



**A clean,
green Cornwall
with healthy rivers
and seas**



Healthy Rivers and Seas Summit

Questions and Answers

27 February 2026

Council Chamber, County Hall / Lys Kernow, Truro

Healthy Rivers and Seas Summit

Summary

Nearly 200 people took part in the Healthy Rivers and Seas Summit held in the Council Chamber at Lys Kernow / County Hall, Truro on 27 February 2026.

The Summit was convened by Cllr Leigh Frost, Leader of Cornwall Council.

The invited audience of 70 stakeholders and expert advisors included people representing the CIOS LNP, Marine and Catchment Partnership, Plymouth and Exeter Universities, Community Area Partnerships, land owners, organisations, charities, industry and business representatives involved in and dependent on water quality. A further 100 people joined the live stream on Facebook and YouTube.

The Summit was intended to be the start of an ongoing conversation between partners and key stakeholders, leading to initiatives that will help address water quality and quantity aimed at improving the health of our rivers and seas.

The Summit set out how organisations are working to tackle pollution in Cornwall's rivers and beaches, acknowledging that water health and quality is complex and requires collective action and personal responsibility. It was evidence-led, briefly addressing the current state of water in Cornwall, looking at trends and challenges including sewage discharges, land management, and urban runoff.

The public event was chaired by Julie Skentelbery, from BBC Radio Cornwall. Julie took some questions from the invited audience for the Panel to respond to and discuss, as well as questions from residents submitted in advance of the Summit via the Council's let's talk Cornwall platform, to ensure their concerns are heard.

The Summit Panel brought together a group of representatives from stakeholder organisations, involved in water quality and management, to discuss and work together to improve water quality across Cornwall. The Panellists were from SWW, the Environment Agency, Cornwall Council, Cornwall NFU, Country Land and Business Association, Marine and Coastal Partnership, Surfers Against Sewage, Westcountry Rivers Trust, and the Local Nature Partnership.

The Healthy Rivers and Seas Summit was immediately followed by a Panel workshop, attended by the Leader of Cornwall Council, the Panellists and their expert advisors. This session was co-chaired by Lord Matthew Taylor, Chair of the CIOS Local Nature Partnership, and Phil Mason, Cornwall Council Strategic Director for Sustainable Growth and Place. The purpose of the Panel workshop was to reflect on the key themes raised during the public Summit, focussing on some of the main issues and opportunities and discuss next steps as part of a collective local response.

The Healthy Rivers and Seas presentation slidedeck, this Questions and Answers Summary and the Panel Workshop Action Plan will be published on Let's talk Cornwall Council, here: <https://letstalk.cornwall.gov.uk/rivers-and-seas>

Questions and Answers

Introductions

Summit Convenor: Cllr Leigh Frost, Leader of Cornwall Council

Host: Julie Skentelbery (BBC Radio Cornwall)

Panellists:

- Cllr Loic Rich, Cornwall Council (CC)
- Carolyn Cadman, South West Water (SWW)
- Mark Rice, Environment Agency (EA)
- Giles Bristow, Surfers Against Sewage (SAS)
- Laurence Couldrick, Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT)
- Claire Eatock, Chair of Cornwall & Isle of Scilly Marine and Coastal Partnership (CIOSMCP)
- Jon Perry, National Farmers Union Cornwall (NFU)
- Victoria Vyvyan, Country Land and Business Association (CLA)

Matt Walpole, Cornwall Wildlife Trust (CWT) was unable to attend on the day.

Environment Agency Presentation – Mark Rice

Mark Rice, Environment Agency Area Director for Devon and Cornwall, set out the current picture for Cornwall's rivers, estuaries and bathing waters.

Water Quality

- We have over 100 river and lake waterbodies in Cornwall, assessed under the Water Framework Directive. 25% are at 'Good Ecological Status', higher than the National average of 16%.
- Cornwall has eight estuaries: one rated *good*, the others at *moderate* ecological status
- Cornwall has 89 designated bathing waters, 1/5 of the total in England, 90% are currently rated *excellent*, with none rated 'poor'.
- Improvements can happen quickly with the right action. For example, Porthluney improved from 'poor' to 'sufficient' after work to stop misconnected pipes, manage farm runoff, and fence livestock away from streams.

Water Use

- People in the South West use more water per person than the UK average.
 - South West Water households use about 153 litres per person each day, compared to the national average of around 137 litres, and government target of 110 litres per person per day by 2050
 - This puts extra pressure on rivers, reservoirs and infrastructure.

Resilience and Climate Impacts

- Colliford Reservoir fell to 15% full during the 2022 drought.
 - Even after the current record-wet winter in 2025–26, it is currently below 90% full, showing how important it is to protect our water resources.
- Ultimately every drop of water we use, is less water available to the environment, including to dilute the impacts of pollution, and is more water that needs to be disposed through the wastewater system. One of the best things we can all do protect the health of our rivers in Cornwall is to use water wisely.

Agriculture and Rural Pressures

- Cornwall has high rainfall and large cattle numbers, which together increase the risk of soil, slurry and nutrients washing into rivers.
- Common issues include ageing farm infrastructure and insufficient slurry storage.
- The EA is also tackling waste crime, including a high-profile £1.5m fine for Davidstow Creamery.

Population and Growth

- More people and more homes mean increased pressure on sewerage systems and natural water environments.

Future Regulation

- Government plans include creating a single regulator overseeing both the environmental and economic performance of water companies.

Questions for the Panel

Cornwall Council invited everyone to submit questions ahead of the Summit on Let's talk Cornwall, and questions were also taken from the invited audience.

Julie Skentelbery put questions to the Panellists in turn and asked them to respond.

The questions and the Panellists responses are set out below.

Questions and Answers

Julie Skentelbery led with a question from MP Ben Maguire: How did we get here? Have we hit “rock bottom”?

Reflections from the panel:

Cllr Loic Rich – Cornwall Council

- Cllr Rich reflected on how Cornwall has reached a point he considers a “worst-case scenario.” He recalled seeing untreated sewage as a child and expressed concern that,

despite progress over the years, we are again facing serious challenges with the health of our rivers and seas.

Carolyn Cadman – South West Water (SWW)

Carolyn explained the work SWW is doing to reduce pollution and improve water quality:

- Around 3% of sewage spills are untreated, and reducing this is a priority.
- All storm overflows across the region are now monitored, giving a much clearer picture of what is happening.
- 291 overflows are due to receive targeted investment over the next five years, focusing on those closest to homes, bathing beaches and shellfish waters.
- She highlighted historic programmes such as Clean Sweep and ongoing investment plans designed to modernise and improve the system.

Jon Perry – National Farmers’ Union (NFU)

- Jon believes the situation has reached its lowest point and is now starting to improve.
- However, he stressed that progress depends on better coordination between farmers, water companies and regulators to make sure efforts across the countryside are aligned.

Victoria Vyvyan – Country Land and Business Association (CLA)

- Victoria explained that rural communities and farmers are already subject to heavy environmental regulation, such as Marine Conservation Zones and nitrate vulnerable zones.
- She said there are positive examples of progress — including reductions in harmful chemicals linked with daffodil farming — but more work and clearer communication are needed.

Laurence Couldrick – Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT)

- Laurence emphasised that Cornwall’s rivers are the lifeblood of communities and a clear indicator of what’s happening across entire catchments.
- He highlighted a range of pressures affecting rivers, including: soil and sediment washing off land, nutrients and fertilisers, road runoff, pharmaceuticals and pet flea treatments and pesticides.
- Laurence also noted that there is a mix of excellent and poor (sometimes illegal) farming practices, and each river requires a tailored approach.
- He warned that flood risk, drought, and the overall scale of the problem mean long-term investment and collaboration are essential.

Claire Eatock – Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Marine and Coastal Partnership (CIOSMCP)

- Claire spoke about the need to overcome “blue blindness” — a tendency to forget that the marine environment is just as important as the land.

- She highlighted sensitive marine habitats such as maerl beds, which can be thousands of years old and support rich marine life. Everything that happens upstream eventually impacts these fragile habitats, she noted.

Giles Bristow – Surfers Against Sewage (SAS)

- Giles said that the public’s expectations are simple and fair: people should be able to swim without getting sick and rivers should not be polluted.
- He shared that SAS receives 1,000–2,000 reports each year from people who became unwell after entering the water. 75% of these illnesses occurred at beaches rated “good” or “excellent.”
- Giles reminded the audience of eight-year-old Heather Preen, who died after contracting E. coli while swimming at a Blue Flag beach — a tragic example of why change is essential.
- He argued that Cornwall is not yet at rock bottom and that what we are seeing is a systemic failure involving water companies, regulators and government. He urged a shift toward putting public health and the environment above profit.

Additional comments from Lord Mathew Taylor – Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Nature Partnership (LNP)

- Mathew acknowledged Cornwall’s achievements — such as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Marine and Natural Resources Framework — but warned that nature is still declining, both locally and globally.
- Many species remain at risk of extinction, and pollution continues to play a major role. He believes we haven’t reached rock bottom in terms of environmental impact — only in terms of public tolerance.
- He said the strong public mood for action presents an opportunity to make meaningful change, and all sectors must work together to use this momentum.

Question: Are sewage spills damaging Cornwall’s reputation as a world-class beach destination?

Question: Why hasn’t the old Victorian sewer system been upgraded sooner?

Reflections from the panel:

Carolyn Cadman – SWW

- 291 storm overflows are receiving investment over the next five years, focused on bathing and shellfish areas.
- £760m million is being invested in these improvements.
- Recent work has already cut total spills by 17% and spill duration by 25%.
- There are 1,600 storm overflows across Devon and Cornwall.

- SWW says that since privatisation in 1989 it has invested twice as much into the network as it has paid in shareholder dividends.
- Long-term aim: by 2040, storm overflows to have fewer than 10 spills per year.

Giles Bristow – SAS

- Raised concerns that some promised upgrades haven't materialised.
- Argued more transparency and structural reform is needed.

Claire Eatock – CIOSMCP

- Claire emphasized the importance of marine health for Cornwall's economy.

Stithians Sewage Crisis

Reports of raw sewage entering homes and running across roads used by children from audience member Andy Snapes who is a resident of Stithians. He highlighted on-going issue for many years, and the situation is affecting people's physical and mental health.

- SWW apologised, confirming one part of the problem is fixed and another is being brought forward urgently.
- EA said the wider issue shows how vulnerable sewer systems are to climate change and water getting into the network during heavy rain.

Housing Growth and Planning

Question: Can our sewerage system cope with thousands of new homes each year?

The government has set a new target of 4,421 houses a year to be built in Cornwall.

Reflections from the panel:

Cllr Loic Rich – CC

- Areas like the Camel catchment already face planning restrictions due to phosphate pollution.
- New housing is still desperately needed, but good design can reduce impact.
- Well-designed modern estates with wetlands and sustainable drainage can actually perform better than poorly managed farmland.
- Off-grid communities rely heavily on septic tanks, which need better support and oversight.

Mark Rice – EA

- Works closely with planners to ensure water is handled on site of development. Water Cycle Study to inform future growth.

Victoria Vyvyan – CLA

- Warned against assuming rural areas or septic tanks are the main source of problems.

Question: Should SWW be a formal consultee on planning applications?**Carolyn Cadman – SWW**

- Yes — they already work closely informally but would like it formalised.

Septic Tanks and Tanker Waste

In our rural communities we have a lot of septic tanks in use and from the questions raised there are some serious issues relating to the disposal of waste liquids pumped out of septic tanks.

Linda and Anthony Martin from Pellows (Cornish waste disposal services company) speak on issues for the industry.

Cornwall produces around 60 million litres of septic waste each year.

Right now, contractors often have to drive it all the way to Bristol because Cornwall has too few receiving sites.

Question: Please can South West Water and the Environment Agency explain why they do not support the disposal of sewage from Septic tanks from domestic properties - meaning that contractors have to travel out of Cornwall to dispose of domestic sewage and as a consequence recharge large sums to the resident. Why is it now down to the contractors to solve the problem? Whose problem is it?

Reflections from the panel:

Carolyn Cadman – SWW

Reviewing sites to increase capacity before the busy summer season. Limited capacity to receive tanker waste but working to increase it – by freeing up capacity at the sites that can receive tanker waste and logistical issues such as the booking system to improve efficiency.

Mark Rice – EA

Working on faster permitting for new infrastructure. Notes widespread illegal spreading on farmland occurred before stronger enforcement by EA.

Farming, Catchments and Rural Land

About 75-80% of Cornwall's land area is farmed and land management throughout a river catchment can have a significant effect on what ends up downstream.

Jon Perry – NFU

- Many farmers are already improving soils, adding river buffers and reducing fertiliser.
- Barriers include slurry storage rules, farm profitability, and complicated regulations.
- Sector needs funding and education around this issue.

Laurence Couldrick – WRT

- Farming is extremely varied — some excellent, some harmful. Need to work with those causing harm through farming practices.

- Climate change, shifting funding schemes and the demand for cheap food all increase pressure.
- Warned that species like Atlantic salmon could disappear from local rivers without action.

Victoria Vyvyan – CLA

- Planning delays stop farms from upgrading slurry storage even when grant money exists. This is an action for Cornwall Council.

Cllr Loic Rich – CC

- Working with farmers through projects like Fal Rivers to Reef.
- Will raise issue on planning delays with planners

Mining and Water Quality

With renewed interest in lithium extraction and the reopening of South Crofty, the panel addressed mining impacts:

Mark Rice – EA

- Working closely with mining companies before projects begin, and planning both operational controls and long-term aftercare in the event of mine closure.
- Investment at Crofty has already led to improvements in the Red River.

Claire Eatock – CIOMCP

- Claire works for the Camborne School of Mines.
- Emphasised the importance of monitoring metals and heavy metals using specialist equipment that we have in Cornwall at the Camborne School of Mines.

Question to each of the Panellists: What action can we all take?

Reflections from the panel:

Victoria Vyvyan – CLA

- Use less water.

Laurence Couldrick – WRT

- Take an interest and care about local rivers.

Jon Perry – NFU

- Reduce waste in all forms.

Giles Bristow – SAS

- Demand transparency; consider un-privatisation; support more designated bathing waters, join a paddle-out protest, make sure we ask questions before committing to the new water bill.

- Stressed that individuals play a role, but the main responsibility lies with companies and regulators. Encouraged people to join “Paddle Out” demonstrations and support more bathing water designations.

Claire Eatock – CIOSMCP

- Consider the seascape as much as the landscape.

Cllr Loic Rich – CC

- Follow the “3 Ps” (Pee, Poo, Paper).

Carolyn Cadman – SWW

- Care (Also notes how important Loic’s point is)

Mark Rice – EA

- Aim for 110ltr per day water use; get a water meter; report pollution; consider joining EA through apprenticeship or employment.

Closing messages from the Panellists

Julie Skentelbery put a question to each of the Panellists: What do you think can come out of the Summit and be achieved after today?

Reflections from the panel:

Mark Rice – EA

- Encouraged formation of community river groups, collaboration.

Carolyn Cadman – SWW

- Wants to deepen partnerships and remove silos.

Cllr Loic Rich – CC

- This administration wants to see Healthy Rivers and Seas. Maintain momentum and convene stakeholders.

Jon Perry – NFU

- Work together; create more consistency; keep the conversation going.

Giles Bristow – SAS

- Urges radical transparency; reduce need for information through FOIs; stop protecting corporate interests.

Claire Eatock – CIOSMCP

- Deliver the 50 Marine Nature Recovery Strategy actions; embed them in planning processes.

Laurence Couldrick – WRT

- Improve data sharing; ensure consistent regulation.

Victoria Vyvyan – CLA

- Support septic tank owners; improve coordination between highways, flood authorities, and planners. Use contemporary systems that are fit for purpose.

Final Contributions

Historic Reading

- A former oyster fisherman read from a 1902 report from the Fish Mongers Hall linking illness and deaths after raw sewage incident in Truro—showing the issue has long historical roots.

Cllr Leigh Frost (Leader of Cornwall Council)

- Cllr Leigh Frost in his summary said that Cornwall Council must lead by acting as facilitator to help develop a joint action plan; and commit to shared responsibility. He said we have to acknowledge there is a massive systemic and organisational issue. He will look for Cornwall Council to improve planning and be easier to work with.