

TITLE	Thames Water
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 16 January 2024
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Neil Carr - Scrutiny Officer

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The role of Overview & Scrutiny is to hold the Council's leadership and key public service providers to account. Scrutiny also acts as the voice of local residents, ensuring that issues of importance and concern are scrutinised publicly.

Residents and community groups have confirmed that the discharge of sewage into rivers and waterways in the Borough is unacceptable. Wokingham Borough is home to rivers and streams of significant importance. Members are keen to understand the steps being taken by Thames Water to address issues such as the discharge of sewage into local watercourses along with the company's plans to secure future investment and the potential impact on its customers.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) consider the update provided by representatives of Thames Water;
- 2) update and revise the action points agreed at the Committee's meeting in June 2023.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Richard Aylard, Thames Water's Sustainability Director, attended the Committee's meeting on 12 June 2023 to give a presentation and answer Member questions on matters of interest to residents and local communities. James Bentley, Thames Water's Operations Director, joined Richard for the Q&A which followed the presentation. The presentation covered a range of issues including the operation of a sewage treatment works, causes of storm discharge into rivers and Thames Water's future investment plans for sites in the Borough.

Following the discussion, a number of action points were agreed including site visits, briefings for Town and Parish Councils, follow-up discussions with WBC officers and the sharing of financial and performance data. The report sets out progress made against the action points.

Thames Water were invited to attend the Committee's meeting on 16 January 2024 in order to consider progress and discuss any supplementary issues.

Background

As Members will recall, Richard Aylard, Thames Water's Sustainability Director, attended the Committee's meeting on 12 June 2023 to give a presentation and answer Member questions on matters of interest to residents and local communities. James Bentley, Thames Water's Operations Director, joined Richard for the Q&A which followed the presentation. The presentation covered the following issues:

- How does a sewage treatment works operate?
- Why do flows increase after rainfall? Causes - infiltration, missed and unauthorised connections, inundation and physical damage.
- Why do flows increase after rainfall – dual manholes.
- Impacts on river water quality – reasons for not achieving Good status in the Thames River Basin.
- Event Duration Monitor (EDM) – showing the number and duration of overflows at sites in the Borough.
- Storm Discharge Interactive Map – showing storm discharge activity indicated by Thames Water's EDM at sites in the Borough. The map has been updated to include improvement plans.
- Thames Water Investment Plans in Wokingham Borough:
 - Arborfield Sewage Treatment Works (STW) – an upgrade is planned to improve the ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges in wet weather. Due to complete in 2026.
 - Remenham STW – is a small treatment works, currently operating well with no major upgrade schemes planned.
 - Longwater STW – ongoing work to improve the efficiency of its sludge system.
 - Ash Ridge (Wokingham) STW – an upgrade is planned to improve the ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges in wet weather;
 - New Mill STW – is currently operating well and there are no plans for major upgrade schemes.
 - Wargrave STW – is being upgraded to improve its ability to treat the volumes of incoming sewage, reducing the need for untreated discharges. The scheme is due to complete in 2026. Assessments for future upgrades are also being considered to cater for future growth in the Wargrave system.

Members found the presentation very useful. It was followed by a constructive debate on a number of key issues. Obviously, since then there have been significant changes at Thames Water, with a change of Chief Executive and ongoing financial challenges.

Members emphasised the role of Overview & Scrutiny in holding the Council's leadership and key public service providers to account. Scrutiny also acted as the voice of local residents, ensuring that issues of importance and concern are scrutinised publicly.

Members confirmed that residents and community groups had confirmed that the discharge of sewage into rivers and waterways was unacceptable. Wokingham Borough is home to rivers and streams of significant importance and Members were pleased to see that Thames Water recognised that urgent action was required.

At the meeting on 12 June 2023, a number of action points were agreed. These are set out below, together with a summary of progress.

- Thames Water undertook to arrange a site visit for up to six people at the Wargrave Sewage Treatment plant – the site visit took place on 30 November 2023.
- Thames Water agreed to provide briefings on issues such as sewage discharge, water leakages and investment plans for Town and Parish Councils and community groups, on request – Thames Water representatives have been invited to attend a meeting of the Borough Parish Liaison Forum in 2024.
- Councillor Chris Johnson raised issues about the performance of the Grazeley Road/Three Mile Cross pumping stations – Thames Water agreed to investigate and provide a written answer.
- Thames Water was currently working on a submission to Ofwat on the price review process – it was agreed that the submission be shared with WBC Members once it was ready for circulation.
- In response to a question about the payment of dividends to shareholders and the movement of funds to the company's internal stakeholders, Thames Water agreed to provide a written response.
- Thames Water agreed to provide feedback on the level of water leakages in the Borough and the action plan/investment in place to address this matter.
- A joint meeting was agreed for September 2023 when Thames Water would brief WBC Members and officers on the roll-out of smart meters in 2024 – the briefing took place on 29 September 2023.
- It was agreed that Thames Water and WBC officers would meet to discuss issues relating to delays in the adoption of infrastructure linked to new housing development in the Borough.
- Thames Water agreed to further discussions with local Members and residents on the learning points from the sink hole incidents in Elms Lane and Evendons.
- The Committee invited Thames Water representatives to attend its meeting on 16 January 2024 in order to discuss progress on the matters set out above.

Following an update from the Thames Water representatives, Members will be able to ask questions on progress and to raise any new issues of interest/concern for local residents.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council continues to face severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of reductions to public sector funding and growing pressures in our statutory services. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions of approximately £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	0	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	0	NA	NA
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	NA	NA

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

Cross-Council Implications

Effective Overview and Scrutiny helps to drive service improvement, policy development and the achievement of value for money for the Borough's residents.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard has been given to Council's Public Sector Equality Duty.

Climate Emergency – The Council has declared a Climate Emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030

Protection and enhancement of the environment, including rivers and waterways in the Borough, is a key aim of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

List of Background Papers

None

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