



**Title of meeting:** Cabinet Decision Meeting

**Date of meeting:** 25<sup>th</sup> July 2023

**Subject:** Bathing Water Quality

**Report by:** Stephen Baily, Director of Culture, Leisure & Regulatory Services

**Wards affected:** All

**Key decision:** No

**Full Council decision:** No

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## **1. Purpose of report**

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to explore the best ways to provide the public with water quality information prior to entering/using our designated bathing waters.
- 1.2. There is a need to consider two elements:
  - i. How best to inform the public of bathing water quality.
  - ii. How to deal with declining bathing water quality at one of our most popular beaches.

## **2. Recommendations**

### **2.1. RECOMMENDED that the Cabinet approves:**

- i. The proposal to locate a digital terminal/s on the seafront which would constantly display Southern Water's Beachbuoy webpage to provide details in respect to storm release activity near our designated bathing waters. Southern Water are currently trialling water quality monitoring buoys. The aspiration is, on completion of successful trials, to include this information on the terminals, but there is no fixed date for this as yet.
- ii. The proposal to continue to work with partners to monitor and protect the quality of our seawater.

### **3. Background information**

- 3.1 Portsmouth is known as the Great Waterfront City; it is beloved for its beautiful and important coastal waters and blue spaces. The city's residents, as well as the vast number of visitors that come to enjoy our waters, use the sea for swimming and numerous other water activities.
- 3.2. Portsmouth has two formally designated bathing beaches located at Eastney and Southsea East. Both of these are formally assessed in terms of their water quality by the appointed regulator, the Environment Agency (EA), during the formal bathing season - May to October each year. Whilst the bathing season is formally assessed and identified by the EA, we are aware, of course, that our waters are used by many all year round and that water quality is important to all users every single day.
- 3.3 The designated monitoring points of these two beaches is defined by the EA. It is at these precise locations which water quality is described. Further details of such can be found in the supportive background documents at the end of this report.
- 3.4 The EA takes samples of faecal indicator organisms at these beaches during this period, which are then graded in terms of their formal classification - prohibition/poor, sufficient, good, and excellent.
- 3.5 Over the last four years, the water quality at Southsea East has gradually declined. At the end of the 2022 bathing water season this beach was given a 'sufficient' classification. The bathing water quality at Eastney has consistently been classified as 'excellent'. The council displays appropriate compliant signage at these locations to ensure the public are aware of these classifications.
- 3.6. Regulatory Services has been assisting the EA by undertaking a supplementary weekly water sampling plan, which began in February 2023. This 38-week plan was developed to test the water prior to and within the current bathing season, at various locations including the Southsea East location so to better inform the council and its partners as to the circumstances of this decline and the quality of our blue spaces more generally.
- 3.7. The result of our sampling indicates that water quality at Southsea East is a concern and supports the narrative provided by the EA and their similar descriptions in respect to a deterioration of water quality in this area over the last couple of years.
- 3.8. Should this decline continue, there is the possibility of Southsea East being classified as 'poor' by the EA after the 2023 bathing water testing period. A 'poor' classification would mean having to advise the public against bathing at this location. This is likely to have an impact on whether the public choose to visit this location to enter the water, which in turn could impact local businesses and our wider reputation as a tourist destination.



- 3.9. There is a need therefore to explore how best to inform the public about this emerging picture, so that they may make the best decisions for themselves and their water activities and, of course, how best to redress the decline in water quality.
- 3.10. To assist with this process the council has undertaken a survey which asked the public relevant questions in respect to when and how they use our waters, what they think of the council's current methods of providing information in respect to water quality, and how these could be improved. The survey and results are attached as **Appendix 1**.

#### **4. Water Sampling results at Southsea East**

- 4.1. The results of both the council's and the EA's water sampling over the last four years and, to date at the time of writing (3<sup>rd</sup> July), within 2023 can be found in **Appendix 2**. The council's testing demonstrates an ongoing concern with respect to water quality at the Southsea East location. The EA's sampling within this bathing season, however, currently presents a more positive representation on bathing water quality at this location.

#### **5. Partnership working to explore and reverse the reason for the decline at Southsea East**

- 5.1 There is wide concern for the quality of water surrounding our coastline and therefore Regulatory Services has been engaging with stakeholders, including Havant Borough Council, Langstone Harbour Board, the EA, Southern Water, the Coastal Defence Team, and the owners of businesses nearby. Their commitment has been important to better understand all the factors that could be contributing towards the decline in water quality, particularly that of Southsea East.
- 5.2 It is possible that a multitude of factors are impacting upon the quality of water at Southsea East and therefore a number of activities may be required to resolve this problem. The impact of sewer releases upon Southsea East, whilst a concern, are less obvious as overflows are not present in this immediate area.
- 5.3 By working with partners to ensure the integrity of grey water sewage connections, including those from businesses into the main sewage system, monitoring possible leachates from the Great Morass underneath the beach at Southsea East, and to reassess potential impacts of the coastal defence works, we hope to better understand the problems, mitigate against such impacts, and reverse the trend.
- 5.4 It is too early to predict the long term impacts of our investigations and mitigation; however, the exploratory work of grey water sewage systems and the most recent formal testing results are currently encouraging with respect to the quality of water at Southsea East.

#### **6. Combined sewer release impacts and improvements**

- 6.1. The EA works with water companies to ensure that they are monitoring and reporting back on their discharge activity.



- 6.2. The Government's Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan has set new targets for water companies. The Plan states that by 2035 water companies will need to improve all overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and will need to improve 75% of overflows discharging into high priority sites. The Plan follows that by 2050 no storm overflows will be permitted to operate outside of unusually heavy rainfall or cause any adverse ecological harm.
- 6.3. The need to provide information for our water users, that will allow them to make more informed decisions on their water activity, therefore is likely to remain for some significant period.
- 6.4. Sewage discharges present two main types of harm:
  - i. **Harm to Public Health:** Discharges from storm overflows contain raw sewage, which can contain high levels of harmful pathogens, such as viruses and bacteria. This can pose health risks to people who use our water bodies for recreation.
  - ii. **Harm to the Environment:** Storm overflows can also lead to ecological harm due to their impact on water chemistry. Discharges of raw sewage can contain organic pollutants, microplastics, pharmaceuticals, nutrients, heavy metals, and visible litter that is flushed down toilets. The impacts of these releases on ecology varies depending on the pollutants it carries, their concentration and the nature of the receiving water body.

## 7. Public information terminal details

- 7.1. Local campaign group Stop the Sewage Southsea previously approached the council and aired their concerns about releases into our waters and asked what the council can do to better inform the public of such.
- 7.2. The recommendation proposes a digital terminal/s, along the seafront, that will provide access to Southern Water's Beachbuoy. By making this information readily available to the public, specifically those without smart devices to hand, would allow the public to check on whether there had been any releases and/or when the last release occurred.
- 7.3. Regulatory Services and the Seafront Management Team are currently providing the public with mapping posters that are updated when a release/s have occurred. Our recent survey illustrated that these posters were well received and used by water users. Details of posters are also contained within **Appendix 1**.
- 7.4. Beachbuoy is a useful tool in providing information to the public in respect to combined sewer releases and their impact. Southern Water are currently reviewing Beachbuoy and working on a number of updates to improve it. We have been part of their working groups and will be able, in due course, to share the conclusions of this review.
- 7.5. Our engagement with Southern Water has been positive in respect to the installation of information digital terminal/s and we hope that agreement will shortly



be reached as to how new devices can be deployed to ensure that public information, and demand for such, can be met. In the meantime, the council will continue to utilise its existing public information posters.

- 7.6. The survey, attached as Appendix 1, shows that Southern Water has more work to do in building trust amongst some members of the public. To show openness and transparency, Southern Water created a Beachbuoy Working Group. The group is made up from representatives across Hampshire, Sussex and Kent, including the EA, various campaign groups, and Local Authorities, including Portsmouth City Council. This group collectively contribute to the continued development of Beachbuoy alongside Southern Water. Although currently, Beachbuoy is not real time data, it is updated every hour, and contains the most up to date information and monitoring on coastal storm overflows.

## **8. Reasons for recommendations**

- 8.1 The Council has been called upon to improve the public's awareness of water quality.

## **9. Integrated impact assessment**

- 9.1. The IIA is attached as **Appendix 3**.

## **10. Legal implications**

- 10.1. Whilst the EA is the formal responsible agency for monitoring water quality and regulating the water companies in respect to releases, the council accepts its responsibilities to provide water quality information to the public.
- 10.2. It is a key priority of the council to deliver infrastructure projects that will help towards addressing the impact of our activity on climate change. The council understands the increasing challenges of climate change and population growth, and the pressing need to improve and enhance the natural environment for future generations.

## **11. Director of Finance's comments**

- 11.1. A provisional procurement exercise in respect to the costs of securing a terminal with associated installing and maintenance suggest that costs are significant. Any contributions from Southern Water would therefore be welcomed in reducing such costs.
- 11.2. The financial impacts in respect to maintaining our additional water sampling in respect to total analytical costs during the proposed 38-week sampling period is £3,340.86. Staffing costs of approximately 3 hours per week, equate to £9,120. The total costs are therefore approximately £12,500.
- 11.3. The continued sampling activities proposed within this report will be funded from the existing service portfolio budgets, as approved by Full Council.



**12. Director's comments**

12.1. The recommendations made in this document are of significant importance to the city and are vital to our reputation as the Great Waterfront City. Water quality has a vast impact on our health, our environment and value of our leisure and tourism industries. Proposals to protect and improve water quality and to inform the public should therefore be supported and met with the upmost care and consideration.

Signed by: Stephen Baily, Director of Culture, Leisure, and Regulatory Services.

**Appendices:**

**Appendix 1:** Results from public survey on seafront posters.

**Appendix 2:** Portsmouth City Council and Environment Agency seawater monitoring sampling results.

**Appendix 3:** Integrated Impact Assessment.

**Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

<b>Title of document</b>	<b>Location</b>
Environment Agency 2023 Bathing Water Profile for Southsea East	<a href="https://data.gov.uk">Bathing water profile (data.gov.uk)</a>
Environment Agency 2023 Bathing Water Profile for Eastney	<a href="https://data.gov.uk">Bathing water profile (data.gov.uk)</a>
Beachbuoy	<a href="https://southernwater.co.uk">Beachbuoy (southernwater.co.uk)</a>
The role of the Environment Agency	<a href="https://blog.gov.uk">Combined Sewer Overflows Explained - Creating a better place (blog.gov.uk)</a>
Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan	<a href="https://publishing.service.gov.uk">Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)</a>

The recommendation(s) set out above were approved/ approved as amended/ deferred/ rejected by Councillor Steve Pitt, Leader of Portsmouth City Council on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

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Signed by: Councillor Steve Pitt, Leader of Portsmouth City Council.