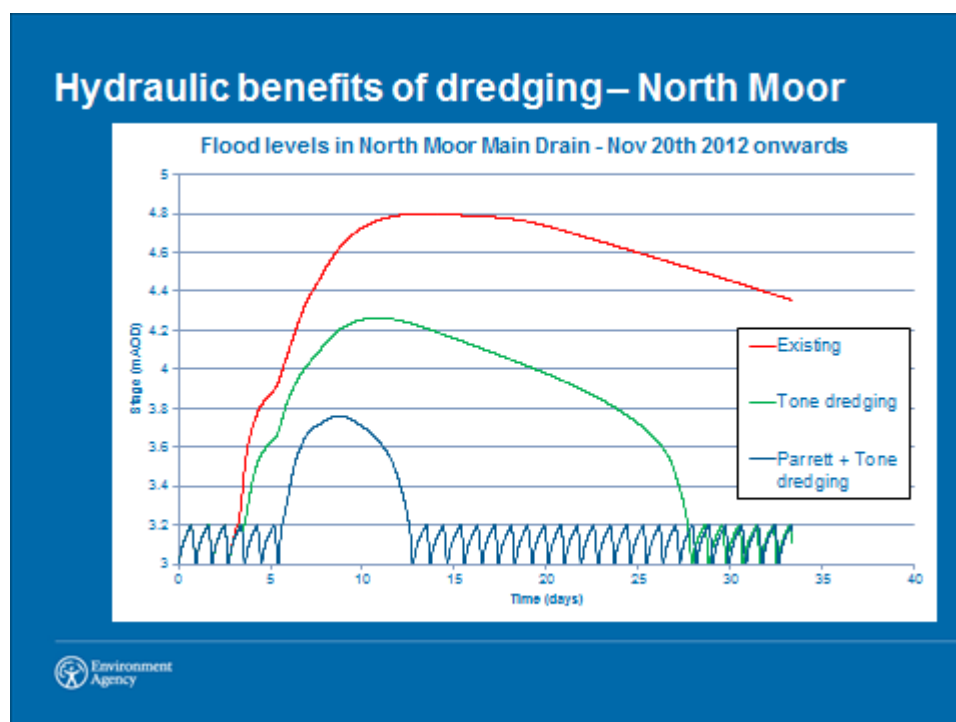
These three EA slides illustrate exactly what is meant by "significantly":



By comparing the red with the blue line, this slide shows that the river Tone would have over-topped the Hook Bridge spillway for only two to three days in late November, and for a similar period in mid-December - as compared with the spillway running continuously for over a month from November 20 - had the Tone and Parrett been dredged in accordance with the scheme which the EA is now proposing.



This slide shows the impact which dredging would have had on the length of time that Curry Moor was flooded: three weeks instead of three months.



That in turn - because once Curry Moor is full, the overflow goes over the Athelney spillway into North Moor - means that North Moor would have been flooded for only 8 days, instead of the best part of three months.

The damage caused by flooding to communities, the economy, farmland and the environment is directly related to the duration, depth and frequency of a flood event. We now know that, had the Tone and Parrett been dredged in accordance with the scheme which the EA is now proposing, Curry Moor would have been under water for weeks, rather than months, the A361 closed for days, rather than weeks, and the flooding risk to properties in Moorland avoided altogether. The disruption to people’s lives, the damage to the local economy and the consequences for farming and the environment would have been vastly less serious had the rivers been dredged. Reduced flood damages across the wider Parrett catchment would also have been achieved through the ability to operate flood risk assets sooner and for longer.

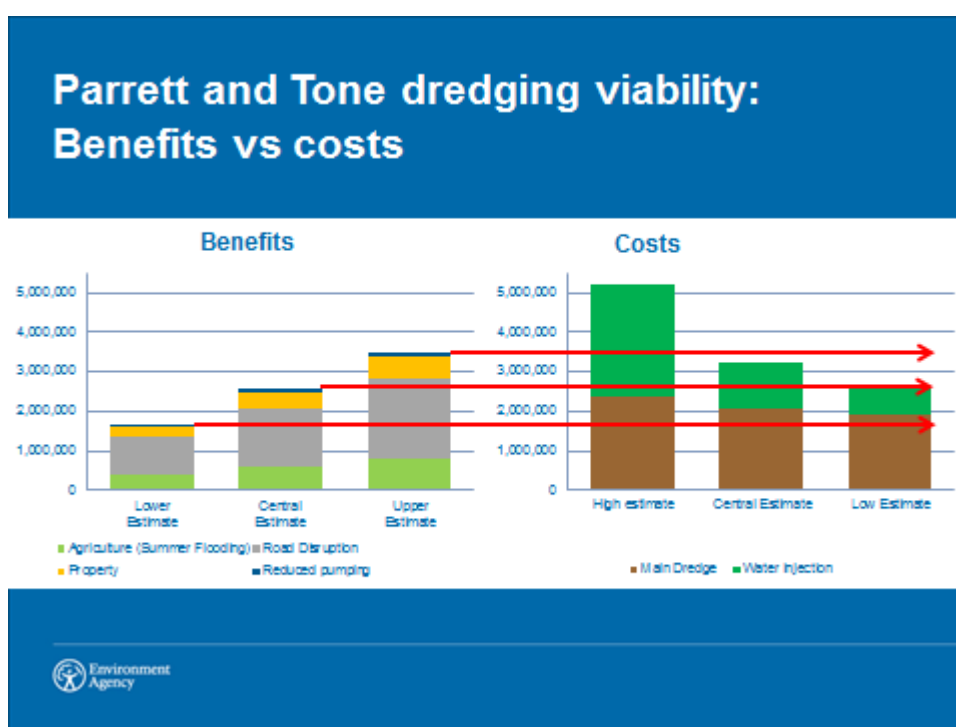
2. The funding problem

The cost of the EA’s dredging proposal will depend on how frequently the rivers need to be dredged to maintain their profile over the notional 20 year lifespan of the scheme. The central estimate is just over £3 million, of which roughly £ 2 million would be the up-front cost of the initial dredge, the balance to be found over the ensuing 20 years.

The benefits which this would produce fall under four main headings:

- Agricultural damage (particularly from prolonged summer flooding)
- Traffic disruption from closure of A361, New Road, with wider impacts to travel on the M5, A39,A38 and A372.
- Damage to properties
- Reduced expenditure on pumping because there would be much less floodwater to remove

An initial analysis by the EA, with input from the IDBs and Somerset County Council has suggested that, under the formula used by Government, the value of the benefits would be broadly similar to the capital costs incurred.



Current government priorities, which skew funding towards alleviating urban flood risk, do not enable meaningful levels of Grant in Aid to be allocated to flooding cases such as this. We believe that the formula used by Government significantly understates the true costs of flooding such as Somerset has seen over the past 12 months. For example, it takes little or no account of the damage to internationally important wildlife sites caused by the prolonged flooding last summer, or of the potential long-term damage to agricultural productivity on the Levels and Moors if nothing is done to address the flooding risk. Work is therefore going on, involving the IDBs and Somerset County Council as well as the EA, to quantify the true local cost of the flooding with a view to a case for funding being made to Government through the EA's Regional Flood and Coastal Committee. We recognise that, even if the case is accepted, the balance will have to be found locally. But without meaningful central Government funding, it is very hard to see how the scheme could ever go ahead.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that, whilst the EA does have some discretionary funds which can be used to address local priorities, these have never been used to pay for maintenance works, such as dredging.

What our MPs can do to help

- Explain to Ministers the impact which the flooding of the past year has had on Somerset's rural communities, on farming, on transport links, on the local economy and on the environment;
- Warn of the potential long-term damage to livelihoods, productivity and some of the most important wetland wildlife sites in Europe if the flood risk is not contained;
- Emphasise that the EA and the IDBs are now convinced that dredging the Parrett and the Tone would make a very significant difference to the duration and severity of future flood events, at relatively little cost;
- Call for the funding formulae to be adjusted so that the cost of rural flood damage can be properly reflected in calculations and allow a worthwhile contribution from central funds to be made to river and channel work such as dredging.

The Parrett Drainage Board as part of Somerset Consortium of Drainage Boards is determined to **make the case for Somerset** in seeking solutions to the terrible flooding of the past year. We look forward to your support.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Maltby
Chairman of the Somerset Drainage Boards Consortium