



Part of the
Medway Flood Partnership



The Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankment scheme

June 2021

This document provides an update on the progress of the Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankment scheme being delivered in partnership by the Environment Agency, Kent County Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, as part of the Medway Flood Partnership.

Background

The Environment Agency is working on a scheme to increase the capacity of the Leigh Flood Storage Area (FSA) to reduce the risk to downstream homes and businesses. The scheme also includes a new embankment to protect homes in Hildenborough.

Ministerial approval to increase the maximum stored water level in the Leigh FSA

The Environment Agency is proposing to increase the capacity of the Leigh FSA by storing water to a greater depth. Currently the Environment Agency can legally store water to a maximum level of 28.05m above ordnance datum (AOD), as measured at the control structure in Leigh. Investigations have shown that storing water to 28.60m AOD will reduce flood risk to over 1,400 homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough.

The River Medway (Flood Relief) Act 1976 sets the level to which water can be stored. Increasing this maximum level to which water can be stored requires approval from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Approval for this is essential to enable both the Leigh expansion and Hildenborough aspects of the scheme to progress.

Over the last 2 years, the Environment Agency has been working with organisations and landowners who are affected by the proposal. We submitted our application to increase the maximum stored water level to the Secretary of State in early June 2020.

Ten objections to the application were submitted to Defra. Unfortunately we were unable to resolve these objections so an Inquiry took place between Monday 26 April and Friday 28 May to allow concerns to be heard.

The Environment Agency responded to the concerns raised by all respondents. You can view all of the material submitted for the Inquiry on the Inquiry website: <https://gateleyhamer-pi.com/en-gb/river-medway/>

The Inquiry is now closed and the Inspector will prepare her report and recommendations for the Minister. She has indicated that this will take approximately 1 month. Once submitted, the Minister will make their decision. Currently we do not have a timeframe for this.

Construction works to expand the Leigh FSA cannot start unless and until the Minister approves our application to increase the maximum stored water level. Under our original programme, we expected to complete construction of the scheme in autumn 2023. However the final completion date will depend on the outcome and timing of the Minister's decision.



Planning permissions

The FSA sits across 3 local planning authority areas: Sevenoaks District Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.

The Environment Agency submitted a planning application for the Leigh part of the works in August 2020. We are pleased to confirm that in winter 2020/21 all 3 authorities approved our planning application for the works to the Leigh FSA.

At Hildenborough, the Environment Agency is continuing to work with residents on the final design. We held a virtual presentation for Hildenborough residents in early February to update them on the progress of the scheme and the current outline designs. We will continue to work with the local community to answer questions about the proposals. We expect to submit our planning application for the Hildenborough works to Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council in summer 2021.

Reservoir Act works

The planning permission has allowed the Environment Agency to proceed with the essential works required to the FSA under the Reservoirs Act 1975.

These works will involve lifting the top soil of the existing 1.5km main embankment and laying reinforcing materials. This reinforced layer will be covered with a layer of soil then sown with grass to further stabilise the surface. Once these works are complete, the embankments will look very similar to how they look now. These works will ensure the Leigh FSA continues to safely reduce flood risk to Tonbridge, Hildenborough and downstream communities into the future.

The works to the embankment will be ongoing over the next three years and will not affect the operation of the Leigh FSA to reduce the risk of flooding.

Next steps

- Amendment to River Medway (Flood Relief) Act 1976
 - Application submitted to Defra: June 2020
 - Local Inquiry held: 26 April - 28 May 2021
 - Decision: to be confirmed
- Hildenborough - separate planning application due to be submitted summer 2021
- Construction begins – winter 2021/22 (subject to Ministerial approval)
- Construction ends – Currently expected to be complete autumn 2023 but subject to Ministerial approval

More information

You can find out more about the history of the Leigh FSA here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/leigh-flood-storage-area>

If you'd like to find out more about how the Leigh FSA works to reduce downstream flood risk, take a look at our new You Tube animation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FVsi0WNa50> or search for "Leigh Flood Storage Area".

If you have any questions about any of the works described in this newsletter, or would like to join our electronic distribution list for future updates, please email the project team at:

LEHES@environment-agency.gov.uk