

Windrush Against Sewage Pollution



The following briefing is aimed at providing a very brief overview of the key issues for the upcoming series of council meetings which will discuss sewage pollution and the environment. More detailed information is available on our website <https://windrushwasp.org> and more may be made available on request. You will find our aims set out there.

Overview

The principle Oxfordshire rivers, Windrush, Evenlode, Cherwell and Thames are affected by the following issues as well as the smaller rivers and streams which receive untreated sewage and sewage effluent.

Sewage and treated effluent has been polluting our rivers for years since the health risks of dumping it in the nations streets became apparent and we moved to pouring it in into our rivers. Now some people are waking up to the health risks of our current system without waiting for an epidemic to prove it.

Processes designed to deal with smaller populations and much less sophisticated waste are still the most commonly used today. Designed to deal with human waste products and a bit of soap, they struggle in the age of the dishwasher, washing machine and the myriad of chemicals entering the system via supermarket shelves and industry. Add hormones, antibiotics and other drugs and the mixture becomes very complicated to deal with. Many of these substances are unaffected by conventional treatment and of course untreated sewage magnified the risks.

The Industry

The water industry was privatised in 1989 and a number of monopolies were set up to serve the regions. The benefits of competition have been lacking from the business model for water provision and sewage treatment. Oxfordshire is served by Thames Water for most domestic services. There is a small company called Albion Water dealing with the new Upper Rissington housing and that is a monopoly for that area.

Profit at the expense of the environment and abuse of monopoly status are well documented on the internet.

The Regulator

The industry is regulated by Ofwat which deals with price setting and service provision and recently penalised Thames Water to the amount of £120M for failing to deliver on drinking water requirements. Until very recently the industry blamed Ofwat for poor sewage standards claiming that it was not being allowed to spend money to do better. If it was ever true, this has now apparently changed as you will read later.

Supervision

Supervision of the sewage works etc is dealt with by Environment Agency although the industry benefits from 'operator self-monitoring' and is no longer subject to more than occasional dip checking. We have established that the EA target for supervisory visits to the approx 360 Sewage Treatment Works in the Thames region is once every 8 years. Last year they failed to achieve even that shockingly low target.

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Sewage Pollution

Untreated sewage is released by the consent of the Environment Agency when rainfall entering the sewers through bad connections and leaks in sewers cause an excess volume with which sewage works cannot cope. This is supposed to be an exceptional event and the sewage is meant to be highly diluted and benign. WASP and the WWF have shown these assertions to be wrong. The overflows are called Combined Sewage overflows CSOs and were subject of a BBC Countryfile episode in which WASP featured with the Windrush. See our Youtube channel.

Years of neglect of the sewage network and a failure by the EA to require the issue to be addressed are the root causes of the problem. This also leads to many of the problems experienced by Witney residents who even on new developments are experiencing sewage backing up in their pipes and leaking out of inspection covers, causing smells in houses, etc. Is this the 21st century in the developed world?

A history of Polluting

In 2017 one of a long series of prosecutions for pollution by Thames Water finally attracted a substantial fine of £20m. The offence was discovered by a member of the public and had been going on for a long period.

Witney experienced a similar offence, prosecuted in 2006 which had been going on for years undiscovered by the EA.

National situation

Environment Agency monitoring methods have failed and continue to fail to identify the true level of the decline of our rivers or to ring the alarm bells that so many local and national environmental groups are doing. See the WWF 'Flushed Away' report about this issue.

The WWF report 'a year on' will be the subject of an APPG at Westminster on Wednesday 12 September. WASP will attend that and report back.

Less than 20% of Britain's rivers are achieving good ecological status under the EU Water Framework Directive and the trend has been downward. The EU target was for 60% to be in GOOD status by 2020.

WASP and many other groups recognise a reluctance by the EA and TW to acknowledge how much sewage pollution damages our rivers despite compelling evidence that it does. The WASP response to that blocking of progress is to ask 'Does anyone think that dumping untreated sewage and poorly treated sewage into our rivers is a good idea?' Then why are we still doing it?

Development.

Development increases demand on the system and historically the sewage treatment works lag behind with upgrades whilst the industry takes the increased revenue straight away. This also adds to the frequency, volume and concentration of untreated sewage discharges.

Once a river is polluted, the rules allow it to be polluted more and we are now seeing the results of such policies.

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Measurement of water quality and the importance of phosphates.

Most sewage works have EA permits which set levels of biochemical oxygen demand, suspended solids and ammoniums and these are measured. Phosphates are not removed at most STWs and despite being recognised as a major pollutant emanating from sewage are not even measured, having been dropped from the list.

The STW at Bourton on the Water was recognised by the EA as producing damaging levels of phosphates and needing action despite not reaching the threshold. The response to that appears to have been – to stop measuring phosphates.

The current policy is for phosphate removal to be mandatory only in sewage works treating over 10,000 population or serving a SSSI or similar. However, we understand that the River Glyme is about to receive the benefit of phosphate removal on its STWs. This is an example worth following

Emerging threats.

The environmental damage to Oxfordshire's rivers presents obvious risks to the wildlife of the area and also the commercial benefit gained from an attractive county asset and the public welfare and quality of life aspects. If the Cotswolds were to be designated a National Park, would a failing and polluted river be an acceptable feature?

Superbugs and infections.

Countries like Switzerland, Sweden and Germany are way ahead of the UK in dealing with antimicrobial resistance and are already employing ultra violet technology. The development of bacteria resistant to antibiotics in sewage has been known for several years but the UK's response seems to be negligible. There are many papers being written on this subject and there was a 2012 parliamentary briefing note which is due for an update.

This is an aspect that has slipped under the radar but we have started to investigate the number of people getting ill after contact with the river. We cannot confirm any of this yet but have credible and respected sources telling us we will find evidence that there is a serious problem.

Fish and Crayfish

Both are caught and sometimes eaten. The relevant authorities have declined to check for contaminants and safety so WASP is funding testing which we regard as important, especially since our own tests on a sewage dumping area near Bourton identified high levels of mercury in the soil.

Opportunities

The Ofwat position regarding the tight restriction on environmental improvements (if ever true) has been redefined recently in various press releases and in this excerpt from a letter from the CEO of Ofwat to WASP in July this year.

"We also want companies to focus on the outcome which in this case is the health of the river. Through the way we set water company prices in 2014 we have given companies considerable flexibility in how they meet their customers' priorities. Rather than prescribing particular investment, we want companies to take actions that will deliver the result."

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"As the economic regulator of the water sector, our role is to help the sector build trust and confidence with customers and wider society. Companies should be proactive and put customers at the heart. Companies must not hide behind meeting the letter of their statutory standards, if it is not delivering the desired outcome."

It seems the time is right for the County to test this with Thames Water which will no doubt want to show that it is delivering in this aspect. Oxfordshire has the opportunity to get to the front of the queue that will inevitably develop and to achieve something which can be used as an example of excellence for Thames Water and local government.

There are no rivers designated as 'bathing quality' in the UK. We only have this feature at the coast and inland still waters and this means that our rivers can receive lower quality effluent than they would.

In the rest of Europe, many rivers are so designated. Oxfordshire may wish to consider aiming for the highest level especially as the Windrush once featured its own Windrush bathing area and a wild swimming pool near Burford was named as the best in the UK by the Sunday Times in 2010.

Minster Lovell is a popular swimming and paddling spot. Should the community be told to get out of the water or the water utilities told to stop making the water dangerous to health?

Ashley Smith 9/9/18

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<https://windrushwasp.org>



Windrush May 2009



August 2017 same place. Come and see for yourselves