

Leigh flood storage area expansion scheme

The Environment Agency's proposal to increase the maximum level of water that can be stored in the Leigh flood storage area has been approved by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The Environment Agency can now start work to enable the Leigh flood storage area to store more water, increasing its capacity by nearly a quarter. Enlarging the reservoir also means that a new flood embankment can be constructed in Hildenborough. Once complete, over 1,400 homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough will be better protected from flooding.

Sally Harvey, Environment Agency Area Director, Kent, South London and East Sussex, said:

We are pleased to confirm that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has approved our application to increase the maximum stored water level in the Leigh flood storage area.

This decision means that we will now be able to proceed with the Leigh expansion and Hildenborough embankment scheme which will reduce flood risk to over 1,400 homes in Tonbridge and Hildenborough.

Cllr Robin Betts, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council Cabinet member for environment and climate change, said:

This project is an important step in response to climate change and the increased risk of flooding in the coming years. We know only too well that many homes and businesses have been seriously flooded in the past and the fear of this happening again still exists for many. Once complete the new flood defence measures will offer reassurance to communities and considerable improvement to reduce the risk of flooding in the future.

Tony Hills, Kent County Council Deputy Cabinet member for the Environment, said:

Kent County Council is proud to support the Leigh flood storage area, which will reduce the flood risk on the River Medway and help the county to be resilient to climate change. We are pleased that the Secretary of State has agreed to these plans and that the project can now progress. Once it is complete, this scheme will

significantly reduce the risk of flooding in Tonbridge and surrounding communities and the disruption this causes to lives and livelihoods.

Christian Brodie, South East Local Enterprise Partnership Chair, said:

It is always immensely gratifying to see the capital funding that we invest in our area start coming to fruition. This project is incredibly important to Tonbridge residents and businesses – it will mitigate a very real worry of homes and business premises being flooded in the future.

This is a complex scheme, which has taken time to design, and a strong partnership has been developed with a range of funding sources and key partner agencies. We are pleased to invest in protecting existing homes and businesses, especially Tonbridge high street which is the life blood of the community. But crucially, this scheme will unlock new sites for homes and businesses in strategically important locations for the area and create new jobs and employment space, which is vital for the future economy.

The scheme is being delivered by the Environment Agency in partnership with:

- Kent County Council
- Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council
- South East Local Enterprise Partnership

Funding is through the government's Flood Defence Grant in Aid (FDGiA), with contributions from Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Kent County Council and the South East Local Enterprise Partnership.

Next steps

The Environment Agency expects to appoint contractors in spring 2022. Work is expected to start on site in summer 2022 and the scheme completed in autumn 2024.

Further information

The investment is part of plans outlining £5.2 billion of investment over the next 6 years. More than £860 million will be spent in 2021/22 boosting design and construction of more than 1,000 schemes across England as part of the Environment Agency's annual capital programme.

The delivery of the new schemes follows the [successful delivery of the previous programme](#). The government invested £2.6 billion in new flood defences through this programme – surpassing its target of better protecting 300,000 homes between 2015 and 2021.

The new schemes will be an important part of the implementation of the

government's [Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Policy Statement](#) and the [Environment Agency's Flood and Coastal Risk Management Strategy](#).

Homes and businesses better protected from flooding

The Leigh flood storage area currently better protects 1,200 properties from flooding. Once the expansion is complete, over 1,400 homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough will be better protected from flooding.

Background

In 1982, the Southern Water Authority completed the Leigh flood storage area (FSA). The FSA reduces the risk of flooding to around 1,200 homes and businesses in Tonbridge and Hildenborough. It works by storing the peak of a flood upstream and releasing it in a controlled manner once the peak has passed.

The flood storage area sits between the villages of Leigh and Penshurst in Kent. When full, it covers approximately 278 hectares. It is formed of a 1.3 kilometre long, 5 metre high earth embankment across the Medway valley. The River Medway itself passes through 3 steel gates built into the embankment. These gates control the amount of water flowing downstream by either letting the river flow normally, or restricting the flow to hold water in the storage area.

The FSA is an 'online' storage reservoir, which means that the river is always flowing through it.

Currently the Environment Agency can legally store water to a maximum level of 28.05 metres above ordnance datum (AOD), as measured at the control structure. Investigations showed that storing water to 28.6 metres AOD will reduce flood risk to more properties.

Proposal to increase the level of stored water

Increasing the maximum stored water level required permission from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs which has now been received.

Since 2019, the Environment Agency has been working with organisations and landowners who are affected by the proposal. The Environment Agency submitted its application to increase the maximum stored water level to the Secretary of State in early June 2020. A number of objections to the application were submitted to Defra which were unable to be resolved, therefore an inquiry took place between April and May 2021 to allow concerns to be heard.

The Environment Agency responded to the concerns raised by all respondents at the inquiry and the inspector submitted a report with recommendations to the Secretary of State in July 2021.

How it works – watch the animation

You can find out more about how the Leigh FSA works by watching our [YouTube animation](#).