

managing flood risk in the Cuckmere estuary

March 2009

The way we manage flood risk in the Cuckmere estuary in East Sussex is changing. We are stopping maintenance of the existing flood defences after a two year notice period, which ends in March 2011. This fact sheet explains what this means and how the area may change in the future.

The history of the Cuckmere estuary

By the Cuckmere estuary we mean the Cuckmere River and the low lying land between the A259 at Exceat Bridge and the sea. The Cuckmere River used to be free to meander through its tidal floodplain. But it is reported that as early as the 1300s, embankments were built to constrain the river and allow the land to be used for farming. The river has not flowed through its winding meanders since the straight channel was constructed in the 1840s.



Aerial view of the Cuckmere estuary

Our flood defences

The existing flood defences prevent the river from behaving naturally. They include earth banks that run along the straight channel, timber training walls at the mouth of the river where it meets the sea and shingle beaches either side of the river mouth. Groynes are also in place on the west beach to help control the movement of shingle.

Because there is not enough water moving in and out of the river mouth, for many years we have had to move shingle from where it collects at the mouth back on to the west beach. This work happens twice a year and prevents the mouth from blocking. It has cost us between £30,000 and £50,000 per year. When required, we have also maintained the earth banks, timber training walls and groynes.

Climate change and the Cuckmere estuary

Climate change poses a real challenge for the future of the Cuckmere estuary. No matter what we do, change is happening here. Sea levels are rising and are currently predicted to rise one metre over the next 100 years. The current flood defences are simply not sufficient to deal with these changes in the future.

To keep the existing flood defences in place and cope with climate change, higher, wider and stronger defences would have to be built, changing how the area looks and potentially damaging wildlife.

Our flood risk management strategy

We produced our flood risk management strategy to address these problems. All flood risk management investment is assessed using a nationally consistent method to ensure that decisions are fair and transparent. We followed government guidance to assess whether we could continue to invest public money on defences here at the Cuckmere estuary. We compared the costs of the engineering works that would be needed with what is benefiting from the flood defences. It would cost around £18 million to build and maintain flood defences here over 100 years. We cannot justify spending that much money when there are no homes at risk of flooding. As a result we have concluded that we should withdraw our maintenance of the defences.

We thank everyone who took part in the strategy consultation between September and December 2007. More than 100 people wrote to us and we met over 250 people at five exhibition sessions. Approximately 55 per cent of all responses

indicated that some kind of management change needs to happen, either supporting our recommended option to withdraw maintenance or the managed realignment options.

Our withdrawal of maintenance

Our withdrawal of maintenance is a gradual process. From now until the end of March 2011, we will continue to work as we do at the moment. This two-year period gives the people affected time to decide how the estuary should be managed in the future.

After the two-year notice period, the only work we will do for flood risk management is to clear the river mouth to ensure that the river is able to drain to the sea. Under this approach, over time the whole area will be restored to a tidal floodplain. Our studies show that there will then be enough water moving in and out through the river mouth to keep it open without us clearing it. We will continue to monitor this as the area changes and we will not stop clearing the mouth until we are happy that this is no longer needed.

This approach works with natural processes rather than building bigger and bigger defences against them. It allows the area to adapt to sea level rise and means that our flood risk management money can be directed to where it is most needed to protect people and their homes.

The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership

We are going to withdraw our maintenance of the flood defences in the Cuckmere estuary, but other people or organisations may decide that they want to do flood defence works in the area.

We are a member of the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership along with landowners and organisations that are responsible for the management of the area. These include East Sussex County Council, Seaford Town Council, the National Trust, the South Downs Joint Committee, Natural England and Wealden District Council.



Existing saltmarsh on the Cuckmere River

The Partnership believes that working with nature rather than against it is the best option for the estuary and that the changes that are happening to the estuary can be managed to preserve what is important and benefit tourism, wildlife, access and recreation.

The Partnership wants to explore all possible options and aim to work together with the community to agree and develop the best possible approach, and to attempt to find the funding to make it happen.

You can find out more about how to get involved at the Partnership website www.cuckmere.org.uk

Contact us

If you have any further questions about our flood risk management strategy please contact us at:

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