



SOLENT PROTECTION SOCIETY

Protecting the Solent and its environment for future generations

Government response to Environmental Audit Committee ‘Water quality in rivers’ report lacks teeth and the necessary urgency

In January 2022, Solent Protection Society (SPS) and other Solent-based contributors provided evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) during its investigation into ‘Water Quality in Rivers’ and [the final report, published in February 2022](#).

The Pollution Group of the Solent Protection Society council has reviewed [the Government’s response to this EAC report](#), published today, and this brief press release contains our initial comments on the content.

The original scope of the inquiry focussed on the impact of pollution entering the inland rivers and waterways from the adjacent catchment areas. In our opinion, it is fundamental that the scope be extended to the harbours and estuaries which we consider to be integral sections of the overall river systems, from source to sea.

Chichester Harbour and Langstone Harbour, despite being covered by multiple environmental protection classifications, are each seriously compromised by the impact of water-borne pollution, both from the river sources which feed into them and from combined sewer overflow (CSO) storm-water discharges from the Southern Water waste water treatment works (WWTWs) which border them. The same is true for the other harbours and estuaries across the wider Solent region including Hampshire and West Sussex to the north and the Isle of Wight to the south. These water bodies are the sites at which the local river systems terminate, often forming popular destination sites for leisure water users who are at similar risk to those at the designated bathing beaches both upstream in the river systems and downstream on the Solent shoreline.

We welcome the government’s agreement with the need to provide active signage showing current and predicted water quality but note that the response rejects recommendations to include accurate or estimated volumetric data regarding spillages.

If the water companies are unable or unwilling to provide accurate spill volumes until suitable technical infrastructure is in place, we believe that local interested parties, including the local authorities and academic resources, could work with the EA and the water companies to derive and publish *interim estimates* of spill volumes with reasonable accuracy based on local observations and knowledge.



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Extending the existing trials of sensor technology to indicate water quality, using local academic research establishments and ‘citizen science’ contributions to the effort, would, we believe, lead to quicker progress towards genuinely aggressive targets for accurate and timely reporting of the impact of sewage spills. By including interim estimates of spill volumes, such a collaborative effort could offer a pragmatic, tactical solution to a recommendation that the government currently reject as being “limited by technical feasibility and cost”.

The government acknowledge that signage at leisure water sites is the responsibility of the local authority, however funding issues will inevitably act against early adoption. Southern Water already has part of the solution available on-line with the BeachBuoy application, though with currently limited accuracy and restricted coverage. Extending the coverage would significantly broaden the value of the tool. By way of example, SPS has already used existing EA data to identify the [34 worst performing CSOs in the Solent region](#), representing just 11% of the total number of CSOs identifiable in the data which together generated 77% of the spillage hours during 2020. Extending BeachBuoy scope to cover these CSOs would significantly enhance the benefits and provide a demonstration of Southern Water’s commitment to improvement.

SPS looks to the government for clear acceptance of the urgency for legislation to address the inadequacies and failings of the Environment Agency in a timely manner. Clear, measureable improvement targets and aggressive implementation timescales are needed to encourage the necessary priority for clean-up actions by the water utility companies. In the Solent region, we remain concerned that commercial pressures may cause Southern Water to prioritise its capital program for water supply over the very clear need for improvements in its handling of waste water.

While [the government’s response to the EAC report](#) goes some way towards ensuring that the recommendations are accepted, the proposed schedules are too long and an early resolution will not be forthcoming. Solent Protection Society is concerned that the government's response does not treat these recommendations with the urgency that our members and Solent residents and leisure water users believe necessary.

Response prepared by the Pollution Group of the Solent Protection Society Council, 16th May, 2022.