

Save our South Coast Alliance (SOSCA) Press release 15 March 2021

Chichester's Coastal Plain at a Tipping Point

Fears are growing about the future of Chichester's coastal plain as more and more community representatives urge politicians and policy makers to prioritise the environment and climate change resilience, claiming the area is now at a tipping point.

Chichester Harbour, the Manhood peninsula and the surrounding coastal hinterland form one of the south coast's leading staycation and international tourist destinations as well as it's most productive food growing areas. The area is also home to the largest group of vital CO2 absorbing biodiverse wetlands in the south and is one of the UK's most important habitat areas for many types of birds as well as endangered species such as water voles.

But all these irreplaceable assets are at risk while Chichester District Council lacks a strategic spatial plan going forward, according to Save our South Coast Alliance. (SOSCA). SOSCA is a research-backed alliance working closely with a growing number of organisations calling for a re-appreciation of the coastal area's unique assets. The other organisations include Save our Harbour Villages (SOHV), Chichester Harbour Trust, the Manhood Peninsula Action Group (MPAG), Stand Up for Chichester (SU4Chi) and Pagham Action Group and many others as well as parish councils.

In the absence of a current Local Plan the district is facing dozens of large-scale housing applications across the coastal plain. Such ad hoc planning will quickly destroy the most important assets in the district – tourism, farming and its incredible marine and wetland ecosystem – the campaign groups claim. SOSCA this week wrote to all councillors asking them to introduce a planning condition, similar to a Grampian Clause, to ensure permission for new homes is only given if infrastructure is adequate and in place for each application, in line with the Conservative Party's election manifesto pledge of 'infrastructure first.'

Inadequate infrastructure in the area particularly surrounding drainage and transport is already causing increasing sewage and pollution spills into the harbour and streets; toilets backing up in homes; and noise and air pollution from road traffic.

Disturbingly, a new report from Natural England describes Chichester Harbour as now being in an 'unfavourable and declining' condition. According to the report "Chichester Harbour is one of the most important sites for wildlife in the United Kingdom and is globally important for migratory birds. The harbour is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA) for birds."

In a presentation to the Manhood Peninsula Partnership this week, Louise Bardsley, the author of the report, said Chichester's Harbour was a 'story of catastrophic decline.' The harbour contains the largest salt marsh in the Solent Special Protection Area, but nearly half

of it has been lost since 1970. According to the report between 58% of saltmarsh habitat area has been lost since 1946 with a 46% loss since the site first became legally protected in 1970. At the current rate of decline the site could lose all its remaining saltmarsh habitat by the middle of the next century.

Sites are experiencing impacts from inappropriate coastal management, including coastal squeeze, to some extent on their landward edge. Opportunistic macroalgae, a sign of nutrient enrichment, was observed at all the land-based survey locations and no transects met the requirement for favourable condition for flourishing saltmarsh habitat. As a result, all SSSI units with saltmarsh in 1970 were assigned to unfavourable declining condition, totalling 3,003 hectares.

But the degradation can be turned around if the value of Chichester's wetlands is fully appreciated and everyone works together, Bardsley claimed. As a result of the report, NE is looking to review the number of times Southern Water is permitted to discharge sewage into the harbour and is working with CDC to safeguard lower lying land from development to allow salt marsh and wetland migration inland, she explained.

The wetlands of the coastal plain are not only vital for wildlife, both on land and in the harbours and Solent, but are also critical for the area's tourism and recreational economy and its future resilience to climate change. As a result, the current state of the district's harbours is raising alarm across the community.

This week the Commodores of all 12 sailing clubs in Chichester and Langstone wrote to the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency Sir James Bevan. They warned that if nothing is done to improve water quality, manage the impacts of climate change, and address the problems of increased housing development, the harbours will lose their status as internationally designated environmental habitat sites, as well as their attraction for recreational use.

In a seminar this week (w/c 1st March) exploring the vulnerability of the coastal area to climate change, Carolyn Cobbold, project leader of the Manhood Peninsula Partnership, highlighted the critical importance of salt marsh and other wetlands in making coastal areas more climate resilient. The Manhood Peninsula is seen as an international leader in climate change mitigation as a result of the newly formed Medmerry Reserve Wetlands, which was Europe's largest coastal realignment scheme when it opened in 2013 and ongoing work of the MPP and the Manhood Wildlife and Heritage Group to improve the peninsula's wetlands.

"Wetlands are nature's most efficient CO2 absorbing habitats, far more effective than trees," according to Dr Cobbold. They also are a vital biodiverse ecosystem and provide natural filtering for water coming from the uplands into our marine environment.

The chief executive of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan, warned the Association of British Insurers last week that the UK is already facing “Reasonable Worst Case” climate change events and that the country should prepare for higher sea level rise and increased storminess and rainfall.

Although Chichester’s coast is one of the most vulnerable to climate change, it has the natural assets and space to allow it to respond positively to climate change. But serious climate change adaptation and mitigation needs to be factored into the planning process by the district council and politicians immediately, SOSCA warns.

“Building large quantities of housing on the low lying coastal plain is storing up flood disaster and huge costs for future generations while harming the area’s most important natural assets which could provide environmental, economic and social resilience to climate change,” said Richard Pratt, SOSCA’s planning advisor.

“There has to be change. There has to be recognition by our Government representatives that their actions, or lack of action, is going to create an environmental disaster within our lifetime. They need to understand the timescale and that timescale starts NOW,” said Libby Alexander, founder of SOSCA.

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