Environment Agency: Torcross sea defences

Responses to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) No. 3

12 June 2026

Project Update

Since our previous FAQ's (2 April 2026) work on the Environment Agency's proposed rock armour project at Torcross has continued progressing at pace. Headlines include:

- The scheme's business case was approved and £19.8m funding secured
- The main rock armour design has been finalised, with the focus now being on the detail of the north and south ends of the scheme.
- An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening assessment has been completed and issued to statutory consultees for consideration. Various detailed environmental assessments are underway, and discussions with key stakeholders ongoing.
- We have formally contracted Kier to construct the scheme – enabling them to start construction planning and procuring rock and marine plant.
- Investigations into movement of, and voids beneath, the existing sea defences continue.

We will be holding a **public drop-in event at Stokenham Village Hall on Tuesday 30th June** when we will share details of the scheme and be on hand to answer questions. We will be formally advertising this very shortly.

Latest community Questions:

Q1. Why are you spending the money to defend Torcross rather than on the road which would benefit more people?

Funding comes from completely different sources and purposes and aligns with very different organisational responsibilities.

The money we have secured to strengthen the Torcross sea defences is coming out of the Environment Agency's Investment Programme, which is provided by Government via the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) specifically for maintaining or improving flood defences to communities around England. It is not *additional* funding but has been secured from within the EA's existing Programme budget.

The road falls under the responsibility of Devon County Council, as the Highways Authority. The Council has declared that it cannot afford to reinstate it from within its

existing budgets and has therefore made a special bid to the Department of Transport (DfT) for additional funding.

Each case also needs to be assessed in terms of economic justification, environmental impact and sustainability etc separately and on its individual merits. So, whilst for residents and users there is an understandable commonality, from a funding and decision-making perspective Torcross and the road are essentially separate issues.

Q2. The shingle has already started to come back so why do we need rock armour?

We know that beach levels at Torcross naturally fluctuate. Detailed work over many years by the University of Plymouth show that (in broad terms) whilst southerly winds remove shingle from the Torcross end of Slapton Sands, easterly winds bring it back – and this is exactly what has happened recently.

Moreover, the events of December and January showed just how *quickly* significant beach loss can occur during periods of high energy storms. The beach levels at Torcross dropped by over 2m to their lowest levels on record - in as many weeks. This was the fundamental cause of the devastating impacts.

We cannot predict when this might happen again, but we believe that it is likely that it will – and we have seen the effects that that can have. The prevailing weather is southerly and the overall long-term trend at Torcross is one of beach lowering.

The rationale for the project is therefore to mitigate for this (current or future) beach loss by placing rock armour at the toe of the sea defences. If beach levels are naturally high then the rock may just be fully or partially covered in shingle. However, if beach levels are naturally low, then the rock armour will be there to absorb much of the energy of the breaking waves and cover the toe piles that would otherwise be exposed.

Finally, we have worked *very* hard to secure the funding for the project, and to mobilise a project so quickly. We have compressed work that we would normally undertake over many years into a matter of months. We have successfully managed to do so *only* because we have argued that the extent of damages sustained by the community and the risk that it could happen again next winter justifies an extra-ordinary and urgent response. It does feel like a ‘take it or leave it’ opportunity that is unlikely to be repeated.

Q3. How will people access the sea once rock armour is deployed? Can the rock armour be designed in such a way as to maintain a beach at Torcross?

For obvious safety reasons we don’t want to encourage people to be climbing over the rock armour, so we are not incorporating access steps through the rock armour in the design.

However, we recognise that beach/sea access is a very important part of Torcross and Slapton Sands. We are therefore aiming to extend the existing steps at the southern end and to extend the slipway at the northern end to facilitate access if/when beach levels permit.

It may be that the natural processes will at times result in shingle partially or fully covering the rock armour. But we recognise that at other times – when shingle levels are low - the beach in front of the sea defences will effectively be replaced by rock.

Q4. How long will the rock armour last?

The rock itself will last indefinitely, however the design life of the 'rock armour design' has been set to the year 2060. This broadly aligns with the anticipated change in coastal management policy set out in the Shoreline Management Plan (SMP), from "Hold the Line" to "Managed Realignment" which is nominally in 2055.

A key factor in the engineering design of the rock armour is estimating future beach levels. If beach levels drop, the toe of the rock armour will also drop and the section will settle and rotate, becoming steeper. If it becomes *too steep* it will be at risk of losing its structural integrity and falling apart during high energy storms. Also, as beach levels drop, breaking wave energy at the defences will increase making this more likely.

Slapton Sands benefits from being one of the most surveyed and studied beaches in the UK. Our Coastal Monitoring programme and the University of Plymouth have both been carrying out regular beach level surveys since 2007, so we have very good historical datasets. We have undertaken a detailed statistical analysis of that record and the long-term trends it shows. As a result, we predict that by 2060 average beach levels at Torcross may be 3m lower than they are today (at which point the beach at the toe of the existing sea defences will be almost permanently submerged at all states of the tide).

The design is therefore based on that assumption – and makes allowance for 3m of future beach lowering and the gradual rotation and settlement of the rock armour section that would be expected to occur as a result.

This of course is an estimate-based design assumption. The vagaries of future weather events and climate change impacts, and their effects on Torcross's very dynamic coastal geomorphology are impossible to predict with certainty. But we have taken a rational and evidence-based approach which gives us confidence that the rock armour will remain effective without the need for significant maintenance for several decades at least.

Q5. Is the EA still on track to deliver the proposed scheme in time for next winter? When will you know for certain if/when it will start?

We are still on track to substantially deliver the scheme in 2026. At the moment our programme shows Kier mobilising on site in mid-August with a first delivery of rock in mid-September and a final delivery in early January. This is however based on a number of key planning assumptions in particular relating to rock delivery and consents.

Rock deliveries will be dictated by when the specialist marine plant and shipping is available. This is still to be confirmed, but we have contracted Kier early to enable them to book the necessary plant and shipping, and we hope to have a clearer picture on this by the end of the month.

The other critical programme factor relates to consents and licences. The site lies within the Slapton Ley Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the South Devon National Character Area, and close to the Skerries Banks and Surrounds Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ). We need to demonstrate to statutory consultees Natural England (NE), the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) and the Local Planning Authority (LPA) that we are not going to cause significant environmental damage, and we will need to obtain a MMO Licence. This involves us making various environmental assessments to submit to the statutory consultees, who need time to properly review and evaluate them.

This work – and supporting discussions with NE, MMO and the LPA – is well underway but will take some time to conclude and the outcome is not a certainty. If there are significant objections to our proposals, or if further – more detailed – environmental impact assessment work is deemed to be necessary, then it is very unlikely that we will be able to undertake the scheme this year.

Our programme assumption is that all necessary consents will be in place by mid-August – giving us the green light to proceed with construction. However, at this point in time, consents are probably the key delivery risk and are something we are monitoring very closely.

Q6. Is there a back-up plan for the wall if the works are delayed or cannot be completed?

At the moment all our energies are focused on trying to deliver the proposed project in 2026. We have successfully cleared several of the key hurdles involved, including getting business case approval, securing funding, and appointing and mobilising a project team - all at great pace.

Nevertheless, there are some critical hurdles we still need to clear - in particular obtaining the necessary statutory consents and permissions and securing specialist shipping. These could delay (or even theoretically prevent) delivery, and whilst we are trying to actively manage these, they are not fully in our control.

If any of these risks does materialise and prevent or delay the project, then we will consider what alternative or contingency plans might be possible in the circumstances at that point in time.

Q7. What will happen to the Car Park?

The situation at the car park is a bit more complicated than elsewhere. This is partly because the Environment Agency (promoting the Torcross defences project), Devon County Council (the Highways Authority responsible for the road) and South Hams District Council (the Coastal Protection Authority and Car Park lease holder) all have overlapping interests; and partly because whilst the EA project is progressing at an accelerated pace, whilst the position of DCC's bid to Government for funding to repair the road at this point remains unclear.

However, EA, DCC and SHDC are all agreed of the importance to the community of the car park and therefore of the need to reinstate the defence in front of it – regardless of what happens with the A379. We are working collaboratively to overcome the complications, and the EA has included reinstatement of the car park defence in our design – whilst we work out the details.

Q8. Can the defensive gates in the sea wall be opened/altered/improved? Currently they trap shingle and water on the landward side?

The gates were installed for public safety reasons – to discourage people from accessing the revetment when beach levels were low and there is a risk of falling off a significant vertical edge at the toe piles, or when storm waves are breaking on/over the revetment.

There are regular drainage holes through the sea defences, and we are not convinced that modifying the gates would make a huge difference in this regard – but would welcome any photo's etc that would indicate otherwise, and we will keep this under review.

Q9. Can the Slipway be reopened ahead of EA works if sufficient shingle has returned?

The safety fencing was erected by Devon County Council following the storm damage, and if beach levels make it safe then DCC have confirmed they are happy to remove it.