SAFAG-report to Shipston Town Council-October 2026

SAFAG received further local publicity in the September edition of the Shipston Forum. Under the heading 'Finding out about SAFAG', the article (including a photo) covered a recent visit to Woodlands Farm in Long Compton by members and some of the volunteers (including a Town Councillor), to look at some of the flood mitigation interventions (a mixture of leaky dams, ponds and a wetland area). This followed a session where Mike McCarthy delivered a presentation, explaining SAFAG's history, current activities and ongoing objectives.

As mentioned in the September report, STC placed an order for 10 additional high vis Flood Action Group vests to meet the increase in SAFAG volunteer numbers. Using this while on location is an important Health and Safety requirement. Because the cost of £65.87 fell under the £100 designated limit, prior approval from STC wasn't required. They are stored at NCH for ease of access.
The cost has been allocated to the SAFAG designated bank account (General Fund).

The rolling 3 year program to review and assess all the interventions is now in its 2nd year (April 2026 to March 2027). The objective for this period is to visit and inspect 290. So far, the SAFAG team has achieved 80 (68 leaky woody dams, 6 ponds, 3 bunds, 1 wetland area and 2 FWRAs (Forested Woodland Retentions Areas).

The summer period is generally given over to maintaining and repairing interventions, with September to April being the ideal time to initiate a round of inspections. With an increased number of volunteers now available, it's hoped the number of assessments will now increase. Contact has already been made with many landowners and farmers to secure their agreement for a visit, with just a mutually convenient date to be confirmed.

Tim Burridge has advised SAFAG that a Catchment Restoration Officer, Avery Hill, has been appointed by SRT (Severn Rivers Trust). She was previously the Biovdiversity Officer (Wetlands) at Heart of England Forest and will bring considerable experience and expertise to this new position. Eventually, she will take take over Tim Burridge's role, once she has become familiar with the current projects and opportunities. It's hoped to arrange a meeting locally by the end of September/early October.
Tim Burridge has confimed that the Stour catchment area remains a priority for SRT.
An NFM (Natural Flood Mangement) report has now been sent to the owners of Belle Isle Farm for their consideration. It's expected that most, if not all, of the recommendations will be accepted/approved.

SRT has established contact with BBOWT (Berks, Bucks, and Oxon Wildlife Trust) about the Lambs Pool area on their land which is adjacent to Belle Isle Farm, to identify how it is connected to the Stour and whether they will be interested in some flood mitigation work at that location.

SAFAG's regular monthly meeting took place on 10th September at NCH. Present-Vanessa Benjamin-Smith (Chair), STC and WCC Councillor Jo Barker, SDC Councillor Dave Passingham, STC Councillor Hilary Kelly (Chair of the Environment Working Group) Mike McCarthy, John Dinnie, Paul Neal, volunteers Trevor Bradnam, Katharine Rutherford and James Law. Also present-Frank Wardak and Clive Hickman.
The summary of the key points are limited to those matters which fall within SAFAG's remit or scope of interest.

- Although unable to attend the meeting, Brian Cooper did distribute beforehand a summary of the current financial position-no identified issues or concerns.
- The process/procedures for closing the roads in high river level events needs to be clarified and a formal plan established to provide the appropriate guidelines and lines of responsibility. This includes the provision of better-quality additional sandbags. More prominent signage, especially in the areas of the 'at risk' car parks should also include a link to the EA alerts and warnings. To this end, a recommendation should be put to the regular meeting of STC that they put in place a comprehensive flood and emergency resilience plan.
  Note-the February 2026 SAFAG report to STC did provide details of an initiative introduced by Notts CC (Nottingham County Council). It allows trained members of the community to close local roads (within defined/agreed parameters) during periods of significant flooding. WCC are already aware of this.

Recommendation-that STC create and put in place a comprehensive flood and emergency resilience plan.

- The current 3- year intervention maintenance program should continue until such time as farm-based solutions (catch the rainwater where it falls and alternative farming practices) are more widely implemented. To achieve those objectives will require funding and this is likely to require underpinning by DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), RFCC (Regional Flood and Coastal Committee), WCC and SDC.
  Note-with the exception of Brailes, approaching the local parish councils for financial support for local flood mitigation measures has not been successful.
- As the Lead Local Flood Authority, WCC should be providing top-down project management, like the county wide initiatives in Herefordshire for the rivers Wye and Lugg. Joe Barker will raise this with WCC.
- LCFAG (Long Compton Flood Action Group) has secured £1m for a potential hard engineering project. Furthermore, they have been given a grant of £5,000 by SDC from the Community Climate and Nature Fund. This is to clear the vegetation and debris from Nethercote Brook. However, hard engineering is not a solution for most of the Stour catchment, as NFM (Natural Flood Management) implemented by farmers, using sustainable farming practices in a coordinated manner is a better option. The investment needs to be in the upstream fields and headwaters of the various tributaries and watercourses, to catch the rainwater where it falls. Jo Barker will follow this up with WCC Councillor Robert Gisbourne, whose portfolio includes flooding.
- It's suggested that the existing South Warwickshire Sustainable Farming group be expanded to give it greater effectiveness (like the adjoining catchment of NE Costwolds). Updating the map of the catchment area would be the first step.

Such a project would require leadership. The LLFA or an appropriate grant could support a PhD student (not unlike Tom Lavers who was previously employed by SAFAG). The aim would be to bring improvements to farming techniques, farm by farm, across the area. The possibility of help from Coventry University is to be explored by Vanessa Benjamin-Smith, with Storm Geomatics as another option-Dave Passingham to investigate.

- A multi-agency approach, driven by effective political leadership can achieve positive results, as evidenced by Manuela Perteghella's (local MP) efforts in relation to the local sewage treatment concerns.
- The re-seeding of key areas on Paddle Brook and Brexit Brook is scheduled for 15th September. *Note-a review of the workday is included later in this report*.
- Vanessa Bdenjamin-Smith has updated the current list of volunteers and removed those who are inactive. The possibility of reaching out to the villages to increase the number of volunteers was discussed. The observation was made that too many could reduce the opportunities available.
- John Dinnie and Tim Burridge of SRT are due to meet the landowner at Dunsden Farm on 30th September, to review previously identified opportunities.
- Dave Passingham and Mike McCarthy have arranged a visit to Blackdowns Farm (Paddle Brook) on 17th September, to follow up possible additional flood mitigation measures. *Note-a review of this is included later in this report*.
- Frank Wardak and Clive Hickman raised concerns about the scrape and butterfly bank at Cornmill Meadows. Their comments/representations, together with proposals made by Tim Burridge of SRT, will have to be considered by both the Environment Working Group and STC (as landowners).

In May of this year, STC authorised a payment of £65 to Ben Goren, who controls the SAFAG website, in relation to the planned transfer of the domain name and host provider from Bluehost to GreenGeeks, due to take place in late September/early October of 2026, whereupon the appropriate invoice would be submitted.
It now appears that there are additional costs involved, including the first year's subscription/fees and a fix to correct issues identified on the existing website.
Ben Goren had advised that the total expenditure will now rise to £150.14. These changes are essential to ensure the operational effectiveness and security of the SAFAG website, where much of SAFAG's historical activities are recorded, as well as the monthly SAFAG reports to STC.

Recommendation-that STC approves the payment of £150.14 to Ben Goren to cover the essential upgrades and changes to SAFAG's website.
This will be costed against the SAFAG designated bank account-General Fund.

The advent of more favourable weather conditions (recent rain and more forecast) delivered the chance for SAFAG to action one of the outstanding tasks, namely the re-seeding of parts of Brexit Brook and Paddle Brook. Both watercourses had major works undertaken by a contractor earlier this year. On 15th September, the team of Mike McCarthy, Vanessa Benjamin-Smith, Katharine Rutherford, Heidi Ellis, James Law and John Fedorowycz raked and re-seeded the watercourse banks around 14 dams on

Paddle Brook and 4 dams on Brexit Brook. This will give the soil/banks more resilience during the winter storm surges. It's estimated that this workday involved walking in excess of 4 miles.

Picture below- 3 of the team at work. Left to right, Mike McCarthy, Katharine Rutherford and James Law. Behind the camera-Vanessa Benjamin-Smith.

As a result of an earlier intervention inspection at Blackdowns Farm (Paddle Brook), Mike McCarthy and Dave Passingham re-visited on 16th September to review the original report and to discuss further flood mitigation measures with both the Estate Manager and landowner. The latter is known to have strong green principles and promotes regenerative farming.

In addition to the leaky woody dams, there is on site a very large lake (formerly a muddy wetland) which has been partially de-silted. The landowner may be interested in competing this task, especially as the capacity allows for significant capture and storage of water. The dams are upstream of the lake, and the majority are still operating effectively.

The possibility of further ponds elsewhere on the farm were discussed. A further visit is planned in October, accompanied by Tim Burridge and Avery Hill (both of SRT), to have another meeting with the landowner to consider the options for additional flood resilience.

Update from LCFAG (Long Compton Flood Action Group). They are the first in the county to be included in the WCC's Flood Warden Scheme. They have taken delivery of some sand and hessian bags so that they can make up some sandbags. These are currently being stored at Woodlands Farm and can be distributed by members of LCFAG's Flood Resilience Team. They are a group of volunteers who have agreed to help out residents during periods of flooding.

On 30th September, John Dinnie and Brian Cooper, accompanied by Tim Burridge and Avery Hill (both of SRT) visited Dunsden Farm for what turned out to be a full and comprehensive discussion with the landowners about potential flood mitigation measures. The watercourse at this location flows downhill from a large pond at the top end of the site and discharges into Knee Brook, within an area surrounded by woodland. The land at the lower end of the secondary watercourse is generally wet/boggy even in dry conditions. It's considered that creating a wetland feature, adjacent to the existing wooded area and close to the Old Mill and Knee Brook, possibly supplemented by tree pollarding of the numerous willow trees, would improve flood resilience. This will be environmentally beneficial and support the objective of capturing water before it reaches the adjacent Knee Brook. Whilst on site, an overgrown existing pond was identified, and this will provide further opportunities for water capture and flood mitigation.

The landowners were receptive to the proposals. A survey of the location will be carried out by SRT, together with a follow up visit. A report will then be prepared by SRT and submitted for due consideration. If approved, SRT proposes to manage and fund the whole project. *Pictures of the visit are on the next page of this report*.
This is an example of a warm lead generated by SAFAG.

This farm visit was followed by a meeting with the core SAFAG team (Mike McCarthy, John Dinnie and Brian Cooper) and Tim Burridge and Avery Hill (both from SRT), to discuss matters of common interest.

A quick review of the morning's visit to Dunsden Farm was delivered. It's hoped to arrange a joint visit to Blackdowns Farm (Paddle Brook) in October to discuss with the landowner further flood resilience measures.

The creation of ponds in the catchment is now a targeted priority, as these encompass the principle of catching the water where it falls, before it discharges into watercourses. It was generally agreed that a Project Office (2 days as week) would be beneficial to bring together the various agencies.

SRT is already in discussion with some landowners within the Stour catchment area, about a variety of flood mitigation measures, and further details of these will be included in future reports to STC, once any proposals and recommendations have been accepted by the relevant landowner/farmer.

Cornmill Meadows was raised. It seems that a senior official of SRT, (Project Manager for the Lower Severn) has become involved and he will be liaising direct with STC.
Picture-John Dinnie and Tim Burridge in the proposed wetland area-Dunsden Farm.

Picture below-the concealed pond in the woodland area at Dunsden Farm.