

MINSMERE LEVELS STAKEHOLDERS GROUP

Planning Group Meeting

Notes of a meeting held at Four Winds, Eastbridge
6 September 2008

Attended by:

John Keeble (Convenor)
Jon Swallow
Janet Lister
Stephen Brett
David Robb
Nat Bacon
John Rea Price
Judith Croton (note taker)

Apologies:

Pauline English
Adam Rowlands

Agenda

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2008 were agreed as an accurate record.
2. Matters Arising
All matters arising were included on the agenda of this meeting.
3. Review and follow up of the Public Meeting held on 18 July 2008.
The general feeling was that it had gone well.
There were approximately 40 people there – about half the number who attended the first public meeting but those that came seemed likely to have a continuing interest in Minsmere Levels Stakeholders' Group. With this number, there was more room in the hall with everybody able to hear what was said.

JRP suggested we should have 2/3 such meetings a year. SB agreed, so long as we have something to say. It was agreed that it was important to keep people up to date with what we are doing and to invite speakers who could keep people informed.

DR reported on last week's meeting of the Sizewell Stakeholders' Group (SSG). Piers Larcombe, a geophysicist working for CEFAS, gave a very good presentation on coastal movement and erosion etc. He said he would be happy to come to one of our meetings. It was suggested this could be at the same time as a discussion on the Shoreline Strategy. Probably spring 2009. We should also invite the SSG representatives from Westleton and Dunwich.

4. Planning for the next public meeting

DR has spoke to IDB Engineer Ian Hart who is happy to come to a public meeting.

It was agreed that Friday was the best evening and that it should be in early October before the clocks go back and the evenings are too dark. Can we still have the village hall on a Friday if the youth club needs it? JK thought it could be arranged.

It was provisionally agreed for **Friday 3rd October at 7 30pm**. This needs to be confirmed quite rapidly as we have been holding up publication of the newsletter pending agreement on the date.

JK will book the hall

DR will contact Ian Hart and Adam Rowlands

Format for the meeting

JK to chair

Update from MLSG (?DR)

Ian Hart – ¾ hour on IDB and local work schedule

Round up (? JRP)

N.B Both JS and JL are unable to attend the public meeting as they will be away.

Should there be an IDB sub committee meeting with IH that same day? It was agreed it could be at 5pm at Theberton Hall Farm. DR will arrange with IH and AR (AR was unable to attend today's meeting but he sent an e-mail outlining his contact with IH and Giles Bloomfield – see below).

5. Meeting with Giles Bloomfield, 1 August 2008 (notes already circulated)
Every year a notice from the Environment Agency goes up on the Dam bridge inviting people to inspect the accounts. DR responded - the accounts don't say anything but the accountant was very helpful - JRP spoke to him and put him in touch with Giles Bloomfield who is a middle manager at the EA with responsibility for wide area of rivers in the region. (He comes from a local family and knows this area very well.) His job is 'technical support' but he is the one in EA responsible for bidding for whatever pots of money can be accessed, and for determining what is spent where in the light of this.

GB described how he used to 'amalgamate' money as it was a waste of money to get equipment on site for a small amount of work. Last year there was a deficit of £7000 caused by the work on the Leiston main drain (there was some concern at the meeting that IH might have inherited this deficit but as the Leiston MD is not the responsibility of the IDB it was thought unlikely).

Those who attended the meeting with GB (JK, NB, SB, DR, JRP) thought he was very open, especially about the Shoreline Management review produced he said by people "in the back office on high ground". The reality is that apart from the area around the Gipping / Ipswich and Stowmarket, Suffolk is a low priority to the EA.

Planned work programmes can be thrown awry by emergencies such as the damage to the banks of the Blythe near Walberswick which resulted from the tidal surge last November £250,000 had to be found from other budgets

With hindsight, GB felt that he had taken too many shortcuts to get the work done. A digger cut through the phone cable – normally he should wait for responses from utilities etc before starting any work, but did not on this occasion. The preparatory background work can use up half of his funding just to get through the bureaucracy before work can start.

There followed a discussion as to why the EA's estimates for work are so high. It was felt by some MLSG members to be quite cheap to get a digger on site. The use of mats increases costs, but what else goes into EA costings? NB and SB thought £5000 would be enough for a week's work on the Old River. SB thought mats wouldn't be needed for 80% of local work.

The asbestos sheeting which is now lying on the path, was cut through by the workmen from Blowers who have the contract from Suffolk County Council for keeping footpaths clear. It is said that the EA has put £300,000 aside for the work to remove asbestos from the riverbank. They implied it would be done quite soon but who knows if there will be other calls on the budget.

JRP said he was surprised to learn that the powers under which the EA operates are entirely permissive – it could just walk away from Minsmere with no obligation to do anything. He now understands why conservation legislation is our strongest hold over the EA as it is binding in European as well as UK law.

Sometime was spent, both with GB, and at this MLSG planning group meeting, discussing overtopping and in particular the breach in the banks of the New Cut by the reserve, which SB had recently seen and said was now very big. There clearly had been difficulties in the past between the RSPB and the EA in agreeing what be a suitable month in which to do the work. AR's e-mail, received just before the meeting, indicated that he had spoken to GB who confirmed that the Environment Agency have allocated £15K towards a three-year programme of ditch clearance works along the Minsmere Old River, starting in the next financial year (April 2009). The work would be phased over three years (i.e. £5K per annum), but they may be able to bring some forward depending upon other priorities (which could also set the work back). GB had indicated that April would be an ideal month for them to work due to other operational constraints, but this will not be possible along the SSSI and SPA stretches of the river where there would be too much disturbance to breeding birds. In these areas the work will need to be done in the autumn and the RSPB will apply pressure to the EA, along with Natural England, to ensure that this is the case. The RSPB will also continue to highlight the importance of the work from a conservation perspective (e.g. reducing flooding impact on nesting bitterns), again along with Natural England, to ensure that it is determined a high priority by the Agency.

The sluice was briefly discussed. The meeting noted, with some scepticism, the health and safety requirements which at present prevent EA staff from entering the sluice chamber.

6. The Shoreline Management Plan
DR and JK went to meeting at Southwold.

The document is overdue, it was to have been published in July, and then the autumn, but it probably won't be before Christmas. The consultants say they are looking carefully at their models again, following the flooding of the last two years, so the delay may not be a bad thing. It is a 'work in progress'.

7. Membership, funds and other administrative matters

There are now 24 individual members. Leiston Town Council has applied to join – JRP accepted the application, although we have no arrangement for corporate membership (They have nominated Bing Boast as their representative). JRP has now written to Joan Harvey, parish clerk, about Theberton and Eastbridge Parish Council also becoming members (as parish councillors, JS and SB would have to declare an interest).

We currently have £160 in the bank. We haven't yet paid for the use of village hall for the public meeting in June.

The next priority is business cards - Leiston Press can do 250 for £50 – it was agreed we would have the photograph of flooding as the 'ghost' with JRP's contact details, plus space for other members to put their names. JRP to pursue.

8. Future programme of work

We need to 'keep an eye on things', e.g. with the Catchment study and the Shoreline Management Plan

We've gone through the 'first flush' and now we need to demonstrate that people are listening to us.

In the future we should be in a position to produce press releases, have items in the EADT, on Radio Suffolk etc.

JS pointed out that at the beginning we didn't know who did what, where funding came from etc. Now we have gathered all this information it would be useful to have diagram showing who does what etc. JMC supported this saying it would be useful to produce information sheets so we could share what we have learned with the rest of the membership.

9. Any other business

DR and JRP went to the Suffolk Record Office this week, looking at documentation on the draining of the Levels etc. This is an on-going project.

JRP raised the issue of the consultation on the future boundaries of the county of Suffolk. The current proposal is that Ipswich and Felixstowe would form one unitary authority, Lowestoft would go in to Norfolk, with the rest of Suffolk becoming an authority administered from Bury St Edmunds.

JRP's view was that this would have significant consequences for coastline management. The new Ipswich and Felixstowe council would probably reach Bawdsey, with any money for coastline defence probably going there. A county headquarters in Bury St Edmunds would be 60 miles away from here, and at least 40 miles inland from any point on the coast. Councillors and their staff would most likely have little knowledge of, and even less interest in, the coast.

Apart from the cost implications (? An extra £100pa on the council tax bill), duplication of top management etc, the coast needs one council to speak with one authoritative voice.

It was agreed that JRP would draft a letter for JK to send on our behalf opposing the proposals.

A diesel bowser and planking has arrived by the bridge, at the side of the New River. The EA are to start the annual de-weeding of the river next week.

10. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that we didn't need to meet before the public meeting and that we would agree the next date then

Judith Croton
7 September 2008