

Report to	Scrutiny Committee for Economy, Transport and Environment
Date	14 September 2011
Report By	Director of Economy, Transport and Environment
Title of Report	Management of the Cuckmere Estuary
Purpose of Report	To update Scrutiny Committee on decisions regarding future management of the Cuckmere Estuary.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the progress made in obtaining a consensus on future management of the Cuckmere Estuary and comment on the proposals for taking this forward.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 The Pathfinder project was entirely funded by Defra. It is not proposed that the County Council fund any of the future work needed (although there could be substantial capital costs involved, funding of which would be an undoubted challenge) therefore there are no cost implications for East Sussex County Council (ESCC) other than the cost of officer time supporting any emerging partnership. It has been suggested that, in the absence of the Environment Agency maintaining the flood defences, responsibility would fall to the County Council as riparian bank owner on the east side of the estuary. We do not hold this view but, even if it was correct, the responsibility would apply whatever management option is taken forward.

2. Background

2.1 The Cuckmere Estuary is generally recognised as an iconic landscape, due to the combination of the Seven Sisters cliffs, river meanders and Coastguard Cottages. It draws some 450,000 visitors annually but preservation of the status quo is heavily dependent on maintenance of a main channel and flood defences constructed over 150 years ago.

2.2 In anticipation of the decision by the Environment Agency to withdraw the funding for the maintenance of flood defences with effect from 1 April 2011, the County Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008 with other statutory and land-owning organisations to form the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership (CEP), which undertook to develop and undertake a policy of managed realignment. In essence, this policy was based on the principle that sea level rises and climate change made change, including flooding of the estuary, inevitable and sought to manage and, to an extent, accelerate the process by breaching the flood defences to allow flooding to take place in specific locations.

2.3 This policy and the existence of the partnership was contested by individuals and organisations opposed to the principle of managed realignment, who additionally argued that they were effectively excluded from any decision-making process because they could not join the partnership without signing the MoU, which would commit them to supporting managed realignment.

2.4 The CEP recognised this in 2009 and committed to three public engagement events open to the wider local community. This identified a strong desire for more local involvement in decisions about the future of the estuary and led to the formation of a Cuckmere Community Forum to progress this.

3. Pathfinder Project

3.1 In late 2009 DEFRA invited bids for Pathfinder funding, the aim of which was to engage local communities in the management of coastal change. ESCC successfully bid for funding in relation to the Cuckmere Estuary and a project was developed involving two main elements:

- Commissioning additional research to fill any evidence gaps
- Public engagement in decisions about the future management

3.2 The project ran from the spring of 2010 until June 2011. The evidence gathering phase included work on a visitor survey, the economic value of the estuary, its cultural heritage and landscape values. The public engagement process involved the community in identifying the options for future management (drawing heavily on work carried out by the Community Forum), the criteria against which the options should be assessed and, finally, assessment of the options.

3.3 The final engagement event on June 7, at which options were assessed, was open to all who wished to attend, and 120 people took part. It was independently facilitated, as were all the public engagement events. Throughout the process it was made very clear that the aim was not to ask people to turn up and vote for their preferred option. The intention was to encourage constructive debate and objective, evidence-based assessment of the options.

3.4 At the June 7 event, the options were assessed in break out groups and then scored by each attendee. As anticipated, no single option was a clear “winner” but maintaining the existing defences scored most highly, closely followed by reactivating the meanders. In plenary discussion it was very clear that maintaining the meanders was the most important thing for the vast majority. There was also recognition that maintaining the defences was not necessarily a sustainable option in the longer term and there was therefore real interest in exploring the reactivating of the meanders option. The consensus that was reached was therefore to maintain the defences while exploring further the option of reactivating the meanders as a possible longer term option. A copy of the report to Lead Member, recommending adoption of this as County Council policy, including attachments providing more detail, is attached as the Appendix.

4. Community Involvement

4.1 One of the major benefits of the Pathfinder process has been the active involvement of, and engagement with, the community in its widest sense and the move from confrontation to constructive debate. This engagement and consensus is far more likely to be maintained if the next steps are taken by a partnership of all interests, rather than led by a single organisation, which tends to create suspicion that organisation is driving its own agenda.

4.2 In the latter stages of the Pathfinder project, a “Friends of Cuckmere” grouping was formed by some leading members of the community. However, while individuals who have signed up to this are keen to be involved in the future management of the estuary, there is a real nervousness about the “Friends” being asked to lead on the next steps. A meeting is being arranged later in September of all interested organisations and individuals to set up a partnership to take forward future management of the estuary, possibly in conjunction with management of the Seven Sisters Country Park.

5. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

5.1 Scrutiny is invited to note progress to date and comment on the proposed next steps.

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6 September 2011

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None