

Update On Land Drainage In The Alt-Crossens Catchment

Briefing Note - Lancashire County Council Scrutiny Committee

13 February 2015

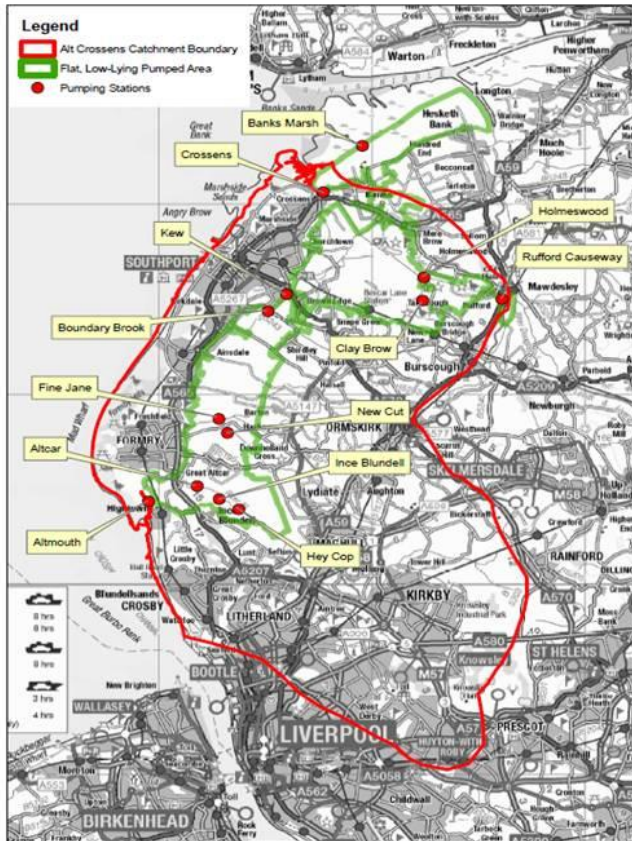


Figure 1 – Alt-Crossens Catchment

Background

The Alt-Crossens catchment (see Figure 1) covers some 39,600 hectares of land in North-West England, from the northern edge of Liverpool to Southport and bounded by higher ground to the east and the towns of Kirkby, Ormskirk, and Burscough. The catchment is approximately 60% Grade 1 and 2 farmland, with much of that farmland situated within a flat, low-lying area (below 5 metres above sea level) reliant on pumping for its drainage (area outlined in green – Figure 1).

We currently own and operate a network of eleven 'satellite' pumping stations in the catchment, which pump water to two larger pumping stations at Crossens (near Southport) and Altmouth (south of Formby) and subsequently out into the Irish Sea.

We also carry out watercourse maintenance using our permissive powers to selected stretches of main river in the catchment as revenue budgets, priorities and staff resources allow.

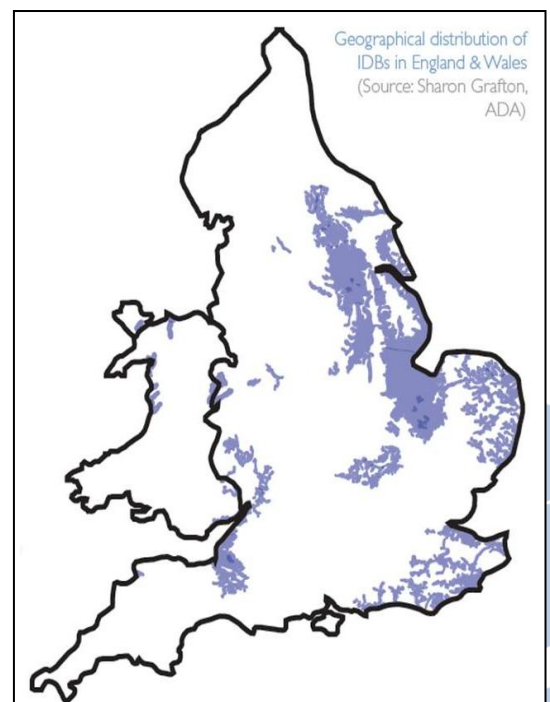
History

From the 1930s up until the early 1980s, land drainage in the north of the Alt-Crossens catchment was managed by the River Crossens Drainage Board. This board derived its income from 'drainage rates' paid by farmers and landowners, and 'special levy' grants paid by local authorities for other benefits to infrastructure. Privately-run drainage boards managed drainage in the south of the catchment covering the Altcar Estate and land owned by the Church Commissioners.

Those boards were all disbanded by the early 1980s along with all other drainage boards in the North West, with their role passed to the Rivers Division of the newly-formed North West Water Authority. This was unusual as drainage boards in other areas of the country remained in place, and still exist to this day (see Figure 2).

The National Rivers Authority upon formation in 1989 then assumed the role of land drainage in the North West, prior to our taking this role on in the region upon our formation in 1996.

Figure 2 – Internal Drainage Boards in England & Wales



Since the abolition of the North West drainage boards, farmers / landowners and local authorities are no longer required to contribute drainage rates or special levy for the benefits they receive from river maintenance and pumping in the area.

The North West is therefore unusual in comparison with other English regions in having no internal drainage boards (IDBs). We have filled their role up to now in carrying out land drainage activities within the region.

Issues

- Government Policy

Given DEFRA priorities on protecting human life and residential properties from flooding, and taking into account our reduced revenue budgets and staff resources, our previous levels of pumping and watercourse maintenance in the flat, low-lying area of the catchment have become unsustainable.

- Flood Risk Revenue Spend

Due to the large amount of pumping required to drain the area, the Alt-Crossens catchment requires significant expenditure in order to drain the flat, low-lying area. In 2010, it was estimated that our revenue spend in the catchment totalled around £3 million per annum, despite residential property flood risk from main rivers being comparatively low (around 300 properties in the flat, low-lying area) in relation to other parts of Lancashire.

How do we prioritise our flood risk revenue spend in Lancashire?

In order to determine the level of watercourse maintenance and pumping which we can justify within each part of Lancashire, the county is separated into individual areas called 'asset systems' (see Figure 3).

Undefended flood risk within each asset system is evaluated, before damages from that risk are calculated in line with Government valuations provided by the Treasury's Green Book and Multi-Coloured Manual. Those damages are compared with the cost of our current flood defence maintenance, watercourse maintenance and pumping within each system. We then generate a benefit-cost ratio of those activities.

During 2013/14, asset systems within the North West required a benefit-cost ratio of greater than 15 to receive part-funding, with systems with a ratio of 30 or more attracting full funding for all watercourse maintenance and pumping activities. For the flat, low-lying parts of the Alt-Crossens catchment, the relevant asset systems all have a benefit-cost ratio of less than 15, indicating that current expenditure in those areas is too high. Revenue savings must therefore be made so that funds for high-priority activities in those systems can be secured going forward.

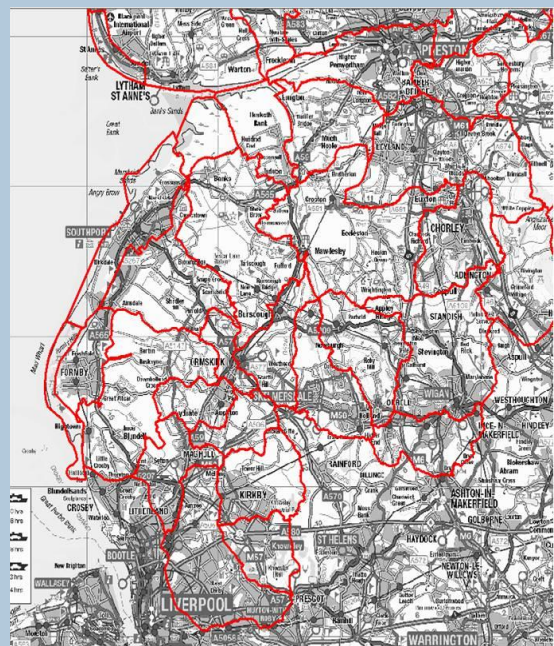


Figure 3 – EA Asset Systems In South-West Lancashire

- What This Means Locally

As a result, in 2013/14 it is estimated that we were only able to maintain around 40% of main rivers in the Alt-Crossens catchment. The watercourses maintained are prioritised based on those posing the greatest risk of flooding to properties, or to honour legal obligations that we may have inherited.

In addition, modelling work has suggested that the key purpose of the smaller 'satellite' pumps is to drain farmland. The majority of residential property flood risk in the catchment is effectively managed by Altmouth and Crossens pumping stations, the operation of which we are fully committed to going forward.

In response to the above issues, we are currently preparing to serve two years' notice under the Environment Agency / DEFRA Asset Maintenance Protocol on a number of pumping stations in the catchment. These notices will inform those who benefit from the pumps of our intention to no longer operate them at the end of the notice period. The pumps on which notice will be served are those which do not appear to benefit flood risk to residential properties, and which do not have legal obligations attached to their operation.

We are open-minded about the future of those pumps on which we will be serving notice, and have been working with partners, including local farmers, on future options. One possibility is that others could choose to operate the pumps under alternative arrangements. We would then transfer ownership of the pumps as needed and help with any transitional arrangements. If no one was willing to take over operating the pumps, we would begin steps to decommission them at the end of the two years' notice.

- Similar Areas Elsewhere In The North West

Given the lack of drainage boards in the North West since the early 1980s, the issues affecting the Alt-Crossens catchment are not unique in the region. Extensive discussions on successor arrangements for pumping and watercourse maintenance have also taken place in the Lyth Valley (South Lakeland) and Waver-Wampool (Allerdale) areas of Cumbria, where we have served notice on a number of land drainage pumping stations. In addition, local arrangements to carry on operating two of our pumping stations and maintain watercourses which drain land in the area of Ince and Frodsham Marshes in Cheshire have been discussed.

Advisory Group

In Summer 2012, on the advice of the Lancashire County Council Scrutiny Committee, an Alt-Crossens Advisory Group formed. The purpose of the Group was to oversee and guide our engagement with those affected by decisions in the catchment, rather than to act as a decision-making body for future arrangements.

The Group is chaired by County Councillor Janice Hanson, and comprises officers and representatives from the following organisations:

- Environment Agency
- United Utilities
- National Farmers Union (including two representative local farmers)
- Country Land & Business Association
- West Lancashire Borough Council (including two nominated Elected Members)
- Sefton Borough Council (including one nominated Elected Member)
- Lancashire County Council (including two nominated Elected Members)
- Knowsley Borough Council

The Group has met on eleven separate occasions since September 2012, and will continue to meet until all engagement activities are complete.

customer service line
03708 506 506

incident hotline
0800 80 70 60

floodline
0345 988 1188
0845 988 1188

www.gov.uk/environment-agency

Engagement Activities

Since 2012, the Advisory Group has overseen and approved the approach for engagement on issues affecting the catchment.

During Summer 2013, an intensive period of work amongst the partner organisations took place to develop a common understanding of the issues and solutions. Following this, a partner website (www.altcrossens.org) was developed, which went live in early January 2014.

During late January / early February 2014, a series of five public information events hosted by the partner organisations took place across the catchment, to raise awareness of the issues surrounding land drainage activities and highlighting all the potential future options that the partner organisations had discussed.

Press releases to publicise both these events and the partner website were sent to local newspapers, with the National Farmers Union and Country Land & Business Association sending invites to their members from the catchment. Invites were also sent by post to any properties within the flat, low-lying area. Further such events will be held to update the wider community later in 2015.

In July 2014, the partner organisations involved in the Alt-Crossens discussions attended a meeting in Westminster with the Defra Floods Minister, Dan Rogerson MP. The Minister endorsed our approach in directing our resources to those areas where the benefits in line with Government priorities were greatest, and encouraged us to continue working locally towards a solution.

We have held drop-in events with the National Farmers Union in 2013 and 2014 to highlight which watercourses would receive maintenance by us, so that farmers and landowners could choose to carry out maintenance themselves as riparian owners. To assist with this, a pilot approach has been trialled in the catchment to allow landowners to carry out some desilting activities without requiring our written consent.

Engagement with a range of other organisations within the catchment on possible future arrangements for pumping and watercourse maintenance, including Martin Mere (Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust), Natural England, Network Rail, and the Canal & Rivers Trust, has also taken place.

We have also sent out newsletters to the local community and other interested groups on an adhoc basis when we have had updates for them.

Partnership Working Group

In December 2012, the Advisory Group recommended the formation of an officer-led Partnership Working Group. The purpose of the working group was to identify options to manage water levels in the catchment going forward. We were a member of the Working Group and explained to the rest of the group that we would have to serve notice on some of the pumps to meet government guidelines on how we prioritise our flood risk management work. However, beyond that, we were completely open to suggestions from others on the future management of land drainage in the area, including options for the future management of the pumps.

The Working Group comprised a similar membership to the Advisory Group, but without elected member representation. The Partnership Working Group met on nine occasions between January 2013 and October 2014, and its work to identify preferred options is now complete.

Preferred Options

The preferred technical option of the majority of the working group was the formation of a new internal drainage board (IDB) covering the flat, low-lying area, to take over the operation of pumping stations and carry out watercourse maintenance across the area. The board would be a statutory public body, whose work would be funded by drainage rates paid by farmers and special levy paid by lower-tier local authorities.

However, the lower-tier local authorities covered by the proposed board felt it would be difficult to contribute the necessary 'special levy' funding to the board in the current financial climate, especially without the funding assistance that is provided by Government to drainage boards elsewhere in England.

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On this subject, West Lancashire Borough Council considered the matter and voted against providing special levy funding towards the proposed IDB during a meeting of the full council in December 2013.

A more fragmented, scaled-down IDB option has also been looked into to reflect our upcoming decisions on specific pumps. This may be more affordable for local authorities who would be required to contribute under the current IDB funding legislation. This option is not the preferred approach of the farming and landowner representatives, who believe the flat, low-lying area should be treated as one complete system.

In addition, the partners considered more local arrangements, with farmers and landowners co-ordinating maintenance and pumping within their local area. However, this approach would not offer a co-ordinated approach across the flat, low-lying area.

Moving Forward

The Advisory Group will continue to oversee and approve the approach for engagement activities, to ensure that those affected by changes in land drainage arrangements are kept aware of progress.

Following the serving of notice on those pumps in the catchment that we cannot justify operating in future, work will continue amongst the partner organisations, including ourselves, on potential ways of managing land drainage in the area. This will include looking at successor arrangements to take over the operation of the pumps.

While this is happening, we will work in parallel to identify our scope of work to either:

- Bring pumping stations up to a sufficient standard to be handed over to others.
- Identify the work required to decommission the pumps in the event of no one coming forward to take over operating them.

Lessons will also be learnt on setting up alternative arrangements from the areas in Cumbria (Lyth Valley, Waver-Wampool) where the same issues to Alt-Crossens exist, and where similar challenges regarding the formation and funding of new drainage boards are shared.

The partner organisations remain committed to reaching a successful resolution on this matter, and we would be happy to update the committee in future on progress.

Further Information

Please contact Matthew Connor (Alt-Crossens Project Manager) on 01772 714102, or by e-mail at matthew.connor@environment-agency.gov.uk.