

Water and Flooding – Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Board Spotlight Review

Report to Torbay Council and South West Water

Background

1. Since 2023 the Overview and Scrutiny Board have carried out an annual Spotlight Review on Water and Flooding. The Board met on 29 October 2025 to discuss concerns in respect of water and flooding. The Board examined the written responses to the initial key lines of enquiry and supporting documents (full details of which can be found at <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=218&MId=26764&Ver=> and received the following:
 - Key lines of enquiry and responses from the Environment Agency;
 - Key lines of enquiry and responses from South West Water;
 - English Riviera Business Improvement District (ERBID) Company response to question;
 - Updated presentation from the Environment Agency; and
 - Presentation from South West Water (SWW).
2. The Board heard evidence from the following:
 - Clarissa Newell, Regulatory Manager (Water) - Environment Agency;
 - Dave Shorten, South West Catchment Co-ordinator - Environment Agency;
 - Alan Burrows, Head of Local Government Affairs – SWW;
 - Ian Lake, Head of Developer Services – SWW;
 - Jonathan Coldwell, Operations Manager Waste Water Services – SWW; and
 - Carolyn Custerson, Chief Executive Officer - English Riviera Business Improvement District (ERBID) Company Ltd.

3. Key Findings

Environment Agency:

- 3.1 The Environment Agency is responsible for regulating major industry and waste; treatment of contaminated land; water quality and resources; fisheries; inland river, estuary and harbour navigations; conservation and ecology; and managing the risk of flooding from main rivers, reservoirs, estuaries and the sea.

3.2 The following issues were highlighted:

☐ **Water Resilience & Climate Change:**

- Drought was a growing concern.
- Extreme weather events were increasing and impacting on the network.
- Agricultural expansion affects water quality.

☐ **Pollution Trends:**

- Many pollutants have decreased, but new types were emerging.
- The EA aims for transparency in regulation and enforcement.
- The concern regarding the quality of water at Ilsham stream would not be investigated by the EA as it was not a designated bathing area and there had only been limited water quality sampling carried out by the community. The EA need to focus their resources where they could make the most difference to protect the environment or people.

☐ **Regulatory Framework:**

- EA is funded through permit fees.
- Ofwat oversees water companies to ensure customer value.
- Legislative changes were expected to strengthen Regulation and make it easier for the EA to issue fines rather than having to take companies to court.

☐ **Storm Overflows:**

- Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) show when overflows occur.
- Overflows discharge very diluted waste during storms – this was around 90% water and 5% sewerage. It was acknowledged that the messaging around the content of storm overflows needed improvement. Ofwat have a good video on this which can be found at <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/about-us/ofwat-and-the-environment/pollution-and-water-quality/storm-overflows-explainer/>. The Water Companies have permits to allow such discharges to occur. The EA was more focussed on discharges that were not in accordance with permits or other serious spillages.
- EA expects no spills 24 hours after rainfall.

☐ **Enforcement Strategy:**

- 24 cases were currently in court.
- EA prioritises based on environmental and public impact.
- Enforcement tools include warning letters and undertakings.
- Fines could be redirected into community investment.

☐ **Surface Water & Sewerage:**

- SWW must submit a plan next year to reduce surface water entering sewers.
- Climate change was causing faster rainfall events which was impacting on the network and causing increased flooding.
- Plans to store storm sewerage longer were underway.
- Misconnections were a big problem e.g. new extensions connected to surface water drains instead of waste drains, culverted streams, as well as the impact of blockages caused by wet wipes, fats, oils and grease.

□ **Community Engagement:**

- EA encourages citizen science – more information can be found on their website at <https://engageenvironmentagency.uk.engagementhq.com/citizen-science-participate> - Councillors were encouraged to signpost members of the public to this page.
- Campaigns like “Yellow Fish” raise awareness of pollution – more information can be found at <http://oilcare.org.uk/avoid-pollution/yellow-fish/>.

South West Water:

3.3 The following issues were highlighted:

□ **Water Resource Management:**

- Planning for population growth and climate pressures were crucial to water resource management. Including developers providing Sustainable Urban Drainage Solutions (SUDS).
- Most water for Torbay comes from the Roadford Reservoir.
- A new reservoir was planned in Cheddar to help provide capacity across the South West of England (due mid to late 2030s).
- There was an ability to move water across the South West region to help meet demand.

□ **Waste Water Resource Management Plan:**

- It was now mandatory to have Waste Water Resource Management Plans in place setting out what the capacity of the network was, where does water need to be and what does SWW need to do to the network and water treatment systems to protect their operation and reduce pollution. Torbay Council will contribute towards this considering the Local Plan and future house building.
- SWW was focussing on network capacity and pollution reduction.
- There were no major rivers monitored in Torbay, the main area was the coastal water and protecting the number of designated bathing areas which need to be the best to attract tourists.

□ **Storm Overflows:**

- Target: max 10 spills/year per overflow.
- Bathing waters: max 2 spills per season.
- SWW aims to meet government targets by 2040; earlier for bathing/shellfish waters (2030).

□ **Water Quality & Tourism:**

- Coastal waters were key due to tourism.
- Improvements had been made due to investment to Brokenbury Treatment Works, electronic monitoring, faster responses to blockages, storage tanks on Paignton Seafront and also through the work of the Environment Agency.
- Goodrington was the only beach rated “Good” (all others were “Excellent”).

- Issues include urban pollution, misconnections, and dog waste can also impact on water quality.
- **Environmental Goals:**
 - Net Zero strategy via Pennon Power.
 - Solar farms planned (e.g. Brokenbury).
 - Biodiversity improvements and removal of invasive species.
- **Customer Charges & Investment:**
 - £3.4 billion investment planned.
 - One-third funded by customers, two-thirds by loans/investors.
 - Pennon was one of three publicly listed companies, ensuring greater financial transparency than some other water companies.
- **Tariff Trials:**
 - Aimed at reducing water usage.
 - 75% of customers were still on the trial.
 - Early data shows slight behavioural changes.
- **Community Projects:**
 - Better Futures Fund supports local environmental initiatives – more information can be found at <https://www.southwestwater.co.uk/our-south-west/community/better-futures-fund> - Councillors were encouraged to share this link with their communities.
 - SWW collaborates with ERBID and local Councils.

3.4 Agreed actions for South West Water:

- to provide a written response if the 25% of people who opted out of the tariff trial were from Torbay or a wider area;
- to share more information with the Board on the tariff trial when it is available;
- to provide a link to the updated Waste Water Resource Management Plan;
- to work with Councillor Spacagna on the issues raised in connection with works at Cockington;
- to provide a written response regarding the temporary sewerage pipe at Ilsham Marine Drive; and
- to provide links to water data and catchment data explorer.

ERBID:

3.5 The following issues were highlighted:

- **Impact of cryptosporidium Outbreak (May 2024):**
 - Global media coverage affected Brixham and wider South Devon.
 - £40 million in forward bookings cancelled.
 - Misconception that beach water was contaminated.
- **Marketing Recovery Efforts:**
 - £1 million support agreement with SWW.

- Two national TV adverts aired on ITVX and Sky.
- Targeted Midlands and South Wales audiences.
- Campaign ran for 7 months starting February 2025 and will be run again next year.

□ **Positive Outcomes:**

- Greenway businesses saw a 9% uplift in turnover.
- 10 million advert views.
- New Brixham video and photography produced.

□ **Legacy Fund:**

- £250,000 Brixham Legacy Fund for local projects.
- Ideas include electronic visitor boards and creative promotions.

3.6 Agreed actions for Torbay Council:

- Teresa Buckley to find out who the single point of contact was from the Council for bathing waters, previously this was someone from the Harbour and inform Councillors;
- Teresa Buckley to provide details of the background to the issues regarding traffic management at Cockington to Alan Denby so that he could liaise with SWISCo on what improvements could be made working with statutory partners regarding road works and communications;
- Teresa Buckley to share the SWW Council Enquiries email address with all Councillors; and
- Councillor Cowell to provide SWW with details of the SUDS projects in Sherwell Valley Primary School and St Cuthbert Mayne Schools.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 The Board reflected and debated the information provided to them, both verbal and written. The Board welcomed the progress that had been made to improve the quality of water across Torbay and recognised the need for continued investment and partnership working across all agencies to address the challenges faced by climate change; and the need to build more houses and the crucial role we all have to play in raising awareness and influencing the public and developers to reduce water and ensure that water was connected correctly and to report leakages and concerns to SWW.
- 4.2 Members thanked the representatives from the Environment Agency, SWW and ERBID for all of their hard work and for contributing towards the Spotlight Review.
- 4.3 The Board formed the following recommendations and upon being put to the vote, the motion was declared carried unanimously.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations for South West Water:

- 5.1 to respond to the Regulation 18 consultation on the revised Torbay Local Plan and raise any concerns over the proposed housing expansion and how these fits with SWW's plans for investment and expansion;
- 5.2 to convene strategic conversations on a sufficiently frequent basis between Torbay Council and major service providers to share opportunities and risks;
- 5.3 to work closely with key partners, including the Environment Agency and the Council on the impacts of climate change specifically to understand our specific roles in managing surface water flooding and links to storm overflows;
- 5.4 to review the process for reporting of incidents e.g. leakages, pollution etc. to ensure that SWW go back customers who report leaks etc. to advise of the outcome of any investigation or work; and
- 5.5 to supply leaflets/information on the campaigns for Councillors to share with their residents;

Recommendations for Torbay Council:

- 5.6 that the Director of Pride in Place be requested to ensure the Local Plan includes reference to how the Council is responding to the updated Government housing targets to enable investment decisions to be made in a timely manner and ensure planning focus on Sustainable Urban Drainage Solutions (SUDS) to ensure that additional pressure is not placed on the existing sewerage and drainage network;
- 5.7 that the Director of Regeneration and Place Delivery be requested to establish a working group with SWW and Torbay Council, with ERBID being invited where appropriate, to explore options around connections and to help reduce the operation of storm overflows and reduce the potential for pollution in Torbay, particularly at the Rivier Fleet (Fleet Walk), Barton Tip and Goodrington Lake and to provide an update on the conversations to the Overview and Scrutiny Board;
- 5.8 Councillors be requested to ensure that they use the dedicated SWW Council Enquires email address for locally elected Councillors to report any concerns and raise awareness of any events that may have impacted so that SWW can log, track and respond in a timely manner;
- 5.9 that Councillors and the Director of Corporate Services be requested to promote positive customer behaviour through Council channels to help protect the environment as per below:
 - prompt reporting of incidents e.g. leakages, pollution to ensure an effective response can be made;
 - promote the 'Love you Loo' campaign i.e. only flush pee, poo and paper down the loo. By doing this it stops wet wipes entering the

network which can cause blockages to occur and stop our pumps for working effectively. In some instances, this can lead to pollutions occurring and storm overflows operating. A link to the 'Love Your Loo' campaign can be found at [Bin it don't block it | South West Water](#);

- promote the 'Think Sink' campaign. Avoid pouring Fats Oils and Greases (or FOG) down the kitchen sink as these can cause "fatbergs" which again cause blockages and can lead to pollutions and storm overflow operation. A link to the 'Think Sink' campaign can be found here [Bin it don't block it | South West Water](#) and for the Director of Pride in Place to work with SWISCo to promote positive action to encourage recycling of waste oil;
- to encourage residents when considering building extensions which include plumbing of new toilets, sinks, washing machine to ensure they are connected to the correct pipe work. SWW continue to find mis-connections across the network that have occurred because of wrongly connected pipe work. These can lead to pollutions occurring. The Director of Regeneration and Place Delivery to be requested to consider the role for Building Regulations to ensure this is assessed and understood; and
- promote water efficient measures e.g. water efficient shower heads, not running the tap when brushing your teeth, installing a water butt. These will help both save water and reduce bills for those on meters as less water is used. There is lots of information at [Save water | South West Water](#).