

Environment Agency questioned over spending of public money

# Probe into cash for Cuckmere

**THE ENVIRONMENT Agency is being scrutinised over the spending of £440,000 of public money on the Cuckmere Valley flooding project.**

Letters have been sent to the National Audit Office (NAO), which investigates whether public money has been spent correctly, asking specific questions about the project.

The NAO said it had not launched an investigation but will be looking at whether the Environment Agency have gained good value for money.

The Environment Agency, English Nature and the National Trust all want to create a salt marsh at the Cuckmere, but have already been defeated at the planning stage.

Planning committee councillors on Lewes District Council voted unanimously and colleagues on Wealden District Council voted by 7-1 to accept a motion to raise the banks by a foot.

This week it was revealed that concerns have been raised about the amount of money the public agency has spent.

Norman Baker, MP for Polegate and Seaford, said that he had not been involved in the correspondence but believed the issue should be investigated.

He said, "I do not think that a public body should be spending substantial amounts of money on a scheme which has yet to receive the approval of the public.

"I'm disappointed that the Agency has gone ahead and spent this amount of money when no decision has been made.

"Whether you are for or against the scheme, I would think that you cannot agree that this sort of money should be spent on something that might not happen.

by **Matthew Brown**

"I have not personally been involved in writing letters to the National Audit Office but I believe that it is something that it should investigate.

"I look forward to hearing the response to the questions which have been raised."

A spokesman for the National Audit Office said, "We have been asked a number of specific questions to which we will reply with answers to from the people who asked them.

"At this time there are no plans to publish a report to Parliament.

"The National Audit Office is an independent body and we ourselves decide what needs to be look at and then take it from there.

"Members of the public are free to write to us if they have a concern and we will respond to them.

"If we think there is something we need to investigate further we will, and our findings will be reported to Parliament."

The Environment Agency has said that it will cost £17 million to maintain and rebuild the banks to stand for a further 100 years.

It is expecting to announce the findings into reports it has commissioned into the future of the valley next year.

Andrew Gilham, the Environment Agency's Sussex area flood risk manager, said, "We are aware of the involvement of the National Audit Office and have spoken with them.

"We have nothing to hide and have been looking into how the Cuckmere will be maintained in the next 100 years.

"It does take money to research this. We are working and looking at the future of the area for years to come, which is not cheap."

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SEAFORD GAZETTE 18.10.06