

Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankment scheme (LEHES) update

The Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankments project is an Environment Agency-led, partnership funded scheme to deliver the following outcomes:

- Increase the storage volume in the Leigh Flood Storage Area (FSA) by 24% to reduce the flood risk to 1,430 households downstream of Leigh
- Reinforce the main embankments at the Leigh FSA
- Replace the drive and control systems at the Leigh FSA
- Construct a new flood embankment and pumping station in Hildenborough

The project is now in the detailed design phase, the Environment Agency is progressing the following activities:

Planning and stakeholder engagement

The planning application for works at the Leigh FSA will be submitted in August 2020 to the three planning authorities that the flood storage area will affect, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Sevenoaks District Council. The works at Hildenborough will be covered by a separate application and submitted later in 2020.

The Environment Agency has been engaging with a wide range of landowners and organisations with an interest in the proposed works, on a one to one basis where possible. This work has been impacted by the changes required to manage Covid-19 but we have kept up contact in a safe manner. The works at Hildenborough are currently undergoing a redesign to reduce the visual and construction impact on local residents, this is the reason for the separation of the planning applications.

The River Medway (Flood Relief) Act 1976

The maximum stored water level inside the Leigh FSA is set by the River Medway (Flood Relief) Act 1976. To enable the expansion to proceed, the Environment Agency has applied to Defra to increase this maximum stored water level. This requires the approval from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The application will be considered under the terms set out in the Act. To date, eleven representations objecting to the changes have been received.

The Environment Agency is working with the objectors to resolve their concerns. If their objections are not resolved then an inspector will be appointed to consider the application and the objections via a public

enquiry or hearing. The Environment Agency do not have any information on the likely timescale for this process but are working closely with Defra to keep the process moving.

Detailed Design

All of the engineering, environmental and survey work for the proposed works are progressing on target for a business case submission in April 2021. The business case approval will authorise the expenditure for the construction phase of the project. The project is aiming to be carbon net zero and to exceed the 10% biodiversity net gain target. The construction phase (depending on planning and the progress of the approval required under the River Medway (Flood Relief) Act) will be staggered over three years to ensure that the FSA remains operational during the works.

Through close engagement with Network Rail the project team has designed out the need for additional concrete reinforcement to the railway line through the FSA. This change of design reduces the number of vehicle movements and disruption to local residents and is a major project success. The additional benefit of reduced carbon will help the project toward achieving net zero carbon.

Key Project Milestones:

- Leigh FSA planning – August 2020
- Design activities concluded - Winter 2020/21
- Hildenborough planning – Winter 2020/21
- Full Business Case Approval – April 2021
- Construction begins – Spring 2021
- Construction ends - Autumn 2023

The Environment Agency's operation of the FSA over the last winter reduced the impact of flooding to hundreds of households and demonstrated the value and importance of the Leigh FSA. The Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankment scheme will improve the protection the FSA offers and reduce the risk of flooding to an additional 230 households. The improvements to the embankments and mechanical structure will complement this flood reduction with new operational equipment and improved reservoir safety.