EXMOUTH TOWN COUNCIL

Flooding & Water Quality Working Party Meeting

Notes of the Zoom meeting held at 11am on Thursday 24th September 2026

Present

Graham Deasy	GD	ETC Councillor, Littleham Ward (Chairperson)
Pauline Stott	PS	ETC Councillor, Halsdon Ward
Ian Kirvan	IK	ETC Councillor, Brixington Ward
Tim Dumper	TD	ETC Councillor, Halsdon Ward
Chetna Jones	CJ	ETC Deputy Town Clerk
Lisa Greenway	LG	ETC, Note Taker

Observing

Mike Rosser	MR	ETC Councillor, Littleham Ward

Apologies

Mark Williamson	MW	ETC Councillor, Littleham Ward
Steve Gazzard	SG	ETC Councillor, Withycombe Raleigh Ward

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1. **Welcome, introduction and apologies**

   GD welcomed members to the extraordinary meeting and apologies were noted.

2. **To agree a response to the Environment Agency consultation on the South West Water permit applications on behalf of Exmouth Town Council to submit prior to the deadline of the 6th of October 2026.**

   The link to the consultation and briefing report was circulated with the agenda in advance of the meeting.

   It was agreed at the last meeting that an additional meeting would be held after the EA public open day held on 9thSeptember to enable members to agree a formal response to the EA consultation on SWW's permit application before the consultation deadline of the 6th of October. GD opened the meeting by referring members to the briefing report and asked if members had the opportunity to review the report.

   Members unanimously confirmed that they had read the briefing report and expressed appreciation for the work undertaken to prepare it. TD thanked those involved in drafting the document, describing it as comprehensive and well-balanced. IK agreed, stating that he had reviewed the document twice and found the draft response to be very strong, while PS also endorsed the briefing report and the proposed response.

   MR raised concerns about the proposed ten-year duration of the permit, arguing that if the permit was genuinely intended as a temporary solution pending upgrades to the Maer sewage treatment works, it should not extend beyond the anticipated completion of those improvements. Given SWW's commitment to upgrade the treatment works by 2029, he suggested that a three-year permit would be more appropriate and proportionate than the proposed ten-year period. He expressed concern that a decade-long permit risked becoming a long-term arrangement rather than a temporary measure.

MR also questioned aspects of the environmental modelling presented within the consultation documents. While considerable emphasis had been placed on bathing water quality at Exmouth Beach, he noted that the EA documentation did not appear to contain specific data relating directly to Exmouth Beach itself. He highlighted the tidal movement around Straight Point and up the Exe Estuary, suggesting that incoming tides could transport pollutants further into estuarine waters than had been fully recognised. He further referred to recently published research from Plymouth Marine Laboratory indicating that E. coli contamination could affect mussel beds up to ten kilometres from a discharge point. In his view, this demonstrated the need for ETC to consider broader environmental consequences extending beyond bathing waters and designated shellfish areas.

GD highlighted concerns regarding the projected increase in discharge rates. He noted that the proposal would increase discharge capacity from approximately 273 litres per second to 991 litres per second and questioned whether sufficient information had been provided on the cumulative impact of this increase. He also raised concerns about the effect of additional sewage flows expected from infrastructure projects, including the Lime Kiln pipeline connection from Budleigh Salterton. Given existing concerns about the capacity of the treatment works, GD questioned whether the system would be capable of handling significantly higher volumes in future.

Discussion also considered the operation of the wider sewage network, including spill events within the Exe Estuary. TD clarified that spills at Hartopp are tidal in nature and not directly connected to the treatment works improvements.

CJ stressed that the central issue underpinning the permit application was the urgent need to upgrade the treatment works itself. She added that without substantial investment and improvement at the treatment site, the proposal simply risked transferring pollution spills from one location to another without addressing the root problem. Members agreed that ETC's response should place greater emphasis on the necessity of completing treatment works upgrades and ensuring that any permit granted remained closely linked to those improvements.

The adequacy and independence of monitoring arrangements generated significant discussion. GD acknowledged that the EA's proposal included monitoring provisions and powers to review or withdraw the permit if conditions were breached. However, members expressed scepticism about how effective such powers would be once the permit was operational. CJ raised particular concerns about the regulator's reliance on information supplied by SWW, noting recent incidents that had highlighted shortcomings in communication and reporting arrangements. The EA should commit additional resources to independent monitoring rather than relying primarily on information supplied by the operator itself.

Members unanimously agreed that this point should be highlighted strongly within ETC's response and that independent monitoring by the regulator should be specifically requested.

Members discussed the findings of the Plymouth Marine Laboratory study in greater detail. MR reiterated that the research showed evidence of E. coli being detected in mussel beds up to ten kilometres from discharge locations and argued that this evidence should not be ignored. He offered to share the research with members, and CJ agreed to circulate the document and include it as supporting evidence within ETC's response. Members felt that attaching credible scientific evidence would strengthen the authority and weight of ETC's submission.

TD provided an alternative perspective, noting that the use of an outfall at Straight Point was not a new concept and had effectively existed for many years. He suggested that concerns based solely on moving the discharge point away from Maer Rocks should be viewed in that context. Nonetheless, he stressed the importance of ensuring improved transparency and consistency in pollution reporting. He explained that conflicting information from SWW, the EA and organisations such as Surfers Against Sewage had created confusion for residents and members alike. He therefore suggested that a long-term objective should be the introduction of a common reporting standard for pollution incidents, enabling all parties to work from the same information and reducing public uncertainty.

GD informed members that he had recently met with representatives from EDDC and the EA to discuss the reporting issues that had emerged over the previous ten days. He described the discussions as robust and highlighted widespread concerns regarding inconsistencies between SWW's reporting systems, Surfers Against Sewage notifications and official regulatory information. Members agreed that the issues demonstrated the need for clearer communication procedures and greater transparency.

Further concerns were raised regarding SWW's commitment to reducing reliance on storm overflows. GD referred to information published on SWW's website indicating that works intended to reduce storm overflow usage had slipped from an anticipated completion date of the end of 2028 to late summer 2029. This prompted concerns among members that project delivery timescales could continue to drift and that assurances previously given by SWW might not be achieved as originally promised. Members felt ETC's response should reflect these concerns in a balanced but firm manner.

Members also considered the terminology used within the permit application, particularly references to discharges occurring during periods of "heavy rainfall". GD suggested that the phrase required a much clearer definition, expressing concern that storm overflows had reportedly been activated during very low levels of rainfall. Members agreed that the consultation response should request a more precise and enforceable definition to prevent inappropriate use of the permitted discharge arrangements. PS added concerns regarding local coastal conditions, observing that strong currents and storm conditions could potentially carry discharged material back towards Exmouth's beaches. She felt this represented an additional risk that should be recognised within any assessment of environmental impacts.

There was broad agreement that while ETC did not object in principle to the historical use of Straight Point as an outfall location, significant concerns remained regarding the scale of the proposed discharge, environmental impacts within and beyond the Exe Estuary, treatment works capacity, the independence of monitoring arrangements, project delivery timescales and the need for stronger regulatory oversight. Members unanimously agreed that any permit granted should be limited to three years rather than ten, reflecting SWW's stated timetable for upgrading the treatment works. They also agreed that ETC's response should be publicly available, that scientific evidence from Plymouth Marine Laboratory should be attached in support of the submission, and that the final draft response should be circulated to all members for review before being submitted to the EA.

The proposal to draft and circulate the comments before submission was formally proposed by IK, seconded by PS and approved unanimously by all members present.

3. Close of meeting

Meeting ended 11:27