

Council – 28 February 2024

Councillor Questions:

9. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor J Martin, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Otterpool Park and Planning Policy

It has been brought to my attention the Dymchurch Dippers Sea Swimming Group have had to advise their members it was not advisable to go into the sea due to continued discharge of sewage water across the Bay. Could you please advise on the actions the council is taking on:

1. Putting pressure on Southern Water to upgrade the sewage plants on the Marsh and to stop them polluting our beaches.
2. Querying why is Hythe being upgraded and not the Romney Marsh.
3. Notifying people and others to ensure the residents of and visitors to the Romney Marsh are updated about the beaches and sea water standards.

and finally, would you please call a public meeting and invite the Environment Agency, Southern Water, Local Parish Councils and concerned local stakeholders to come along in order to work together to try to resolve these and similar matters?

13. From Councillor Cooper to Councillor Scoffham , Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Biodiversity

The public can get information about discharges in the bay from things such as, for example, beachbouy and SSRS, but this only gives discharge information for the outlets at designated bathing areas, however, there are other outlets which are not considered at designated bathing areas such as for example, at Willop/Redoubt - which is used by a number of sea swimmers. As you will be aware It's understood discharges from any outlet affects the whole bay which is evidenced by Dymchurch not releasing all last season. But having high bacteria readings during test dates when other outlets were discharging. Can we please find out why is there no apparent transparency about these outlets and please can the council pressure Southern water and the EA make this data available on beachbouy etc? In so doing, I along with a number of others, would like to have a look/tour at the New Romney plant and the Willop depot, to get a better understanding of how it all works - or should work! Can you please use your best endeavours to make this happen and also include other interested parties.

Following the council meeting Southern Water and the Environment Agency were contacted in relation to Q9 (points 1&2) and Q13 for comment.

Tom Gallagher, Open Water Improvement Lead responded on behalf of Southern Water.

Peter Ehmann has responded on behalf of the Environment Agency.

Q9

1. Putting pressure on Southern Water to upgrade the sewage plants on the Marsh and to stop them polluting our beaches.

EA - This question is for SWS to answer.

SWS - We are working hard to reduce storm overflow activity throughout the region. This includes the West Hythe and Range Road Catchment areas. The company is investing £3 billion between 2020 and 2025 to improve our environmental and operational performance, focusing on significantly reducing the number of pollutions caused by technical failures on our assets and blockages in the network. We've already deployed over 26,000 sewer sensors to detect and reduce sewer blockages before they become an issue. This is helping us to make steps in the right direction, demonstrated by our move from a one to two-star Environmental Performance Assessment rating by the Environment Agency for 2022. We know we need to go further than this though, which is why we're expecting to achieve three stars by 2025 and are working extremely hard to make this happen.

The company have spent £10 billion since privatisation to increase the volume of wastewater that is fully treated before being release back into the environment (previously only approximately 50% treated to around 95% today). This has helped improve the quality of our bathing waters from only 28% meeting public health standards pre-privatisation, to 88% now rated as 'good' or 'excellent' by the Environment Agency.

While we work on improving our assets, reducing storm overflows requires an entirely different approach. During heavy or prolonged rain, local sewer networks can struggle to cope with the amount of water entering pipes and storage tanks. When they fill up, pressure relief valves built into the network – known as storm overflows – activate to release the excess water into rivers and seas to prevent homes, roads, and businesses from flooding.

In our Bathing Season Report 2023, we included a chart showing the impact of rainfall and groundwater on storm overflow releases during the summer months. We saw unprecedented rainfall in 2023. In March we had more than two and a half times the normal amount of rainfall. In October, we had more than three times the normal amount of rainfall - by the end of October we'd had more rain than we normally get in a year. We ended the year at around 40% more rainfall than normal. Groundwater also plays a part. We had 150% more rainfall than normal between November 2022 and January 2023, starting the year with

exceptionally high groundwater levels (the highest ever recorded at one of the sites in our region). This has added further complications to an already complex issue.

This is an industry leading approach to find long-term solutions and is backed with £35m investment (agreed with Ofwat and money put in by our shareholders). As well as improving our assets and storage capacity, the team are piloting several schemes including: optimising existing assets (both publicly and privately owned), finding and fixing misconnections in the community where rainwater is entering the wastewater network, installing nature-based solutions such as wetlands, raingardens, trees and greening our high streets to separate surface water/divert water back to the environment, and trialling rain harvesting devices to slow the flow of water in towns and cities.

Some key highlights so far:

- 93 schools provided with sustainable drainage systems to manage impermeable area like playgrounds and large roofs. Removing well over 20 football pitches worth of hard surface run off each time it rains
- Over 3000+ slow-drain water butts installed to manage surface water. In one village on the Isle of Wight, the installation of water butts reduced released from the local pumping station by 70%
- Reconfigured the storage capacity at Swalecliffe Wastewater Treatment Works, in agreement with the Environment Agency. The changes have reduced storm releases on site by c. 30%.
- Over 250 raingarden planters installed in the community to manage surface water.
- 200 pipe joints and 1.2km of private pipework sealed to prevent groundwater infiltration. In the Pan Parishes Pathfinder, this has reduced tankers sent to site from an average of 30 per year before over pumping was required, to only 5 currently despite record groundwater levels.
- 1 wetland constructed at Lavant to naturally treat stormwater.
- Deployed two water quality buoys to test the water every 15 minutes. This is a pilot project with one buoy off Hayling Island. We hope to share the results later this year. We also have five citizen science projects across the south which are ongoing, one on the Isle of Wight.
- 142 private misconnections to the surface water sewer identified.
- Over 40 site tours to provide an understanding of the wastewater treatment process and answer customer questions.
- 34 highway SuDS schemes being investigated to manage surface water from roads.

We have almost 1,000 storm overflows in our region and 50% of these are already hitting the government's new 2050 target, for example spilling 10 times or less a year. Our plan sets out how we will tackle the remaining storm overflows that need attention in our region.

We are prioritising overflows in line with Government and regulatory targets to first reduce the impact on shellfish waters, environmentally sensitive sites and bathing waters. While we are also trying to include high frequently release sites.

2. Querying why is Hythe being upgraded and not the Romney Marsh.

EA - This question is for SWS to answer.

SWS – *Did not respond directly on this point.*

Q13 Can we please find out why is there no apparent transparency about these outlets and please can the council pressure Southern water and the EA make this data available on beachbuoy etc?

EA - Beachbouy shows data of all storm overflows, which could impact on designated bathing waters. The Beachbuoy service is operated by SWS and we are not responsible for its content. We understand that the purpose of beachbuoy is to notify people when storm discharges (of untreated sewage and storm water caused by heavy rainfall) are made.

For clarity, the EA do not receive any additional data or information on the operation of Storm overflows, to what is shown on Beachbuoy. Southern Water are only obliged to notify us if a discharge is or has been made, which is not compliant with its permit. If such an event occurs, we would be in contact with Folkstone and Hythe District Council to discuss whether additional actions need to be taken such as issuing advice against bathing.

There are other discharges made into the sea apart from Storm Overflows also known as Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs).

Rainwater drains (surface water sewers) will discharge rain run-off from roads and houses into watercourses including the sea during wet weather. This water may be contaminated with substances that gets picked up off roads etc. Regular maintenance of road gully pots is therefore vital to reduce the risk of contaminants going into the sea. Houses that have misconconnections (sinks/toilets plumbed in to the rainwater drain rather than the foul sewer by dodgy builders) can also find its way in to the sea via surface water sewers. Beachbouy does not notify people of discharges from surface water sewers. These outfalls are likely to discharge whenever there is rainfall and are often not owned by Southern Water.

Sewage treatment works treat foul sewage and discharge treated effluent into the environment. This is a continuous discharge and the treatment is designed to a level, which protects against impact on bathing waters. At New Romney and Dymchurch Sewage treatment works, (Waste water treatment works) the effluent has additional UV treatment to kill bacteria. Dymchurch works differs slightly from New Romney works in that it is designed to treat all flows that arrive and so doesn't have a CSO or storm overflow. Therefore, the discharge from Dymchurch

works should always be treated. This is why there is no storm overflow shown on Beachbouy website.

The continuous discharge from both New Romney and Dymchurch works is monitored and tested (by Southern Water). The results are reported to us and are available on the GOV.uk website. [Open WIMS data](#)

Individual bathing water results can also be seen on our SWIMFO website. [Bathing water quality \(data.gov.uk\)](#)

SWS – Beachbouy does indeed feature storm overflows and outfalls that affect designed bathing waters. However, we asked a group of independent experts to conduct an assessment of Beachbouy’s ability to provide consistent, reliable and credible near real-time warnings of potential water quality impacts from storm overflow releases, and to provide a series of recommendations to improve the accuracy and user trustworthiness and confidence of the system.

We’re committed to acting on the recommendations and will incorporate them as both short and long-term goals for Beachbouy – details on timeframes are outlined in report.

We’re committed to acting on many of the recommendations as part of our new and improved Beachbouy platform, which we’re looking forward to launching in spring 2024, complete with all inland outfalls and improved usability in features. You can see the report below

[sw-bb-review-final-report_v7.pdf \(southernwater.co.uk\)](#)

Q13 In so doing, I along with a number of others, would like to have a look/tour at the New Romney plant and the Willop depot, to get a better understanding of how it all works - or should work! Can you please use your best endeavours to make this happen and also include other interested parties?

EA - For SWS to answer about site visits. For clarification, the EA Willop depot is an operational depot for Flood risk management staff to work out of and is situated next to the Willop surface water pumping station. The purpose of this pumping station is to manage flood risk and maintain levels in the ditch system of the local area. The treated effluent from Dymchurch works discharges in to the basin next to the Willop depot where it mixes with other surface water flows and is discharged through the sea wall in to the sea. It is not connected in any way to the Dymchurch sewage treatment works and operates entirely separately. As previously mentioned, there are no storm sewage overflows in this catchment and therefore only treated effluent is being discharged at this location.

If Members really want to visit the Willop Depot I will contact my colleagues in Flood risk management. However, there is nothing in the depot itself, which is anything to do with sewage or sewage treatment and the pumping station is not really visible. The basin can be viewed from the roadside.

SWS – *Did not respond directly on this point.*