Consultation and participation in decision making

An important element of improving accountability and the transparency of decision making is the involvement of stakeholders. As demonstrated by the wide range of organisations represented on the Dredging Liaison Group, there is widespread interest in maintenance dredging activities on the Thames Estuary.

The PLA, in partnership with the TEP through the DLG, continues to work hard to improve partners’ understanding of its operations, including maintenance dredging. Many of the concerns and misconceptions resulting from the lack of effective means of communication have been addressed. An important part of the Maintenance Dredging Framework, however, is the ongoing involvement of key stakeholders in the decision-making process if sensitive environmental resources could potentially be affected by dredging activities. In addition to providing and disseminating information on maintenance dredging, the development of the decision making framework and other technical material, the PLA is committed to consulting stakeholder organisations where their interests could potentially be affected by a proposed maintenance dredging initiative. For example, it will be appropriate to consult English Nature, the Environment Agency and/or Kent & Essex Sea Fisheries Committee for those applications where conservation sites, water quality and/or fisheries may be adversely affected.

The challenge for the PLA and the TEP is to get the balance right. Too little consultation and stakeholders may be concerned that they are not being involved as much as they might think appropriate. Too much consultation on the other hand - consultation for its own sake - can waste everybody’s time. In this respect, the IES (to which all parties have contributed relevant data) plays an important role.
Role of the IES in determining when consultation is required

The data contained in the IES, when used to inform the completion of an environmental checklist and when supplemented by any necessary additional information, should enable all maintenance dredging initiatives to be reviewed very quickly and categorised as follows:

- no apparent constraints; need to review system prior to each dredging campaign to ensure no additional data has been added, but dredging can go ahead;
- some constraints; seasonal restrictions, for example, may place limits on when dredging can be carried out; the decision maker can then either suggest re-programming the dredging or, if this is not possible, consult relevant interested parties;
- possible constraints or no data: new data may need to be collected or an investigation undertaken; depending on the outcome, subsequent dredging initiatives should fall into another category;
- potentially significant constraints: consultation will be required to resolve the issues.

Given that future maintenance dredging is most likely to take place in areas which are already regularly dredged, consultation may in future only be necessary for a small proportion of initiatives. Further, in many cases where consultation is initially required (and/or data collection is needed) in order to resolve a particular issue, it is possible that subsequent maintenance dredging will be able to proceed without further consultation.

Keeping the system up to date, so that it remains accurate and effective, will limit the cases requiring further work and associated specific consultation to those identified as being particularly sensitive or vulnerable.