



To:
Councillor David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations

BY EMAIL

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Overview & Scrutiny

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27 October 2021

Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations. The letter concerns the meeting held on 6 October 2021 and the updates received regarding Water Pollution.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

On 6 October 2021, the Panel met to discuss the update regarding the Council's management of Water Pollution. The Panel were grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the observations of the Panel.

The Panel heard about the joint approach to this area of work, and the good working relationship between Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Swansea City Council (SCC).

Officers explained to us that there are eight designated bathing water areas in Swansea. We understand that water samples are taken throughout the bathing season (May-September) giving results to enable classification within one of the four categories; being excellent, good, insufficient and poor.

Members queried the bathing season duration (May-September) and whether the duration of this season should be extended. Officers highlighted that this seasonal period was designated under statutory regulations.

We heard that the Council is the owner of Swansea Bay and therefore responsible as Beach Manager. Officers highlighted to us that Swansea Bay has been designated as 'good', the remaining seven bathing areas designated as 'excellent'.

We discussed the River Tawe water quality situation, recently highlighted in the media, which came about via sewage entering the River further upstream. Officers explained to us that pollutant levels were significant enough to take a precautionary approach, recommending against bathing at that time. We also heard how Welsh Water started

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tracing the pollution to a collapsed sewer entering a surface water drain; a problem which has since been rectified.

We discussed general concerns over recreational use of the River Tawe during such abnormal incidents, and how signage is erected to inform the public and advise against recreational use.

Officers explained that the River Tawe has no current designation as a 'bathing water' area and therefore no account is currently taken of bacterial standards in the water. The Panel heard that there is currently no 'recreational water' standard for non-bathing water.

The Panel also discussed other recent media coverage relating to discharge into beaches during emergency discharge events. Officers explained to us that the drainage system is designed to have an emergency overflow, allowing for surface water run-off and storm discharge during such events.

The Panel raised concerns over the effect of climate change on intensifying rainfall and how such events will impact upon storm overflow incidents. We heard that NRW have worked to significantly reduce the number of such events, although officers acknowledged that this is an ongoing challenge.

The Panel heard about the 2011 collaborative project between SCC and NRW, when officers undertook an intensive water sampling survey, resulting in a computational model to predict water quality on an hourly basis at Swansea Bay. We understand that this model is now an automated process, enabling fast and effective information sharing via signage and Twitter.

The Panel heard that installation of septic tanks / cesspits is an NRW regulated process, requiring a permit or exemption. The Panel was told that Swansea has a significant number of septic tanks; NRW dealing with the environmental impacts, and SCC dealing with the public health aspects.

Panel Members queried allowing new build properties to have septic tanks, especially located within clay soil and therefore affecting the process of percolation and resulting in increased levels of run-off.

Officers drew our attention to the aeration system on the River Tawe, active during summer months, in place to deal with situations where the salt water overtops the barrage. Officers explained that the saline wedge can have an effect on river life and the system acts to mix fine bubbles of air into the water column. SCC monitors salinity and once every two years carries out a dredge of the navigable channel.

Members commented on the odour around the Port-Tennant treatment works. Officers confirmed that discussions are on-going with regard to future intentions at that site, however, in the meantime an e-diary is available online to log such comments or complaints.

The Panel raised the issue of residential front gardens being converted into hard standings, acting to increase surface water run-off. Officers commented that any new builds over 100 sq/m require sustainable drainage systems to be implemented, explaining that new features are often incorporated to aid drainage through permeable surfaces.

Members raised concerns over urban areas and surface water run-off, citing the Sandfields area as an example. Officers also highlighted that this particular area accepts run-off from higher ground. Officers explained that good gully maintenance would help alleviate this issue.

Panel Members commented on the excellent working relationship between NRW and SCC and praised the teams involved in this collaborative area of work.

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter but, in this instance, we require no formal written response.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Jones

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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