

RIVER THAMES SCHEME - LANDSCAPING & GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction

Whilst the River Thames Scheme (RTS) is aimed primarily at flood risk reduction, it will also provide “environmental gain” and new public access. The RTS team presented their plans relating to Landscaping and Green Infrastructure to about 30 members of the public on 21 November 2023 in Egham. (There was also an excellent buffet lunch!).

This was a preview of some fairly detailed plans, not a consultation. Consultation will be provided via the Statutory Consultation early next year. Attendees were not allowed to photograph the 11 detailed displays. Nevertheless, the session provided for many questions and answers, and revealed some key aspects for the first time.

The RTS is a huge scheme. There are many details not yet decided. Whatever questions attendees asked, the RTS team could not necessarily provide a definite answer, but made it clear that the issue was already under careful consideration.

Active Travel Route (ATR)

A key feature of public access will be a new “Active Travel Route” (ATR), running from Staines Town (actually from about 150m South of the railway bridge in Chertsey Lane) to the Desborough Cut, South of Shepperton. 5.5 miles long, fully off-road. Not for motorised vehicles. It will provide for walkers and cyclists (and TBD horse riders). Where possible walkers and cyclists will be separated. Also provision for wheelchairs and buggies. The ATR will be accessible from multiple points along its length, with new branch paths in places.

The ATR will require two new bridges across the Thames (not for motorised vehicles). These will have a cost, but the concept of the ATR will be substantially damaged without them. Ramps accessing these bridges will have a gentle gradient.

The ATR will not in the main follow the new flood relief channels. Its width and materials are still to be decided.

New open spaces accessible to the public

The ATR will be fully accessible to the public, but usually not the land alongside it. Nor access in many places to the new channels. So for example there would not be public access to the banks of Littleton Lake North (between Thameside and Littleton Lane, and North of the M3).

But there will be two new public open spaces:

- At the northern end of the ATR, to the West of Chertsey Lane (A320).
- South of the M3, between Littleton Lane and Sheep Walk. This would have new off-road access to Shepperton Green.

Infrastructure associated with the ATR and new open spaces

It is recognised that the ATR will attract the public (which is indeed the aim), and this will require new car parks. Related details are still to be decided. Likewise the potential provision of lighting and buildings (eg toilets).

Navigation on the new flood relief channels

This is definitely being considered. There are potential issues, for example:

- If a new channel linking existing lakes needs to be steep sided, this presents a safety risk (no easy escape from the water)
- Some lakes have use restrictions due to migrating birds etc.

Whatever, it will not be possible to transit the length of a new channel, on the water, due to structures such as low bridges and gates controlling water flow. But canoeists may be able to portage their craft past such obstructions.

Subject to the above, the Thames Conservancy Act 1932 may enforce a right of navigation on the new channels.

Elevated ground

Earlier designs provided for two publicly accessible “viewpoints,” in the form of small hills. This concept has been replaced by making the ATR undulating along its length. This will provide users with views over surrounding countryside from a variety of places. Material excavated to form the new channels can be used (if not contaminated) to provide this elevation, reducing the amount of material removed from site (and thus reducing lorry traffic).

The routes for cycles and pedestrians may not both go over the top of the undulations. Gradients will be gradual, to take account of wheelchair users, for example.

Areas not accessible to the public

The detailed maps show many significant areas coloured dark green. This marks areas that will be environmentally improved, but without having public access. These areas are likely to be privately owned (eg by gravel pit companies). RTS are hoping to negotiate with the owners to achieve the environmental improvement, but if this fails Compulsory Purchase may well be considered.

Maintenance after construction

It is expected that Surrey County Council will be responsible for maintenance of the “green” areas, although the funding for this is not yet resolved. The Environment Agency will be responsible for “blue” areas (ie water and associated structures).

Timing – blue versus green aspects

Construction of blue aspects (ie to reduce flood risk) is likely to be completed before green aspects. Converting areas from their current form into a more environmentally friendly form (eg established woodland) can certainly take time.

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