
THANET BEACHES CONTAMINATION REVIEW TASK & FINISH GROUP FINAL REPORT TO OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

To: **Extraordinary Overview & Scrutiny Panel – 20 December 2012**

Main Portfolio Area: **Operational Services**

By: **Members Report - Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Ward: **Thanet Coastal Wards**

Summary: The purpose of this report is to present the findings and recommendations of the Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel for adoption and recommendation to Cabinet.

For Decision

1.0 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 On 17 July 2012, Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel established the Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group to review the sewage spillage incidents that took place early this year. The terms of reference for the Group are detailed in Annex 1 of the report.
- 1.2 The Group held five meetings where they took evidence from Thanet District Council officers, Environment Agency, Southern Water, members of the public and business community separately. Southern Water representatives were recalled for another meeting because Members of the Group wanted to seek further clarifications on issues raised by some residents affected by the sewage spillage flooding on their private properties.
- 1.3 Members also went on site visits to the Southern Water Foreness Point Pumping Station and Weatherlees Hills Wastewater Treatment Works. These visits enabled Members to familiarise themselves with some of the operational work involved in managing the sewer system under review. Members also went on a site visit to the Margate Beaches (Main Sands) to witness the sampling procedures that are routinely conducted by the Environment Agency to monitor the quality of bathing waters on Thanet Beaches. A work programme for the Group is detailed in Annex 2 of the report.
- 1.4 After all evidence gathering, Members then met to draft their report with recommendations in accordance with their terms of reference. The report will be referred to the Extraordinary Overview & Scrutiny Panel meeting on 20 December 2012.
- 1.5 Members of the Task & Finish Group are grateful to all the TDC officers, Southern Water and Environment Agency staff as well as members of the public and business community who cooperated with the review and took time out to give evidence at the various meetings set up for this investigation.

2.0 The Findings

- 2.1 After collecting evidence from witnesses that included TDC officers, Environment Agency staff, Southern Water representatives, members of the public and business community, the Group made a number of observations regarding how the emergency incidents in question were managed.
- 2.2 Members were concerned that the spillage incidents were reported by a member of the public and not any one officer from the three agencies (TDC, Southern Water or Environment Agency). They suggested that a more rigorous approach for monitoring Foreness Pumping Station and identifying any spillages should be put in place.
- 2.3 There was confusion regarding who was responsible for producing and distributing signage to warn the public of the sewage spillages on the beaches.
- 2.4 There was limited use of alternative media to advise the public about the contamination of beaches due to the spillages.
- 2.5 Signage used to warn the public about contamination on the closed beaches was too small, inadequate and therefore not appropriate.
- 2.6 There was no acknowledgement of communication between the three agencies regarding reporting of the emergency incidents; or confirmation that action was being taken.
- 2.7 Once the beaches had been cleaned up, there was no evidence of advertising through social media that the beaches were clean, open and safe to use.
- 2.8 Members were concerned that the beaches that had not been affected by the spillages were unnecessarily closed.
- 2.9 Thanet District Council does not have an effective Contingency Plan for closing the beaches in response to emergencies. The Environment Agency was looking at coming up with some framework for Best Practice which can be considered for adoption by Councils in the South East region.
- 2.10 Southern Water should be more sympathetic to direct claims of compensation by sewage related flood victims. There was concern about what appeared to be inadequate communication between Southern Water and residents affected by these incidents under review.
- 2.11 The accumulation of 'rag' particularly during a drought period increases the chances of flooding on some properties (due to back flow) during heavy rains. There are no planned schedules of jet cleaning to get rid of rag and thereby mitigate this problem.
- 2.12 Members are of the view that the costs incurred in improving the sewer system infrastructure would be justified if it helps avoid the damage caused by contamination on beaches during the spillage incidents under investigation.
- 2.13 The Environment Agency do not ordinarily carry out bathing water sampling on beaches in winter because there was no legislative funding for it.
- 2.14 Members would like to forward to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel a number of recommendations in relation to their observations made during this review. These recommendations are detailed in Section 6.0 of the report.

3.0 Other

- 3.1 Members of the Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group would like thank Southern Water, Environment Agency, TDC officers and members of the public and business community for their cooperation during this investigation.
- 3.2 Members feel enormous sympathy for the residents affected by these spillage incidents.

4.0 Next Steps

- 4.1 Once agreed, any recommendations adopted by the Overview & Scrutiny Panel would have to be referred to the Executive. Cabinet may then wish to engage both Southern Water and the Environment Agency to progress these recommendations.

5.0 Corporate Implications

5.1 Financial and VAT

- 5.1.1 Although there are no financial implications arising directly from this report, part of the recommendations suggest the production and stocking of appropriate signage (boards) that would be used in emergencies to warn the public about the closure of the beaches in Thanet.
- 5.1.2 Some costs would be incurred in procuring these boards. This would have to be funded from the Council's contingency budget set aside for emergencies.

5.2 Legal

- 5.2.1 There are no legal issues arising directly from this report.

5.3 Corporate

- 5.3.1 Council's response to emergencies is an important aspect of a responsive public organisation. Where concerns are raised regarding previous performance in relation to corporate preparedness to emergencies, Council should endeavour to make improvements as is appropriate.
- 5.3.2 The Overview & Scrutiny Panel can review matters of public concern affecting Thanet residents and then make recommendations to an appropriate body of Council for final approval.

5.4 Equity and Equalities

- 5.4.1 There are no equity and equality issues arising directly from this report.

6.0 Recommendation(s)

A. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THANET DISTRICT COUNCIL, SOUTHERN WATER AND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

- 6.1 Communication: - Thanet District Council, Southern Water and Environment Agency should meet quarterly to look at the emergency response arrangements and ensure that these arrangements are appropriate and up to date;
- 6.2 In the event of an emergency, with regards to the initial contact between Thanet District Council and Southern Water; there should be confirmation of any communication between the agencies; so that if a telephone message is left, the call should be returned and if an email is sent, it should be replied to;
- 6.3 There was a need to produce and adopt a Contingency Plan for the closure of Thanet Beaches which should be based on the best practice framework model for the South East Region to be developed by the Environment Agency;

B. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THANET DISTRICT COUNCIL

- 6.4 Compensation: - Cabinet be asked to lobby local MPs to amend the legislation that governs the water industry (particularly the sewer management sub-sector) so that in cases whereby flooding caused by the overwhelming of sewer systems it becomes the responsibility of water companies;
- 6.5 Thanet District Council should be responsible for signage and dissemination of information during emergencies;
- 6.6 Generic large signage boards (AO size) should be in store; ready to be deployed at strategic points of public access only to the beaches affected by the emergency event. The response to emergencies should be measured and appropriate and ensure that beaches not affected are not closed;
- 6.7 Social media (to include face book, twitter and local radio stations) should be used to alert the public about the contamination on the beaches;
- 6.8 After the beaches have been cleaned, signage should be put up to let visitors and the public know that the beaches are now clean and open. Appropriate signage, including social media should be used to advertise that the beaches have been cleaned and are safe;
- 6.9 Cabinet be asked to lobby local MPs to amend the legislation that governs the funding of the Environment Agency to enable them to carry out random sampling of bathing water on beaches during the off season (in winter);

C. RECOMMENDATIONS TO SOUTHERN WATER

- 6.10 The response time between alarm action and the physical presence of staff to an emergency site should be 20 minutes and Monitoring CCTV facility should be installed at strategic points at Foreness Point Pumping Station in order to enable early response to emergencies;
- 6.11 After a prolonged period of drought, there should be more frequent jet washing of the sewer system particularly along known pinch points;

6.12 Southern Water communication/compensation procedures should be more responsive and more sympathetic discretion should be used to compensate residents whose properties are affected by sewage flooding;

6.13 In the event of future emergencies, an ad hoc 'Incident Dedicated Contact Point' for customers should be set up;

D. RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

6.14 Request the Environment Agency to consider carrying out random water sampling on beaches in winter due to the increase in winter sports during the off-season.

6.15 Request the Environment Agency to draft a best practice framework model for Contingency Plan for closure of beaches in emergencies.

7.0 Decision Making Process

7.1 This is a review project by a sub committee of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel. The Panel can finalise recommendations from its Task & Finish Groups and forward to another appropriate body of Council for final decision. Members of the Task & Fish Group have agreed to forward their report directly to the Overview & Scrutiny Panel without the need for another Group meeting.

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Annex List

Annex 1	Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group Terms of Reference
Annex 2	Thanet Beaches Contamination Review Task & Finish Group Work Programme – 2012-13

Background Papers

Title	Details of where to access copy
None	N/A

Corporate Consultation Undertaken

Finance	Sarah Martin, Financial Services Manager
Legal	Harvey Patterson, Corporate & Regulatory Services Manager