



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cllr Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council

Caroline Douglass, Executive Director for Flood and Coastal Risk Management, Environment Agency

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Dear Cllr Oliver and Ms Douglass,

Response: River Thames Scheme Public Consultation 2024

I write as the MP for Runnymede and Weybridge regarding the statutory public consultation on the River Thames Scheme (RTS). Increasing protection from flooding and protecting our natural environment are two of my core priorities for my constituency.

The main message I want to submit to the consultation is that the RTS needs to be built as soon as possible.

The RTS will provide improvements to biodiversity and community leisure facilities, and it represents a huge investment in our area. I support the active travel benefits of the scheme which I called for in early discussions around its design.

Via the consultation, the public have had the opportunity to raise questions over the environmental impact of the RTS. It is right that these considerations are taken into account and where possible risks mitigated. However, the primary focus of this project is, and must continue to be, flood alleviation.

I have raised with Ministers that the Government should move as quickly as possible in relation to the phases of the Development Consent Order (DCO) process where it is able to influence timescales for scrutiny and consideration. I hope that the scheme will be able to take advantage of this to bring forward estimated construction dates.

Based on experiences to date, it is vital that the tools are in place to ensure that RTS flood alleviation channels, once built, are well maintained. Without clarity over legal responsibilities, roles, and enforcement processes, the effectiveness of RTS flood mitigation could be undermined.

My full consultation response is set out below. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further detail in relation to the points raised.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Ben Spencer MP
Runnymede and Weybridge

Mitigating flood risk

While the RTS envisages several key aims including promoting biodiversity, active travel and engagement with our natural environment, I welcome the consultation's clear statement that minimising flood impact is the foremost goal of the scheme.

The RTS was borne out of the severe floods of 2013/14 which wrought devastation on so many households and businesses across Runnymede and Weybridge, and beyond. The continuing risks were highlighted most recently by the impact of Storm Henk, with many areas experiencing disruption from flooding of properties and highways, as well as sewage flooding from drainage systems in other areas.

Many properties remain at risk – not only from the most severe events – but regular flooding issues every year. It cannot be right that hundreds of residents live with anxiety each winter as they watch the river levels rise, wondering if they will again face the catastrophic damage and disruption that flooding can cause. This risk is only likely to be exacerbated by climate change and the frequency of storms increasing.

Storm Henk was one of the most severe episodes of flooding experienced by Runnymede and Weybridge since the storms of winter 2013/14. This has been reflected in the level of concern expressed and the feedback given to me as I have engaged with residents, flood groups, and local authority representatives across the constituency throughout this period. Many of the residents affected asked why, 10 years on from the 2013/14 floods, the RTS is not already operational.

The RTS is, of course, designated as a project of nationally significant importance and therefore subject to the mandatory timescales imposed by the DCO process. However, I understand the frustration of residents, and this is an issue I raised with the Secretary of State for Defra in our recent meeting where I called on him to ensure that the Government moves as quickly as possible in relation to the phases where it is able to influence timescales for scrutiny and consideration. The Secretary of State proposed strategies and offered support to help expedite the DCO application process where possible, which I will take forward with the project team leads.

We are at a crucial point in the development of the RTS. I know that the consultation will elicit a range of views from constituents with concerns over the environmental impact of the scheme, provision of community facilities and infrastructure.

It is right that these considerations are taken into account and, where possible, risks mitigated and benefits enhanced. However, the primary focus of this project is and must continue to be flood alleviation, and I urge the project team to ensure this can be delivered at the earliest possible opportunity.

Enhancing biodiversity and promoting access to waterways for leisure pursuits

Where we can enhance the benefits of the scheme for the community, within the current timeframe, we should. I have been contacted by a number of community groups and constituents, who use the waterways which will form part of the RTS for leisure pursuits, raising queries or concerns about the potential implications for those recreational activities.

While there will, inevitably, be changes to the natural environment surrounding the RTS stretch of the Thames, I welcome that the proposed scheme aims at increasing opportunities for residents to access nature and active travel, while also implementing extensive measures to enhance biodiversity.

One particular campaign has highlighted concerns over the possible impact on local water quality at Ferris Meadow Lake due to, amongst other factors, the route passing through sites previously used for landfill.

While this lake lies outside of my constituency, I know it is an important amenity used by many residents. I therefore wrote to the EA to highlight these concerns, and I am pleased to see that the consultation sets out several alternative models aimed at the protection of this important waterway.

While I am supportive of the need to protect Ferris Meadow Lake, I hope that the option the RTS leadership selects will balance the need for environmental safeguards while not compromising the paramount aim of getting the RTS operational as soon as reasonably practicable.

Addlestone Canoe Club have also queried whether there is likely to be an uninterrupted right of navigation between the Thames and the RTS channels. I have raised this question with RTS leadership and, while I understand the intention is that small, lightweight craft will need to be moved between channels on foot, I welcome that the new channels will extend the scope of water-based leisure activities locally.

Riparian ownership model: Abbey River and Burway Ditch

Constituents have also written to me to raise concerns regarding the maintenance of smaller waterways, including the Abbey River and Burway Ditch tributaries, where blockages caused by debris and vegetation overgrowth impede river flow and exacerbate flood risk.

The state of the Abbey River, and apparent challenges associated with enforcing of the obligations of riparian landowners to keep these channels in an acceptable state of repair, is an issue that I raised with both the EA and Ministers. Ensuring effective management of all waterways, including timely enforcement when required, is a key factor in local flood mitigation.

The fact that the Runnymede channel of the RTS will cross over the Abbey River and Burway Ditch should help to deliver improvements to the state of these waterways. However, the consultation makes clear that landowners whose properties are adjacent to, or taken up by, the proposed flood channel will take on the responsibility of being 'riparian landowners'. This means that they must take steps to ensure that water can flow naturally (including proactively maintaining banks and beds of the watercourse), prevent pollution to the water, and protect wildlife in and utilising the flood channel.

It is envisaged that the EA will have a role in the enforcement of these obligations and may undertake repair works to major waterways in order to secure the ongoing effectiveness of the RTS as a flood defence scheme. However, based on experiences to date, further focus and resource may be required to ensure the flood alleviation channels, once built, are well maintained. Without clarity over legal responsibilities, roles, and enforcement processes, the effectiveness of RTS flood mitigation could be undermined.

Public concerns over impact of flood alleviation schemes

RTS leadership will be aware of broad public concern which came to the fore during Storm Henk regarding the impact of the Jubilee River on water levels downstream at times of heavy rainfall, and the assurances provided by the EA that this does not increase flood risk. It is imperative that the EA makes every effort to explain and engage with deep concerns of residents who face the real prospect of waters rising around their properties when floods occur.

I welcome the EA's work to date on creating a website which can be accessed by the public explaining the operation of the Jubilee River, as well as the EA's recent confirmation that it will take part in a public engagement event to address concerns and questions. It is essential that clear and accurate information is provided about the effects and benefits of flood alleviation schemes, such as the Jubilee River and the RTS, across the whole of the Thames in order to address public concern and ensure support for these essential community infrastructure projects.

Compulsory purchase considerations

Concerns have also been raised over the proposed use of compulsory purchase orders on land required to deliver the scheme. Naturally, this has the potential to cause anxiety and distress, particularly to those constituents who are long term residents of properties and/or have businesses attached to their residence.

It is essential that clarity over the process to be followed and timescales for decision-making should be provided to affected households and businesses at the earliest opportunity. They should also be provided with a dedicated point of contact within RTS leadership so that lines of communication can remain open during what will undoubtedly be a challenging period for some residents.

Anticipating the RTS: Interim flood resilience building

As highlighted, the RTS will be the largest infrastructure project ever undertaken by Defra. It is a huge and complex project requiring scrutiny of not only technical and engineering considerations of river management and defence development, but also impacts on transport networks, land ownership, and environmental considerations.

Delivering a project of this complexity naturally takes time. However – as discussed above - I understand the frustration of many residents that it has already been 10 years since the awful flooding of 2013/2014, and is anticipated to not be completed for at least 2031.

I am pleased that the project is underway, and this public consultation is giving residents the opportunity to express their views on all aspects of the RTS. However, given residents will still face significant flood risk for at least another 7 years, it is vital that agencies provide equal focus to flood relief and management of our waterways in the interim.

I have reiterated to statutory authorities that measures must be put in place or enhanced to mitigate the ongoing challenges presented by flooding, and the level of public concern associated with this.

Storm Henk highlighted the need for effective channels of communication to alert residents to flood risk, and where to go for advice and help with flooding and recovery. I have been calling for a local flood contact centre to be established, which could be a single point of contact for residents and help co-ordinate the response between authorities and organisations in the event of flooding. I have already raised this in Parliament, and will be raising resident concerns and reiterating this request as part of the review process into the Storm Henk flood response.

I have also written to the Secretary of State for Defra and spoken to the EA regarding the need for ongoing maintenance of waterways to maintain capacity and flow while the DCO process is underway. This may include the use of dredging as well as river clearance and enforcement where waterways are blocked.

In tandem with this work to alleviate flooding on the ground, I remain committed to supporting the RTS to progress as quickly as possible.