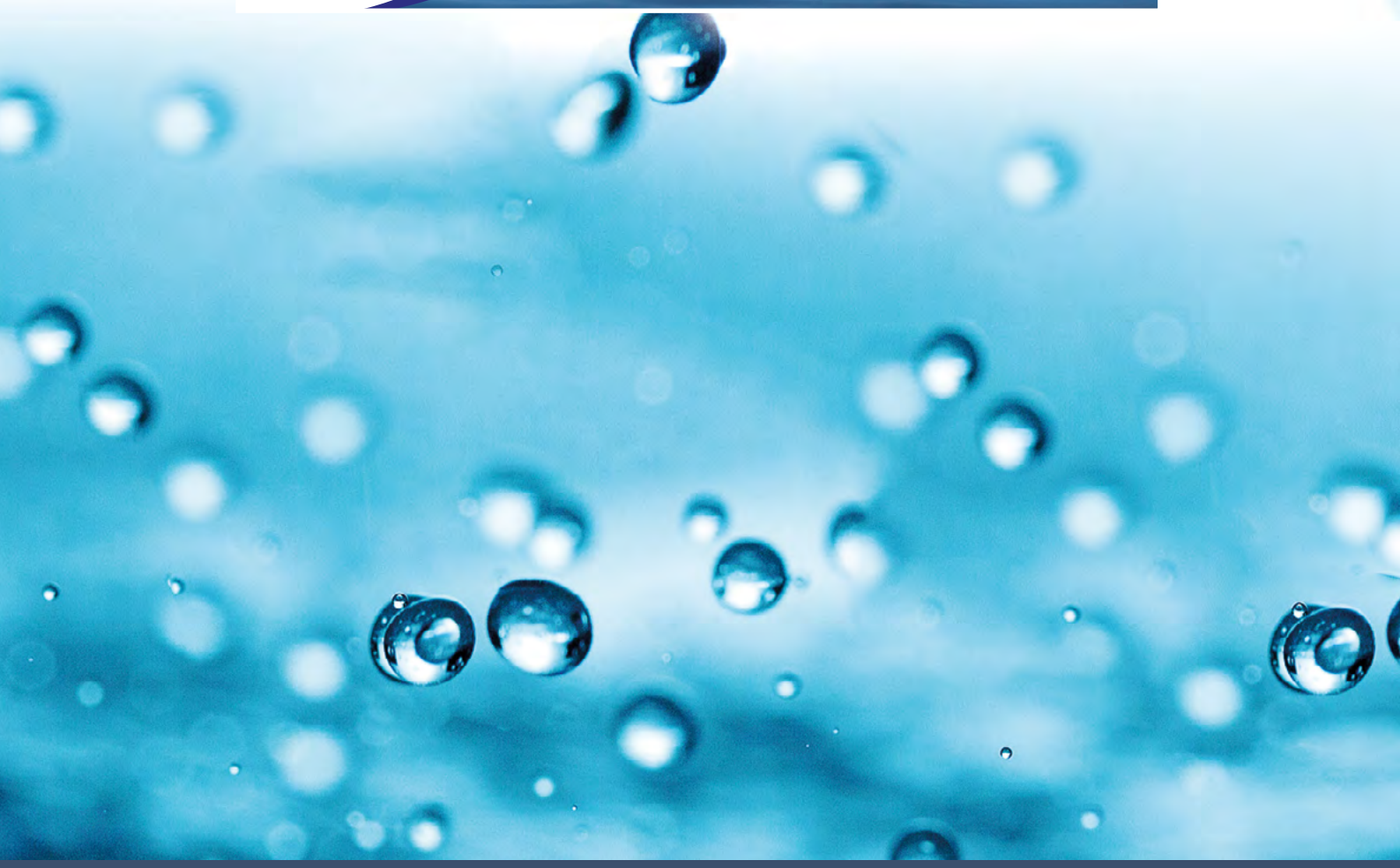
Suffolk Flood Risk Management Partnership



Consenting Works on Ordinary Watercourses and Culvert Policy

APRIL 2026

Consenting Works on Ordinary Watercourses and Culvert Policy

1. Purpose and Authority

Suffolk County Council (SCC) is the Lead Local Flood Authority under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. SCC is responsible for consenting works on ordinary watercourses outside Internal Drainage Board areas. The policy aims to minimise flood risk and environmental harm arising from works in, over, under, or near watercourses.

2. Legal Framework

Works affecting ordinary watercourses are regulated under the Land Drainage Act 1991 (as amended by the Flood and Water Management Act). Under section 23 (1) of the Act, consent is required for culverts, obstructions, alterations, or any works likely to affect flow (permanent or temporary). Unauthorized works may result in enforcement action, including notices, prosecution, and recovery of costs.

3. Core Policy Position

SCC applies a strong presumption against culverting. Watercourses should be kept open wherever practicable. Culverting will only be considered where a genuine need is demonstrated and no reasonable alternative exists. All proposals must avoid increasing flood risk and must protect ecological and environmental value.

Culverting can increase flood risk, reduce flood storage, harm ecology, restrict maintenance access, increase long-term costs, worsen pollution, and prevent future restoration. These risks are particularly significant in urban environments.

4. Preferred Alternatives to Culverting

Preferred solutions are, in order: retaining an open watercourse, installing a single-span bridge or diverting the watercourse.

5. Consenting Process

Applicants must obtain written consent before work commences. The legislation does not allow for retrospective consent to be provided. Applications are assessed against flood risk, hydraulic performance, ecology, water quality, health and safety, and compliance with statutory acts and legislation.

Land Drainage Act consent is separate from planning permission and other approvals.

6. Design Expectations (Where Culverts Are Unavoidable)

Culverts must be designed to recognised standards in accordance with CIRIA Culvert Design & Operation Guide (C689). Key principles include installing the maximum practical diameter shortest possible lengths, avoidance of sharp bends and screens, preference for single pipes, and provision for safe inspection and maintenance access.

Here are some of the other things you should consider:

- Trash & security screens should be avoided if possible.
- Access points for maintenance should be provided under the following circumstances:
  - Where a drain or pipe changes direction horizontally by more than 30 degrees
  - When there's a change in pipe diameter
  - Where there is a major junction with other pipes
  - Every 45m for straight run pipes/culverts
  - Every 100m for man-entry culverts

7. Other Consent Matters

Specific guidance applies to headwalls, watercourse diversions, utilities crossings, weirs, dams, and natural flood management measures. Temporary monitoring equipment may be exempt from consent where strict criteria are met. Please contact **floods@suffolk.gov.uk** for further guidance.

Utilities beneath a watercourse should have sufficient cover below the bed, marker posts on either side of the watercourse and a strike plate to prevent accidental damage.

Some temporary works that affect the flow of an ordinary watercourse may also require consent. diverting the watercourse.

8. Environmental Considerations

Environmental impacts are a central consideration. Works must avoid harm to ecology, morphology, water quality, landscape, and amenity. Removal of trees and hedgerows is discouraged, and mitigation will be required where impacts cannot be avoided.

9. Planning Considerations

SCC will normally advise an LPA against planning approval for schemes involving culverting where alternatives exist. Buildings should not be constructed over or within 10 metres of culverts due to maintenance, flood risk, and exceedance flow requirements.

Overall policy position:

- keep watercourses open wherever possible;
- culvert only as a last resort,
- supported by strong justification and mitigation.

Thank you for reading our document.