

Residents bank on the riv

A PLAN by local residents to raise the banks of the Cuckmere Valley to protect it from flooding has been given the go-ahead.

by **Joanne Smith**

Homeowners living near to the site south of the A259 county road near Exceat, submitted an application to raise the height of the flood protection banks by 300mm and re-lay the footpath at a new level.

They decided to put together an application following controversial proposals by the Environment Agency to flood the site.

Millionaire publisher Nigel Newton, owner of one of the Coastguard Cottages, was involved in the campaign which started some four years ago following concerns that the agency's plans would ruin the area and destroy tourist trade.

Speaking at a meeting of Wealden's development control south sub-committee, Alan Edgar, the applicant's agent, said, "The previous time this application was considered, you deferred a decision to allow us time to submit a flood risk assessment and more ecological information.

"This we did and yet despite our modest but professional efforts, the Environment Agency and others have seen fit to step outside their role as statutory consultees and denigrate our submission. They fear we are right in our contention that the lower Cuckmere Valley should not be flooded."

Richard Mann, chairman of the Cuckmere Valley Parish Council also spoke at the meeting of the importance of Cuckmere Valley.

The plans were supported by councillors at the meeting, who said the Cuckmere Valley was an important part of Sussex.

Councillor Brian West said, "I very much support this application. We should be looking out for future generations not allow it to deteriorate."

Councillor Dianne Dear added, "People come to visit this area from all over the world and I think it needs all the help it can get."

Councillor Roy Martin said, "I feel this application is a most sensible way of dealing with this issue.

"In my view it would be a crying shame that the village would be completely flooded over."

After learning that the Environment Agency was proposing the possibility of raising the banks by 900mm using concrete and steel material, with a preferred alternative option to

flood the banks, residents began a petition and collected some 4,000 signatures.

The proposals put forward by residents include building the banks to the south of the A259 out of grass and chalk.

They were approved subject to a number of conditions, including a landscape condition and a wheel washing facility being made available.

Twenty per cent of the land in question falls under the remit of Wealden District Council because of the parish boundaries and 80 per cent falls under the authority of Lewes District Council, which is having a meeting today (Wednesday) to discuss the plans which fall under their remit.

A pleased Mr Edgar said, "I feel that this is the winning of a battle of a hard fought war.

"I know we haven't stopped the Environment Agency, but the people involved have showed everyone that there is a lower cost, benign, lower-intervention alternative to the Environment Agency's draconian plans to flood the valley."

Seaford MP Norman Baker said he believes an independent inquiry should take place and added, "I have some sympathies with this. The Environment Agency has already spent huge amounts of money on preparatory work without planning permission being secured.

"I do applaud the fact that local residents have taken the matter so far themselves."

A spokesperson for the Environment Agency said, "We were surprised to hear that the first planning application was approved, especially as officers had recommended its refusal.

"The estuary is very much a man-made landscape, shaped and managed in the past by engineering works, agriculture and navigation.

"The flood defences which maintain it are coming to the end of their useful life and starting to collapse. It would cost around £17 million to maintain these and cope with climate change and rising sea levels for the next 100 years.

"We are producing a report that looks at how flood risk on the Cuckmere estuary can be managed in the long-term working more with natural processes rather than fighting against them.

"We are continuing with our work and in the autumn the Regional Flood Defence Committee will consider our recommendations."

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THE Cuckmere Valley from the air (C)

MP calls for public inquiry

MP NIGEL Waterson is demanding a public inquiry into plans to flood the Cuckmere Valley meanders.

He has written this week to Wealden planners who are considering the issue at their meeting on Thursday.

Mr Waterson said, "The Environment Agency have been very slow to come up

with their definitive proposals for this area.

"We know that their preferred option is for the sea to be allowed to flood the valley, wiping out the famous meanders and with a long-term effect on the local habitat and wildlife.

"I have always made it clear that their arguments,

along with those of local people who oppose the scheme, should be tested in a full public inquiry.

"It is high time this took place, and that is why I have written to local planners. If Nature is simply allowed to take its course, this beautiful and distinctive piece of coastline could be lost forever."