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Exmouth Water Quality

September 2024

We have created this briefing to update communities and interested parties on Environment Agency actions regarding Water Quality in Exmouth.

Background

Exmouth is serviced by a sewerage system operated by South West Water. Some of the network is due significant improvements and upgrades. Unfortunately, some of the changes planned by South West Water are overdue. The Environment Agency is demanding that the issue is addressed quickly.

Throughout 2023 and 2024 the existing system has been struggling to cope with the increased flows which were the result of both the aging infrastructure and an exceptionally wet winter.

More recently during the summer holiday season, damage to a rising main has resulted in further incidents impacting bathing water quality, this had negative impacts to local businesses and visitors to the town.

The Environment Agency's role

The Environment Agency is responsible for issuing environmental permits relating to the discharge of treated effluent to the environment and ensuring that water companies comply with the conditions.

An investigation into incidents in Exmouth in 2023 and 2024 is currently underway. We are questioning South West Water about the incident and what proposals are in place to prevent further bursts at Exmouth. We also have 24 hour monitoring in place whilst South West Water fixes the current issue. We aim to conduct prompt investigations, however until all the facts are known especially at a site like this where there have been multiple incidents, we cannot set timescales for this investigation and anticipate it will take many months.

We will look at all available options in deciding how best to proceed and this can only be done once the investigation is complete. Any future decision will be made in accordance with the EA Enforcement and Sanctions Policy.

The Environment Agency was successful in getting all water companies to complete a programme to install Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) across England. This was completed for all combined sewer overflows (CSOs) in Devon and Cornwall in 2023 including Exmouth. This published data shows all discharges. Much of our investigation will be on understanding the cause and circumstances of the spills which have taken place.

Ongoing monitoring at Exmouth

We currently collect water samples at Exmouth from May to September and these give us information on the numbers of bacteria in the water. These bacteria can come from a range of sources not just sewage. Because of the increased risk of pollution by South West Water we have increased our sampling to daily monitoring until the end of September and installed sensitive equipment in the Littleham Brook. These are continuous monitors operating 24 hours a day, every day. We now better understand the extent to which South West Water is impacting the local area and this has allowed us to build our knowledge of the local systems.

Water quality can also be impacted by other factors, especially through the winter. We will continue to prioritise proportionate data gathering in this area whilst risks remain.

Outstanding improvements for Exmouth

SWW was expected to deliver two key improvements for the Exmouth Area by September 2023. Improvements at Maer Road Pumping Station and Phear Park Pumping Station, and their associated CSOs, were planned to reduce the number of spills. This environmental obligation was put in place due to the Exe Shellfish Waters having been shown statistically to be deteriorating, with a high degree of certainty.

SWW confirm that the two schemes in Exmouth have been delayed due to the increased complexity of the solution. SWW is proposing an enhanced plan which includes: upgraded pumping stations, rising main improvements and replacement of the sea outfall as well as advancing the upgrade of the wastewater treatment works by 2030. (from SWW DWMP)

We accept that increased investment is planned at Exmouth. However, we believe the improvements needed to reduce sewage spills are well overdue. We have submitted this information to OFWAT the financial regulator of water Companies

We are seeking assurance that SWW are doing all they can to mitigate the environmental impacts now, whilst they wait for planned improvements. The prioritisation of improvements, to reduce sewage spills in Exmouth, remains a substantial agenda item at leadership and performance meetings with the company.

We are receiving many complaints and requests for information regarding Exmouth and will endeavour to update this briefing every 3 months. Information relating to sewage discharges can be found at the following links:

South West Water EPA data report 2023 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Inspection surge to crack down on water sector pollution - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Storm overflows discharge reduction plan - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
Environment Agency investigation into sewage treatment works - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)