

Cuckmere Estuary Partnership Community Engagement Report

The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership is a coalition of local councils, landowners, heritage and conservation agencies who are committed to ensuring a sustainable long-term future for the estuary



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01

Executive summary

In July 2008 the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership commissioned Hopkins Van Mil to design, develop and implement a community engagement programme. This report summarises the process; reports on what people said during the various engagement activities and makes recommendations to the Partnership on future action.

Hopkins Van Mil's recommendations are given in full in section 06 of this report. In summary, we have recommended that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership:

- Publishes this report and signposting it to other organisations that could take action on specific elements;
- Clarifies areas where it does, and does not, have a way of taking action on the short, medium and long term;
- Finds a means of ongoing support of a Partnership Officer to continue active dialogue with the local community;
- Establish community working group(s);
- Works to better understand and raise awareness of the costs, risks, benefits and legal implications of various different management options;
- Ensures that all relevant background and policy information, modelling and costings related to the Cuckmere is accessible by members of the public;
- Tests the feasibility of a range of future management options;
- Develops a fundraising strategy; and
- Develops and implements a timetabled research plan to fill evidence gaps.

We recommend that this work is taken further within the next 18 months, which is the period until public funding is no longer available for maintenance of existing flood defences. Of primary importance is the need for the Partnership to think constructively and strategically about the future of stakeholder engagement.

02

Introduction

The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership is a coalition of local councils, heritage and conservation agencies and individuals with a direct interest in the Cuckmere, all of whom are committed to ensuring a sustainable long-term future for the estuary.

The members of the Partnership are:

- The National Trust
- Seaford Town Council
- Natural England
- The Environment Agency
- The South Downs Joint Committee
- East Sussex County Council
- Wealden District Council
- Lower Coastguard Cottage Owners

The Partnership was formed in 2001 and has evolved as new members have joined up to the present day. The Partnership believes that working with nature rather than against it is the best option for the estuary so that what is important and unique is preserved and benefits are gained for tourism, wildlife, access and recreation. The Partnership want to explore all possible options. Their aim is to work together with the community to agree and develop the best possible outcome, and to then attempt to find the funding to make it happen.

To this end in July 2008 the Partnership appointed Rhoden Green and Hopkins Van Mil to design, develop and implement a communications and stakeholder engagement programme to allow a wide range of voices to be heard.

Rhoden Green is a communications and marketing consultancy, specialising in the public and non-profit sectors. It is owned and run by Jo O'Driscoll, a consultant with over 15 years' experience working for a wide range of charities and government agencies. Hopkins Van Mil is a Partnership of two leading engagement specialists, Henrietta Hopkins and Anita Van Mil. Henrietta and Anita use research and consultation to offer fresh solutions for strategy development and implementation

support. They have over 20 years experience working in the cultural and heritage sector.

In developing a community engagement programme for the CEP, the Associates divided the work as follows:

Rhoden Green

- Project management
- Strategic communications advice
- Development of engagement materials
- Web development
- Publicity, media relations and promotion

Hopkins Van Mil

- Designing and managing the Tier 1 and Tier 2 engagement events
- Facilitating the events and recruiting additional facilitators
- Acting as contact point for key local stakeholders
- Designing, testing and analysing questionnaires for online and on-street surveys
- Analysing the engagement programme results
- Writing the report and producing the appendices

03

Methodology

The community engagement programme was designed as a result of an intensive programme of interviews with members of the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership, with local politicians and the community.

Eight telephone interviews, five face to face interviews and regular meetings with the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership Officer and Communications Sub-Group helped us to shape an approach which needed to:

- Allow a wide range of voices to be heard
- Enable all options for the estuary to be discussed
- Allow people to get involved in different ways (online, at events, by post)
- Set out the facts clearly and consistently
- Be independent and objective

We would like to thank those who were interviewed and gave up their time to help us refine our proposals. They were:

- Des Abbott, Coastguard Cottage Owners
- Norman Baker MP
- Kate Cole, Cuckmere Estuary Partnership Officer
- Jon Curson, Natural England
- Steve Douch, Cuckmere Valley Canoe Club
- Alan Edgar, Plan Sussex Ltd
- Cllr Jon Freeman, Seaford Town Council
- Catherine James, South Downs Joint Committee
- Jonathan Light, National Trust
- Richard Mann, Cuckmere Valley Parish Council
- Andy Robertson, East Sussex County Council
- Tony Whitbread, Sussex Wildlife Trust

- Chris Wick, Environment Agency
- All members of the CEP's Communications Sub-Group

There was a high level of consistency in the feedback from the discussions and interviews about this issue. The people we spoke to were clear that emotions had been running high for some time. They understood that some individuals felt there had been inadequate discussion with the local community and believed that their views were being ignored or sidelined. Interviewees felt that there was a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about the future of the estuary, and a perception that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership was being run by bureaucrats from London, who had already decided on the approach.

Our key findings were that:

- There was indeed a need for a full, open engagement allowing all voices to be heard, managed by an objective third party.
- The engagement should include discussion on all possible future options.
- The Partnership needs to build better relationships with key stakeholders such as cottage owners, the Parish Councils and local politicians.
- The engagement needed to examine business, tourism and heritage interests, as well as the environment.
- 'Managed realignment' is not a term which is understood or generally agreed on as a distinct approach.
- There is a need for clarity about the engagement process: how it is being managed, what is up for discussion, the rules of engagement, and what will happen as a result of people's feedback.

As a result we recommended to the Partnership a tiered and phased approach, allowing different levels of involvement by a wide variety of people and communities. The programme of activity is described in the next section.

04

Engagement programme

The engagement programme involved three sets of face-to-face activity as well as a questionnaire and an online forum.

04.1

Tier 1: open public engagement events

Three public engagement events were held, on:

- 6 July at the Memorial Hall in Alfriston
- 8 July at the Clinton Centre in Seaford; and
- 13 July at the Assembly Rooms in Eastbourne Town Hall.

The locations were selected because of their proximity to the Cuckmere, accessibility in terms of public transport, availability for a reasonable cost and suitability for large group discussions.

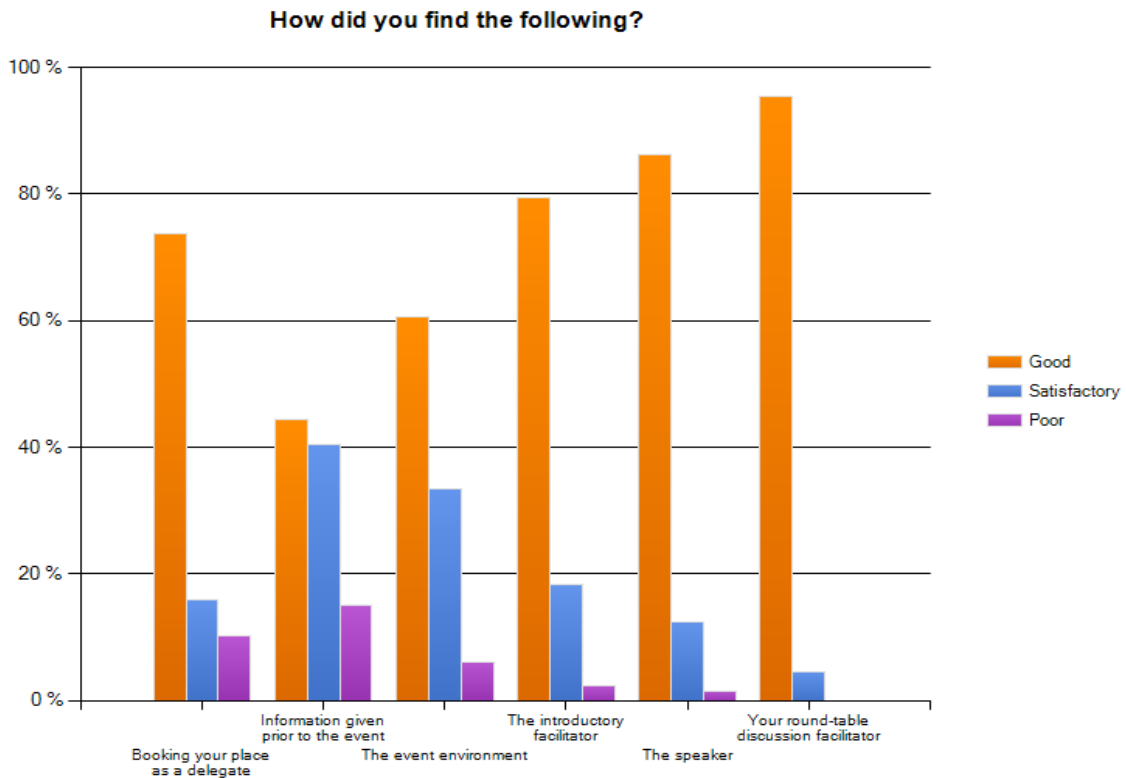
The events were attended by 187 people, who followed the same programme whichever event they chose to attend. The full programme is provided at Appendix 1. Each began with a factual presentation of the history of the Cuckmere Estuary and the current issues, presented by Dr Rendel Williams formerly of the University of Sussex. Dr Williams was asked to give a brief, neutral overview of the situation and was encouraged to speak to other members of the community in preparing his presentation.

This was followed by matters of clarification asked by participants before the session broke into round-table discussions around an agenda designed by the team. These discussions were led by a facilitation team brought together for the purpose by Hopkins Van Mil. The sessions closed with an opportunity for everyone to look at the summary sheets produced by each group. The aim of these events was to allow a wide range of voices to be heard in a neutral and independent forum.

135 of the 187 participants used the evaluation forms available at the events to give feedback on the sessions. From these we know that 99% of those who completed a form felt they were given plenty of opportunity to express their views and 95% stated that the event met their expectations.

Chart 1 gives further information on what people felt about the various aspects of the event from information prior to it to the facilitation of their round-table discussion.

Chart 1



Participants were also encouraged to use the forms to give any additional comments on the events. 86 people made such additional comments which fell broadly into four categories, those who felt that the event they attended:

a) met or exceeded their expectations:

'Exceeded my expectations - my particular group, whilst having differing views, was very positive and accommodating. Thank you for a very useful experience.'

'Very well facilitated open and fair. The discussion on our table was very good and really informative.'

b) had been poorly advertised and / or the event environment had been a barrier to participation:

'Information about the event was poor and booking online not easy to find as it came under a sub-heading. I expect all facilitators' recordings to be produced word for word in the final report.'

'The acoustics were poor. The event didn't meet my expectations because I hoped people might be more realistic!!'

c) may yet be some kind of lip service to engagement:

'A futile public relations exercise.'

'Could be a smokescreen so authority has its way.'

d) would have benefited from more detail and information:

'Didn't meet expectations because of lack of clarity on costings and lack of engineering presentation.'

'More information from the Environment Agency to the local communities would be worthwhile.'

The comments that fell into the first category made up about 38% of those that could be categorised under these headings; the second about 35%; the third 13% and the fourth 15%.

04.2 Tier 2: subject specialist workshops

On 21 and 22 July we held five themed seminars to which people with a specific professional or personal interest in the Cuckmere Estuary were invited. The themes were:

- natural processes;
- recreation;
- business and tourism;
- biodiversity; and
- historical landscape.

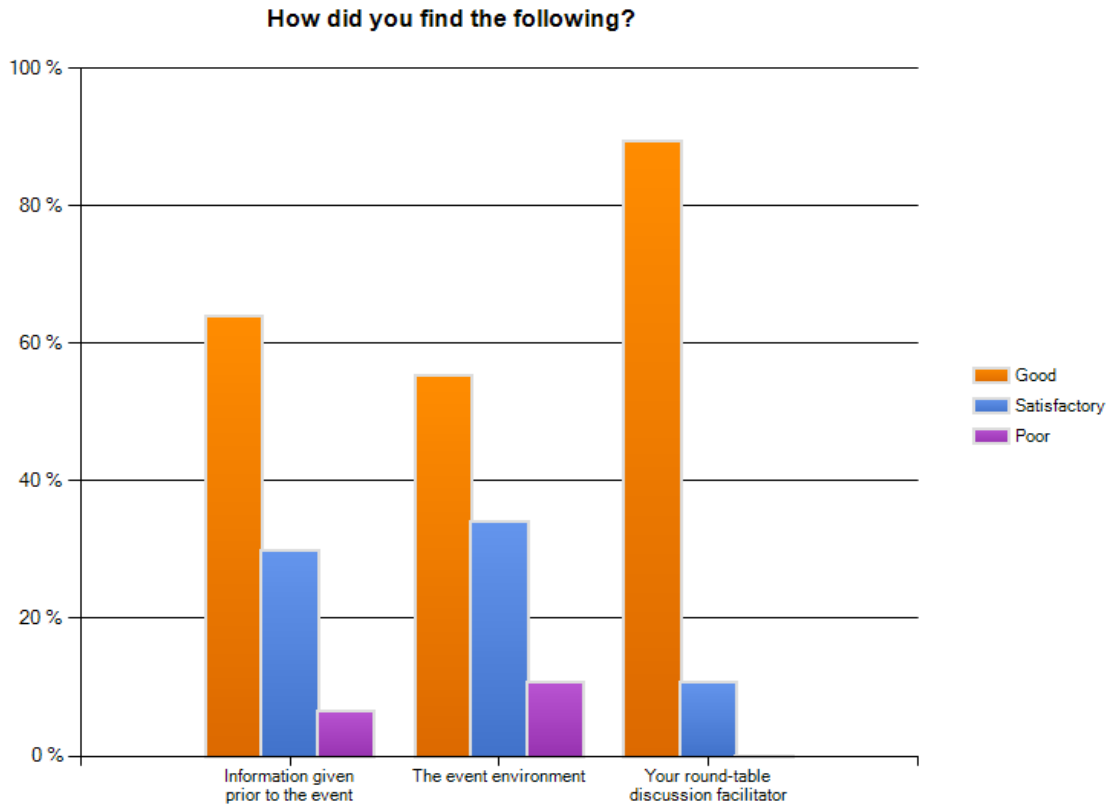
There was a total of 75 participants over the two days. Each workshop followed the same format, this time with no presentation and just two facilitated break-out groups. The programme is provided at Appendix 2 of this report.

The aim of these events was to ensure that the engagement process captured the views of those with a very specific interest and knowledge in the future of the

Cuckmere Estuary. Again participants were asked to evaluate the sessions using a form provided at the event.

Chart 2 summarises the views of those that attended.

Chart 2



94% of the participants at the Tier 2 subject specialist workshops found that the event met their expectations and the same percentage said that they had plenty of opportunity to express their views.

The 25 comments provided in addition to the tick box answers on the evaluation forms reveal in general a satisfaction that there had been an opportunity to express views:

'Facilitator was excellent - such a relief to be part of a group where informed discussion can be aired.'

'An excellent themed workshop with lots of good thoughts and ideas.'

'I am pleased that local views are last being taken into account.'

However, one person stated that they were:

'not sure why it was necessary to employ the services of facilitators' [as given the extensive knowledge of the participants] 'I am sure that we would have been quite capable of spontaneously discussing the future of Cuckmere and summarising our discussion.'

The workshops were held at the Turkey Barn at the Seven Sisters Country Park and there were some understandable comments about the size of the room and working in two groups with a difficult acoustic:

'Because we had two groups they interfered with each other; more space needed.'

However, the majority of the comments were positive such as,

'I felt these meetings / workshop to be very productive and helpful and have helped generate many new ideas and working relationships amongst various interested parties.'

04.3 Fieldwork

In addition to the workshops the Hopkins Van Mil team organised surveys carried out in Eastbourne, Lewes, Alfriston, Seaford and at the East Dean Farmers Market. This involved Hopkins Van Mil together with National Trust and South Downs Joint Committee staff stopping people in the street and asking them to answer the questions contained in the online survey form. Those that did not wish to fill in the form there and then were given a leaflet and encouraged to either attend an engagement event or complete the survey form online.

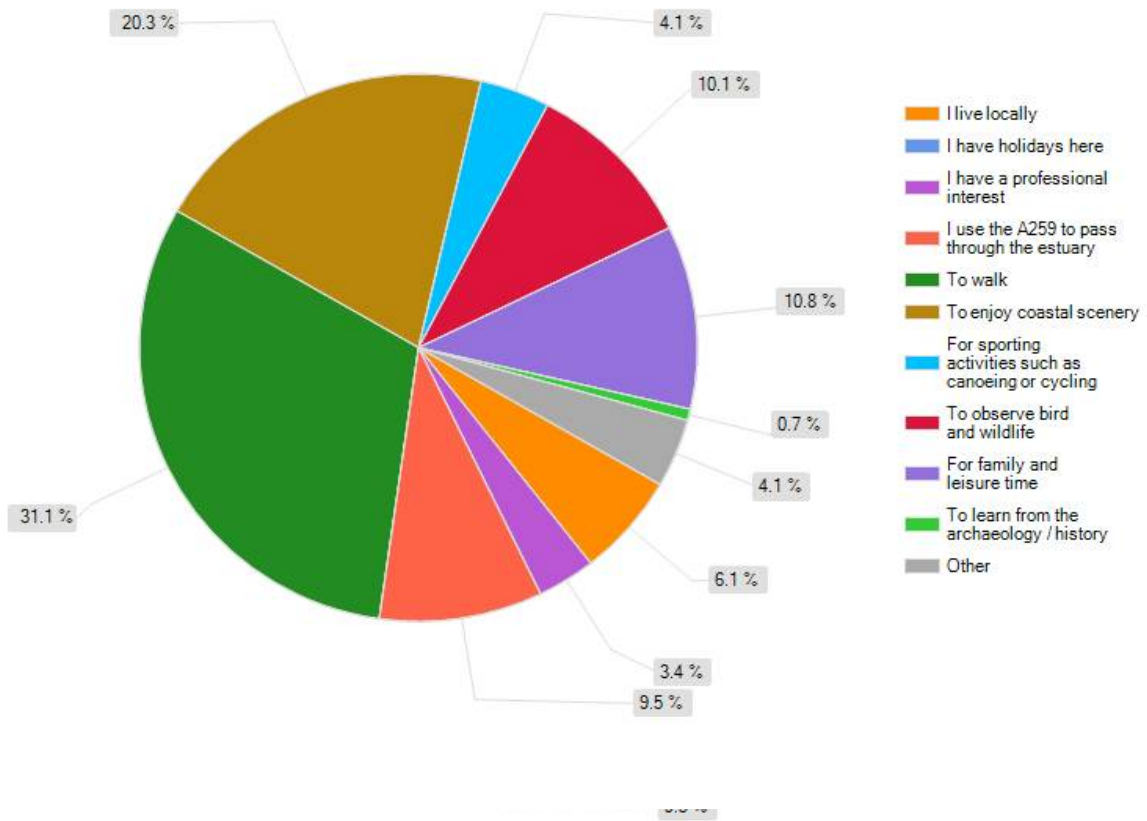
75 people completed a form in this way, or by completing a form at the Seven Sisters Visitor Centre and interesting comments were gathered to inform the findings of this report which are set out in Section 5. Two clear points came out of this process for the team, that the perception is that, *'they are going to flood it aren't they?'* and that there is no clear idea who, *'they'* are. This supports the information provided by participants in the engagement events who made comments which we have grouped together under the heading *'Perceptions and Voices'* in the next section.

The results of the street and online surveys (completed by a further 88 people) are provided in full at Appendix 3. A summary is provided here. The majority of respondents (59%) live within five miles of the Estuary. 32% of respondents visit the estuary at least once a month; 25% once a week; and 6% come every day. 11% of respondents to the survey were visiting the area from further than 20 miles away and therefore visit less frequently.

Chart 3 (over the page) demonstrates that for the majority of respondents, their main reason for coming to the Cuckmere is to walk (31%), when asked for all the

reasons they come to the estuary (please see appendix 3) people also valued highly the coastal scenery (84%) and enjoying family and leisure time (61%).

Chart 3



Quotations from those who provided comments on their use of the Cuckmere have been used in Section 05 of this report. They range from people who wish to emphasise the beauty of the Cuckmere,

'The coastal scenery is unique and beautiful even in passing from the car it is memorable.'

'the scenery is jaw dropping.'

Others who talk about bird and wildlife as being a priority for them,

'to observe bird and wildlife. This is a very important undeveloped stretch of Sussex coastline that offers wonderful wildlife watching opportunities with a range of important and interesting habitat types. The estuary is a sanctuary for wildlife in the highly populated South East.'

To those who comment on the importance of the area for walking,

'Easy walk for children and lovely scenery combined'

'Dog walking in a beautiful place is good for the soul, as well as the dog!'

And those who wish to record memories and family time,

'Having visited Seven Sisters Country Park for over 20 years with family and friends it has provided a stunning setting for many wonderful experiences and lasting memories.'

Whilst still others wished to comment on future plans,

'I am concerned about the appearance of the river, and flood risks, upstream of the estuary. I feel that the lower (tidal) Cuckmere should be looked at as a whole.'

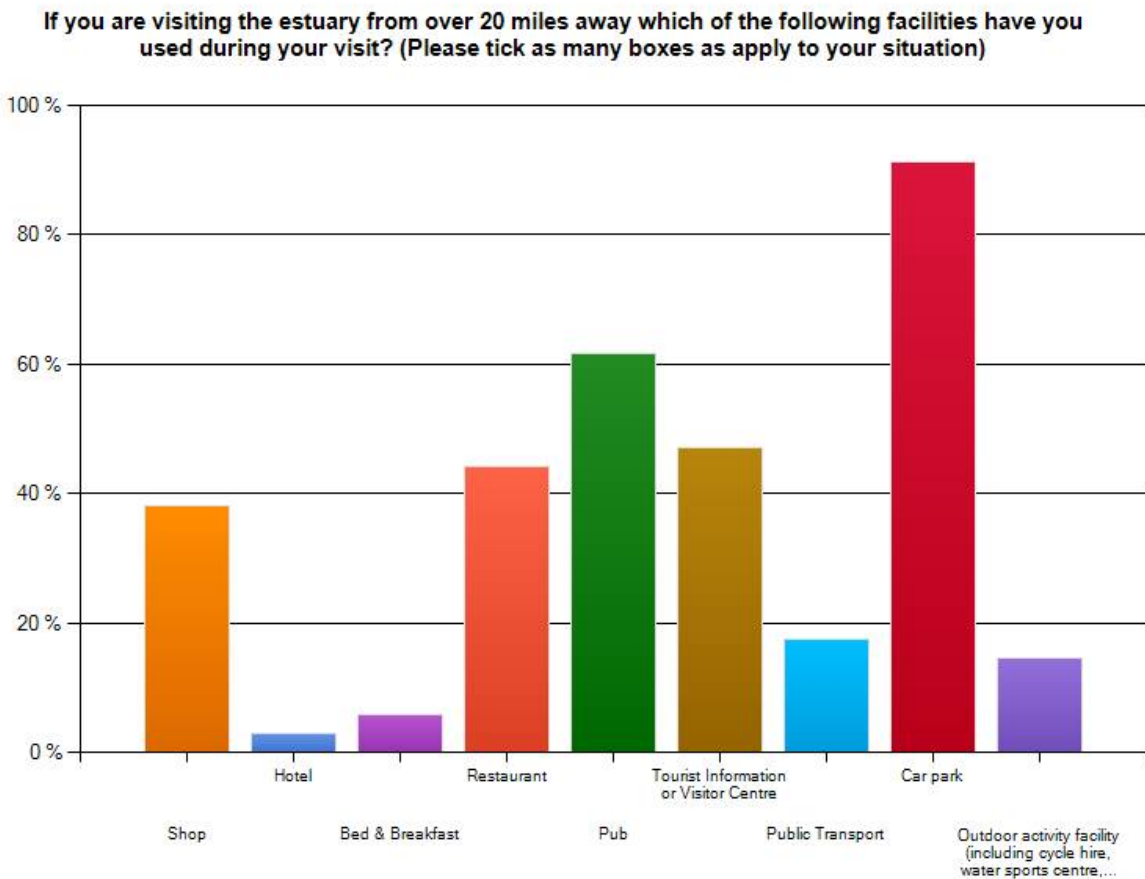
'when something is perfect why try to change it, maintain it for as long as possible for future generations to enjoy as we currently do.'

'I like looking at the old meanders but believe that an increase in saltmarsh will increase the opportunities for observing wildlife.'

These points are picked up again in Section 05, Findings.

We also asked those from over 20 miles away what facilities they had used whilst in the Cuckmere area. The results are presented in Chart 4 over the page.

Chart 4



04.4 Online forum

People were also encouraged to contribute to an online forum which was set up on the Partnership website at www.cuckmere.org.uk. The latter received 34 comments during the engagement process. These ranged from views on the future of the Coastguard Cottages:

'Loss of the beach (when the groyne disintegrate) will undermine the seawall and therefore the [coastguard] cottages. Aside from their iconic status (pictures of the cottages and cliffs are used world-wide as symbols of the UK) they are an intrinsic part of the history of the valley and an important definition in the landscape. I would like some assurances that the safety of these buildings is considered in the wider plans for the valley, and they are not merely overlooked as they have been so far.' (Posted 10 June 2009)

to requests for more information from the Partnership and the Environment Agency on costings:

'It will cost £18m - where has this figure come from? What estimates have been obtained? Is this for strengthening both sides of the river? Has the partnership considered strengthening the eastern bank only? Would that not halve the cost (and leave a substantial area now protected by the western bank defences to revert to nature and provide the advantages described in the preferred option?).' (Posted 16 June 2009)

Comments were made on proposals to raise the flood defences by 300mm, and on returning the estuary to a naturally functioning system. The full sheet of comments received to date on the forum is provided at Appendix 8, and many of these points are discussed in more detail in Section 05 of the report.

04.5 Publicising the engagement activities

People could sign up to attend the events either online, or through a paper booking form.

The team set up a website (www.cuckmere.org.uk) to explain the current options for the estuary, set out the Partnership's position and encourage people to take part in the engagement process, either by attending the events or completing the online survey. During June, July and August 2009 the website received 1,631 visits, with an average of 17.5 visits a day.

Some 200 individuals and organisations on the Partnership's stakeholder database were contacted by post or email to invite them to take part in the process. In addition to this targeted mailing, 2000 leaflets and posters were produced to advertise the engagement events to the public, and these were distributed to community centres, shops, pubs and public noticeboards across the region.

The Partnership issued two press releases during the build-up to the events. These featured in the Eastbourne and Seaford Gazette and Herald, and in the Sussex Express and the Argos. To further publicise the events, the Partnership Officer gave interviews to several local radio stations including BBC Sussex and Sovereign FM. In addition to this editorial coverage, the Partnership took out paid advertising in the Eastbourne Gazette and Herald.

05

Findings

The findings described in this report are taken from the engagement activities described above. We have grouped the discussion in to a series of headings which have emerged as themes across the engagement process. Where possible we have used the words of participants to explain the issue raised.

Across the 459 people who engaged in all activities during June and July we have gained a fascinating insight into the wide range of views and the common ground. These have been summarised as challenges, opportunities, and proposals. We urge you to also look at the transcripts of the flip chart sheets at Appendices 6 and 7 as well as the photographic record of the Tier 1 flip chart sheets which can be found on the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership's website www.cuckmere.org.uk.

The engagement process, as demonstrated in these findings, emphasised people's desire for more understanding through evidence and research and engagement. All the engagement activities showed people's willingness to look positively at the future and consider as a community what would be best for the estuary. The following quotations are taken from cards written by participants in the Tier 2 workshops to record their highest hopes for the Cuckmere Estuary. They make this point very clearly:

'Honour the beauty of Cuckmere, acting now in a manner which will make future generations proud of us'

'Achieve something for the valley which will reflect its past, anticipate and add to its future and record what is lost, to provide a place of beauty to inspire future generations'

05.1 Challenges

The following summarises the challenges discussed across the engagement activities. As with each following section, the quotations used are taken from the words used by participants in the sessions; comments made by respondents to the online and street surveys; and those involved in the on-line forum.

05.1.1 The A259, access and infrastructure

The A259 was discussed as a vital communications link between Seaford and Eastbourne providing an essential route to healthcare provision for Seaford residents needing hospital treatment in Eastbourne, literally described as Seaford's 'artery to healthcare' by participants. 45% of the survey respondents said that they used the A259 to pass through the Cuckmere Estuary and for 6% of people this is the one main reason they come to the estuary. The fear expressed is that regular flooding would restrict the A259 as an access route, and 'Seaford would become remote without it'. The challenge raised is that the A259 requires protection from flooding and consideration has to be given to the 'major financial implications if it has to be replaced or re-engineered'.

Questions were asked about spring flooding south of the A259 causeway and how much of a problem this could become in the future. Equally of concern was the impact of flooding north of the A259 on Alfriston and other communities. A respondent to the survey commented:

'Flooding would cause so much to be lost south of the A259 and is a major worry to the north.'

In this discussion a request was made, 'to treat the entire valley as a whole'. As someone inputting a comment to the on-line forum said:

'I question the logic of separating the estuary, for decision and consultation purposes, from the river north of the A259. Its fate will be intimately connected with events in a flooded estuary and if 'working with nature' means anything, surely the river which feeds the estuary is part of the natural unit.'

Participants saw it as a challenge for business, tourism and the local economy generally if the A259 regularly flooded and people's access routes to work were restricted. The role of East Sussex County Council in maintaining the A259 was acknowledged and policies to limit the width of Exceat Bridge to discourage large vehicle use were raised, but this was also considered a challenge to tourism and to access causing congestion on the road.

Congestion was raised by a great number of people, both on the A259 ('the road can't cope') and in the Visitor Centre car park. The latter was summarised by one participant as follows:

'Car parks are getting full in the summer at peak periods and the country park can only accept coaches for dropping off and picking up as there is no room for them to stay. Blockages lead to visitor disappointment.'

The introduction of car parking charges five years ago was seen by some as an asset in managing visitor flow and by others, such as this respondent to the survey, as a nuisance: 'car parking charges are a pain'.

The Exceat Causeway was mentioned as a challenge by some who noted that it was a medieval or possibly earlier creation and referred to it as

'a man-made divide which is disrupting natural processes and limiting discussion to the lower Cuckmere Valley which is only a partial solution.'

Legal issues in terms of access were brought to the engagement events with discussions on the effect of Environment Agency plans on rights of way, including the Vanguard Way, footpaths, access to the beach and to the coastguard cottages, all of which participants wished to see protected in any new plans to manage change as can be seen in subsequent sections of this report.

One of the changes which participants in the recreation themed workshop had welcomed at the Seven Sisters Country Park was that physical access to the Cuckmere had improved over time, including access for users of wheelchairs and mobility scooters and disabled toilets at the Visitor Centre. The challenge would be to protect access for all users of the Cuckmere in future management plans. One group summarised access needs as follows:

'Access to the beach; access – flora, fauna; Access – public enjoyment; Accessibility to nature; access – people – physical, intellectual; Human access assured although no problem should it need to be re-routed.'

The costs of maintaining the A259 as a crucial route for Seaford residents; for business; tourism; recreation; work and travel were considered a challenge in terms of sustainability. A participant in the business and tourism themed workshop described the A259 as being:

'dangerous and congested and not seen to be in need of improvement by East Sussex County Council.'

Clarity of information and evidence was requested:

'There is no consensus on the facts – some say the A259 will flood and some say it won't – what is the real answer? And how much will it cost to find a sustainable solution?'

Another person recorded their view on a card in the workshops as follows:

'Eventually the A259 causeway will have to be raised at VAST cost to the public.'

Such clear statements were made and countered during the discussions and it is important that perceptions and evidence are addressed so that engagement can continue based on the facts and a clear understanding of the impact of managing future changes to the estuary.

05.1.2 Environmental issues

One respondent to the survey prioritised visiting the Cuckmere to consider climate change, saying:

'I observe changes and examine effects of climate change and adaptation approaches [and] teach my children about climate change.'

Another saw it as important to *'preserve beautiful areas because of climate change'*. In the engagement events people discussed the challenges of understanding sea-level rises when such a wide spread of divergent information is available, as was pointed out in the presentation by Dr Williams with predictions of anything from 1 to 2 metres over the next 50 to 100 years.

There was a general feeling of a 'lack of knowledge about climate change' and its impacts on the Cuckmere voiced by a number of participants. One participant said:

'I question sea levels rising – are we sure we have the evidence? Do we believe the information we are given?'

Another commented on the information provided on sea-level rises as follows:

'I don't trust or believe the Environment Agency's figures, especially regarding sea level rise. In their own literature they say sea levels are rising (historically) 2mm per year. The rest is speculation.'

Others commented that the information was based on observation rather than evidence:

'We have noticed an increase in storms and the cycle of storms has changed significantly with more northerly winds and monsoon type rain storms in July with fewer in April for example.'

Others accept sea-level rise predictions and their fluctuations but ask *'how will we cope with sea-level rises and climate change?'* Still others saw environmental

issues for the community as being diminished visitor numbers to the Cuckmere with rainier winters; and others as a drain on the public purse:

'There will be many demands on tax payers' resources to combat climate change efforts. We should resist those that are not absolutely necessary.'

The proposal to build up the sea defences to provide for a

'50 year scenario, allowing longer for planning and mature thought (sea-level rise, intensity of rain, societal changes e.g. leisure time, more holidays in the UK because of climate change etc)'

was seen as a challenge for others who said, *'but leaving it for 50 years makes it someone else's problem.'* More discussion on this proposal is presented under 'Opportunities' (see Section 5.2 below).

Others described the challenge as being that *'change is inevitable – sea levels are rising'*. For others, the challenge is about making reasonable predictions:

'To predict what will happen to the river mouth under natural processes: will it move east? Will the mouth clog with shingle? Will it need constant maintenance? To predict what will happen to the river meanders? Will they become scoured out? Will they infill with mud? Will spartina clog up the estuary?'

Finding evidence to help to make such predictions was seen as an important issue in urgent need of addressing for participants across many of the engagement events.

The biodiversity themed workshop considered changes in flora and fauna as a result of global warming, with:

'biodiversity is increasingly vulnerable as a consequence of climate change if we don't manage the change.'

05.1.3

Balance: biodiversity and people

In the street and online survey 59% of respondents said that they use the Cuckmere Estuary to observe bird and wildlife and 12% said this was the one main reason for visiting the Cuckmere. 49 respondents to the survey mentioned wildlife as an important factor in their additional comments. As one said, *'bird and wildlife is abundant and easy to observe'*, and another wrote in this section:

'The Cuckmere River valley is an incredibly beautiful mix of grazed pasture, geomorphology, wildlife and peace. It is the lynch-pin of many different walks, and you could say it symbolises the diversity, peace and beauty of

the whole eastern end of the South Downs. It is SO special that it is a joy to visit and should be fought to maintained.'

A third said:

'As a marine biologist and coastal ecologist, I enjoy watching the range of wildlife that currently inhabits the estuary and I am keen to find out how the wildlife may change in the future.'

The challenge frequently raised in this context is balancing the needs of the increasing numbers of people visiting the Cuckmere with those of the diverse flora and fauna. This was also discussed under 'Opportunities' and 'Proposals' (please refer to Sections 5.2 and 5.3 below). For some, the *'man-made system produced by the Cut has changed the balance'* and the *'meanders are stagnant, therefore less biodiversity'*. For others the presence of people on the Cuckmere is part of its history: *'habitats and species have changed with the construction of the Navigational Cut'* and people's influence *'has been present since farmers settled in the area'*.

The challenge is summarised as being that:

'biodiversity will be affected whether we manage the change or do nothing: it's about nature and people living in harmony.'

As one participant in the Tier 1 workshops said, *'people care, fair share, earth care'*. At the moment participants have noted a decrease in wildlife (and particularly birdlife) as the number of visitors to the Cuckmere has increased.

For some the answer to the challenge is to:

'create a naturally functioning estuary system which would be much more useful for biodiversity'.

One person said this could benefit everyone:

'It would be enhanced if we had a proper estuary – more types of wildlife, and therefore increased tourism, and let nature have its course to benefit wildlife.'

Other participants agreed, with a number of comments such as:

'a more naturally functioning estuary being excellent for all wildlife and enjoyable for people!'

For others this is seen as an even greater challenge:

'Need to keep balance between wildlife and recreational use – kids aren't interested in salt-marsh wildlife [and this would] destroy the attraction for the main mass of people.'

For others the more important issue is to preserve the wildlife with the 'area managed for wildlife not people'. And consideration should be given to:

'a sustainable plan working with and not against nature, with all views taken into consideration. Wildlife should have priority.'

Concern was voiced that if proposals to breach the banks at certain points took place then there would be a 'loss of existing wildlife'. For others the solution comes in a different form:

'Let nature takes its course it is too man- managed at present. Let the wildlife thrive in an improved setting.'

More consideration is given to these issues in subsequent sections.

05.1.4 National Park Authority

An issue raised during the Tier 1 engagement events was the new National Park Authority which is likely to be operational by April 2011. Questions were asked about whether it would be sensible to delay any detailed consideration of the future of the estuary until the National Park Authority is in place and ready to make decisions. Two specific questions were asked:

'Is the National Park likely to lose a real asset before the park is set up through the Environment Agency's proposals?'

'Will flooding the valley be contrary to local guidance for a national park?'

There was a general feeling that there is a lack of clarity on what the creation of the new Authority means for the Cuckmere Estuary and the communities passionate about its future. At the events it was explained that Natural England will retain its statutory responsibility for SSSI after the establishment of the National Park.

05.1.5 Maintenance

Routine maintenance of the Cuckmere Estuary was a strong theme running through the workshops and covered three main areas discussed in the following section: the river mouth; the health of the meanders; and sluices (please refer to section 9 *Matters of Clarification* for more information on sluices).

One survey respondent said the primary reason for them to visit the Cuckmere was to see if routine maintenance was being carried out along the river banks. Nine mentions of the meanders as being a priority for visiting the Cuckmere were made by survey respondents. Comments included:

'The coastal scenery – including the river with its meanders and the historic cottages but also of course the white cliffs – partly because it's good to have something to look at while you walk and partly because they give me a sense of belonging – this is my familiar countryside.'

'The unique estuary and its meanders: there can be few finer sights than the meanders from Seaford Head or Haven Brow or at field level. Very noticeable how many school parties are there to learn about the meanders.'

'Coastal scenery. Inspiring views. It would be much better if meanders were functioning properly!'

Maintenance was discussed at the engagement events as an activity which used to be carried out but now isn't. This was clarified by one participant who said:

'The River Board used to dredge the river bed in the winter and put the silt on to the river banks.'

A survey respondent said:

'Maintenance north of the A259 is not good enough – none on dredging or river bank work for 15 years.'

A number of participants linked this work ceasing with the blockages in the sluices and the meanders silting up. Those who use the Cuckmere for canoeing raised the latter as an extremely significant issue. They highlighted the importance of the Cuckmere nationally for its

'... mix of water. There is flat water 3-4 feet deep which is perfect for novices. As people advance they can use the water towards the Golden Galleon and then gradually move towards the tidal water and then have access to the sea as they gain in confidence.'

Another meander-related challenge raised at the events was the reporting of massive fish kills, in particular during the last dry hot summer, and to a lesser degree on a more regular basis with decreasing oxygen levels in the meanders: *'massive fish kills when the tides aren't big enough to keep water in the meanders'*. Lack of maintenance of the meanders was discussed at the engagement events as an important challenge to address, with the gradual silting up making them stagnant, and as with the death of fish, smelly and acting as a deterrent to Cuckmere visitors. So, as one participant put it, *'the lack of flow through the meanders is considered an important challenge to be considered in any future scheme'*. Increases in *'frequency and vigour of storm events where at 7m tide the river tops the bank in certain places – I have found seaweed on the banks after storms'* are seen as being in part attributable to climate change and sea-level rises but also considered to have been made worse by lack of maintenance. The challenge then is to retain the meanders in any future scheme, for their beauty, for

importance to tourism and learning, and for recreational activity such as canoeing.

Consideration was given at the events to a range of other maintenance issues, including:

- whether the groynes were being maintained effectively or if revetments would be a better form of sea defence;
- the impact of long shore drift;
- the movement of shingle around the river mouth;
- the extraction of shingle at Seaford, and the impact this has on the movement of shingle around the Cuckmere;
- the *'building up of the cliff at Hope Steps at least three times in the last 20 years, almost all of which has eroded away'*; and
- the affect of coastal erosion at the cliff on the Coastguard Cottages, defence of which has been paid for privately by the cottage owners.

The challenge noted by some participants is that fluctuations in long shore drift, the movement of the river mouth, coastal erosion at the cliff and shingle movement have not been measured consistently over time, *'so changes are currently being based on anecdote and perception rather than fact and evidence.'* One participant said:

'If shingle is lost from the beach engineering reports say that within five years the sea walls being to collapse.'

Another responded:

'A lot depends on how fast shingle is coming from Seaford to replace that lost eastward.'

Discussion was held on the Environment Agency's predictions that they will need to maintain the river mouth for 15-20 years from 2011 but after that it will be self-clearing. Participants discussed the truth and cost of this prediction. They also discussed whether or not the Environment Agency was carrying out enough work currently to clear the river mouth and maintain the river banks:

'Blockages back up and cause a flooding problem north of the A259.'

'The Environment Agency should ensure the banks are properly maintained during the next two years before they pull out.'

'The EA are only doing the minimum to keep the river mouth open.'

Under maintenance the possible introduction of saline water inland was raised with discussions on potential impact on the bore hole and drinking water. The

challenge brought to the themed workshops was to monitor salinity now to ensure that any increases are addressed early enough not to cause the water authorities to have to increase water rates to pay for expensive desalination plants and treatments.

05.1.6 Perceptions and voices

In this section we wish to address two issues which came through very strongly in the engagement events. There were perceptions about options put forward by the Environment Agency and proposals by the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership to return the estuary to a naturally functioning system which are a barrier to mutual understanding and effective ways forward. One of these perceptions is about mudflats, well summarised in the following comment made online by a survey respondent:

'I like cycling near the meanders on the cycle path. I love seeing lots of people there, walking. It is the most beautiful place in the world. It makes me and my family happy because of the beauty. It needs to be saved and not turned into ugly, disgusting mudflats. I would never go there again if this happened. Tourism would be ruined. The Golden Galleon (£1.2 million turnover bringing £6 million to the community through employment) would go out of business. No more canoe barn or footpaths, no more cycling. Death to the area. Alfriston and Littleington would be under risk of floods and you say there are no houses there. The A259 will cost over £10 million to be rebuilt, not at your cost. Why do you keep talking about the Estuary when sorting out the river (with higher banks and a sluice) and dredging of the meanders would solve the problem at less cost (£1 million max.). You keep avoiding the issue because your idea is to spend NOTHING. This place should be listed by English Heritage and awards should be given by English Heritage so save it from an insensitive government. Shame to you!!!!'

Another survey respondent held a different view and was concerned that people will continue having the perception that,

'the estuary with more saltmarsh / mudflats is an unattractive landscape devoid of wildlife or that the entire floodplain will be filled with water all the time – neither of which is true!'

This raises a point made by an engagement event participant who was concerned about the words people were using to describe proposals and said this:

'We need to be careful about terminology. We are talking about the conversion from pasture to saltmarsh: that is not the same as flooding.'

Those taking part in the biodiversity themed workshop were concerned about the public perception of mudflats and saltmarshes. They discussed the issue in the following terms:

'Change is a certainty, convincing people that change can be positive is the issue.'

'People say "it has always been like this", but it hasn't.'

'The Cuckmere used to be inter-tidal mudflats and saltmarsh.'

'The loss of saltmarsh is due to river engineering and drainage.'

They talked about this habitat being:

'One of the most productive systems in the world for biodiversity with an abundance of invertebrates and as a nursery ground for fish with all the appropriate nutrients.'

The group was also concerned to stress their understanding of people's emotional response to the Cuckmere as it is now. This is something that came through extremely strongly in the engagement activities. When asked to tick as many boxes as applied to their situation 87% of respondents to the survey said that they came to the Cuckmere to enjoy coastal scenery; and the same percentage said that they came to walk. When asked to select one option, 20% said they visited to enjoy coastal scenery and 34% to walk. These were the two main reasons selected. A wide range of people used the comments section of the survey to speak of the beauty, tranquillity, peace and iconic status of the Cuckmere Estuary, the Seven Sisters Country Park, the cliff tops and the Coastguard Cottages. These speak very eloquently for themselves:

'I am deeply attached to the Cuckmere Valley, it is part of my soul. The landscape is as much a part of me as my heart or spleen.'

'There are no two days the same in the Cuckmere Valley. It is one of the most beautiful parts of England to be in. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. The beauty of the valley takes my breath away every day. We must look after it and make sure that people can still walk and enjoy it.'

'It is so beautiful in all weathers that I find it a great joy.'

'Our walking group make good use of the level paths to admire the scenery.'

'The coastal scenery is unique and beautiful even in passing from the car it is memorable.'

But one survey respondent saw a downside to the beauty of the Cuckmere as viewed from a car: *'the beauty is a problem - causes car crashes'*.

Those involved in the engagement workshops used the words 'beauty', 'tranquillity' and 'peace' repeatedly in the engagement process. Where asked to express their highest hope for the Cuckmere Estuary one person said,

'Honour the beauty of Cuckmere and to act now in a manner which will make future generations proud of us.'

The Coastguard Cottages were frequently cited as an integral and essential part of the beauty. One participant, in response to being asked what matters most to each person at the event, said,

'the Coastguard Cottages are a key feature of this iconic and historic landscape.'

Some perceptions are around the idea that a decision on the future of the estuary has already been made:

'They have chosen the most expensive option – maintaining what's there is cheaper.'

'We cannot easily reverse a decision to flood the valley.'

One survey respondent said:

'I feel sad it will be flooded.'

If not already made, then, 'plans will be imposed'.

There are also fears that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership do not share the concern of others for the estuary's future:

'The Partnership don't seem to have a passion to preserve what's there.'

Another said:

'The CEP will simply roll over local opinion because of financial cost.'

Equally there are people who feel that they are not being heard against stronger voices within the community:

'A minority will spread misinformation about the ecological outcome / realistic prospect of maintaining the current flood plain.'

And:

'The EA will be forced to spend money on maintaining unsustainable flood defence structures for short-term maintenance of the current landscape – better spent elsewhere.'

One participant in the Seaford workshop said he was worried:

'That technical expert advice is 'shouted down' by local vested interests.'

Concern was raised at the natural processes themed workshop that some reports were being quoted as evidence when they were not publicly available, *'What is the Haywards Heath report? We need to know chapter and verse'* as it was being quoted without all members of the group having seen it.

Some questions were also asked about the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership's authority to take decisions on the future of the estuary,

'With respect I do not quite know where the Cuckmere Partnership came from, or what authority it has to take what could be huge decisions for the Cuckmere Estuary – affecting the whole area in many ways, and changing a national icon for future generations'.

This point was raised by some participants who asked for, *'some outside / neutral assessment (adjudication) made'* of any decisions. Two people participating in the Tier 1 workshops said there is a,

'need for an independent public enquiry.'

'why not use the money from the car park to maintain the valley? Public inquiry please.'

Others said that they wanted it to be clear that there is,

'difficulty getting appreciation that the majority of the public do not want the estuary to change'

However the facilitation team did not see this as the majority view with, as we said at the beginning of this section, many participants willing to discuss change in all its forms, even if that is simply about how the banks are maintained. One participant in the Seaford Tier 1 event said,

'Help from community offenders to repair banks'

and another wanted,

'to take this opportunity of re-creating an internationally rare habitat in this unique situation'

05.1.7 Understanding costs

There were calls in the engagement process for clarification of the costings provided in the Environment Agency's proposals:

'Costs and integrity of them. Need clarity e.g. whole life, initial cost, embankment costs, clarity on costs and over what timescale.'

Some saw the way in which proposals had been presented as a hindrance to the process:

'In many ways a negative viewpoint has driven this process – EA stance 'change inevitable' and money based in contrast to more positive approach of how can we save this unique and loved valley.'

Another participant had a different view:

'The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership can't win: they are told that they hadn't consulted with the public but are criticised for spending money on an engagement process.'

One person expressed their concern in a question:

'Is the near and medium future to be driven by necessity to protect tourism, roads, villages, or by the shortage of available money so that the risks rise rapidly to people and property?'

Another said:

'The Government / EA wants to reduce spending. Yet they want to carry out DEFRA funding research – is it cost? To protect the Cuckmere Estuary or lack of it. Is it basically cost?'

Other questions relate to specific detail:

'£10 million to lift up the A259. It is made of alluvium silt which is unstable and soft – who pays for this?'

'[what are the] costs of proposed flood barriers along 1) A259 2) car park 3) canoes 4) road to sea?'

'No costs put forward for defending A259. I want to see estimates.'

More general questions included:

'What will be the consequence if the valley is flooded and the cost involved and who is going to pay?'

'What is the cost of doing nothing – farms flooding?'

For some, the costings put in the Environment Agency's proposals need questioning *'the relative given costs don't appear sensible. Can the breakdown be published?'* People expressed frustration:

'So much information is available "somewhere" but excluded from the main discussion e.g. information behind the costs, more information on geology and river flow e.g. £18 million is 100 years whole life cost.'

'There is particularly lack of information around some of the costs for option 1 that are not recognised e.g. protecting A259 and info re timeframes.'

The challenge for these participants is being given access to existing information on costs and finding additional information where necessary to take an informed view of development plans.

Finally, some participants were concerned about an option which focused on biding time as this would be

'passing on costs to future generations – instead of taking decisions now.'

05.2 Opportunities

We found the majority of participants in the engagement workshops to be enormously positive about looking for opportunities for the future. Seven themes emerged as opportunities, which are explored in this section. Underlying them all though is the idea that now is the time to '*get the solutions right*'.

For some, this means a short-term solution to raise the banks; for others it means returning the estuary to a naturally functioning estuary; and for others it is about making sure '*whatever solution is chosen it is 'sustainable – economically and environmentally*'.

05.2.1 More research

It became clear, particularly in the Tier 2 themed workshops, that participants would very much welcome more research into key aspects of the process. They saw the engagement workshops as the catalyst for instigating some new research, building on that done by the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership, the Coastguard Cottage owners in developing their planning application and the Environment Agency. The research areas proposed are summarised in the following bullet points drawn from the flip-charts development at the events (please see Appendix B for the full transcript of the sessions).

- sea-level rises – accurate figures building on the Newhaven study together with predictions based on national / international data;
- changes in business and tourism behaviours;
- visitor / non-visitor research ('*finding out what visitors really want, not guessing or assuming*');
- economic impact and cost / benefit analysis of each proposal;
- measure and record nitrates in the silt over time;
- long shore drift;
- shingle movement;
- migration of river mouth; and
- monitoring inland salinity.

Armed with new research it was agreed that all the communities of interest could work together on positive solutions for the estuary. Please see Section 7 for recommendations in this area.

05.2.2

Explore diverse funding sources / investment

Whichever proposal is taken forward in the future (see Section 6) it will require funding. This was recognised by participants as we have already seen as a challenge, but noted by some as an opportunity for the various communities of interest to work together on a solution.

One participant said *'we need a survey of all the costs and consequential costs'* from which to decide how to look for funding. Another suggested:

'The CEP should look for funding by involving local people, setting up working parties to fund the necessary improvements and preserve iconic landscape.'

In Seaford there were mixed views expressed, with one person calling for:

'A local friends group or trust to be set up like the Friends of Eastbourne Hospital to raise funds – look at a community approach.'

One person was concerned that *'the CEP will have to agree to such an approach'*, another proposed looking for European funding but also concerned that *'this requires matched funding, which would be hard to find'*. The final comment in this discussion was from a participant who was worried that, *'switching responsibility to voluntary sources is dangerous'* as it lets those with statutory responsibility off the funding hook.

So funding is seen is an important opportunity for the Partnership and for the community working together.

05.2.3

Habitats

We discussed the challenge of balancing the needs of visitors with those of nature in the previous section of this report. Here we are summarising the views of participants on potential changes in habitats as opportunities for the Cuckmere Valley. One person said:

'We need to recognise importance of marsh (and edge habitats) for biodiversity and therefore visitors.'

Another:

'Cuckmere Valley is an important area where so many people get in contact with nature – this should and could be enhanced and represents an incredible opportunity. It is an area that can help people understand natural processes – nature and dynamic and the estuary can demonstrate this'.

Some see changes to the estuary as:

'an important precedent on landscape regenerate in an era of climate change and sea levels ecological changes precipitated by natural/man-made processes following a river valley ecosystem'

'using Cuckmere as a living example of a natural process responding to climate change to creating new sustainable habitats'

'manage the estuary for wildlife – opportunity for change, controlled flooding'

and:

'a unique opportunity to recreate a national and internationally important habitat of salt marsh and mudflat'.

05.2.4 History

The importance of the historical landscape and archaeology was discussed in two break-out groups and was a recurring theme in the Tier 1 events. Proposals for change were seen as opportunities to ensure that efforts are made to, *'record older residents' experiences before they're lost'* through an effective oral history programme.

This lead to discussions around carrying out a *'systematic recording of historical artefacts' / landscape'* to both, *'preserve and give access to what is there'.*

In the light of the recent English Heritage listing of the World War II tank traps this can be seen as another important opportunity. Ensuring that educational opportunities are taken from such recording and preserving was also highlighted as important:

'Explain more about historical landscape to wider public and encourage understanding.'

Local and community engagement in this recording process was seen as essential and integral:

'Create a local working group to manage future action – not just inform but engage as we are doing today.'

05.2.5 Recreation

For recreation there are two main opportunities which were raised by the groups:

- ensure good levels of access to the Cuckmere and the beach; and
- ensure a mix of recreational activities for all age groups and physical / intellectual abilities.

For one participant this was clearly linked to the funding opportunity:

'The opportunity provided by a strong commitment of stakeholders to develop a funded package of landscape, recreation and wildlife measures on top of the Environment Agency's basic position.'

A mixed range of visitors and residents able to use the Cuckmere in a variety of ways for now and in the future is the opportunity to be taken according to participants.

05.2.6 Marketing and communications

Marketing and communications was considered a useful opportunity to be taken by the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership and others in conveying the importance and value of the Estuary.

An area which required better communication and promotion according to one of the recreation break-out groups was the bus service between Eastbourne and Seven Sisters via Birling Gap and Beachy Head running every 10 minutes. This started seven years ago and is described as 'excellent' by participants and so they wished

'to change people's behaviour and encourage them to use their own cars less to get to the Cuckmere.'

They also would like to see the 'promotion of linear walks' so that people walk to the estuary as part of longer rambles and treks across the downs. This is in part to cope with the challenge discussed earlier of balancing increasing visitor numbers with limited car parking space and disruption to wildlife of large numbers of visitors.

This leads into a discussion held in the business and tourism session where participants called for visitor and non-visitor research in order to:

'base marketing on what visitors want instead of us thinking about what they want.'

The group discussed ways of improving *'the marketing of the Cuckmere nationally and internationally'* although other groups had mentioned its iconic status around the world, *'including Korea, Japan and China'*.

One participant mentioned an idea,

'to raise the profile of the history of the area by listing historical artefacts and developing story boards including the proposal put to Seaford Town Council in 2005 (approved but no money to develop) for developing a Thomas Paine trail from Seaford.'

This group saw the development of the National Park as a marketing opportunity from which national and international recognition for the area would come. They discussed that this could *'encourage economic growth in the area'*.

The biodiversity break-out groups had another need for better communications: they discussed the perception that the Cuckmere would be covered in mud and wished to see better communication to address this, where *'mudflats are described as channels with edge habitats – not all mud.'* They wanted to use marketing and communication tools to explain the value and beauty of such a landscape, something they felt was not being conveyed effectively at the moment.

05.2.7 Building trust for future

Following these engagement events people wanted to make it clear that they wished to remain part of decision making on the future of the estuary. They wanted to know that the process would continue to be *'democratic'*; that they would be given *'good baseline information to inform decision-making'* and that the Partnership now understood that the *'public's views are a key factor for decision-making'*.

In the evaluation forms we received comments such as:

'I am very glad that the CEP are making these events available to so many people to allow a wider discussion on the future of the Cuckmere.'

whilst calls for *'more information from the Environment Agency to the local communities'* were made. In the Tier 1 events people very forcefully said things like, *'I don't trust the quangos'* and, *'Are we being rail-roaded?'* as well as commenting that it is hard to make decisions when, *'there are too many agencies involved'* and *'the Government should encourage joined-up thinking'*. As the facilitation team Hopkins Van Mil could see that this was an opportunity to build trust to enable future engagement, an opportunity articulated by one participant in this way:

'The committed interest shown here is an opportunity to come up with an enhanced package for the Cuckmere including the historical landscape- using a democratic approach, bringing a lot of people together and understanding their views as we're doing today!'

05.3 Community Proposals

Across the engagement process participants were very keen to make their own proposals about the future of the Cuckmere Estuary. Some development themes put forward already by the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership; others reiterate the planning application made by some of the Coastguard Owners and still others are new suggestions.

05.3.1 Transport routes

A number of proposals were made on transport issues including the A259, such as:

'Build safer way of crossing A259 and defend it from flooding (underpass, viaduct, bridge, flyover, raise it).'

'Widen A259 bridge to make it 2 way, this will improve safety.'

'Create a pedestrian tunnel under A259 further up hill through the chalk.'

'Take the long-term view – suspension bridge over A259 so the whole environment can develop more naturally.'

Suggestions were also made for:

'creating cycle paths from Newhaven and Seaford into the estuary'

and *'promoting the excellent bus service'*.

And who would be paying for these ideas? Well one participant made the following proposal:

'A levy on tourists and local taxes – in order to provide maintenance, need to establish short, medium and long term costs.'

05.3.2 Flood defences

Flood defence discussion included the proposal submitted as a Planning Application to Wealden District Council and Lewes District Council to raise the river banks by 1 foot and plan for short, medium and long-term solutions in order to:

'Maintain the status quo for 30-50 years and give time for the development of another more accurately developed plan, taking into account societal changes and economic impact data.'

Other proposals put forward included reconnecting the meanders, but then:

'making sure those areas that need protection from flood are protected like the coastguard and foxhole cottages; the meanders; the canoe barn and the A259.'

This proposal also wanted to ensure that access was maintained to the beach for all. In essence, *'protect what is important to the Cuckmere'*.

05.3.3 Natural functioning estuary

For others, including the members of the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership who participated in the events, the proposal put forward at the engagement events is to return the estuary to a naturally functioning system. As one participant in the Tier 1 engagement events said,

'Create a functioning grazing marsh, salt marsh, mud flats – contributing to UK targets in habitat creation.'

Another related proposal was presented by a participant in the natural processes session. He proposed a three-stage plan for reactivating tidal creeks which would appear to date

'from before the conversion of the floodplain to summer pasture, and before the era of flood prevention. They are 20-70cm deep and if reactivated would play a significant role in transferring water across the floodplain in an ordered and predictable way.'

Another supporter of developing the estuary into mudflats and saltmarshes said:

'It is most unlikely the Cuckmere will develop the expanse of mud often portrayed by opponents but there are many examples of areas around the country where these too are seen as great assets because of the large numbers of birds attracted to the area as a result. The economy of the North Norfolk marshes for example is greatly enhanced because of tourism related to bird watching.'

Within this proposal it is recommended that the Partnership set up a series of fact-finding missions to other parts of the country for local businesses to see the benefits of the conversion of grassland to this kind of landscape.

05.3.4 Recreation

In the recreation working group a proposal was made to,

'Create a unified outdoor centre building on existing facilities but combining them into one centrally managed facility to include: guided cycling; canoeing and kayaking; educational facilities; guided walks; zip wires and rope walks together with a conference centre and catering facilities which could be let out to make the centre contribute to its up-keep.'

It was acknowledged that a lot of this exists already, but not as a coherent offer for visitors. Those putting forward the proposal believe that this more holistic approach would bring benefits for visitors and for the economy.

05.3.5 Increased public use / wildlife balance

To manage the issue of increased public use and the desire to maintain a diverse wildlife at the Cuckmere a proposal was made to:

'Create a system of boardwalks which manages the people flow setting aside areas for biodiversity.'

This was also considered useful to ensure that dog owners could still walk their dogs without disturbing wading birds and other wildlife. This was considered a way of managing

'wildlife as a managed reserve, whilst preserving access and coastguard cottages and foxhole communities.'

05.3.6 Models

People were excited at the potential for the Cuckmere to be used as a model in this country and overseas for environmental conservation. People said it could be a case study for *'managing climate change on the coast'*:

'Important to look at landscape management – Cuckmere is unique – an opportunity to see how a river valley eco-system change – playing a part in climate change.'

Another participant tied this into research and evidence gathering,

'good socio-demographic data in relation to whatever happens. Starting now, and track the changes. Cuckmere is a useful case study for others.'

05.3.7

Engage local voices in decision making

A number of different groups thought about ways of ensuring that the engagement continued with a useful dialogue between the Partnership and the community. A proposal was made for the creation of a:

'working group combining all interested parties including local farmers and Parish Councils'

as a basis for *'future decision making'*, echoed by a second participant who said,

'create a local working group to manage future action, not just being kept informed but engage (as we're doing now)'

Another person suggested *'setting up a trust through which the management of the Cuckmere is taken forward'*.

People wanted to ensure that they were involved in many ways including the gathering of local knowledge and ideas; disseminating that knowledge and ensuring that their voices are heard in decisions being made about the future of the estuary.

06

Our recommendations

Rhoden Green and Hopkins Van Mil have been delighted to work with the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership on communications and engagement activity since July 2008. As a result of our community engagement work we have a number of recommendations to put to the Partnership which we believe will strengthen its ability to work towards a sustainable solution for the Cuckmere Estuary.

06.1

Continued engagement

We have demonstrated in this report the commitment of those that took part in all the engagement activities to continuing to engage with the Partnership to ensure solutions are discussed, consulted upon and explained; involving community views and activity as far as is possible. The first step in this process should be that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership builds on the stakeholder map, and these engagement activities, including existing engagement strategies to produce a long-term stakeholder engagement strategy. Secondly the Partnership within one month of the publication of this report should respond to it in a published statement clarifying the areas in which it does, and in which it does not, have responsibility for taking action in the short, medium and long-term. The importance of clarifying to the community who is responsible for which areas of the Cuckmere's future cannot be underestimated. We recommend that the Partnership also takes active steps to signpost the report to other organisations who could take action on specific elements of the report, ensuring they are aware of community views.

We believe that continued engagement is only possible if the Partnership is able to commit to continued active dialogue through the ongoing support of a Project / Engagement Officer. This post is currently supported jointly by all Partners and offers two days a week to the project. However, the current post-holder has moved to a new position within the Council and can no longer work on the project. We believe that an urgent solution is needed on a more sustainable basis. In addition to coordinating the work of the Partnership, we feel the post-holder should take forward the engagement activity already begun, maintaining the stakeholder map developed through this project. Adequate administrative and

communications support is required to enable the post-holder to keep the community up to date with Partnership discussions and the results of this engagement activity. This should include regular meetings with those not currently part of the Partnership but who have played an active role in this process. These are listed at the front of this report, and are referred to again in the final report recommendation.

We recommend that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership support the community in setting up a Community Working Group such as proposed in the previous section. This should include a wider cross-section of the community than has previously signed the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership's Memorandum of Understanding (see Appendix 10) including local Parish Councils, farmers, societies and community groups and residents associations. The Working Group would exist to ensure that the Partnership is kept informed of community views, and to take on specific pieces of work. To aid this we suggest that an observers place is given to a member of the Community Working Group at the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership's meetings and an observers place also given to the Partnership at Working Group meetings, leading to healthy and positive cross-fertilisation of ideas and action. In the initial stages we recommend that the group is supported in its set-up and facilitated with external support.

06.2 Information provision

Over the last 12 months the Partnership has done a lot of work in articulating the challenges facing the estuary and in clarifying its core position: that it believes it would be in the best long-term interests for the estuary to work with, rather than against, nature, but that it is keen to explore all possible options. We believe it will be important to continue to build consensus amongst the Partnership members about the costs, risks, benefits and legal implications of the various different options for the future.

Individual representatives have shown a real commitment to the Partnership and a personal passion for finding the most sustainable solution for the estuary. We feel that further work could be done by individual representatives to feed back to their respective organisations to ensure that those organisations are kept up to date and support the work of the CEP.

Perhaps most importantly, we recommend that Partnership members take all possible steps to ensure that all relevant background and policy information and modelling and costings relating to the Cuckmere is accessible by members of the public, either via the Partnership or from organisations' individual websites and information departments.

06.3 Community proposals

Those that attended the engagement activities took great care in considering options for the future, often building on existing proposals such as raising the banks or returning the estuary to a naturally functioning system. We recommend that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership tests the feasibility of these proposals in order to move in to the next phase of decision making where concrete proposals can be developed through cost benefit analysis and funding can be sought to develop them effectively and sustainably. There are some proposals on which it may be possible for certain Partnership members to take action in the short term. We recommend that the Partnership reviews the proposals by the end of 2009 and includes in their response to them in their published reaction to this report proposed above.

06.4 Fundraising strategy

We recommend that the Cuckmere Estuary Partnership develops a fundraising strategy, once clarity is reached on the proposals, through which to seek diverse funding streams and certainly no later than spring 2010. The funds should support ongoing engagement work (see 6.1) as well as creating a pot to carry out related activities including research and marketing. Once this solid foundation is in place then funding can be sought for agreed development plans. The strategy should conform to Institute of Fundraising guidelines, and, given the limited capacity of the group, may need to be drawn up by external advisers. We recommend that the funds are sought by the Partnership working with the local community, through the Community Working Group proposed above, as the passion and commitment of the community for finding the right solutions will contribute enormously to the power of the arguments made to potential funders. As well the collective knowledge produced by such a collaboration. This requires a degree of unity which will only come if action is taken on our first recommendation.

06.5 Research

The participants in the engagement events identified a number of areas in need of research, from those relating to the landscape, the environment and archaeological investigation to research into the needs of visitors and potential needs of current non-visitors. We recommend that the Partnership use the resource available to individual members to develop a timetabled research plan. This should build on the research database currently held by the Partnership. Steps should be taken to make existing knowledge available through the Cuckmere

Estuary Partnership's website together with the research plan. As more knowledge becomes available this too should be shared with the community. We commend the proposal made in the previous section to go on fact-finding missions to other areas of the country such as Norfolk and Essex where mud flats and salt marsh habitats have been developed as this will inform any future decision making for the Partnership and the Community. The research plan should be developed by March 2010 and the programme of visits completed by December 2010.

06.6 Marketing and communications

It is important that any solutions developed by the Partnership working with the community are marketed and communicated effectively. Various communication channels have been established through this engagement programme and we recommend that these are maintained by the Partnership. In particular, the website should be further developed to include information not just directly about the Partnership, but to act as a source of more general historical, environmental and ecological information about the Cuckmere Estuary. The website should continue to be interactive, and the forum maintained.

It is also important to remember that some participants in the engagement process said that they did not have access to the Internet, so regular engagement events where people are allowed to meet and discuss in neutral non-confrontational ways are very important to maintain. This should begin as soon as possible and no later than January 2010 to ensure momentum is not lost. We recommend that the few days remaining within the current contract for Hopkins Van Mil are used to inform the community through face-to-face meetings about the contents of this report.

The Partnership should also continue to work with the media to ensure that coverage of the issues facing the Estuary is balanced, responsible and factually correct.

06.7 The future of the Partnership

The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership has a very important role to play in the future of the Cuckmere. We have seen throughout this project the commitment of individual members to finding the appropriate solutions to meet the needs of residents, visitors, recreational users, those with an interest in biodiversity and the environment and in infrastructure issues and coastal processes.

The Cuckmere Estuary Partnership Project Officer and those that have supported her closely within the National Trust and the South Downs Joint Committee have worked tirelessly to ensure that this engagement process begins to counter the

sense of mistrust that has built up over years. We believe this engagement process is the beginning of more fruitful relations with all interested parties and we recommend that the Partnership continues to work together to demonstrate its commitment to a sustainable future for the estuary.

The Partnership may wish to consider formalising its ways of operating. We recommend establishing a stronger leadership base by appointing a committee Chair who stays in the role for at least six months to a year and is responsible for the work of the partnership not only during meetings, but in the weeks in between meetings, pushing forward activity and leading discussions with key stakeholders. This will be increasingly important if the Partnership is to seek external funding. The Partnership may also wish to consider establishing a number of formal sub-committees to take forward key tasks such as fundraising and research, building on the example of the communications sub-group, and linked to the Community Working Group proposed above.