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Residents win fight to raise river banks and keep meanders

Cuckmere victory could be dammed by English Nature

A MULTI-MILLIONAIRE publisher has stopped the Cuckmere Valley being flooded, but plans could be thwarted by English Nature.

Nigel Newton, the chief executive of Bloomsbury books whose titles include Harry Potter, submitted a planning application to raise the banks of the Cuckmere River by 300mm, which he would fund.

This was in response to a plan submitted by the Environment Agency where one of the options was to flood the entire valley.

Mr Newton and many Seaford residents fought to save the river, appealing to the EA and English

Nature to seek an alternative plan. The EA spent in excess of £400,000 on consultation and investigation.

At a meeting of Lewes District Council's planning committee on Wednesday, councillors went against their officers' recommendations and approved Mr Newton's plan.

Steve Howe, the planning officer, said the application to raise the river banks by 300mm should be refused because no adequate flood risk assessment or assessment of the impact on wildlife and the ecology of the area had been submitted.

But district councillors also heard from town and parish counterparts from Seaford and the Cuckmere

by **Hannah Russell**

Valley as well as from Mr Newton's planning advisor, Alan Edgar, and an owner of one of the Coastguard Cottages at Cuckmere Haven.

A resident spoke out against the plans, saying she agreed with the Environment Agency.

Rose Diment said, "I am sure the estuary will be just as beautiful."

She said nature should be allowed to take its course as the flood banks were a man-made measure.

Mr Edgar called the Environment Agency's plan 'ethnic cleansing' for the existing eco-structure of the valley.

He said, "The Environment Agency fears we are right.

"It fears our plan is more benign — a low-cost, low-impact alternative to the draconian plan offered by the Environment Agency — a plan which will create ecological mayhem, ethnic cleansing for the existing ecostructure.

"If the EA just walks away, then what happens to the Cuckmere?"

"We maintain the status quo by just such works as we propose."

Des Abbot lives in one of the Coastguard Cottages that overlook the Cuckmere Haven, which could be under threat under the EA's plan to flood the valley.

He said, "The EA has already spent over £400,000 of taxpayers' money on plans and reports to for this work, a matter being investigated by the National Audit Office, to save some £30,000 to £40,000 annual maintenance on keeping the river mouth clear and repairing the groynes, with little done to improve the flow.

"Apart from the loss of four well-used footpaths, access to the beach will be more difficult for nearly half a million annual visitors, which, when turned into mud flats, will be less attractive."

He added the EA plan would flood his vehicle right-of-way to Exceat Bridge and would cause an earlier demise of the well-photographed Coastguard Cottages through increased wave action when the level of the beach shingle lowers.

He said, "To maintain this spectacular site of great importance we must protect the river, because once lost there will be no turning back."

Cllr Sharon Davy said, "It seems to

me that the organisations that tell us what to do do not necessarily live here.

"When my husband showed me Sussex, he specifically took me there."

Cllr Kim Clark added, "We are looking at one of the most famous landscapes in Sussex and its value to tourism is absolutely enormous."

The application was approved by Wealden District Council last week as 20 per cent of the area falls within its area.

The final 80 per cent was approved in a unanimous vote by the planning committee at Lewes District Council.

Mr Edgar, speaking after the meeting, said, "This is fantastic, a unanimous vote. This is a victory for local people.

"But we still have a long way to go."

At the meeting the council was reminded that before final permission was granted, English Nature would need to be told as it could recommend the plan be called in by the government.

If this happens, the Cuckmere could still be allowed to flood.

A spokesperson for English Nature said, "At the moment we are reviewing the planning decision by both local authorities.

"We will make any subsequent decisions known.

"We are discussing the options at the moment and also waiting for planning authorities to come back to us about the reasons they approve the decision against our advice."

A spokesperson for the Environment Agency said, "We objected to these applications because the proposals constrain natural processes and we have concerns over the Flood Risk Assessment.

"We were surprised to hear that the planning application to Lewes District Council and Wealden District Council was approved particularly as the recommendation from their own planning officer was for it to be refused.

"Separate to our comment on the planning application, we are continuing with our work, as part of The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership, to ensure the long-term future of the continued recreational use of the Cuckmere Estuary."

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