

River Thames Scheme - Community Stakeholder Working Group

What is the River Thames Scheme?

The River Thames Scheme (RTS) is intended to reduce the risk of flooding in areas including Laleham, following the serious flooding that occurred in 2014.

The flood risk to properties in Laleham is deemed to be high or medium, although the centre of Laleham and the Abbey are low risk. You can see the risk level in specific locations by going to <https://www.gov.uk/check-long-term-flood-risk>

The cost of property insurance is affected by the level of flood risk. Sadly, some properties in Laleham are currently uninsurable.

The key part of the RTS will involve the creation of two new water channels parallel to the Thames. In flood conditions water can then use both the Thames itself, and a new channel. This should lower the water level.

The new channels will be created by linking existing lakes etc with newly dug waterways. The upstream channel, of more interest to Laleham, will be situated on the Surrey side of the river, and start opposite the end of Wheatsheaf Lane and end downstream of the M3, above Chertsey Lock. The downstream channel, on the Middlesex side, will start upstream of the M3 and end just above the Desborough cut (below Shepperton lock).

For a map of the new channels see:

https://www.riverthamesscheme.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/316022/River-Thames-Scheme-Map.pdf

In addition, the weirs at Sunbury, Molesey and Teddington locks will be expanded to allow additional water flow (25% approx.) when required. Further, the riverbed downstream of Desborough Cut will be lowered, to increase capacity.

Alongside all this "hydraulic engineering", there is a strong emphasis on "community gain" in terms opening up access, landscaping and environmental considerations.

Funding for this will come from the Environment Agency (ie UK government, hence the taxpayer) and local authorities including Surrey County Council (SCC) (the council tax payer) and Spelthorne Borough Council (ditto). Overall cost will be about £640 million, of which SCC may provide about £270 million. These numbers appear in a web page that is not dated.

A further new channel, above Staines bridge, has been dropped from the original scheme. The relevant local authorities declined to provide funding.

A new Community Stakeholder Working Group

Following two rounds of public consultation (the second one being held late last year, and very extensive), the RTS team have now established a "Community Stakeholder Working Group" (CSWG) to consult about 15 local interest groups. In addition to residents' associations, this includes canoeing, cycling, disabled, horse riding, rowing and sailing interests.

The CSWG's first meeting was held on 9 August, via the web, with 7 RTS team members and 23 community reps present. Two further meetings are planned.

Questions discussed at the first Community Stakeholder Working Group meeting

Here is a sample of the many questions, indicating the level of detail that is being considered

Q: Will the newly dug channels have steep sides? If yes, entry to/exit from canoes will be difficult, and in the event of an accident it will be difficult to extricate the person from the water.

A: Yes, this is being actively considered. Where the channel has to be narrow (eg due to neighbouring structures) steep sides may be needed to retain adequate water throughput.

Q: Please provide a map of flooding extent and depth both *with* and *without* the 2-channel scheme

A: We will do this [the maps shown at the public consultation late last year were not easy to read]

Q: Who will maintain the scheme once implemented?

A: The Environment Agency (EA) will maintain the channels etc. SCC will maintain the areas alongside the channels. However, this was still under discussion, and the word "budget" was not mentioned.

Q: Will this scheme definitely happen?

A: [this question was not answered!]

On behalf of the LRA, I raised the following two points:

Some Laleham residents cannot at present get any property insurance due to flood risk. This is very serious for them. They cannot sell their properties. Is the RTS consulting with insurers to see whether the RTS will enable insurance to be obtained once the scheme is implemented?

Within Laleham, road traffic is a noted issue. Excavating new channels will produce a large volume of gravel, topsoil and so on. Will all this be removed via local roads? Can a significant amount be retained to create "hills" as part of landscaping? For the road traffic, will restrictions be placed on contractors to spread the load and avoid unsuitable roads?

I raised these points via "chat". Unfortunately, the meeting ignored most of the 15 to 20 points raised in this way, and concentrated on verbally raised points. I have asked that these two points be responded to. Any answers will be made known to LRA members.

Overall, it was clear that the RTS team is considering a very wide range of topics, very diligently. That was quite impressive.

Further process steps prior to implementation

The RTS is regarded as a "project of national significance", and its consent will involve getting a "Development Consent Order" (DCO). This differs from normal processes in that only one application need be made, rather than a myriad addressing many topics. It does however require lots of consultation.

The DCO process involves 6 stages, and the project is currently at stage 1 ("Pre-Application"). Several stages have time limits imposed. The RTS team suggested that the 6 stages might take 18 months overall. Note however that stage 6 involves the final decision by the Secretary of State, and there appears to be no time limit on this.

Finally

If readers have a question to be put to the RTS team, then send an email to rts@environment-agency.gov.uk

Please keep me informed if you do contact the RTS team (contact me at webmaster@laleham-residents-association.org.uk).

The RTS' website is at www.riverthamesscheme.org.uk

Let's hope that the RTS will be approved, and implementation completed before 2030.

Mike Garrett

LRA Committee Member / LRA rep on RTS CSWG

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