OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 23 JANUARY 2023

THAMES WATER BRIEFING

Executive Summary

At the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21 October 2022 Members agreed to invite representatives of Thames Water to discuss concerns that are held over the health of the Rivers Bourne and Wey that run through the Borough, particularly in relation to the effects of sewage overspill. Thames Water operates wastewater and sewage treatment infrastructure adjacent to waterways in the Borough.

Thames Water has accepted an invitation to attend a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, provide a presentation, and answer queries raised by Members.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That

(i) the report be noted; and

(ii) the presentation be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Following a request made by Councillor John Morley, the Committee agreed to invite Thames Water to a future meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.2 Members are concerned that Water Treatment Plants operated by Thames Water in the Borough are discharging untreated sewage into waterways.

1.3 It is hoped that the session will; assist Members and residents in understanding the issue of sewage overspill and water quality, the responsibilities of relevant organisations, and possible actions that might be taken in the future.

2.0 Thames Water

2.1 Thames Water is the largest provider of water and wastewater facilities in the UK.

2.2 Over 15 million people have their wastewater processed by Thames Water across London and the Thames Valley. In addition, Thames Water provides water to 10 million people.

2.3 Thames Water provides all mains wastewater services in Woking Borough and the surrounding area.

3.0 Processing Plants

3.1 Thames Water operates a Sewage Treatment Works on Carters Lane, Old Woking, adjacent to Hoe Stream.

3.2 Thames Water also operates a Sewage Treatment Works on Broadford Lane adjacent to The Bourne river. The works is along the border shared with the neighbouring borough of Surrey Heath.

4.0 Water quality in Woking borough

4.1 Water quality is a complex issue in relation to our rivers and has many factors, with sewerage overflows being just one of them. Others are:

- highway discharges - road network runoff is discharged directly into rivers untreated, resulting in microplastic (tyre particles) and chemicals from our highways entering our watercourses)
- misconnections (foul discharges connected to the surface water sewer system (domestic property extensions are at times a cause of this)
- agricultural land runoff (fertilisers and pesticides)
- parks and golf course land run off (fertilisers, pesticides)

4.2 Often many of these pollutants are held within the silt and settle to the beds and banks of the rivers for many years to come until they are disturbed. To improve water quality within the rivers it is necessary to also address how we deal with our land management practices within the catchment and look at more sustainable options, such as different fertilisers, installation of Sustainable Drainage Systems (including in our highways) and our general water management practices. With regard to highway runoff, Woking borough is retrofitting raingardens in some areas to treat, attenuate and control surface runoff before it enters the river.

4.3 Often during summer months water quality drops within rivers as the water levels drop in the channels, meaning the chemicals that enter our waterways are no longer sufficiently diluted, the rivers also become more accessible, and the silts often get disturbed. Dry conditions often mean the build-up of chemicals on our roadways, and result in further disturbances of the silts that historically hold some of these pollutants. Summer rain often washes the build-up of

pollutants from our highways directly into the river, which are frequently low, causing sudden drops of water quality. Intense summer storms that cause surface water flooding often result in the foul system becoming hydraulically overloaded - foul systems in highways are aerated (holes in the manholes) allowing the flood water to enter - this causes the sewer overflows to the rivers but also the highway drainage transfers this untreated water directly to the watercourses as well.

4.4 It is important to monitor the areas that possible pollutants can enter the watercourse. Downstream of outfalls, with the aim of identifying key sources and incorporating mitigation to help reduce these pollutants entering. Highway run off is however more difficult to address.

4.5 Woking Council has been part of the Wey Landscape Partnership for a number of years, helping to address some issues in the catchments (including water quality and invasive species), improve monitoring and undertaking enhancement work. The Partnership is chaired by Surrey Wildlife Trust.

4.6 The Wildlife Trust also runs a program called river fly monitoring through which volunteers are trained and record the presence of river fly (a key indicator on the quality of the river water and its habitat) as well as water quality testing. The majority of this work to date however has focused in the upper catchment, led by the River Wey Trust who have been helped and supported by Surrey Wildlife Trust.

4.7 In terms of sewerage overflows, the two main local treatment plants are located at Byfleet (Wisley Lane) and Old Woking (Carters Lane discharges to the Hoe Stream, a tributary of the River Wey).

4.8 Thames Water consulted this year in relation to its Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan. For more information see www.thameswater.co.uk/about-us/regulation/drainage-and-wastewater-management This document will be a key component to helping ensure water quality is improved in our waterways in the future.

4.9 Defra is currently looking into implementation of the Sustainable Drainage Approval Body (SAB), which would mean that any works that have a drainage implication would need SAB consent. If implemented correctly with the correct organisation identified as the SAB, this would mean all development including highway works and permitted development works will need to incorporate Sustainable drainage systems. Therefore, new highway works would no longer rely solely on the traditional gully drainage system that transfers pollutants quickly to the watercourse but would need to treat the water before it enters as well as controlling the runoff rates. These systems can also reduce the risk of surface water flooding from intense storms, reducing the risk of hydraulically overloading the foul sewers. Whilst such a step would not retrofit to address current issues, it could ensure the problem is not made worse.

4.10 A further local opportunity to assist water quality in our waterways is by designing areas into any future local flood risk reduction schemes.

5.0 Commitments from Thames Water

5.1 On 15 March 2022 Sarah Bentley, CEO of Thames Water, spoke at the Rivers Trust Spring Conference on the topic of untreated discharges into waterways.

5.2 At the conference, Sarah Bentley reiterated Thames Water's stance "that all discharges of untreated sewage are unacceptable, even when they are permitted."[1]

5.3 Thames Water is currently reviewing all of its sites to ensure that they are compliant with the requirements made by regulatory bodies under all conditions (1).

[1] www.thameswater.co.uk/media-library/home/about-us/newsroom/latest-news/2022/April/sarah-bentley-rivers-trust-speech.pdf [accessed 19 December 2022]

5.4 At the same conference, Thames Water committed to reducing the total annual duration of spills to 50% and reducing spill duration by 80% in sensitive catchments by 2030.

5.5 The commitment to reduce sewage discharges has been reiterated in the Thames Water 'Annual Report and Sustainability Report'[2].

6.0 Statistics

6.1 A temporary licence (TH-TEMP.2484-001) to discharge prior to processing was granted on 2 November 1989 which ran until 2 September 2010[3]. A new licence (TH-TEMP.2484-002) was granted on 3 September 2010 and is in effect[4]

6.1.1 Storm overflow annual return statistics for 2021 indicate there has been 1139.87 total hours of spill into the Bourne[5] from commissioning in 2019.

6.2 A licence (CTCR.1977) to discharge prior to processing has been in operation since 18 March 1983 covering the Thames Water site at Lyne Lane in Chertsey.

6.2.1 Storm overflow annual return statistics for 2021 indicate there has been 654.22 total hours of spill into Chertsey Bourne[6] from commissioning in 2019

7.0 Corporate Strategy

7.1 The invitation to discuss sewage and wastewater overspill supports the Woking For All Strategy's Greener Communities strand by scrutinising the health of local waterways, seeking to protect environmental quality, conserve and restore existing habitats.

7.2 It also supports the Corporate Strategy's Healthier Communities strand by helping to ensure long term access to clean, reliable water for residents.

8.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

8.1 There are no finance or risk implications associated with this report.

Equalities and Human Resources

8.2 There are no equalities or human resource implications associated with this report.

Legal

8.3 At this stage there are no legal implications associated with this report.

9.0 Engagement and Consultation

9.1 Woking Borough Council reviewed and responded to Thames Water's Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan consultation that was released in 2022.

REPORT ENDS

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[2] www.thameswater.co.uk/media-library/home/about-us/investors/our-results/current-reports/thames-water-annual-and-sustainability-report-2021-22.pdf [accessed 19 December 2022]
[3] https://environment.data.gov.uk/public-register/water-discharges/registration/TH-TEMP.2484-001
[4] https://environment.data.gov.uk/public-register/water-discharges/registration/TH-TEMP.2484-002
[5] Event Duration Monitoring - Storm Overflows - Annual Returns - 2021 (data.gov.uk) (zipped dataset)
[6] Event Duration Monitoring - Storm Overflows - Annual Returns - 2021 (data.gov.uk) (zipped dataset)