

Select Committee Review – Water Quality

Thursday 22 February 2024

PRESENT:

Councillor Bingley, in the Chair.

Councillor Tuffin, Vice Chair.

Councillors McLay, Penrose, Raynsford, Reilly and Tofan.

Also in attendance: Councillor Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change), Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning), Hannah Whiting (Democratic Advisor), Alan Burrows (South West Water), Lawrence Couldrick (Tamar Catchment Partnership), Elaine Hayes (National Marine Park CEO), Mark Hinchliffe (Sea Swimmer), Paul Montgomery (Sea Swimmer), Bruce Newport (Environment Agency), Frank Newell (Environment Agency), Jenny Parkins (Ocean Conservation Trust) (via Teams), Professor Richard Thompson (University of Plymouth) and Mark Wolsford (South West Water).

The meeting started at 11.00 am and finished at 3.40 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.

1. **Declarations of Interest**

Name	Minute Number	Reason	Interest
Councillor Raynsford	3	Had a share in Pennon South West Water (something customers were offered).	Disclosable Pecuniary

2. **Chair's Urgent Business**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

3. **Water Quality Review**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Select Committee and gave an overview of proceedings.

Issues and Challenges

Councillor Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change) welcomed everyone to the Committee, introduced the item and highlighted:

- a) Thanks to everyone involved in the ongoing major incident in

Keyham due to an unexploded WW2 bomb that had been discovered;

- b) The Corporate Plan included a vision for the waterfront;
- c) The waterfront was one of the cities greatest assets that supported economic prosperity, health and wellbeing;
- d) Plymouth's waterfront had been designated the first National Marine Park in the UK;
- e) Supporting people to engage with the water, and public needed to be assured of a clean environment;
- f) Wildlife within Plymouth Sound needed clean water to thrive;
- g) Use of storm overflows were of concern;
- h) Partners had worked hard together to create a third bathing area in Plymouth at Firestone Bay;
- i) No singular, easy or cheap fix, whilst facing the climate change impact of increased rainfall;
- j) A collaborative, creative and innovative solution was needed.

Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning) introduced Plymouth City Council's role in relation to Water Quality and highlighted:

- k) Plymouth City Council had a role in provision of signage on water quality and short term pollution advice;
- l) Strong partnership working with organisations on nature delivery, shell fisheries, highways and flood risk;
- m) Challenges included the sewage network, urban and agricultural run-off, microplastics, changing weather patterns, changing culture in relation to 'bathing season', behaviours, complexity of solutions;
- n) Every household could be part of the solution.

Bruce Newport (Environment Agency) introduced the Environment Agency's role in relation to Water Quality and highlighted:

- o) All 3 of Plymouth's bathing waters were classified as excellent, the highest rating, without any discounting;
- p) The Environment Agency advised the Council when water quality was going to be impacted and signs could be put up;

- q) Samples had continued through the winter at Firestone Bay to see if winter sampling was feasible and to determine the winter water quality, which was excellent;
- r) Discharges, treated by Plymouth City Council, into the River Plym from Chelson Meadow landfill continued after its closure and would for some time, but did not impact bathing waters;
- s) Devonport Dockyard discharges had been eliminated;
- t) Ammonia levels were increased due to agricultural activity;
- u) Industrial areas were monitored;
- v) More employees across the country to increasing monitoring of water companies;
- w) Not all storm overflows had the same impact on Plymouth Waterfront.

Frank Newell (Environment Agency) added:

- x) Infilled creeks meant that a lot of the water drainage within the city was underground and was difficult and expensive to map;
- y) Integrated urban drainage modelling allowed them to understand what improvements could be made;
- z) Expected 30% increase in peak rainfall events over next 60 years, 50% over 100 years;
- aa) Sea levels were expected to rise 1.5m over 100 years;
- bb) Significant investment was being made into water storage in parkland at Trefusis Park;
- cc) Work in the city centre was aimed at separating surface water into a new system, but this was an expensive solution.

Alan Burrows (South West Water) and Mark Wolsford (South West Water) introduced South West Water's role and highlighted:

- dd) Strong partnerships in Plymouth;
- ee) Strategy called Waterfit up to 2025 and then to 2030, aimed at nurturing healthy rivers and seas and aiming to reduce the impact on rivers by 1/3 by 2025 and to reduce operation of

storm overflows;

- ff) Changes in people using the water had led to a demand from the public expecting good water quality all year round;
- gg) Significant progress had been made in reducing pollution incidents since 2020, with none serious incidents in 2021, and one in 2022 and none in 2023 and only 13 minor incidents since 2020;
- hh) South West Water (SWW) had installed event duration monitors on all storm overflows ahead of the government target, and the information was available to regulators, and members of the public;
- ii) A storm overflow action plan had been submitted to the Secretary of State, and SWW were waiting to be able to publish this;
- jj) SWW expected to complete their plan by 2040, the only company in England and Wales to set this target (Government's target was 2050);
- kk) 126 overflows in the Plymouth region, 54 were meeting standards at the time of the meeting, and did not require investment;
- ll) A lot of what happened in the network could be as a result of customer behaviour and putting items into the system that should not be there such as wet wipes and sanitary products;
- mm) Working with ECAS (Environment Compliance Experts) looking at sewer misuse from food establishments to stop grease, oils and fats entering into the system;
- nn) Green and blue systems were looked at as a priority as they were more sustainable;
- oo) Focus on storm overflows and pollution, with significant investment from 2025-2030 as the majority of the coast was bathing water and/or shellfish water;
- pp) Plan to invest just over £3 billion from 2025-2040 in storm overflows, with £750 million funded from customer bills;
- qq) There were four categories of pollution impact levels, set out by the Environment Agency (EA).

Laurence Couldrick (Tamar Catchment Partnership) added the

following:

- rr) A graphic was shown demonstrating the impact of farming on water quality from overgrazing, growing crops close to the river, high risk crops, inadequate infrastructure, non-separation of pollutants, meaning they wash into the river system: [VRT Good Farm Bad Farm Logo small-scaled.jpg \(2560×1805\)](#);
- ss) Agriculture was one of the biggest pollutants of the rivers local to Plymouth, impacting Water quality and resilience;
- tt) Tamar Catchment Partnership (TCP) aimed to build and promote nature based solutions, through incentives with farmers as well as regulation and enforcement;
- uu) Soil health needed to be achieved;
- vv) TCP aimed to build resilience in communities and the catchments.

In response to questions, the following was discussed:

- ww) Data was taken from the Met Office which predicted the future impacts of climate change on the weather, which was used by SWW to assess the future impacts on the sewage/water systems and the investment plan would be updated every 5 years using this data;
- xx) 11 named storms came over England in 2023, when the average had been 3 or 4 previously;
- yy) Balance of affordability and size against climate change forecasting;
- zz) Customer bills and dividends in relation to the SWW investment plan;
- aaa) 1.2 million water customers and 900,000 waste customers of SWW;
- bbb) At the end of May 2024 a full report would be produced on Firestone Bay by the Environment Agency;
- ccc) Real time data was available on storm overflows;
- ddd) Water Quality was commensurate with animal welfare;
- eee) Water for animals in farming;

- fff) Water net gain was a project helping farmers to create lakes and ponds to store storm run off for their animals;
- ggg) 0 days were discounted in Plymouth in 2023 for water quality, but some days information on pollutants allowed people to decide if they wanted to enter the water;
- hhh) Approximately only 6 or 7 poor warnings for water quality were given in West Hoe each year;
- iii) There were four categories of pollution that the Environmental Agency regulated water companies on;
- jjj) Issues relating to Ernesettle Creek;
- kkk) Major developments in the Joint Local Plan had a requirement to deliver sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS);
- lll) The city centre developments included sustainable urban drainage systems to separate run off from sewage;
- mmm) Misconnections from homes;
- nnn) Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act (2010) had not yet been enacted, but the Government planned on enacting it within 12 months, which would make guidance on SUDS in new developments more clear;
- ooo) Promotional material to make residents and companies more aware of what couldn't/shouldn't be put into the drainage system;
- ppp) Educating communities of impacts of actions such as concreting over driveways.

Impact and Opportunities

Professor Richard Thompson (University of Plymouth) introduced the subject of microplastics and highlighted:

- a) Microplastics varied in size, shape, polymer and chemical composition and origin, but had to be 5mm or less to qualify;
- b) The first paper on microplastics had been published in Plymouth in 2004;
- c) Action to reduce larger items of plastics in the present, would reduce “the microplastics of tomorrow”;
- d) It was believed that nano-particles of microplastics were in

the environment in large quantities but they were so small, their presence had not yet been confirmed;

- e) Long term chronic effects of microplastics on organisms;
- f) There was a limit to the amount of plastics that could be banned as plastic was beneficial to society;
- g) Microfibers from domestic laundry were released in relatively high quantities, and some 'solutions' that were marketed, were not effective;
- h) Tyre wear created particles that were entering the environment in relatively high quantities and had been tracked locally;
- i) Testing had proved that some agri-plastic that claimed to be biodegradable, had not decomposed at all over 12 months in a different environments;
- j) Tests on a device collecting rubbish in the Barbican, had collected more seaweed and small fish (some of which were dead after not being able to escape) than plastic, and could be doing environmental damage;
- k) New products needed to have a focus on design for life and end of life.

Jenny Parkins (Ocean Conservation Trust) explained how water quality had impacted some of the work the Ocean Conservation Trust (OCT) was doing at the National Marine Aquarium, Plymouth, and highlighted:

- l) The OCT was working hard to get as many people involved with Plymouth Sound as they could;
- m) In 2023, at least 7 snorkelling sessions (approximately 100 people in total) run by OCT had to be cancelled due to sewage discharge from storm overflows;
- n) Getting involved with the water was important for heritage, culture and mental health;
- o) OCT encouraged young people to write to the Council and SWW when they had been unable to enter the water.

Elaine Haynes (CEO, National Marine Park) gave an overview, following on from her statement included in the agenda pack, and highlighted:

- p) People were responsible for the water quality they received and were both the problem, and the solution;
- q) Need for update of the bathing water regulations;
- r) The National Marine Park (NMP) would campaign and work towards the goal of good water quality 365 days a year;
- s) Education of local communities on water quality;
- t) Changing behaviours of local people and help people to take personal action;
- u) Sea grass meadows in Plymouth Sound were being killed by some of the pollutants coming down the rivers;
- v) Nature was resilient;
- w) Need to hold polluters to account;
- x) Need to use the NMP status as leverage for improvement.

Mark Hinchliffe (Sea Swimmer) and Paul Montgomery (Sea Swimmer) spoke about their experience of water quality in relation to sea swimming and highlighted:

- y) Sea swimming was of huge benefit to mental health;
- z) It could impact sea swimmers negatively if they could not sea swim that day due to poor water quality;
- aa) Bathing areas would benefit from more signage on safety of the water, and of the location/provision of safety equipment;
- bb) Confusion and frustrations on accuracy of water quality levels.

In response to questions, the following was discussed:

- cc) There were a number of other sea swimming groups in Plymouth;
- dd) Misinterpretation of water quality data;
- ee) Request for previous years data on snorkelling sessions cancelled due to poor water quality from OCT;
- ff) Possibility of Water Quality Ambassadors;
- gg) Reliance on the Surfers Against Sewage app and the lack of clarity of data on whether it was a large storm overflow or

small;

hh) Need to reconnect people to the ocean and how their actions could improve water quality;

ii) Cost of water sampling;

jj) Need to look at how information on water quality was communicated and understood;

kk) Importance of the role of all stakeholders in improving water quality;

ll) Education of young people on water quality;

mm) Checking of safety features at sea swimming locations;

nn) Need for bins near to sea swimming areas;

oo) Education on disposal of waste.

4. **New Partnership Approach**

Councillor Briars-Delve (Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change), supported by Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning), introduced the new partnership approach, and highlighted:

- a) Importance of a high quality marine environment for all;
- b) Recognition of the issues increased rainfall presents to water quality;
- c) The memorandum of understanding (MOU) was a mechanism to push the boundaries of what could be achieved;
- d) The MOU provided the opportunity for:
 - i. Partnership collaboration;
 - ii. Community involvement;
 - iii. Innovative nature based solutions;
 - iv. Alignment of investment;
 - v. Multi-benefits (reduced flooding, improved water quality, improved nature, access, wellbeing etc);
- e) Importance of understanding past approaches and moving towards green solutions;

- f) Importance of enabling greater levels of community engagement, understanding and community co-design of solutions to water management;
- g) Delivery of investments and programmes in a more integrated way to maximise benefits, including wider social, environmental and economic benefits);
- h) MOU outlined an ambitious and action orientated plan for Plymouth.

In response to questions, and supported by Bruce Newport (Environment Agency) and Alan Burrows (South West Water), the following was explained further:

- i) Need to deal with the root cause, rather than just dealing with the issues caused;
- j) Importance of green first approaches and education needed;
- k) Central Park drainage improvements;
- l) Storm damage;
- m) Importance of new technologies in the future.

5. **Recommendations**

The Committee unanimously:

1. Accepted the conclusion in the report that the issues and challenges with water quality were complex, would increase with predicted climate change and needed an enhanced and urgent approach to delivery;
2. Supported the collaboration set out in the MoU, for a long term delivery focused relationship of Plymouth City Council with the Environment Agency and South West Water;

Recommended to South West Water

3. That they ensure existing investment identified for drainage infrastructure of the city is delivered in line with the ambition of the MoU where there were no legal constraints;

Recommended to the Environment Agency:

4. That they make sampling data from Firestone Bay taken over the winter available to the public at the earliest opportunity;
5. That they carry out winter pilots in the 3 bathing areas to improve water quality data, and make this available to the public;

Requested:

6. That trading standards to provide Committee Members with information on environmental enforcement in Plymouth.

In addition, the Committee recommend to Cabinet that:

7. Signage was increased and improved at the sea fronts when storm drains discharge;

8. SWW and EA work with PCC officers to increase education across the city on what communities can do to improve water quality;

9. The National Marine Park school engagement programme included education on improving water quality;

10. A water ambassador programme was developed with the National Marine Park;

11. The MoU was more specific on how other stakeholders would be engaged with when improving water quality;

12. They lobby government for Plymouth be a pilot for an area of water quality improvement;

13. They improve and increase facilities/infrastructure for sea swimmers, such as life rings, defibrillators, hot showers and bins, in consultation with local sea swimming groups;

14. Green jobs and growth opportunities in Plymouth for future generations are promoted;

15. The Cabinet writes to the relevant minister to ask when schedule 3 to The Flood and Water Management Act 2010 is going to be enacted;

16. The Cabinet writes to the relevant minister to ask them to update bathing legislation.

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