Natural Infrastructure and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 2 April 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Darcy, in the Chair.
Councillors Allen, Bannerman, McCarty, McLay, Moore, Ney, Raynsford, Ricketts, M.Smith and Sproston.

Apologies for absence: Councillor Holloway.

Also in attendance: Alan Burrows (Head of Local Government Liaison, Pennon Group), Hannah Chandler-Whiting (Democratic Advisor), Ian Lake (Head of Developer Services, South West Water), Philip Robinson (Service Director for Street Services) and Mark Worsfold (Director of Asset Management, South West Water).

The meeting started at 3 pm and finished at 4.57 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

38. **Declarations of Interest**

Name	Minute Number	Reason	Interest
Councillor Raynsford	41	Had a share in Pennon South West Water (something customers were offered).	Disclosable Pecuniary
Councillor Bannerman	41	Partner had a share in Pennon South West Water (something customers were offered).	Personal
Councillor McCarty	41	Worked with OceanOS on water quality projects.	Personal

39. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

40. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

(At the conclusion of this item the meeting was adjourned for five minutes)

41. **Drainage and Wastewater management in Plymouth now and in the future**

Alan Burrows (Head of Local Government Liaison, Pennon Group) outlined the business plan for the future of Pennon Group, parent company of South West Water (SWW):

a) The business plan 'Asset Management Plan 8' commenced on 01 April 2025 and ran up to 2030;

b) There were four pillars to the business plan:

   i. Storm Overflows and Pollutions;

   ii. Water Quality and Resilience;

   iii. Biodiversity Net Gain and Carbon Net Zero;

   iv. Affordability.

The following was discussed during the item:

c) Three years ago the Secretary of State for Environment had made a request that all water companies submit plans to reduce the operation of storm overflows by 2050, and SWW's plan had a 2040 target date, and had been accepted by Government;

   i. Investment areas had been identified, and shellfish water and bathing water storm overflows would be prioritised, most being addressed over the first five years;

   ii. There were 1379 storm overflows in the South West, 450-500 already met the new Government standards and 291 would be improved within the next five years;

   iii. SWW was the only company to be proposing to meet new standards by 2040;

   iv. SWW would be investing £764m to in storm overflows 2025-2030;

   v. Storm overflow information was required by Government and was published online - WaterFit Live showed the status of storm overflows live online;

vi. 11 overflows in Plymouth were to be improved within the first five years, all of which were related to bathing waters and shellfish waters;

d) SWW recognised the economic value of clean bathing waters for the South West region;

e) Bathing water quality in Plymouth was very high;

f) SWW were working with Plymouth City Council (PCC) on a Plan for Water to limit surface flooding and impact on storm overflows, and how to use green solutions to help reduce the water going into storm overflows and water quality overall;

g) There was no breakdown for expenditure in Plymouth, and the increases in bills were spread across the customer area;

h) There was an investment programme of £3.2 billion across the Pennon Water area;

i) Bill increases were being invested in improvements to benefit the environment such as storm overflows and waste water management;

j) Investment plans were heavily scrutinised by regulators;

k) The West Hoe storm overflow has been identified for improvement;

l) Combined sewers (that carried both sewage and rain water) had been in place since Victorian times with the aim of taking sewage to the sea, but at the time of privatisation in 1991, 40% of sewage discharges were treated and this had increased to 97% in 2025;

i. 3% was going into overflows and was not being treated and investments would mean less than 1% would be untreated in the future;

m) There had been substantial political change since the beginning of the most recent pay review;

n) There was engagement with a number of officers at PCC working on improvements that could be delivered in the Plymouth area and do as much as possible through green and blue solutions, for example aiming to stop rain water from entering the sewage system all together or SUDS to allow rainwater to percolate back into the ground;

o) It was the responsibility of the beach owners or managers to provide signage on storm overflow discharges, it is usually a manual process;

p) Local and national data on use of storm overflows was publically available;

q) A consultation had included comments about increasing the number of sampling points for bathing waters;

r) Storm overflow contents included sewage, microplastics, pathogens, chemicals and anything that ran off roads into the combined sewers;

s) South West Water were going to work with Exeter University on research into the contents of storm overflows and microplastics throughout the water system;

t) 410 water quality monitors needed to be deployed into rivers within the next five years, and data would be made available to the public online within an hour;

    i. This data would help to understand the full impact of the use of storm overflows, as well as other sources of pollution;

u) Storm overflows had been prioritised for improvements;

v) Engagement and suggestions of opportunities from the public were vital for implementation of green and blue solutions;

w) SWW wanted to have more engagements with Councils on future growth;

x) The number of odour contacts were tracked and various chemicals could reduce smells;

y) Housing has built up around sewage waste plants;

z) The typical life of a sewage treatment works was 50-70 years but each plant contained several different assets all at different points in their lifetimes;

    i. Every five years an assessment was carried out on performance and capacity and then considered alongside data on planned growth in the area, to estimate lifetime of assets;

    ii. Current sewage treatment plants had capacity for growth up to 2035;

aa) Sewage in Saltash was transported to Ernesettle sewage treatment works, so a possible future plan was for Saltash to have its own treatment plant to create capacity;

bb) Plymouth Central sewage treatment plant was being considered for improvements to increase capacity;

cc) Appraisals of sewage treatment works would be in the public domain when ready containing information on capacity and growth;

dd) It was important to engage with local Councils across the South West to understand where new homes would be built as forecasts needed to be in

seven years in advance in order to obtain data in time to flag for price review process to be able to expand the system;

i. All developers were charged an infrastructure charge which was used to invest in the network to allow for growth as and where required to make network improvements;

ee) The network of infrastructure was completely mapped out apart from some local sewers that were transferred in 2011, but there were indications of locations and records were being obtained where possible;

ff) The Environment Agency make data available from tests in rivers and this data influenced where water companies would invest and water companies performance was measured against this data;

gg) SWW worked with the agricultural sector and partners to address pollution issues along the river Plym;

hh) UK drinking water standards were some of the best in the world;

ii) SWW were aware of the Joint Local Plan (JLP) but needed to clearer on additional growth challenges to be delivered by the Government and would like to work collaboratively with Councils;

i. 30,000 planning applications annually across Devon, Cornwall and Bournemouth that would have an impact on the network;

ii. SWW held key relationships with major house builders to give insight on timings for projects to allow for improvements for the system;

iii. Important new developments considered the surface network hierarchy;

iv. There was an incentive scheme with developers to produce water efficient properties;

jj) 10,000 new homes were planned for Plymouth City Centre, and SWW recognised improvements were needed at Plymouth Central as a result;

i. Detail on the number of residents expected in each home help with forecasts;

ii. Engagement with relevant PCC officers was needed to understand these plans in more detail;

kk) One concern for SWW was that the effects of climate change would occur faster than planned;;

ll) Education was needed on what could and couldn't enter the system;

i. Customer behaviour changes were a challenge;

ii. Each blockage costs a substantial amount to remove, so it was important to improve education;

mm) One contribution to increased surface water run off was people tarmacking over front gardens for parking spaces to they could charge their electric cars, so there was a need to encourage people to use permeable materials;

nn) Illegal or missed connections cost water companies significant amounts to correct;

oo) Pennon had a renewables policy and were building solar farms to power the business.

The Panel unanimously agreed to:

1. Recommend that the relevant Cabinet Member enquired about a digital display system for water quality in the three swimming zones in Plymouth following up on a similar recommendation made during Water Quality Select Committee;

2. Recommended that the relevant Cabinet Member worked with officers at PCC and SWW to ensure that there was clear and consistent dialogue about the growth plans for the city and the possible impacts on SWW infrastructure;

3. Recommended to South West Water that the results of air quality impact assessments and strategies to reduce odours for all sewage treatment works (if appropriate) were shared with the local authority (including Panel members).

42. **Tracking Decisions**

The Panel noted its tracking decisions document.

43. **Work Programme**

The Panel noted its work programme.