BURLESCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL
VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE IN SOUTH WEST WATER

Passed at Burlescombe Parish Council meeting Wednesday 18 November 2026

PAGE 1: BACKGROUND AND EVIDENCE

1. Purpose

Burlescombe Parish Council is concerned about the performance of South West Water and its effect on residents, communities and the environment.

These concerns relate not to the company's frontline employees, but to its management, investment, infrastructure and environmental performance.

2. Customer bills

Households served by South West Water continue to face among the highest average water and wastewater bills in England and Wales.

Published comparisons for 2026/27 place the company's average combined household bill at approximately **£740 a year**, around £101 above the England and Wales average of £639.

Residents paying comparatively high bills are entitled to expect reliable services, resilient infrastructure, value for money and strong environmental performance.

3. Environmental performance

The Environment Agency records that, between 2011 and 2025, South West Water was consistently rated either **one star, “poor performing”, or two stars, “requires improvement”**.

The company received the lowest one-star rating five times, more than any other water and sewerage company recorded in the assessment. It was again rated one star for 2025.

This demonstrates a longstanding pattern of poor or below-target environmental performance, rather than an isolated year of difficulty.

4. Sewage discharges

There is continuing public concern about sewage discharges into rivers, coastal waters and bathing areas.

Analysis published by Surfers Against Sewage on 1 April 2026 reported that, in the early part of 2026, South West Water had recorded the highest total sewage-discharge duration among English water companies, at more than **39,000 hours**. This was an early-year analysis of live-alert information, rather than the final annual regulatory dataset.

Later analysis attributed to Surfers Against Sewage identified **1,380 dry-weather spills**, lasting 12,567 hours, during the first six months of 2026.

The condition of the region's rivers and coastal waters is important to public health, wildlife, recreation and the South West's visitor economy.

5. Leakage and security of supply

According to South West Water, it repaired more than **26,700 leaks** across Devon and Cornwall in the 12 months to 14 September 2026, equivalent to approximately 73 repairs a day. The company said that around 30% of the leaks it identified were associated with customer-owned pipework.

However, a joint regulatory letter reported by Devon County Council stated that leakage was **18.5% above forecast** and had increased to **113.54 million litres per day in 2025/26**. The letter warned that this trend placed customers at greater risk during continuing drought conditions.

It is unreasonable to ask residents to reduce their consumption without expecting equally urgent and effective action to reduce losses from the wider network.

6. Infrastructure and housing growth

The Council is concerned about whether water supply, sewerage and wastewater-treatment capacity will keep pace with planned housing and population growth.

The Council believes that significant development should be supported by transparent, development-specific evidence demonstrating that sufficient capacity exists. Where additional capacity is required, infrastructure improvements should be completed before or alongside development, rather than after problems emerge.

Ofwat's 2026 cost-change process recognises the need for additional expenditure on asset health and growth, including growth at sewage-treatment works and increases in water demand.

South West Water states that it is undertaking a substantial investment programme to 2030, including £760 million to tackle storm overflows. The Council welcomes promised investment but considers that public confidence will depend on measurable, independently verified and sustained results.

7. Action by councils in Cornwall

On 21 July 2026, Cornwall Council passed a vote of no confidence in South West Water by **68 votes in favour, none against** and two abstentions. Its official report states that this followed similar votes by **16 town and parish councils in Cornwall**.

The Cornwall model motion seeks a Special Administration Order and the transfer of services to a publicly owned organisation. St Agnes Parish Council adopted a formal letter following that approach.

The proposed Burlescombe Parish Council motion is narrower. It concentrates on performance, regulation and infrastructure without requiring the Council to adopt a particular position on the future ownership of the company.

PROPOSED MOTION

Vote of No Confidence in South West Water

It is proposed that Burlescombe Parish Council resolves as follows:

Burlescombe Parish Council, representing the residents of the parish, considers that public confidence in South West Water has been seriously undermined by:

- household water and wastewater bills which remain among the highest in England and Wales;
- its long-standing record of poor or below-target environmental performance;
- continuing sewage discharges into rivers, coastal waters and bathing areas;
- unacceptable levels of leakage and the associated concerns about security of supply;
- concerns about the condition, capacity and resilience of water and wastewater infrastructure; and
- the need for infrastructure investment to keep pace with population growth and new housing development.

The Council acknowledges the investment programme announced by South West Water and recognises the work undertaken by its frontline employees.

Nevertheless, residents are entitled to expect demonstrable and sustained improvements in environmental performance, infrastructure resilience, service reliability and value for money.

Burlescombe Parish Council therefore declares that it has no confidence in the current performance and management of South West Water.

The Council further resolves:

1. Regulatory action

To write to Ofwat, the Environment Agency and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, asking:

- what further regulatory and enforcement action will be taken;
- how improvements will be measured and independently verified;
- what timetable will apply to those improvements; and
- how South West Water will be held accountable if it fails to deliver them.

2. Infrastructure and development

To call for water-supply, sewerage and wastewater-treatment capacity to be given greater weight when significant new housing development is considered.

The Council further calls for:

- transparent, development-specific assessments of existing capacity;
- the cumulative effects of planned development to be taken into account;
- clear consultation with affected communities; and

- necessary infrastructure improvements to be delivered before or alongside development.

3. Parliamentary representation

To send this resolution to the Member of Parliament representing Burlescombe Parish Council residents and ask them to:

- raise these concerns with the Government;
- seek a response from the Secretary of State;
- press for effective regulatory and, where necessary, legislative intervention; and
- support measures that deliver reliable services, adequate infrastructure and improved environmental performance.

4. Collective action by local councils

To circulate this resolution to parish and town councils across Devon and other communities served by South West Water, inviting them to consider adopting the same or a substantially similar motion. To also share this resolution with our Mid Devon District Councillors and our Devon County Councillor.

5. Coordinated representation

Where other councils support this initiative, to seek a coordinated approach so that the resolutions can be presented collectively to:

- Members of Parliament;
- the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs;
- Ofwat;
- the Environment Agency;
- South West Water; and
- relevant principal local authorities.

6. Authority to act

To authorise the Chair and Parish Clerk, following consultation with the Council, to:

- finalise and issue the necessary correspondence;
- share the adopted resolution with other councils;
- coordinate responses from supporting councils; and
- publish the resolution through the Council's usual communication channels.