

Flood & Coastal Risk Management

Securing community support

Securing community support for changing flood and erosion defences on the coast

With rising sea levels and greater-than-ever demands on the funds available for defence against flooding and coastal erosion, it is vital to plan for the long term and identify the options available. We aim to support communities on the coast and enhance the environment in a way that is sustainable into the future. We defend where we can; however, there will be times and occasions where this won't be sustainable or affordable. We are developing strategies to determine how best to manage the coast of England and Wales.

One strategy in the latter stages of development is for the defences of the coast between Pagham and East Head on the peninsula south of Chichester in West Sussex. This area has 14,000 properties in the main town of Selsey and surrounding villages, including East Wittering, Bracklesham, West Wittering and Pagham. Today, around 1,200 properties are at risk of flooding and erosion. Without intervention this could increase to over 5,300 properties over the next hundred years.

Tourism is vital to the area. The local population more than doubles during the summer holiday season, with many visitors staying in static caravans or chalets. More than 3,000 holiday chalets and static caravan plots are currently in areas with a significant likelihood of flooding so there is a substantial risk of loss of life or injury to holiday-makers. Agriculture is the other main industry on the peninsula and there is an extensive greenhouse crop industry.

“We attended a meeting in the West Wittering Memorial Hall on the 18 July 2008 to hear a report by the various [organisations] concerned with the Draft Coastal Defence Strategy and the Adaptive management group... This was the most sensible meeting we have attended in the 20 plus years we have lived in West Wittering”

Community member during the consultation process

The main town of Selsey relies on a single road link which is vulnerable to flooding, and the future viability of the community depends on maintaining this link.

To assess the options for defence, the strategy area has been divided into six ‘frontages’: Selsey; East Wittering & Bracklesham; Cakeham; West Wittering & East Head; Medmerry; and Pagham. Chichester District Council, Arun District Council and we are the operating authorities responsible for carrying out works on these shores.

The 2001 strategy for this coastline did not have the support of the local community or Natural England.

When Defra’s strategic guidance changed we had to update the strategy. Following a quick review of the initial strategy the operating authorities consulted the public in late 2006 and early 2007 about their opinions on the proposed options. During this exercise the strategy team met over 1,200 people and received over 2,000



responses. The *East Head Working Group* (considering the issues at East Head & West Wittering, and later renamed the *East Head Coastal Issues Advisory Group*) and the community group *Save Our Selsey* were established at this time to consider the issues at East Head, West Wittering and Selsey.

We used these community responses to modify the options for the frontages, and the draft strategy was issued for further public consultation over 12 weeks from the end of May 2008. This included four public exhibitions; meetings with residents and landowners; and meetings and workshops with local parish, town, district and county councils and community groups. Each area's local MP, Andrew Tyrie and Nick Gibb respectively, was actively involved and chaired meetings of community groups.

One of the more contentious frontages was Medmerry. The proposal, on the grounds of cost, was to manage a realignment of the defences, moving them further back inland, sacrificing agricultural land and creating habitat as a result. Comments were received both for and against the proposed option. Some people believed that habitat creation was the prime reason for the realignment rather than the provision of flood protection to the area. There was also concern that properties on the sea front and on the cliffs were not going to be protected.

Some people were worried that what happened at Medmerry would threaten properties in adjacent frontages as they were not convinced that the knock-on impacts were fully understood.

People were also looking for 'social justice', believing that those who are adversely affected by any changes should be duly compensated. Landowners reiterated the need for compensation if their cooperation was to continue. The principle of losing agricultural land was questioned particularly given current world food shortages.

The overriding comment was that managed realignment was a significant change and the community must be involved with the process so that it can influence the scheme development.

Since consultation the options have been reassessed for all frontages, including Medmerry. Despite the increased value of agricultural land, holding the existing line at Medmerry is still too expensive to qualify for central funding. Managed realignment remains the proposal, improving the standard of protection and thereby assuring the future of Selsey over the next hundred years. The company which owns the large West Sands Holiday Park at Medmerry has already invested in maintaining its own defences and has plans to do more work in the future. This will help to assure tourism potential for the area into the future.

The operating authorities hope soon to secure approval for the latest strategy from HM Treasury and Defra.

The pressures of climate change and increasing development mean that management of the coast is becoming more challenging. We aim to maintain and enhance the viability of coastal communities but we accept they may need to change. The approach to this particular strategy illustrates how we work with communities to understand the issues and approach the difficult decisions on the coast. Our shoreline

management plans enable us to set policies looking 20, 50 and 100 years ahead. They provide the framework for difficult decisions to be made in the strategies and long-term investment plans.