

Provisional response to the Environment Agency consultation on its strategy for the future protection of the Minsmere coastline.

Minsmere Levels

The Minsmere Levels are the flood plain of the old Minsmere River, comprising some 650 hectares of arable, grazing and marsh land; since 1810 they have been drained by the New Cut to enter the sea at low tide through the Sluice. The management of the area presents particularly complex challenges. Unlike other vulnerable Suffolk rivers and coastal marshes, it is not estuarine, and the problem of discharge of inland floodwater through a sluice is as great a concern as the protection of the coastline. Whereas until 1958 maintenance of ditches, drains, the New Cut, Sluice and shingle bank sea wall was all undertaken by the local landowners, since then responsibility has become progressively more fragmented. Currently the Environment Agency is responsible for both coastal defence also inland water flowing through for the New Cut and certain other main drains; however coastal defence and the prevention of inland flooding appear to be allocated to separate departments of the Agency, and subject to different policies which seem sometimes hard to reconcile. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the recently reconstituted Internal Drainage Board, to which the major landowners still contribute financially, has taken over responsibility for certain other main drain; with the landowners themselves still retaining obligations for a significant number of lesser drains.

The Minsmere Levels Stakeholders Group (MLSG) came together in December 2007 to campaign for a more coherent and integrated approach to the management of this complex environment.

The three primary objectives of MLSG are

1. The defence of the coast against storm surges and rise in sea level due to global warming.
2. The maintenance of the New Cut and Sluice to ensure its continued capacity to discharge fresh water, even if the sea level rises.
3. The improvement the internal drainage of the marshes to allow flood water to drain into the New Cut and hence to the sea.

For several years the Environment Agency has been undertaking a detailed appraisal of the Minsmere coastline as part of its Suffolk Shoreline Management strategy. Consultation. On 21st November the agency held a public display in Leiston to present its latest proposals on Managing Flood Risk at Minsmere. MLSG recognises the recent challenges of which this review has to take account. The East Coast has of course been subjected to strong storms and storm surges throughout its recorded history, with Dunwich being the most well known example of coastal erosion of the soft sands and shingle: storms in 1286, 1328, and 1347 destroyed the port and a quarter of the town. Local drainage records show that the northern part of the Minsmere Levels sea defences were cut through in 1828, 1898, 1938 and 1953 leading to complete flooding of the Marshes. Then in 2006 and 2007 two storm surges breached the bank of sand and shingle and filled the foot path along the shore with shingle. The inner clay defences just held, though a higher surge (as predicted) would have produced very serious sea water flooding of the whole RSPB scrape and marshland area.

The Environment Agency's preferred option is for a partial managed realignment of the primary sea defences and strengthening the north wall to provide greater resistance to sea water inundation during a storm surge. The East Anglian Daily Times on 19th November had a rather dramatic preview of the proposal 'Part of reserve to be surrendered to the sea'. The full proposal of the Environment Agency can be down-loaded from its web site: www.environment-agency.gov.uk

The photograph shows in red the north wall, in yellow the main RSPB scrape and marshes, and in blue the area which would be most liable to sea water flooding if the sea defences are breached. The continual beach recharging by long shore drift will probably rebuild the coastal shingle bar, but the marsh behind will initially become saline until flushed out by fresh water. Hence the longer term freshwater habitat in the blue area will need to be recreated elsewhere.

Whilst regretting the loss of the North Marsh over the next 20 (?) years or so implied by this option, MLSG considers this to be a realistic proposal to reduce the effects of coastal erosion and probable sea level rise due to global warming *provided* that adequate funding is made available to ensure that the re-aligned sea defences are sufficiently substantial to withstand the future surge tides that can be expected. MLSG is particularly heartened that the more drastic option tabled four years ago to redraw the line of sea defences at the Dam Bridge and thus abandon the area of the Minsmere Levels to the east (including the low lying levels of the RSPB reserves, including the scrapes) has been rejected.

MLSG see this proposal as the next stage of a longer term series of actions to maintain the Minsmere Levels as a unique area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; however the maintenance of the remaining sea wall, sluice and main river drainage are all integral to this objective and we will continue to press the Environment Agency to ensure that there is a joined up strategy for coastal defence, the management of the sluice and the inland floodwater that flows through it.

This is a provisional response of MLSG to the Environment Agency's proposal which will be modified as required following a public meeting in Theberton to be organised by MLSG at which Environment Agency staff and their consultants have agreed to elaborate upon their proposals

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