

A fresh water future?

Peter Simpson – Anglian Water



Peter Simpson has been CEO of Anglian Water since 2013. He spoke to CIWEM policy director Alastair Chisholm about sewage, how to restore public trust in water companies and how a landscape-scale approach to managing water is the future.

In at the deep end

It's impossible to avoid starting with the issue grabbing political and media headlines: sewage and storm overflows. I ask Simpson how the water industry was caught on the back foot so much by event duration monitor (EDM) data and whether it should have better anticipated the backlash given it knew a decade ago what was on the way.

There's no doubt, he says, that companies haven't given the issue the attention it deserved; that they should have responded more quickly. They have to take that on the chin.

He says that in Anglian's region at least, eyes were likely on other challenges: There, storm overflows only contribute to just over one percent of reasons for not achieving good ecological status under the Water Framework directive.

Bigger issues on the radar were things like nutrient loading and reducing abstraction; particularly beneficial to river health in the region. Now, there's clearly a need to make rapid progress on storm overflows, but he emphasises the importance that it's not at the expense of focus on nutrients, abstraction or issues like river morphology.

The reputational nadir for the industry is a big issue for employees of the company and the other organisations they work with, he says. "Within the business people are genuinely upset. None of them turn up to work to be called polluters and I get a lot of questions asking when this is all going to be sorted out."

The joint Get River Positive initiative with Severn Trent is, Simpson feels, something that can deliver great results and motivate employees amidst the current climate. A year in, it's exceeding targets on habitat creation, partnership working and proposals for new bathing waters. The blot on the copybook is serious pollution incidents Simpson concedes – mainly caused by blockages due to fats and wet wipes.

Anglian's EDM roll-out programme is a bit behind some other companies' at just over 86% of their outfalls but Simpson says it will be complete by the end of 2023.

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Alongside EDMs, a big focus has been on creating smart sewers. Something more common in clean water networks, Anglian are now installing 22,000 in-sewer monitors. With machine learning and weather data, these will create almost a digital twin of the network, understanding what's entering it and what's happening at pumping stations, to help get ahead of events and prevent spills from happening.

Whether this kind of measure will enable Anglian to go faster than Government's storm overflows reduction plan targets or not Simpson isn't clear on, but maybe. He recognises that new development in the Anglian region – of which there is a lot – isn't as challenging to manage with modern-day separate sewer systems and sustainable drainage, as some of the legacy development in other water company areas that's proving monumental to address.

A purpose-led approach

I wanted to ask Simpson about Anglian changing its articles of association to become a purpose-led organisation, requiring consideration of the wider impacts of the company's activities on its customers, community and the environment when taking any decisions. It feels very pertinent to the public trust issue and criticisms over some corporate behaviours that have been exposed in parts of the industry recently.

He is at pains to emphasise it wasn't like flicking a switch or getting a badge to show off. Rather, it was a logical culmination of an approach that had been maturing for years. It's resulted in infrastructure projects which could have been quite one-dimensional, instead working with a growing range of partners like local river trusts and councils to maximise the range of outcomes.

Since, Anglian has worked with the British Standards Institute, KPMG and others to create a publicly available standard, PAS 808, on purpose-driven organisations.

I wonder whether given the current climate it might be something policymakers should require all companies to do but Simpson isn't sure. "Firstly we're not saying our approach is the best one; other companies are looking at alternatives such as becoming B Corp certified. But also for it to really work you need to believe in it. The last thing you want is people just chasing badges."

I ask why the Public Interest Commitment, a collaborative water industry initiative developed in 2019 hadn't got more visible uptake; whether following the renationalisation debate in the run-up to the 2019 General Election interest waned. Simpson feels the overall umbrella concept didn't get the traction it could have, but across the industry many of the

components like more ambitious leakage commitments, net zero targets and affordability support are still being taken forward.



Wendling Beck

Water companies as enabler of environmental recovery?

To the public and campaigners, the idea of water companies as agents of environmental recovery might sound somewhat outlandish. But there are examples of innovative partnership projects led by companies that put the environment right at the forefront of how outcomes are delivered. Anglian's treatment wetlands at Ingoldisthorpe or two mega-greenhouse complexes that re-use heat and carbon dioxide from wastewater treatment works being examples.

There are 24 more wetlands in-train at the moment, Simpson tells me. Anglian have a catchment-based programme around the Norfolk Broads balancing phosphate reduction from treatment works with agricultural reductions as well as a programme of septic tank rehabilitation.

They've formed a joint venture with several local authorities to broker a credit scheme for nutrient neutrality, delivering nature-based (and hybrid) solutions that un-block housing delivery.

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They're working increasingly with landowners to deliver water quality and flood risk benefits through regenerative farming and landscape-scale nature recovery such as at the Wendling Beck project. It's an experience they hope will prove concept for far wider delivery of similar approaches. And they're planning two major new reservoirs as part of the Future Fens Integrated Adaptation project Simpson says will be genuinely multi-purpose, combining flood risk and water level management, biodiversity as well as public water supply benefit.

So what's needed to unlock and mainstream these kind of approaches? How much regulatory change?

Simpson points to a combination of initiatives like RAPID (the regulators' alliance for progressing infrastructure development) to speed delivery of some things up, alongside the need for longer-term planning which can bridge 5-year investment cycles. But he says a lot of the time, partnership working with local organisations helps demonstrate the art of the possible to regulators, as with Natural England on nutrient credits.

It sounds like something far more outcomes-focused and flexible. “We need something more than lists of infrastructure and performance targets; at the moment we funnel an awful lot of money towards things that may not shift the dial very much on ecological status.”

Instead, he says, start with the outcomes you want to achieve for a river basin or catchment then think at landscape-scale, understand and map out what the best ways to achieve those outcomes are. That, he suggests, is how water companies should be working and regulated in the future.