



Hoylake Beach – Consultation and Engagement Working Group

**A report produced by the
Environment, Climate Emergency and
Transport Committee**

March 2021 Final Report

This report provides Members of the committee with an update on the recommendations from the meeting of the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee of 3rd December 2020 to:

- Procure an independent study as a scientific evidence base upon which to develop future management options for Hoylake beach.
- Produce a Communications Strategy for the development of the beach management plan for Hoylake in consultation with a politically proportionate Working Group.
- Produce a specification for a request for assent of non-vegetation management activities.

The future management of Hoylake beach strategically aligns with both the Sustainable Environment and Safe and Pleasant Communities themes of the Wirral Plan 2025.

Working Group

Further to the second recommendation members agreed to a cross party working group made up of 7 Members to ensure political proportionality.

The working group met on 22 February where they received a presentation of the draft strategy and the communication and engagement strategy.

The working group consisted of:

Cllr Elizabeth Grey (Chair)
Cllr Irene Williams
Cllr Christina Muspratt
Cllr Alison Wright
Cllr Helen Cameron
Cllr Chris Cooke
Cllr Alan Brame

Presentation

The draft Communication and Engagement strategy was circulated in advance of the meeting and Members received a presentation which covered the following:

- What needs to be established to deliver the Strategy and Hoylake Beach Management Plan.
- The framework around which the Hoylake Beach Management Plan will be developed.
- Set out the how and when we will consult and what the objective is for each stage of consultation.
- Proposed a timeline for each stage of consultation, plan development and plan implementation.

Members were informed of work which was still underway which included:

- The Launch of a Steering Group comprising of officers which cuts across all service areas impacted by Hoylake Beach
- Establish a political Working Group to ease approval through the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee.
- Gain Approval for an interactive project website, to be used as an area to inform and then to provide the framework for the public consultation further down the line.

Members were shown website options which provided an interactive forum for information sharing, input from residents and formal consultation. This has been used successfully by various council departments as a useful forum for brainstorming and collating information.

They were then advised of the proposed timeline for the consultation including;

- An initial consultation, then establishing the framework based on scientific studies to develop the shortlist,
- The consultation on these options and then,
- The approval and publication of the preferred option.
- Members were reminded that no one option may be suitable and there may need to be a compromise.

Discussion

Members discussed the timelines for the consultation, with several voicing concerns on the order of the engagement and consultation process. They reasoned that officers needed to engage with professional bodies prior to *public* consultation so the public can consider viable options and the parameters of what is feasible. Some Members thought it would be difficult to go immediately into a public consultation without scientific data and information.

Officers responded by saying that they understood this, but they wanted to include the public early due to the length of time the ecological survey will take. They were conscious that they wanted to engage during this process to avoid (what could be perceived as) inertia. Officers were keen to collate information and comments from the public whilst work was also being done in the background.

Members also referred to the call-in where there were comments from residents about the lack of engagement between the council and the community. The panel agreed that accusations of the lack of engagement should be mitigated by early discussion. Some of the panel also commented that they had no issue with using a portal system to receive public comments (prior to official consultation) but this will need to come with the caveat that they will be limited by the parameters of what the authority may be able to do, based on the outcome of scientific studies. It would be disingenuous for the authority to suggest that residents can put through ideas which fundamentally cannot be delivered. Members were concerned the discussion could end up being a circular debate without resolution.

Fundamentally, Members were concerned about opening a conversation without presenting the outcomes of the studies. However, they also saw that it is imperative that the community is involved early, due to a historic sense of disengagement. There is a great level of concern with residents and it needs to be an open conversation. The panel also raised a query regarding elderly people and those who do not use social media – how would they be communicated with? Members unanimously agreed that the interests of both sides should be considered.

The impact of COVID-19 was discussed with the understanding that time had been lost due to resourcing implications. They also noted that a lot of residents feel as if “things are done to them” and commented that this can lead to a greater feeling of discontent and disenfranchisement. Expectations can be managed by early engagement, but several Members still cautioned against consultation at an early stage due to potential outcomes of the geomorphic and ecological surveys which will confirm the legal parameters of what will eventually be allowed. Conversely, other Members of the working group also cautioned against any pre-determination as this may inflame opinion and people may disengage.

They also queried how the consultation would be undertaken and officers advised that given the timescales involved they hoped that there may be some face-to-face consultation allowed, to ensure visibility amongst the community and to include those who are digitally isolated. Some Members of the panel felt that the consultation should focus on local residents in the Hoylake and Meols constituency area, however there was not a consensus among all the Members on this.

After much discussion, Members agreed that early engagement was needed, but that officers needed to include clear information on existing data as well as upcoming scientific studies. Officers also need to be clear on the fact that it is a rolling process and an outcome will not be immediate. They noted the time scales were unfortunate, but there was little that could be done about this due to the impact the pandemic has had on resources.

The panel discussed what data could be included on an online portal and officers were able to advise that they could include the evidence already supplied in the geomorphic study. Members also requested that they have sight of the brief for the geomorphic study as soon as possible to ensure that there is not any pre-determination. Alongside this, they asked that the reports be presented in plain English, with an executive summary and this should be included within the brief.

Members also requested that the study be independent and not influenced by previous studies. They also queried where the flood risk data would come from – would it cover the area of Wirral or Hoylake or the whole of the Wirral coastal strategy.

Officers confirmed that they didn't have specific data for these areas and that this was done at a regional level. They have done targeted work on flood risk and sea levels in West Kirby. Hoylake is not one of the priority areas, unlike Moreton, West Kirby and Meols who have issues due to erosion. The Coastal Management strategy mostly considered risks and intervention, but also considers the Climate Emergency and flood risks. Members asked about surface level flooding in Hoylake, due to

rainfall and the build-up of sand. Officers responded to say that these drain out through the seawall, and once cleared the issue will resolve itself. There should not be any correlation between surface water and ground water, but consideration to ground level flooding should be put into the consultation.

Members then asked about membership of the steering group and which officers would sit on it. Officers confirmed that the steering group would comprise of all services effected by beach management and those who would be affected by budget implications. This group will work with and alongside the political working group.

Engagement will be as defined by natural England, so the portal will contain the dissemination of full fact information with the availability to leave comments, but these should not be seen by the public at that stage.

Recommendations

After much discussion, a majority of the working group felt that:

- The project site should be named– ‘Hoylake Beach information portal’ avoiding the term ‘consultation’ at this stage (but confirming there will be a public consultation once all the scientific information is available and options are agreed by Natural England).
- ‘Engagement’ is important (as suggested by Natural England), so the portal should contain all information to date. This should include the Natural England report and information on climate change, natural capital, carbon storage and predicted sea level rises and flood risk, allowing the public to comment, but not make these comments available to other users to avoid unnecessary hostility. The aim of this is to keep residents fully informed of legal constraints and scientific data. The data could be provided both as a summary and as long read hyperlinked versions. All comments are to get an appropriate response.
- The Procurement brief needs to be shared urgently via email (this has been actioned)
- The steering group membership should be confirmed as soon as possible and they should work closely with the Members working group. They and their work need to be open and transparent.
- Final consultation options and wording – Officers should ensure that the working group has a say in forming this and any academic or outside professional bodies eg. Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service, local universities, Cheshire Wildlife Trust etc are included as with the Local Plan consultation. The consultation is to be open to the wider public and will inform the final decision on beach management to be made by this committee.