

Scottish Water Gairloch Stakeholder Group

Draft Meeting Minutes

Date of Meeting: Tuesday 3rd November, 6:30pm

Location: Via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Gairloch Community Representatives

Karen Buchanan (KB)
Alex Gray (AG)
Ian McWhinney (IMcW)
John Port (JP)

SEPA

Paul Griffiths (PG)

Scottish Water

Kevin Clifton (KC)
Gavin Steel (GS)

Apologies:

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Minutes

1. Welcome

Gavin Steel welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Minutes of meeting held via Skype on 22nd April 2020

GS noted that attendance at the meeting on 22nd April had been limited, but appreciated that there had been unusual circumstances which everyone had been adjusting to. The minutes had been circulated by email. No amendments had been received by email and AG agreed they were an accurate reflection of what had been discussed.

3. Actions and matters arising

Action 1: Scottish Water Gairloch Stakeholder Group to agree any required revision to the timing of the pilot operating period at its autumn meeting.

GS suggested it would be best to discuss this once the SEPA and Scottish Water updates had been given. As anticipated in April, it had not been a normal year in terms of the bathing season and the sampling that would normally take place.

Action 2: Scottish Water Gairloch Stakeholder Group to consider best timing for an update on progress to the full community.

GS acknowledged that communication beyond the Stakeholder Group had not taken place for some time and understood from members there had been some questions raised, particularly about odour in the vicinity of the WWTW. He suggested this be discussed at the end of the meeting to identify what would be helpful.

4. SEPA / Sampling Update

PG noted that, as anticipated in April, sampling arrangements had been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Three sets of samples had been taken between January and March, but lockdown had then resulted in all routine monitoring activity being stopped.

There had ultimately been a curtailed bathing season which had run from mid-July to early October. This had been supported by limited monitoring, with only a single set of samples taken for the Gairloch beaches during the period. While this meant less data was available than would normally be the case, he confirmed that the samples taken had been comfortably within the range for 'excellent' standard.

PG explained that SEPA had initially been focused on getting a laboratory operating on a Covid-secure basis and getting the logistics in place to allow essential sampling to take place. Currently only the Angus Smith Laboratory at Eurocentral was operating. Work was ongoing to re-open the lab at Aberdeen but there was not yet a date for this. In these circumstances, the limited laboratory capacity available had to be reserved for suspected significant pollution events.

In light of this, PG regretted that SEPA was not in a position to support off-season sampling at Gairloch over the winter of 2020/21 in the way that had earlier been envisaged. This would make it difficult to complete the two year trial operating period in the way which had been expected at its outset. This had been discussed with Scottish Water ahead of the meeting and both organisations wanted to agree the best way forward with the stakeholder group.

PG noted that he had collated all the sample data collected at Gairloch, both for the bathing water sampling points and additional sampling locations, between 2017 and 2020. This had been provided to GS to circulate to the group.

Action 1: GS to circulate collated sampling data to members of the group.

PG noted there was some ongoing follow-up engagement taking place about private drainage arrangements that discharge to the River Sand. While all bathing water samples had been well within the excellent standard, it was felt there could be a potential impact from the river so this was being followed up. The focus of all SEPA's work was on making sure the bathing waters continue to achieve 'excellent' standard.

AG noted that the campsite was extending its normal season further than usual into the autumn.

5. Scottish Water Project Update

KC gave an update on Scottish Water's ongoing work, noting that there had been two distinct areas of focus.

Odour

KC noted that members of the group had raised concerns about odour experienced while passing the site. This was being followed up. A significant factor was believed to be saline ingress and an area of network on the foreshore near the Glebe had been identified for attention to reduce this. The inlet works where the rising main discharges, upstream of the septic tanks, had been identified as the primary source of odour within the WWTW site and rubber matting was being installed over this area to provide a better seal.

Disk filter

As had been discussed at previous meetings, the disk filter had not been performing in line with the manufacturer's expectations and had required more regular manual cleaning than expected. Over a period of drier weather in the summer, there had been concern that the issues presented a risk to the site's compliance with the part of its licence that relates to particles suspended in the effluent. Sampling had found that the UV had remained very effective throughout, so there was no risk to compliance with the licence standard for bacteria.

KC explained that progress with resolving the challenges with the disk filter had been slowed due to travel restrictions. There were regular calls taking place with the supplier and various sampling in an effort to understand the problem and pinpoint the cause. Seals within the unit had recently been replaced to rule these out as a possible contributing factor.

As explained to members via email at the time, a temporary dosing arrangement had been established and operated over a short period in late summer, which used a natural tannin-based chemical to improve the settlement of particles within the septic tanks.

AG asked if the dosing arrangement had worked.

KC confirmed that the effluent quality had improved. Dosing had not needed to continue for a long period as wetter weather meant that the concern about meeting the licence standard receded. The issue had seemed to be linked with periods of lower flows in dry conditions and might also be linked with salinity.

AG asked if salinity wasn't the root of both problems.

KC agreed that it could be, but that it was a continuing challenge of coastal sewer networks, especially with sections that were regularly below sea level. The only solution was continuing capital maintenance efforts when significant sources of saline ingress were identified. The new treatment process was less vulnerable to the effects of salinity than the old one, but it was likely to remain a challenge.

AG asked how the disk filter was letting material through.

KC noted that this had been the focus of investigation to build an understanding of what appeared to be happening from sample results. Seals had been renewed to eliminate possibility that some effluent was bypassing the disk. Options had been identified to optimise the unit, potentially by using a finer filter to remove smaller particles and/or by using potable water for the automated washing of the disk instead of effluent.

JP noted that there were issues with the disk filter and odour at the roadside and asked if these were related.

KC explained they were not believed to be directly related, although salinity was a possible contributing factor in both. The issues with the disk filter were most significant during periods of drier weather. Salinity issues were most significant on the highest tides.

JP asked if odours were an issue throughout the network.

KC noted that odour issues linked with salinity had been raised in the past elsewhere on the network, but he was unaware of particular reports in recent times. Scottish Water was keen to be alerted where customers were experiencing odours, whether at the WWTW or elsewhere, so that it could investigate.

AG asked if salinity was monitored at Waste Water Pumping Stations around the sewer network.

KC explained that it is not monitored on a continuous basis, but that operators have hand-held monitors which they use when investigating.

WWTW trial period

KC noted that SEPA were unable to carry out sampling over the winter period and explained that Scottish Water was exploring whether there was any practical alternative for sampling to be carried out. At present, the UV was running and continued to work well. The only alternative might be for Scottish Water to carry out sampling itself.

JP noted that it was reassuring for the community if SEPA carried out the sampling. KB echoed this point and felt it might be badly received by the community if Scottish Water was to carry out sampling.

KC explained that Scottish Water's laboratories are independently accredited and carry out a lot of work where accurate reporting of results is critical. He recognised that Scottish Water did not have experience of collecting seawater samples and this would need to be explored further.

Community members reiterated that they felt there were issues to be resolved about the operation of the new treatment process and proceeding with the proposed winter operating period (without UV) could result in an adverse response from the community. Given SEPA were not able to carry out off-season sampling, they proposed the best option was to operate with UV remaining on over winter 2020/21 while efforts to resolve the other issues continued.

Action 2: GS and KC agreed to feed back the Stakeholder Group's view within Scottish Water and confirmed that the UV would not be switched off without further discussion with members.

Questions

IMcW felt we kept coming back to seawater ingress and the challenges this causes. He asked if there was realistic prospect of these problems being resolved.

KC stressed that there has been a lot of engagement with the manufacturer of the disk filter to improve its performance. Progress had been slowed by public health restrictions on international travel, but there were a number of potential improvements still to be explored. He recognised that seawater ingress was an inherent challenge of the Gairloch sewer network and would require continuing management, but stressed that where sources of seawater ingress were identified it was generally possible to remedy them.

JP noted that odour was currently the key concern, given potential impact on the community.

IMcW asked if challenges at the WWTW were linked with dry weather, whether a solution might be to connect a local source of freshwater to the sewer network.

KC explained that this would be problematic at times of high surface water flows and could result in flooding and/or more frequent spilling from Combined Sewer Overflows. It would also increase the carbon cost of transporting and treating a higher volume of surface water which did not require treatment. For both of these reasons, Scottish Water had a fairly firm policy of not allowing new surface water connections (outside highly exceptional circumstances) and seeking opportunities to remove surface water from combined sewers where possible.

6. Communication review

GS noted that an update had not been given to the wider community for some time, with the pandemic resulting in other issues taking priority.

He proposed that an update would be useful to inform the community of the progress of work at the WWTW; to reflect the action being taken in response to odour concerns; and to ensure clarity about how any future odour concerns could be reported for investigation and attention.

Members agreed that an update via the Gairloch and District Times would be helpful.

Action 3: Scottish Water to circulate a draft update for proposed publication in the Gairloch and District Times.

7. Any other business

There was no other business.

8. Date of next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 23rd February at 6:30pm and would be held via Microsoft Teams. This would allow the position to be reviewed well in advance of the 2021 bathing season.