

# Enough is Enough! Stop Oxford Flooding

**Caveat and disclaimer:** this article is written in good faith as our best understanding at the time of writing, March 2014. However very little is decided for sure, and things can and will change, the scheme may never even happen, so nothing said here should be taken as gospel or relied on for taking important decisions.

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The Oxford Flood Alliance has been campaigning since 2007 to reduce Oxford's flood risk. We have had real success but have always known that more would need to be done. Here are the reasons why we strongly support the proposed "Western Conveyance" What follows is based on our best understanding at present. There are several years of planning ahead before work on the ground begins.

## **Something needs to be done to reduce Oxford's flooding**

Oxford has suffered increasingly frequent flooding in recent years, a problem which is only likely to increase in future. There are serious effects on individuals, families, businesses, the universities, railways and roads, and the sewerage system. Oxford and Oxfordshire's economy is damaged, along with its reputation as a place to work and to do business.

Action needs to be taken to rid Oxford of this threat once and for all. We support the proposed Western Conveyance (also known as the Oxford Relief River, ORR). This is a scheme devised by the Environment Agency and the subject of public consultation in 2009. If various bodies can together in partnership raise the necessary £123 million, it is likely to be given the go ahead next month.

## **What is the Western Conveyance (Oxford Relief River)?**

It will be a flood relief channel, running in the floodplain to the west of Oxford city centre. It begins just above the Botley Road, near the Seacourt Park & Ride, and ends below the lock at Sandford-on-Thames. It will be able to contain more water during times of flood than the present water course, the Hinksey Stream. The exact route and design is not yet decided. The channel will very roughly follow the course of the Hinksey Stream. In some places there may be adaptation of the existing river, in others a new watercourse.

It will be a flood relief channel, not 'another Thames' - not least because in times of lower water levels the Thames will still need most of the available water to remain navigable. So the ORR in the open flood plain will be a so-called two-stage channel - that is a smallish watercourse with water in all year, but having very wide (many metres), shallowly sloping, 'sides' which can fill with water during floods. Most of the year (apart from the small deeper central channel) it will be dry, and grazed by animals as at present, but in flood times it will fill and do the job.

To remove present pinch-points there will probably be (i) a new bridge under the Botley Road, (ii) a new bridge under the railway at Kennington, (iii) a new cut to contain more water and going directly to the downstream side of the lock at Sandford, by-passing the lock and so using the available gradient.

Most of the channel will be the long stretches in the open flood plain. As a grazed two-stage channel these will not be visually obtrusive, will be landscaped and will enhance wildlife habitat. The different levels of the channel significantly increase the diversity of plant habitat.

Only very short sections will be heavily engineered, maybe even to the point of a concrete channel: the section immediately downstream of the Botley Road to avoid excessive land take, and through the Redbridge landfill site to avoid contamination issues. These will be minimized as much as possible. Flow will be controlled by two moveable and two fixed weirs.

There will be new public open space and foot/cycle paths.

The intention is that it will be 3-4 years in the planning and completed within 8 years. If that is achieved, the first benefits would be seen in about 5 years.

### **But do we need this channel at all? What about upstream measures?**

We are not opposed to upstream measures in principle. These could include flood storage areas and/or slowing the flow of water into rivers by tree planting and other changes. However, even assuming they could ever be implemented sufficiently to make a meaningful difference, they would not on their own be enough. Oxford's wider flood plain ends at a narrow gap in the hills at Redbridge. There is a very marked geological narrowing of the Thames valley immediately south of Oxford city, in the Redbridge/North Kennington area. The natural gap is only about 320 metres wide. That has to take water from seven rivers: the Upper Thames, Coln, Leach, Windrush and Evenlode in the Cotswolds and the Cherwell and the Ray to the east. Their combined catchment is about 2500 km<sup>2</sup>. *Just 1cm of rain on that area is 25 million cubic metres of water, that's 5.5 billion gallons or 10,000 Olympic swimming pools.* In the western part of the flood plain, that is west of the railway line, there are additional problems caused by the railway acting as a dam, and the flood plain being taken up by landfill dumping, buildings, the ring road and a waste recycling centre.

Furthermore, upstream measures would require alterations in farming practice and loss of agricultural production. While pilot studies in carefully selected small valley systems may yield encouraging results, to undertake something involving huge areas of the Cotswolds is another matter altogether. Does anyone even have any idea what scale of intervention would be needed, how much farming land would need to be forested? What loss of food production would be entailed? One can guess that farmers would have a great deal to say. Suffice it to say that there would inevitably be decades of negotiation before anything of practical value emerged - if it ever did. Even then the present scheme would be needed.

### **How will the money be raised?**

The money will be raised by a partnership of institutions. First a DEFRA grant of £39 million can be anticipated. Second, hopefully a £12 million contribution from the Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee. Oxfordshire County Council is leading the campaign and the scheme is backed by Oxford City Council. Both Oxford MPs, Nicola Blackwood and Andrew Smith, support the scheme. We hope that some or all of the following organisations, who will all benefit to varying degrees, will also want to contribute, directly or indirectly:

Network Rail  
Thames Water  
"Big business"  
Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership  
Oxford University  
Oxford Brookes University  
Scottish & Southern Energy, SSE  
Vale of White Horse District Council  
South Oxfordshire District Council  
West Oxfordshire District Council

Others?

Discussions, led by Oxfordshire County Council, are ongoing. A Flood Summit on March 21<sup>st</sup> will bring the potential partners together.

The facts of the local geography dictate the solution to Oxford's frequent flooding. The **ONLY** scheme that will work in the foreseeable future is the proposed flood relief channel. Other measures, while they might contribute eventually, will never on their own do the job. Such measures would anyway take decades to negotiate and implement on any meaningful scale. We believe the present proposals are the only answer and will be visually and environmentally acceptable. We strongly support them.