Torcross – sea defences and post-storm impacts

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Environment Agency (EA) response to questions provided by residents following site meeting 27 February 2026

1. **Urgency of response** The Torcross community understands the purpose of the sea defence is to prevent risk from flood and coastal erosion (e.g. overtopping) to property (from direct flood damage and wave impact vibration damage), infrastructure, utilities, life, health etc. With significantly lowered beach levels the sea defence is no longer able to fulfil this purpose, so we are now subject to a continual level of risk of overtopping and wave impact vibration. Even moderate future weather events represent a risk, and many properties may not survive another winter.
   - Why is the situation not classified as an emergency and being handled with more urgency?
   - Why isn't the EA acting more quickly, with short term solutions (e.g. rock armour, shingle recharge) to mitigate these immediate risks?

We really do appreciate the severity and urgency of the situation in Torcross, and the desire for an 'emergency' response that would deliver mitigation works this year. Given the significant cost of major unprogrammed works needed to achieve this, a decision on in-year funding availability is beyond local approval (see Q4 later). This situation is being discussed as a matter of urgency with senior colleagues. We hope to be able to clarify the outcome of these discussions with the community in April 2026.

During and following recent storm affecting property here, our initial response regarding 'emergency' was based on inspections and understanding that the defence was sound and not at risk of structural failure. This is still the case, but now having witnessed the impact and consequence of beach lowering on the defence and the community behind, we are progressing our project development (economic feasibility, assessment of construction costs & benefits, business case and approval of funding) on the assumption works are 'emergency' but a decision on available funding is beyond local approval and we await this outcome. Small-scale, low-cost mitigation works are unlikely to be effective in this high-energy environment, and that is why significant and therefore more costly works are needed.

2. **Wave impact vibration** Ongoing wave impact vibration due to beach erosion is causing structural damage, risk to life and properties to become uninhabitable (residents liken the impact to continual seismic activity). How are you treating the impact of wave impact vibration due to beach erosion? What form should vibration data take to be useful as an input to your narrative?

We are developing the project and business case for public money identified based on established government funding rules and project appraisal guidance Flood and coastal erosion risk management projects and funding - GOV.UK

Detailed information and data specific to vibration is not currently required for project appraisal but the impact experienced will inform the business case narrative and 'damages' assessment.

3. SMP "Hold the Line"

a. **Meaning and influence** The community does not feel that, with lowered beach levels, the existing sea defence will be able to support the SMP "Hold the Line" designation until 2055. How does the EA treat the "Hold the Line" designation and how does this influence EA funding and prioritization?

SMPs are non-statutory policy documents that support the sustainable management of coastal flood and erosion risk. All statements identified in SMPs should be referenced relative to the overarching 'generic approach' that 'depend on funding and relevant approvals.' Timescales identified 'should not be taken as definitive and should be considered as phases in the management of a location.'

Shoreline management at Torcross is included within the Strete to Limpet Rocks Policy Unit reference 6b75 and 6b76 https://environment.data.gov.uk/shoreline-planning/unit/SMP16/6B76

Policy statements relevant to Torcross are covered by the Durlston Head to Rame Head SMP 2 (June 2011), including Part 1 https://environment.data.gov.uk/shoreline-planning/documents/SMP16%2FSDAD_SMP2_Policy_Statement_Part_1.pdf

and

https://environment.data.gov.uk/shoreline-planning/documents/SMP16%2FSDAD_SMP2_Policy_Statement_Part_2.pdf

Determination of a policy is based on a standardised technical/engineering, economic and environmental options assessment within each management unit. Although non-statutory, this policy needs to be considered (and have clear, justified reasoning if not followed) as part of project business case development and approval. SMP policy does therefore 'influence' but not prioritise' funding.

Hold The Line management at Torcross to 2055 should therefore be considered in context of above. Hold The Line Policy is consistent with the management approach being progressed but as identified, is dependent on funding and relevant approvals.

b. **Extending the sea defence further north** You mentioned that, per the SLP strategy, the SMP2 refresh already extends the "Hold the Line" designation further North. Please can you share details of this? To achieve this, the EA and SHDC/DCC sea defences would need to be considered as a single system to avoid the EA defence from being outflanked. How are you treating the interaction between these defences in your appraisal and business case?

The detail within SMP that relates to extending the Hold The Line policy further north is identified in Policy Unit reference 6b75 and 6b76 which states 'Key recommendations of the Strategy which relate to this unit include: Consideration will be given to reviewing SMP policy that extends the Hold The Line policy at Torcross to include the frontage in front of the existing car park to maintain community resilience here.

Consideration will be given to updating the existing SMP policies as part of an agreed Strategy'.

'Consideration' as part of the review process means, in effect, change in SMP policy is to be agreed. Although change has not been confirmed, it has in effect been agreed as part of the Strategy Review and therefore will not affect the outcome of the business case.

Within our economic assessment we are considering the car park as an essential part of Torcross which supports an estimated 288,000 visitors annually. We are assuming that any proposed works now will include a form of defence to reduce the risk of outflanking and protection in front of the car park.

4. **Funding process and timeline** How does the EA funding process work and how quickly will we know what funding is available? What approaches can we take to speed up this process given the immediate risks?

From the meeting we took it to be: 1) Initial assessment to get funding from regional budget to build full business case - 2 weeks, 2) Full business case for the funding bid - done by June for the next funding round, 3) Funding confirmed - 9 months after June, 4) Funding released - no committed timeline. So absolute best-case funding released April 2027.

There are two basic criteria public projects have to meet for approval.

(a) to demonstrate that it is economically justifiable – through the development and approval of a 'business case'

(b) to secure the necessary funding – which is a function of funding availability and prioritisation.

Business Case

Approval of a 'business case' follows rules set out by HM Treasury which are applicable to most publicly funded projects, as well as Appraisal Guidance published by the EA specifically for FCERM projects Flood and coastal erosion risk management projects and funding - GOV.UK

A typical business case will consider the strategic context and the nature of the problem, the range of possible options (including the baseline Do Nothing Option) and their respective pro's/con's, impacts, costs and benefits etc. It will identify and justify a 'preferred option' and its requirements, setting out how it is to be procured and managed. Central to this is demonstrating that the proposed solution is economically justifiable and good value for public money. This is normally evaluated in terms of an economic Benefit-Cost ratio, which has to be greater than 1. This ratio helps to prioritise projects within a programme. Based on estimated costs and benefits identified to date, works required at Torcross are economically justified, but a decision on funding availability is yet to be confirmed.

We employ consultants to undertake this work using consistent, well-established methodologies and datasets. National standardised datasets are used at this stage to get consistency between projects. Local data can be brought in as required later, depending on need to justify project further.

The resulting business case and proposed project budget is then subject to a technical Assurance review by an independent Environment Agency (EA) team, and then financial Approval by an authorised Director. There are different levels for each of these, depending on the scale, cost and complexity of the project. Approval of a project's business case is a major milestone and effectively means that we can proceed with delivering it within the approved budget but subject to available funding.

Programmed project funding availability

Government provides a fixed amount of Grant to the EA each year to deliver a Programme of eligible projects around England. There is an annual cycle by which the Programme is established and approved. This process starts in May/June with project funding requests being submitted by Local Authorities and local EA teams. Demand always exceeds supply, so available funding has to be allocated, using prioritisation criteria agreed with DEFRA.

Unprogrammed project funding availability

This will need to be agreed and secured from projects outside of our EA area (Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly). An indicative estimate of project cost for a rock armouring project at Torcross is approximately £10 million. Therefore, to deliver an unprogrammed scheme at Torcross in 2026/27, we need to secure additional funding from our National Programme of projects. These urgent discussions are ongoing, with a decision on availability of funding expected in April 2026.

This is a different timeline discussed at recent meeting. These estimates were based on an expectation and understanding of funding decision-making at the time which has now changed.

5. Funding appraisal

a. What's the appraisal period and what is the rationale for it? Is it similar to competing projects?

To note, detail appraisal work is ongoing. Response from our Consultant doing the project appraisal so far identifies:

'We are using a 100-year appraisal period in line with Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) project appraisal guidance. This aligns with Treasury Green Book and the Flood Hazard Research Centre FCERM: Handbook for Economic Appraisal given the normal longevity of FCERM assets. 100 years allows the long-term economic sustainability to be understood.

b. What risk scenarios are you considering in your appraisal e.g. overtopping, wave impact vibration, outflanking/breach?

We are considering wave overtopping and wave impact vibration. Property erosion due to outflanking isn't directly considered as we think properties would be 'written off' (i.e. no longer able to provide a useful function) by frequent flood damage before they are eroded.

Appraisal of vibration is less clear in terms of funding eligibility and needs to be presented carefully within the business case to be considered. Funding eligibility to reduce the risk of flooding and coastal erosion is better defined in guidance.

c. What cost avoidance are you considering and how are each of these appraised? [By "cost avoidance", I presume damage avoidance is being referred to] In particular:

i. Damage to residential and commercial property from overtopping and wave impact vibration

In the 'no investment' case, we are assuming sea front properties are written off after 5 years, a period estimated until the property owners determine it is not viable to repair the properties again. It is considered that immediate write-off is too pessimistic and the business case would lose creditability, with for little economic benefit bringing forward. With the investment (scheme) in place, properties are not written off and flood damage due to overtopping of waves is reduced to a low impact and rare occurrence.

ii. Damage to transport, utility and community infrastructure (water, sewerage etc)

Not considered. With the loss of the A379 Slapton Line road assumed for all scenarios, the remaining road will only serve the affected properties in Torcross. Similarly, it is assumed utilities and

community infrastructure only serve the affected properties. This aligns with industry guidance detailed in the Flood Hazard Research Centre FCERM: Handbook for Economic Appraisal

iii. Risk to people (e.g. life safety, loss of safe access/egress, public health impacts from uncontrolled escape of sewage)

These have been calculated following guidance within Flood Hazard Research Centre FCERM: Handbook for Economic Appraisal. Risk to life has been calculated via guidance from DEFRA based on flood hazard (function of depth and velocity plus things like warning, rate of rise and land use) and Department for Transport valuation of a life. This is only calculated when a property has a residential use (prescribed by guidance to avoid double counting people at home & work for example) and where the property has not already been written off.

- In 'no investment' case, properties along the frontage are assumed to be written off in year 5. Primarily due to repeating structural damage to the properties. The loss of safe access would further support this write-off assumption.
- We have also included allowances for the impacts of flooding and property loss on mental health, and the intangible impacts of flooding on people due to loss of personal effects etc
- In addition to the direct damage to properties and contents, we have also included the cost of temporary housing.
- For businesses, we have included an allowance for businesses incurring additional costs when trying to limit the impact of flooding – e.g. the cost of staff moving assets away from the most at risk locations.
- Based on sewer records, we believe the local urban drainage network is served by a pumping station that pumps sewage inland for treatment. There is an overflow, but this discharges south of Torcross and not through the area being considered. Within the area being considered, properties are served by a sewer that runs along the back of properties following the A379. Aligning with the principles in the guidance, we would only consider sewage impacts where the sewer is at direct risk of erosion and where it serves more than the properties directly affected

iv. The cost of emergency response from future events

This is 10.7% of the capped direct damage based on guidance provided in the Flood Hazard Research Centre's economic handbook.

v. Broader economic impacts from damage to transport, utility and community infrastructure – these impact not only Torcross directly but other businesses in the South Hams

The wider impacts primarily relate to the economic case for maintaining the road.

- There will be no broader impacts to transport, utilities or community infrastructure

- The impact to tourism & recreation has been considered.

- Work for the Beach Management Plan identified 288,000 visitors to Torcross annually.

- We assume visitors would respond differently, some continuing to come to the beach (20%), many others displacing to nearly similar destinations (travel cost impact) and a small proportion (6% would stay at home)

- We assume visitor impact would take 10 years to increase from zero to, estimated £287.4k/yr

vi. Damage to designated environmental sites and habitats

Not considered. The works to protect the community in Torcross is not considered to protect the designated ridge or Ley and therefore it is assumed to have no delay/mitigation of damage to the environmental features and habitat.

6. **Solutions** Rock armour is the most obvious solution but comes with trade-offs for Torcross as a destination (e.g. permanent loss of the beach). When in the process will you evaluate solutions and how will you involve the community (and other stakeholders) in this process?

An evaluation of project options to determine a preferred approach will be ongoing through the business case development phase. The timeframe for this will be dependent on outcome of 'emergency' approach highlighted above. Engagement with the community on decision-making is an important requirement of any project impacting the natural and man-made environment. Engagement will happen but will be proportionate depending on timescales for approval and delivery of any works, yet to be determined. If a rock armour scheme is proposed which is likely, under 'emergency' conditions this work will have to be done quickly to meet accelerated timescales and therefore time for engagement will be more limited. With such a scheme, it means there is likely to be a change in the current recreational use of the beach in front of the defence which we hope the community will recognise as necessary to reduce the risk to property.