

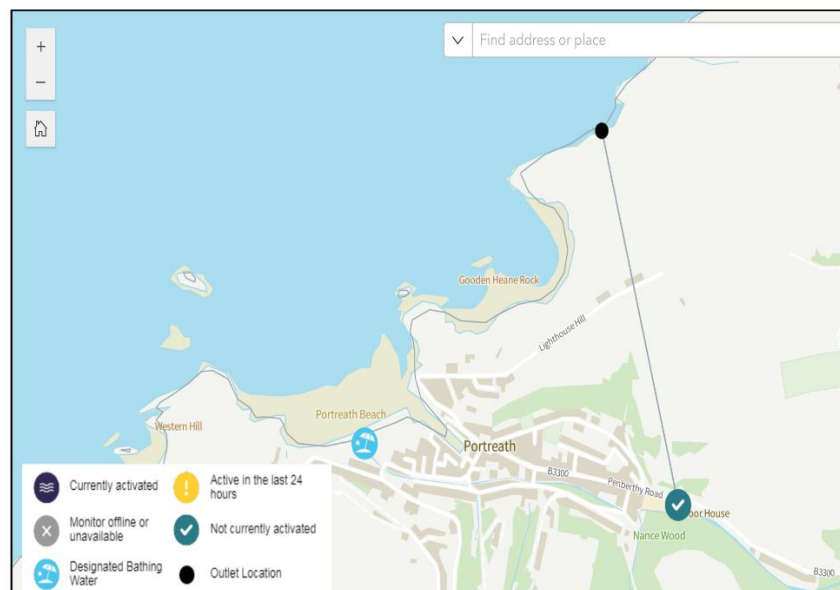
1.0 Introduction

At the Parish meeting on the 1st July a number of parishioners asked the Parish Council to consider a vote of no confidence in SWW (South West Water) based on the high number of days that the Portreath Overspill has indicated the potential discharge of raw sewage over recent months. Due to the proximity of the election advice was given that the council should not consider this matter until the next meeting.

This briefing note is intended to provide Parish Councillors with background information to consider such a vote of no confidence alongside the views expressed by parishioners.

2.0 Portreath Overflow

The Portreath storm overflow is used when the pumping station at Bridge is overwhelmed by rain water entering the foul water network. When this occurs potentially untreated sewer water enters the Portreath tunnel and exits from a tunnel in the cliffs to the North East of the village. This can be seen on the map below with the black line representing the tunnel from Bridge pumping station to the cliff exit for the overflow.



The use of this overflow has been occurring extremely frequently over the last 9 months associated with the higher-than-average rainfalls and high water tables in the Portreath catchment area.

The table below shows the frequency that this occurred at the Bridge pumping station over the last 4 years. I could not find the data for this year – but am aware that it has occurred frequently during 2024.

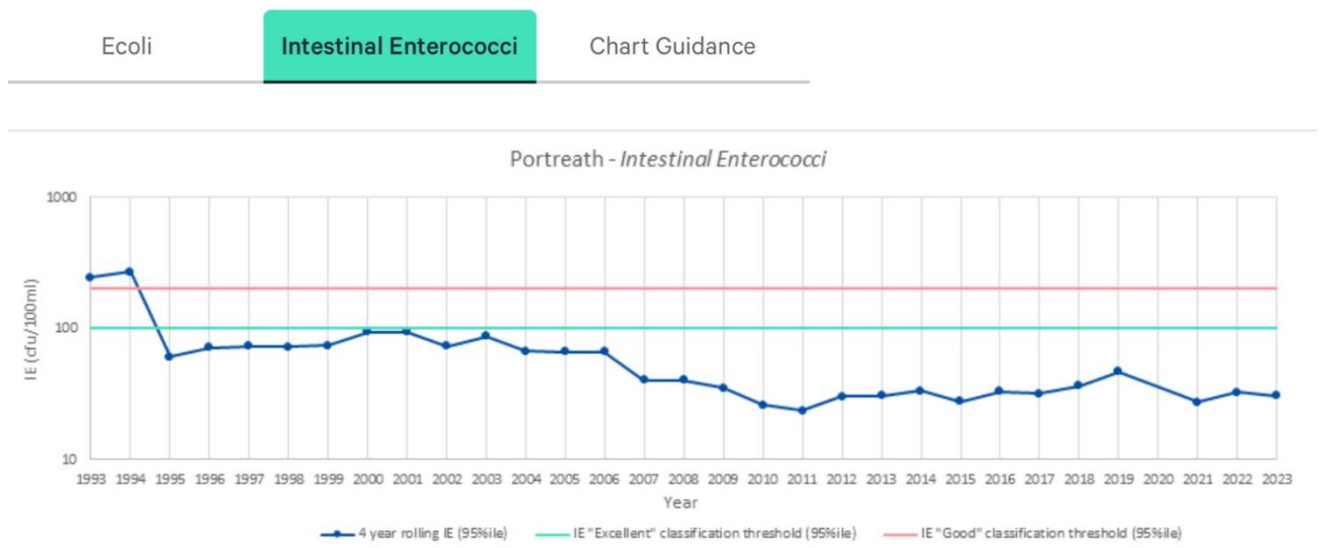
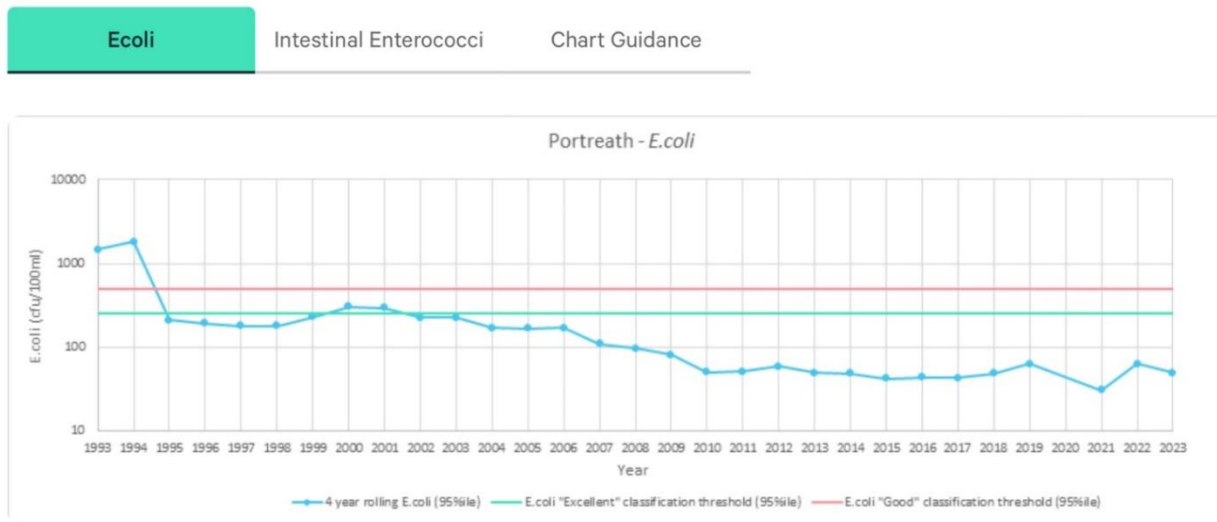
Number of spills

	2023	2022	2021	2020
Bridge pumping station overflow	120	80	94	152

3.0 Impact on Bathing Water Quality

During the bathing season (May to October) the EA (Environment Agency) routinely measure Portreath Beach for the presence of both the Intestinal Enterococci and Ecoli (Escherichia) bacteria.

The charts below show the long terms improvements to water quality on the beach during the bathing season since 1993 for both of the harmful bacteria measured. In summary sea water at the Portreath beach is routinely and consistently of excellent quality during the bathing season.



It is also possible to view the latest data on the EA website with an overview here

https://environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/profiles/profile.html?_search=Portreath&site=ukk3103-31500&fbclid=IwY2xjawELFhdleHRuA2FibQIxMAABHRvcBpqHJLHJz6rEmsTLsK7WLPQURNZK E-69QkBWASeb3LeBi3yqnJHIA_aem_Tc1Yk4D9bzn2Vhp9m9DnEq

and detailed data here

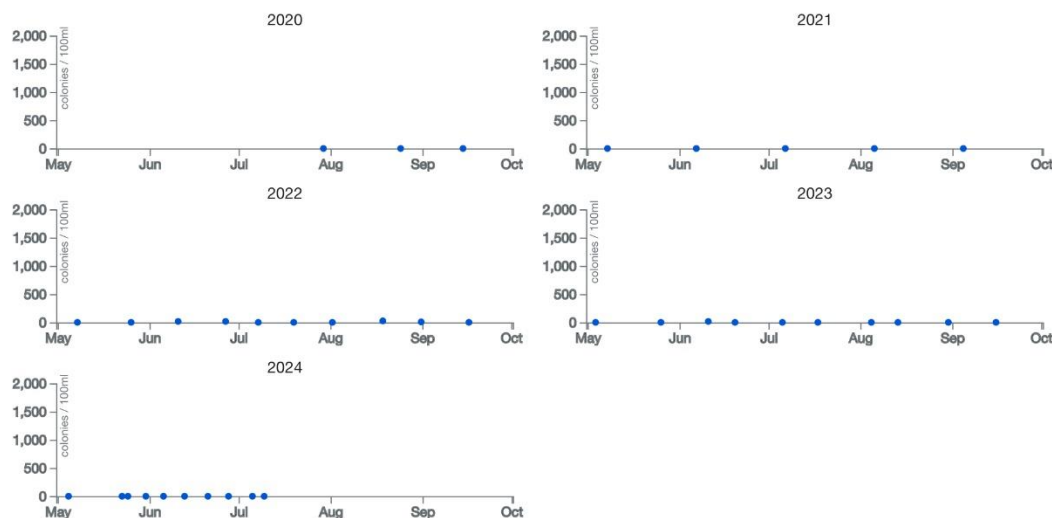
https://environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/profiles/data-samples.html?site=ukk3103-31500&_search=Portreath

For ease the detailed sample results from 2020 to present are shown below.

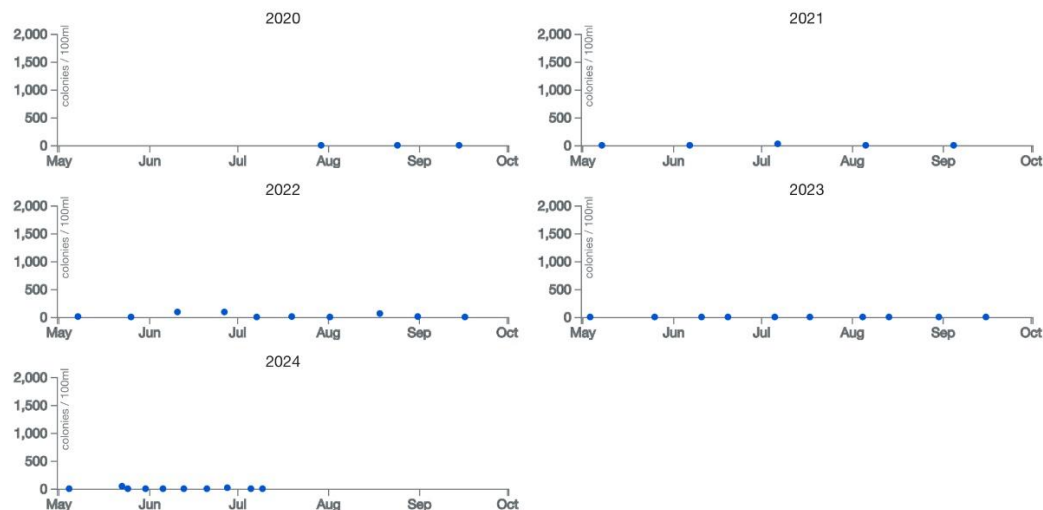
Water quality sample results

See the [help page](#) for additional information on interpreting these charts.

Intestinal Enterococci (IE)



Escherichia coli (EC)



4.0 Roles, Responsibilities and Operating Framework for Water Companies

The Framework for the quality of water in rivers and seas was established during the privatisation process for the water industry and in summary is as follows.

The government is responsible for setting the regulations and laws that govern the operation of the water companies including the use of overflows into rivers and seas. The government target to cease the use of storm overflows by water companies is 2050.

Ofwat has powers and responsibilities set by government for the economic regulation of the water industry, including economic (prices, investment levels and return on investment to shareholders), investment plans (to improve the infrastructure) and operational efficiency as well as overall market resilience. There is a five yearly cycle of business plans for each water company, agreed by Ofwat with the next 5 year plan due to be agreed and in place by December 2024.

The Environment Agency (EA) is responsible for ensuring the water industry (and others) meet the environment regulations and laws that apply to the water industry (and others) and where not to

enforce with fines and/or other action. As such it is responsible for the monitoring of water quality in both rivers and seas to ensure compliance with regulations. This includes the water quality data for Portreath detailed in Section 3 above. It is worth noting that the EA has had its budget severely reduced in recent years and reports that it is unable to fully carry out its duties and responsibilities.

Water companies, including SWW, are primarily responsible for the storage and provision of fresh water and the management and disposal of wastewater. This includes the efficient operation of the current fresh water and wastewater infrastructure as well as investing in improvements to both through the agreed five-year plans with Ofwat. Investment to improve and update the water and wastewater infrastructure comes through either shareholder investment or borrowing with both costing circa 5% in either interest or return on investment to shareholders through dividends. The day-to-day operational cost of the water companies and the funding of capital investment through the interest on loans or shareholder dividends is raised through customer water bills.

5.0 Discussion

The water quality data detailed in section 2 would appear to indicate that although the Portreath overflow is frequently active, due to its location, strong coastal tides and prevailing winds, any bacterial pollution it is taken away from Portreath Beach, hence the consistent rating of excellent for Portreath Beach bathing water during the bathing season.

I think that we all agree that any discharge of untreated sewage into our rivers and seas is totally unacceptable and must be addressed. It is both a local and national issue and must be kept high on the political agenda to ensure there are plans in place for water companies to largely eradicate these discharges in all but exceptional weather events.

To bring about such a change can only be initiated by the government through the regulatory framework outlined above and ensuring that the next SWW 5-year plan tackles this issue head on. The SWW plan from 2025-2030 does seem to address this issue in some detail from page 52 onwards – see <https://www.southwestwater.co.uk/siteassets/documents/about-us/business-plans/2025-30/business-plan-2025-30.pdf>. In summary there is a commitment to invest £760 million to deal with storm overflows that affect bathing waters and fisheries by 2030. To quote from the plan “Tackling 100% storm overflows at beaches by 2030 – ahead of government targets (2050) – maintaining bathing water quality all year round”.

We as a council have been asked by Parishioners to submit a vote of no confidence in SWW in regard to their poor management of sewage. Currently SWW are complying with current legislation in that they only operate the overflows on wet days (to the best of my knowledge). Water companies are only fined or prosecuted for using storm overflows on dry days. The 5-year SWW plan commits to removing this issue by 2030 at an additional cost per customer of £8 per month.

I am personally undecided of how to vote in the proposed resolution. On the one hand SWW are largely complying with current regulations and their 5-year plan, if implemented, will deal with this issue. On the other hand, a vote of no confidence helps keep the topic in the public eye on behalf of the citizens and businesses of Portreath. It is our beach and sea that we and visitors should be free to enjoy without fear of illness with real time information about if it is safe or not safe to enter the water year-round, not just during the so-called bathing season.

I am also mindful of the role of Cornwall Council who I believe should be taking a much more active lead on this issue on behalf of parish and town councils, citizens, businesses and the tourist industry, given it is a Cornwall wide issue. We need to see a very visible Cornwall Council taking forward their ‘Motion for the Ocean’ resolution and understanding progress on their other policies and strategies including Ocean Pollution – Environmental Growth Strategy 2022-2065.

Finally, whatever the outcome of this discussion, Parishioners may wish to write to our new MP and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about these concerns and suggest bringing forward the national targets to stop the use of storm overflows from 2050 to a much earlier date...