

# Cuckmere River and Valley Issues

The aim of this paper is to summarise current issues and propose key objectives and actions for CVPC.

## Introduction

The people who live and work in the Cuckmere Valley are passionate about nature and the environment, and seek to live in harmony with them. In doing so it is legitimate to want to avoid flooding and major change when practicable – nature has adapted successfully to humans' management over many centuries. Organisations with environmental remits sometimes appear to want to engineer significant changes, paying scant attention to the people of the valley. This can present a false dichotomy – maintaining a satisfactory balance is perfectly possible without major work or expenditure.

## Key Objectives

There are two overarching objectives for the community –

- To minimise the risk of flooding and its impact
- To minimise and avoid where possible loss of amenity eg footpaths, verges, views

These give rise to specific actions and targets –

- To inform and engage the community direct
- To represent the community clearly and strongly in all relevant forums and with all relevant bodies
- To achieve a guarantee that whatever schemes are implemented the river mouth will always be kept clear and able to flow properly out to sea, with shingle clearances carried out as necessary
- To agree clear and well publicised trigger points for such clearances
- To ensure the fullest possible consultation and exploration of alternatives in respect of the possible loss of the right of way footpath to the sea along the west river embankment
- To achieve a clear plan with appropriate commitments for proper, regular maintenance of the river channel, sluices, banks and footpaths up Milton Lock
- To achieve better management of parking, minimising obstructive and unsightly parking and restoring the damaged verges as a benefit both to wildlife and visual amenity

Some background on the main issues is in the following sections.

## River Mouth Clearance

Most of the EA's £90k budget for clearances over 5 years has not been spent. The precise timescale and sum of money are not completely clear. Nor is there clarity over what would trigger a clearance – at one time it was said that flood water covering the full width of the Litlington road at the end of the Westdean lane, at any depth, would be the trigger but this is not a formal position.

However, the limited clearance in late 2019 has held and the river continues to flow out to sea. The EA have said they will not demain the river. Demaining and handing over to the WLMB represents possibly the best hope of guaranteeing a clear river mouth in the long term. Such a guarantee under any scenario is critical.

## Pathfinder

The main recommendations of this expensive consultation on the future of the estuary, completed in 2011, were to maintain the status quo in the short term while the option of reactivating the meanders was explored. A review commissioned by ESCC and the WLMB has confirmed that Pathfinder has failed to deliver, largely because of lack of funds for large projects and the inability of any body to lead in developing and implementing schemes.

## Cuckmere Estuary Group

The CEG was established to take Pathfinder forward, and includes all the relevant stakeholders. It is chaired by SDNPA. In over a decade it has failed to agree on any scheme for the future of the estuary, or to ensure maintenance of the status quo. Nor has the group itself issued any general communication to the community – what has been disseminated has been via the community representatives on the group.

At the group's meeting on 10/5/22 it was agreed that the group would liaise with the NT's project manager for Chyngton Brooks to 'explore further how the CEG can support and align meetings to the project timeline'. Key issues raised at the meeting included:

- The footpath extinguishment vs wider access offer/improvements in the area. Recommendation to engage early with access groups.
- Contingency plan to river mouth clearance as alternative to increased tidal prism.
- Early contact with SDNPA planners.

Other points:

- EA will continue to look at the river mouth and need for emergency clearance.
- Some engagement by the project manager with the community/stakeholders is anticipated leading up to the submission of the planning application. SDNPA offered use of space at Exceat to support engagement and deposit of documents/plans.
- An EA flood risk activity permit is also likely to be needed in advance of implementation of any approved scheme.

## Chyngton Brooks

Although the NT had been members of the Cuckmere Estuary Group since 2011, it was not until 2017 that they announced that they would be starting an internal study of options for the future of Chyngton Brooks and the raised river bank, which they own. Their draft report was shared with the group in late 2019 and early 2020, then put on hold due to the pandemic until 2022. Progress on an agreed way forward for the estuary as a whole has therefore been delayed by several years.

The NT's report, prepared by Royal Haskoning, states at the outset that the NT 'is investigating the possibility of tidally inundating the land behind the west embankment of the Cuckmere Estuary to create a more natural sustainable estuary'. The key objective of the report is to 'develop a short-list of

high-level concept design options for habitat creation at the proposed site detailing the size and types of habitat that are possible and different approaches to tidal inflow and outflow', and then evaluate the options and select a preferred design.

The preferred option is to cut five 20 metre unbridged breaches in the embankment. The footpath would be lost. The reports says that the likelihood of a fully functioning intertidal habitat would be significantly increased.

The project raises a number of issues:

- It is not a scheme for the whole estuary, excluding the east side containing the Country Park, the meanders and in large measure the river itself;
- The impact on the river mouth is not certain (and cannot be), so there is no guarantee that the river mouth would be kept clear of shingle blockages;
- The footpath would be lost without replacement, giving rise to legal and public consultation issues;
- It is not clear what impact if any there would be to the east embankment caused by water flowing out of Chyngton Brooks into the river;
- Although retaining the footpath by means of bridges is rejected on cost grounds, there is no attempt to calculate such costs;
- There appears to be no intention to consult the community other than via the formal planning process.

## Seven Sisters Country Park

The South Downs National Park Authority is now the owner of the Country Park, which is within Cuckmere Valley Parish. It is not clear what commitments – if any – they have to maintaining the east river embankment and the meanders. They appear to be studiously neutral on the issue of river mouth clearance, which is unhelpful to the community.

The significant upgrading of the Exceat centre is likely to increase visitor numbers, and therefore car parking pressures. SDNPA's response to these possibilities has been disappointing. Their engagement with the community has also been disappointing.

## River Channel

The river channel is impeded in several places by overgrown vegetation and shingle deposits. This slows the river's exit to the sea, and makes it more likely that it will overtop its banks. High water levels in the river prevent the sluices working properly, and prolong flooding. Proper management of the channel and banks is essential to maintain the environment, but is prevented by the EA and NE.

## Water Level Management Board

The WLMB is responsible for ordinary watercourses- ie excluding the river itself - in the Cuckmere Valley, though their remit does not extend much further north than the A27. They would be willing to take on responsibility for the river and for keeping the river mouth clear, but the EA are not willing to

allow this. Of all the bodies with influence in the valley, the WLMB are the most willing to work positively with the community.

They have previously stated that failure to keep the river mouth clear prevents it from discharging its legal obligations. A current issue is uncertainty about their ability to keep the Freshwater Brook free of dangerous salinity levels, which they are legally obliged to do.