



## DELIVERING SUSTAINABLE COASTAL RISK MANAGEMENT

### How the Environment Agency and Local Authorities are working together in South-East England



*Selsey, West Sussex*

#### **Introduction**

In the past there have been complex and relatively confusing responsibilities for managing flooding and erosion around the English coastline. Over 90 different authorities manage the English coast and this has presented difficulties in ensuring the delivery of a consistent and sustainable approach to coastal risk management. The Environment Agency's Regional Flood Defence Committees have, historically, only addressed flood defence issues, whilst local authority coast protection authorities hold powers for addressing coastal erosion risks. Different skills and management approaches exist based upon the history, complexity and nature of the coastal frontage concerned. It has been recognised that a more holistic and sustainable approach to addressing risks at the coast is required, which allows for robust and evidence-based long-term decision-making to take place. Furthermore, there is a need for the approach to coastal management to be risk-driven with clear roles and accountabilities for the organisations involved.

To try and simplify arrangements and achieve greater consistency and better targeting of investments, as well as reducing the risks to people, property and the environment, particularly in the context of climate change, the Environment Agency, Defra and the Local Government Association established a Project Board to work together on

developing a new structure for flood and coastal erosion risk management. Following extensive consultation, and taking into account a wide range of new legislation and initiatives (Integrated Coastal Zone Management, the Water Framework Directive and Shoreline Management Plans) Defra has established new working relationships. Under this arrangement the Environment Agency take on a 'Strategic Overview' for the coast, integrating flood and erosion risk management.

The Environment Agency recognises that the strategic overview can only be implemented successfully through close partnership working with local authority coast protection authorities through the coastal groups alongside other key interests in the coastal management field. This view was also strongly supported in the recently published Pitt Review 'Lessons learnt from the 2007 floods' (2009).

## **Working together in practice**

### ***National level***

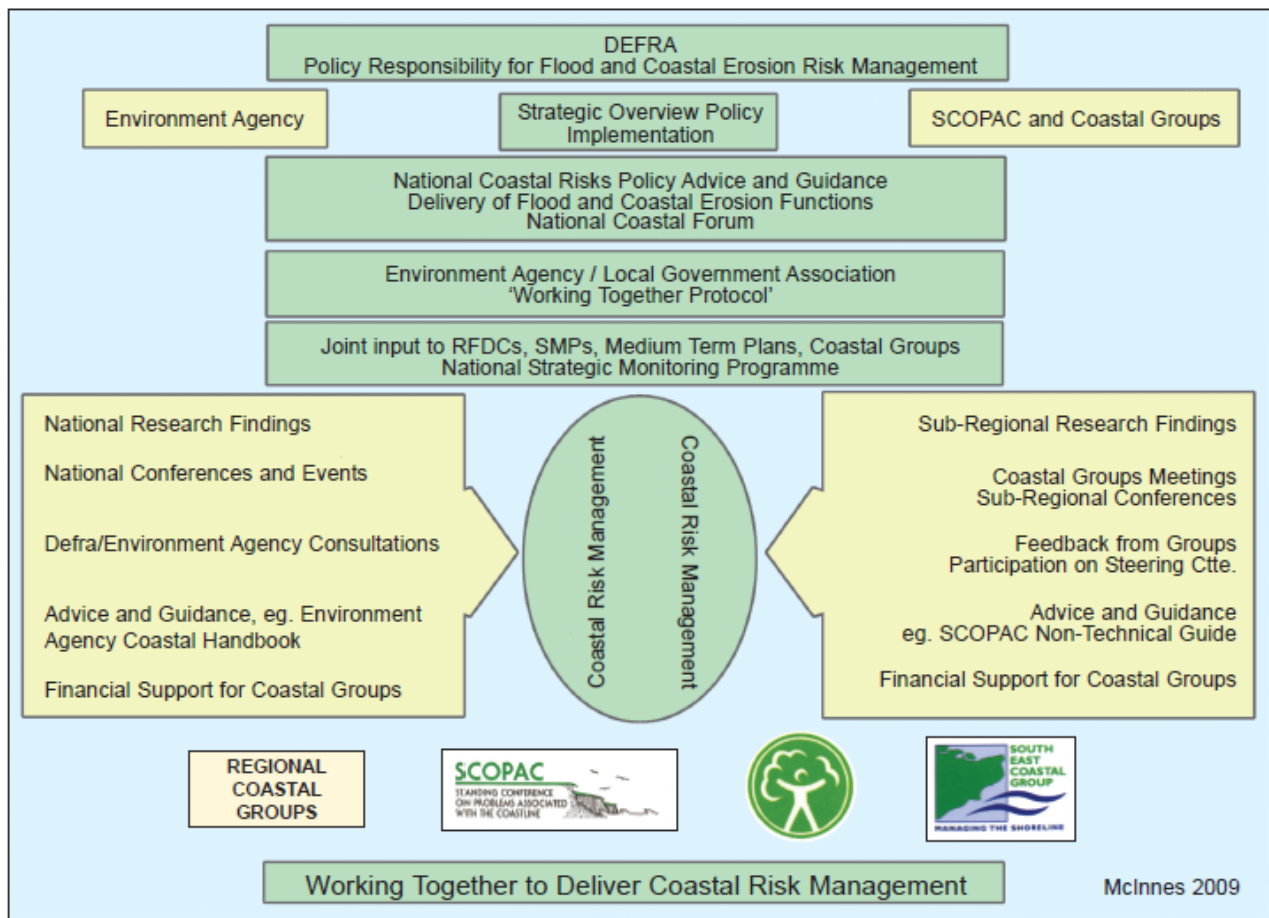
Whilst Defra retains overall policy responsibility for flood and coastal erosion risk management, the Environment Agency is responsible for implementing and delivering the strategic overview. The Agency and the Local Government Association agreed a 'Working together protocol' as long ago as 2003 but the strategic overview has provided a fresh momentum for joint-working on the coast. The coastal groups, at a national level, have been restructured to provide a more streamlined, nationally consistent group of coastal specialists who can work with the Environment Agency developing and implementing the necessary coastal risk management measures on behalf of, and in full consultation with, their constituent members.

An initiative of the Environment Agency was the establishment of the National Coastal Forum in July 2008, a high level, twice-yearly forum where the Agency and coastal group chairmen and other key interests can meet to discuss coastal policy, funding and programming issues. Since 2008 the Agency has provided advice and guidance to assist local authorities in the transition to new scheme planning, approvals and funding arrangements, as well as providing wide national support through conferences, seminars and workshops. Alongside this work there has been active dissemination of findings from its national research programme through the Agency's range of national publications.

### ***Regional and sub-regional level***

Through its Regional Flood Defence Committees (RFDCs) the Environment Agency has historically implemented flood defence policy under the Water Resources Act 1991. More recently, as part of the restructuring of coastal risk management nationally, the RFDCs now also assist delivery of the Environment Agency's strategic overview, which includes a remit for coastal erosion alongside flood risk management. In order that the existing RFDC regional structure can promote implementation of the strategic overview representatives of the coastal groups have been invited to attend RFDC meetings pending new legislation which will extend the terms of reference of the RFDCs to include also coast protection issues.

The RFDCs provide a forum at which coast protection authorities, through their Coastal Group Chairmen, can provide input on coastal erosion risk management at the regional scale. This spirit of co-operation is reciprocated through the invitation of the RFDC Chairmen to attend meetings also of the Regional Coastal Groups. Such a working arrangement ensures that both groups are up to date in terms of policy, legislative and work programming issues, as well as ongoing studies and investigations.



*In 2008 the Environment Agency assumed a ‘Strategic Overview’ for both flood and coastal erosion risk management. This new role can only be fulfilled successfully through effective joint-working with Local Authorities. This figure illustrates how the coastal groups in south-east England, in partnership with the Standing Conference on Problems Associated with the Coastline’ (SCOPAC), are working with the Environment Agency at the various administrative levels and across a range of activities.*

Officers from the Environment Agency continue to attend meetings of the coastal groups where key policy information, funding issues and research findings are disseminated and feedback is obtained from individual coast protection authorities. Progress with shoreline management plans, strategy studies, Medium Term Plans and other studies and investigations, including work on the national strategic monitoring is discussed regularly. In addition some coastal groups have been undertaking research as well as promoting guidance and good practice such as the Southern Coastal Group, which has been working closely with the Standing Conference on Problems Associated with the Coastline (SCOPAC) along the coast of central southern England. With financial support from the Agency alongside core funding from SCOPAC an updated version of the ‘Non-technical guide to coastal risk management’ was launched in April 2009; this publication complements the Agency’s ‘Coastal Handbook’ (2008), which will be updated shortly.

A major new initiative that has involved close collaboration at the sub-regional level has been the development of ‘Coastal erosion risk maps’. To assist dissemination of these

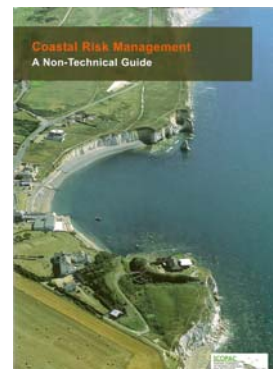
maps, which will be launched alongside the second round of shoreline management plans, the Environment Agency has appointed 'Coastal Engagement Officers' who will work alongside the Coast Protection authorities in ensuring the successful dissemination and understanding of the new maps.



*Freshwater to Yarmouth, Isle of Wight*

*The sustainable management of coastal zones involves close working between the Environment Agency with its responsibilities for coastal risk management, natural conservation and other functions and local authorities who are responsible for planning and coast protection as well as often being coastal landowners or managers.*

*The Standing Conference on Problems Associated with the Coastline (SCOPAC) published its 'Coastal risk management – A non-technical guide' in April 2009 to assist those involved in coastal management decision-making but who are not necessarily technical specialists. The eighty-five page, well-illustrated guide was written and published by SCOPAC through its research programme, which has funded over £1 million of sub-regional research since its formation in 1986. Copies of the new guide can be obtained from [natasha.dix@iow.gov.uk](mailto:natasha.dix@iow.gov.uk) (tel: 01983 855400).*



**For further information about how local authorities are working with the Environment Agency on coastal risk management please visit:-**

**[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)**

**[www.scopac.org.uk](http://www.scopac.org.uk)**

**[www.southerncoastalgroup.org.uk](http://www.southerncoastalgroup.org.uk)**

**Published by 'The Standing conference on problems associated with the coastline' in partnership with the Environment Agency.**