

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Notes of the virtual briefing meeting with South West Water for members of Scrutiny Committee, Councillors and members of the public held Online via Zoom on 2 November 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.09 am

39 Declarations of interest

It was noted that all Members had an equal interest as customers of South West Water.

40 Chair's opening comments, welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed Mr Alan Burrows, South West Water Director of Environmental Liaison and Culture, to the meeting. The Chair expressed the hope that the meeting continues the constructive dialogue between the Council and South West Water (SWW) which began when Mr Burrows attended a meeting in March of this year.

It was noted that Councillors had not submitted questions for Mr Burrows prior to the meeting. Members of the public had submitted questions and there would be an opportunity for these to be put later in the meeting.

41 Presentation by South West Water on beach and river water quality followed by questions from Members of the Scrutiny Committee, Members and the public

Mr Burrows' presentation included the following points:

- SWW serves 2 million customers and up to 9 million people during the tourist season, with 19,000km of pipework, £300m a year investment in the region, 2,500 employees and a net zero commitment by 2030.
- The WaterFit programme comprises the following main areas; nurturing healthy rivers and seas, putting nature on everyone's doorstep, creating and restoring habitats, inspiring local champions, creating a sustainable future and putting people in control.
- With regard to monitoring, data and transparency, Mr Burrows advised that there is a programme in place to provide real time information, in accordance with the Environment Act, although it was noted that elements of the Environment Act have yet to be enacted. A Defra consultation would be launched in January to provide understanding of how the Environment Act would be enacted and to ensure consistency of delivery across all of the water companies. However, SWW was progressing the installation of monitors on storm overflows and making sure that data was being used in decision making.
- With regard to storm overflows, it was noted that, on occasion, members of the public wrongly connect into surface water drains eg. when building an extension.
- There are currently two types of pollution alert system in place; firstly, BeachLive which is SWW's own warning system which operates all year round with alerts issued in real time and secondly, the Environment Agency Pollution Risk Forecasts which operate from May to September and alerts once a day between 08.30 and 09.00am. A Pollution Risk Forecast may be caused by factors other than sewage and storm overflow, including urban or agricultural run off.
- There is a campaign in place to educate the public with regard to removing wet wipes from the system at source as it was noted that, on its own, SWW cannot make all the changes everyone wants to see.

Responses to questions from Members of the Scrutiny Committee included the following:

- SWW would follow up on the number of local residents who are not on mains drainage and therefore not contributing to the problem with wet wipes and provide figures following the meeting. With regard to reducing the impact of wet wipes on the environment, Water UK is working with the Government on this issue and SWW has its own initiative of educating the public regarding the impact of flushing non-degradable wet wipes down toilets.
- SWW is committed to installing EDMs (event duration monitors) on all of its storm overflows by 2023 as required. SWW is also committed to providing real time information under the provisions of the Environment Act, although the exact detail of what will be required is not yet known.
- SWW's WaterFit initiative was launched in the autumn of 2021 and is on track with its aim of reducing the impact of storm overflows by 2025. Progress is checked on a weekly basis to ensure work is on target.
- The targets set by the Environment Agency are harder to meet year on year due to higher standards being introduced. The SWW Pollution Incident Reduction Plan sets out how work is being undertaken to meet the EA targets.
- With regard to uploading data on the SWW website, information is uploaded annually in accordance with Environment Agency requirements. As SWW is currently under review by OfWat and the EA, the decision has been made not to publish any more detailed information in order not to prejudice the outcome of any inquiry which OfWat and the EA may wish to undertake.

Responses to questions from Councillors who are not members of the Scrutiny Committee included the following points:

- Clean surface water should not be entering the combined sewer systems, but should be going back into the environment. The Council's building regulations team could assist with getting this message out to the public.
- Larger developments are considered by SWW to ensure that surface water systems are separated from dirty water systems and this is covered by planning conditions.
- BeachLive provides information for bathers 365 days a year and a policy conversation is required around the EA pollution risk forecasts which are only provided between May and September under the original bathing water directive.
- Development schemes were undertaken using the best information available at the time.

Four members of the public had submitted questions for South West Water. The questions were read out in full and were answered as follows:

Question 1 asked whether SWW would commit to identifying the actual outfall location of the sewer overflow pipe / Littleham Brook using a dye test or similar with Exmouth Town Councillors as witnesses and prior to the start of the 2023 tourism and bathing season.

In response, Mr Burrows advised that his colleague, Mr Ian Vosper, had recently attended a meeting of Exmouth Town Council and had committed to undertake this testing in order to understand the integrity of the sewer network. However, it was noted that Environment Agency approval would be required for the testing as there would be subsequent monitoring requirements as a result of the test. Mr Burrows referred Members to the minutes of Exmouth Town Council which would confirm what had been agreed although a date had yet to be decided.

Question 2 asked when SWW would commit to upgrading the alerting of the general public to releases of storm water surges from the Maer Lane treatment works in order to provide real time 24/7 information on the combined sewer overflow on the Maer Nature Reserve and whether SWW would commit to install water quality monitoring buoys similar to those installed by Southern Water.

Mr Burrows advised that the pollution risk forecasting referred to in the question is the responsibility of the Environment Agency who could be contacted via their local team. It was noted that real time information will be covered by the Environment Act, sections of which have yet to be enacted, but would provide consistency of reporting around the country. Mr Burrows also referred to the response given to Exmouth Town Council at its recent meeting with Mr Vosper as this provided a full response to the question.

Regarding the installation of water quality monitoring buoys, Mr Burrows advised that he would look into this and would provide a further response following the meeting.

Question 3 asked what actions SWW would be taking to reduce the confusion caused by contradictory messaging around water quality to ensure that information is readily accessible and understood by the public so that they are able to make an informed choice about using the water safely.

In response, Mr Burrows agreed that messaging could be confusing and that SWW needs to work with the Environmental Regulator to understand the exact purpose of the pollution risk forecast. Mr Burrows referred to the upcoming BeachWise forum at which it was hoped that beach managers around the south west would be able to discuss this issue.

Question 4 asked whether SWW would commit to 100% reporting of all sewage overflows and their duration year round or whether they would prefer the public swim in pollution while SWW knows that discharges are happening but are not informing the public.

In reply, Mr Burrows confirmed that SWW had committed to fitting Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) on 100% of all of its overflows and a programme of work was in place to ensure that this happens.

With regard to real time reporting, Mr Burrows referred back to previous comments about the Defra consultation to ensure consistency of reporting under the Environment Act.

In response to a question regarding the need for additional sewage treatment plants in East Devon, Mr Burrows advised that a senior manager had recently been appointed to consider the sludge strategy for the whole of the south west which would address the point raised in the question. It was also noted that the treatment of sludge at Maer Lane would reduce over time due to improvements at the Countess Wear facility.

The Chair thanked Mr Burrows for attending and answering questions from Councillors and members of the public.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

J Bailey
M Chapman
O Davey
J Kemp (Vice-Chair)
E Rylance
B Taylor

J Whibley

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
F Caygill
B De Saram
P Faithfull
N Hookway
G Jung
P Millar
A Moulding
M Rixson

Officers in attendance:

Peter Blyth, Beach Safety Officer
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

M Allen
C Gardner
S Hawkins
D Key
H Parr
T Woodward