

**LOCAL REVIEW SEWAGE IN RIVERS AND WATERWAYS REVIEW – UPDATE  
REPORT**

**Report of the Director of Place Management**

**1. Purpose of report**

- 1.1 The report provides an update on the recommendations made to the Cabinet as part of the Local Scrutiny Review undertaken by the Werneth Area Committee between October 2022 and March 2023.
- 1.2 The report was received by the Cabinet at its meeting on 27 June 2023 where it was agreed to formally receive the report and for officers to consider how the Council might respond to the findings and recommendations contained therein.

**2. Review Recommendations:**

- 2.1 The following recommendations were made to the Cabinet in the final report of the review:
  1. The panel notes that change is needed at a national level to bring about change at a local level. As such, the panel requests that the leader of the Council write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs asking her to bring about the legislative changes needed to clean up our rivers and put a stop to sewage pollution. Specifically, that should include:
    - a) The introduction of a legal requirement for water companies to report sewage discharge in real-time and warn local people when untreated sewage is released into our rivers.
    - b) The establishment of a new independent environmental watchdog to hold water companies to account and ensure they meet their obligations.
    - c) The establishment of a new duty of care on water companies to ensure they do not pollute rivers with sewage.
    - d) The establishment of a new fund to support farmers in reducing their environmental impact, including measures to reduce pollution from agricultural runoff.
    - e) Increased investment in wastewater infrastructure to ensure that sewage is properly treated before being discharged into rivers.
    - f) A review of the regulatory framework governing water companies to ensure that it is fit for purpose and can effectively protect the environment.
  2. The panel asks that the Chair of the Scrutiny Review write to United Utilities to invite them to a future meeting of the Werneth Area Committee to detail their plans invest in sewage treatment and to stop sewage dumping in local rivers.

3. A request should also be made of United Utilities that they should increase monitoring and reporting of sewage discharges into local rivers. This could help to identify problem areas and ensure that the company is taking appropriate measures to reduce pollution. This reporting should include signage to inform the local community that local rivers are not safe to swim, canoe or paddle in, as they are used for sewage dumping.
4. Ask that the Cabinet consider the Scrutiny Review Panel findings and recommendations at a future meeting and provide a response to the report to members of the Werneth Area Committee within 6 months of the report's consideration.
5. The panel's findings show that the poor water quality in our rivers affects residents, businesses and local wildlife, and every effort should be made to reduce that pollution as quickly as practicable. The panel requests that Council officers continue to work with the EA, UU, Mersey Rivers Trust (MRT) and other key stakeholders to achieve this aim.
6. The panel requests that the Council, where possible, holds all stakeholders (including, but not limited to, United Utilities) to account for their actions and their compliance – or non-compliance – with relevant legislation.
7. The panel recommends that a review of the Council's planning policies be undertaken with a view to making changes where needed to use the powers of the Council to reduce the percentage connected to combined sewers.
8. The panel requests that the Council considers what more can be done to promote improvements to the condition of its watercourses including rivers, streams, reservoirs and ponds, working with landowners, friends groups and other partners.
9. Recommend to the members of the Werneth Area Committee in the 2023-24 municipal year that they undertake Part 2 of this review. That second part should strive to answer the following questions:
  - a) What can be learned from the recently released 2022 sewage outflow data as it relates to rivers within the Werneth area?
  - b) What specific local infrastructure investment is needed to improve water quality in local rivers?
  - c) Should bathing water status be sought for rivers within the Werneth Area as a way of driving change?

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 Many residents and community groups contact Councillors to express concerns about seemingly increasing incidents of sewer pollution to rivers and streams in our area. The national and local media highlight some of these issues and it has become more high profile in the past year or so, particularly with Climate Change. Some campaign groups are encouraging dialogue with relevant authorities to try and improve our rivers for many reasons.

- 3.2 Many recommendations relate to strategic high level external policy or legislative roles and not in Council officers' remit, but officers work with river environmental partners and influence projects and decisions.
- 3.3 Each recommendation is referred to and commented on.
- 3.4 Other external bodies have not been involved in this update, and this only refers to Council officer involvement. Comments are made if relevant.

#### **4. Information**

- 4.1 There are numerous sources of pollution in to rivers in England (see Figure.1). The top 3 are listed below:
  - 4.1.1 Agriculture and Rural Management - Run-off from fields from agricultural land containing fertilisers, animal manures and sediment.
  - 4.1.2 Water Industry:
    - Foul and combined sewage is treated at Wastewater Treatment facilities to meet the permit standards set by the Environment Agency (EA), before being discharged back in to the environment.
    - Sewer outfalls exist on both combined sewer networks and surface water sewer networks and are permitted by the EA to discharge to watercourses. During intense or prolonged rainfall events, combined sewer assets may surcharge and spill untreated, but diluted, sewage into rivers; to prevent internal foul flooding of homes and businesses. Misconnections of toilets, washing machines etc. into the surface water sewer is not uncommon, this can contribute to pollution in watercourses.
  - 4.1.3 Urban Development and Transport – Run-off from highways containing chemicals, micro-plastics from tyres etc.

## Rivers in England: Reasons for Not Achieving Good Ecological Status by Sector and Activity

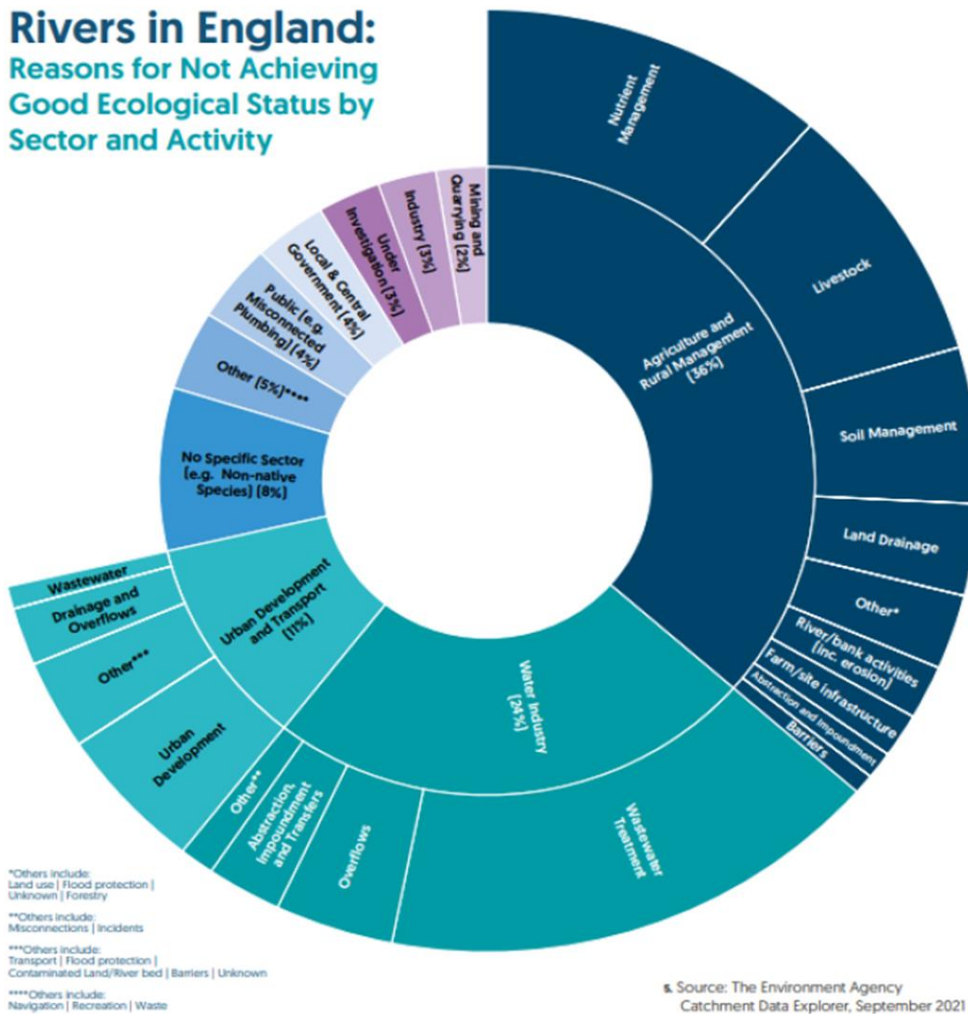


Figure 1. Source apportionment by sector which contribute to reasons for not achieving good in England, Environment Agency, September 2021.

## 5. Responsibilities and Key Stakeholders

- 5.1 The regulation of water quality and pollution to the environment rests with the Environment Agency (EA), who is government led through Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and they take decisions about levels of investigation, projects, and priorities across England. All pollution incidents should be reported to the EA.
- 5.2 United Utilities (UU) are the water and wastewater service provider in the North West of England, so are responsible for operating and maintaining the public sewers and wastewater treatment assets. UU is regulated by the EA through environmental permits and OFWAT through a regulatory contract set every 5 years.
- 5.3 The Highway Authority manages highway drainage, which should in theory have no sewerage, although there will be urban diffuse pollution aspects.
- 5.4 Developers and private property owners all have private drainage, so are responsible for managing and connecting to the correct systems and should manage water sustainably.

- 5.5 We all have responsibility as a community and individuals. The Council has no direct role in managing water quality or sewerage, but has interests to have a better and safe environment for our residents and local users.
- 5.6 The Council's flood team as part of the Council strategy as Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) is helping to manage flood risk by working with all the relevant organisations, as we recognise that helping to mitigate flooding would also include natural water management and control. We develop and share best practice to get multiple benefits such as better amenity and biodiversity.
- 5.7 The Council is responsible for planning and planning policy, while overseeing proper and sustainable development.
- 5.8 There are many leisure users who are interested in local water quality including anglers, wild swimmers, canoeists, walkers, friends of parks groups, etc.
- 5.9 In addition, waterways provide access to water and habitat for wildlife and livestock.

## 6. Review of Recommendations

- 6.1 These recommendations 1. (a) to (f) are at a national government level and related to strategic general management, reporting and monitoring. Some points are related to funding mechanisms. Council officers cannot provide comment, as these are which are more applicable to Defra and EA.
- 6.2 Council officers have not been informed or engaged about future involvement from UU as a result of recommendation 2. The Council is aware that the eighth new five-year Asset Management Plan (AMP) 8 is being brought forward, with a significant level of funding and commitment. AMP8 has an investment of £14bn and starts formally in 2025. Council officers will continue to influence and work with UU in relation to supporting schemes where there is cross partner involvement. The Council has asked to see the schemes and seek engagement with these. At present we are unaware if they are any schemes in Stockport.
- 6.3 UU do monitor and report discharge to rivers, and an annual report is published: <https://www.unitedutilities.com/globalassets/documents/pdf/united-utilities-annual-performance-report-2022-23>.
- However, officers are unaware if UU has considered increasing monitoring but it is apparent that schemes are being developed towards AMP8.
- 6.4 Recommendation 4 is being addressed in this report to the best of our finding and understanding. Many of the issues raised are long-term objectives, but more scrutiny and progress is being made across the industry.
- 6.5 Recommendation 5 refers to continued Council involvement to assist with the river environment. The Council is involved and leads several projects that focus on flood mitigation measures as well as providing other benefits in relation to water quality. The Council is not involved directly with sewerage or sewage control, but can and does work with the EA and UU to get the best value out of schemes. An update of projects is in paragraph 6. To date we have been in collaboration with:
- EA
  - UU
  - Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
  - Mersey Rivers Trust (MRT)

- Beacon
- The National Trust
- Natural Course, Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Cheadle Golf Club
- Hazel Grove Golf Club
- Romiley Golf Club
- City of Trees
- Manchester City Council
- Stockport Homes

- 6.6 We recently applied (November 2023) for an exceptional bid for Natural Flood Management (NFM) schemes through MRT in areas around Stockport, and await a response. It should be noted they were heavily oversubscribed with bids.
- 6.7 At present, the Council has no legislative authority, duty or involvement in managing river environment and water quality. These Duties and Powers rest with the EA as a whole. Monitoring issues and enforcement also lies with the EA.
- 6.8 At present the LLFA's key role is reviewing planning applications for any development that the Local Planning Authority (LPA) refers as a Consultee. The LLFA only advises and provides guidance to ensure that development adheres to Sustainable Drainage principles. The LLFA strives to limit the use of combined sewers and, where possible, remove existing connections with re-development. If this is not possible, the suggestion is to remove water that would previously go into combined sewers, thus reducing the impact of swage and water going into rivers. The LLFA promotes nature and surface-based solutions and measures; such as rainwater harvesting. Planning policy is being reviewed and the LLFA team will continue to influence and promote best practice and steer better development. A reference to the potential Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) Approval Body is made in Paragraph 7.
- 6.9 Consideration could be given to working with river partners to develop a "Riverside Roadshow" that all agencies can present and discuss issues around the river and river environment at key locations. At present, officers refer enquiries to EA, UU and MRT websites and their material. However, officers recognise the potential benefits of promoting issues to assist partners such as "Stop the Block", "What Not to Flush" and "Love Your River" campaigns. Currently the Council website does not have content in relation to rivers. The LLFA has developed guides for future use on:
- Cross-connections (illegal connection of foul drains to rivers)
  - Stop the Block
- 6.10 The Council is not involved in sewage outflow data on rivers, neither do we assist with specific outfall lessons learnt. The EA and UU would lead on these and the EA consents to these discharges if controlled. UU have published a report on rivers this year:

<https://www.unitedutilities.com/globalassets/documents/corporate-documents/united-utilities-better-rivers-report-2023.pdf>.

[An extract from that report refers to Stockport and helping with water waste –](#)

*“We have been working in partnership with residential social landlords and are providing water efficiency audits to help properties within the Stockport area become water efficient. This trial aims to develop a blueprint for all social residential landlords to provide water efficient homes to their customers, including championing the installation of flow regulators in their housing stock.”*

The LLFA would promote and champion social housing stock also having rainwater harvesting as a standard throughout. This would reduce sewage from combined systems and save tenants the cost of water. Investment in schemes along rivers in Stockport is being reviewed and programmed. These rivers being the Tame, Poise and Micker Brook. Delivering or providing a lake, brook or river anywhere Stockport or Greater Manchester to a Bathing Water Status, would be a significant challenge and unlikely to be achievable. This is because of the historic drainage networks connected to rivers in an urban environment. Heavily modified watercourses will not provide nor allow a GOOD status. Upstream landowners would have difficulties adjusting land and land practices to adapt for this.

## **7. Projects and Schemes**

- 7.1 In reference to the funded capital programme, the Flood Risk Management Team is seeking best value to deliver projects across services, so are working with many charities and partners around rivers and drainage. The scope can be limited, but we attempt to get multi-benefits from schemes. We are also continuing to develop new ideas and projects for potential future funding and bids.
- 7.2 The Catchment Partnership works across organisations to share data and information. These work together to provide schemes to help mitigate poor water quality across all aspects. The Partnerships include EA and UU, being the key partners in respect to water quality issues.
- 7.3 Lead Local Flood Authority budgets are also supported by Flood Mitigation in our Statutory Duty as consultee for Planning Applications. Our involvement with around 260 applications this year has changed most applications to provide sustainable drainage and reduce flows into combined sewers and rivers.
- 7.4 The Inspections and Investigations enable us to find issues and try and assist asset owners to corrective actions and give technical advice.
- 7.5 Enforcement and Consent are statutory duties that, where appropriate, the LLFA can sanction or get rectification to issues and assets. These are on-going and we deal with many cases a year. This may include cross-connections if we have been given the evidence.
- 7.6 Communication Strategy is ongoing. This allows the LLFA to give consistent advice to owners and residents about resilience, mitigation and water management.
- 7.7 Strategic Watercourse and Asset Management mainly concentrate on reactive issues with culverts, as well as getting the data recorded and logged.
- 7.8 Romiley Flood Mitigation Project has been commissioned to start in January 2024, but we have had many productive meetings with landowners that are higher in the catchments in Romiley. We hope to reduce and slow flows in Romiley with attenuation and NFM schemes.
- 7.9 Poise Brook Project is led by the EA and supported by the Council, to assist the other partners, GMCA and UU through the catchment partnership approach. The project has stalled through the lack of EA Consultants and we are now developing

aims and opportunities working across many organisations. This is a 5-year project. The LLFA has been successful in several bids and are providing NFM schemes in Offerton and Hazel Grove

- 7.10 Micker Brook Project (which includes Ladybrook, Norbury Brook and Poynton Brook), has been a long running scheme. Initially developed by the Council and delivered through the Upper Mersey Catchment Partnership, it has now been taken up by UU as a Place Based Pilot (PBP), which is a new approach with UU. As part of enforcement undertaking and grant bids, the LLFA has provided, and will provide, more schemes and measures in Bruntwood Park and Cheadle Golf Club, as well as other areas identified. This will continue for several years.
- 7.11 Tame Place Based Pilot Project (PBPP) is led by UU and supported by many partners including a local MP and anglers, to focus and discuss opportunities around the Tame. Most of the measures and work are in neighbouring authorities. The impact and benefits are to Tameside and Stockport river's water quality. Council officers are assisting with information mainly around Reddish Vale and have a watching brief. This PBPP has the most momentum and issues around water quality in the upper Tame.
- 7.12 Flood Mitigation is supporting Council officers to provide feasibility and design to prepare bids for schemes across the borough. It has also supported an extraordinary bid to help fund borough-wide NFM projects. Also, it supports Green Recovery bids through UU taking water out of sewers.
- 7.13 Lavington Avenue is now a collaborative, combined and enhanced scheme with Natural Course and City of Trees, to provide amenity and mitigation measures to help reduce flooding in that area. This will be underway in 2024.

## **8. SuDS Approval Body**

- 8.1 The prospect of new legislation coming through in 2024 may create the new SuDS Approval Bodies (SAB) in England, which may be modelled on similar existing SAB in Wales. These duties are likely to go alongside and replace some duties of the LLFA, but will be more onerous for the Council.
- 8.2 It is expected that the new SAB will have more powers to influence and control development activities, get better SuDS in all developments and therefore help to reduce pollution to rivers by removing sewer outfalls. This means providing more natural measures to clean and control water nearer to the source.
- 8.3 Officers are liaising with GMCA and Welsh authorities to learn and explore issues, benefits and how we can best deliver this improved service within the Council. We intend to develop Business Cases to support this.
- 8.4 Options are being explored and advice taken. One of the key things is that our work is chargeable, and it is advised that the process should be before any Planning Application process, so that the SAB can advise on better outcome. At present, the LLFA is restricted with predetermined development layouts and constraints without considering how a site can manage its water.
- 8.5 The SAB, as the LLFA does at present, steers developments away from the use of combined sewage going into our rivers to protect the environment.
- 8.6 We see that there may be opportunity to provide Council Policy to support Planning Policy and promote or enforce areas such as School SuDS and Rainwater Harvesting.



## **9. Integrated Water Management Plan (IWMP)**

- 9.1 GMCA, UU and EA have formed an agreement led by Greater Manchester's Major to guide; that all partners are to work together to improve and create better drainage solutions and protect the river environment.
- 9.2 The IWMP was new in 2023, and partners are working to create ideas on how this can influence change. To date, the Plan is focused on two areas in GM: Heywood and Stockport West, which are the developments around King St West and Chestergate. We hope that it may influence outcomes and advise developers on a better and more sustainable way to manage water. This is without simply relying on the River Mersey to take all water, as we have done in the past
- 9.3 Council officers will hopefully play a key role in influencing the Tripartite, in the hopes that Stockport West will be a good high-profile pilot and exemplar for future projects.
- 9.4 There currently stands in legalisation: 'the right to connect new developments or redevelopments to sewers', although this may change in 2024. If an existing area or land has an existing connection to a combined or any other sewer, then UU are obliged to accept. Only the LLFAs at present can intervene and seek that the developer looked at alternatives due to the flood risk issues. Through working with the IWMP it is also hoped that developers' immediate thought would not be to connect to a sewer or rivers and seek more sustainable practices and alternatives. We hope to have more input early in the development process.
- 9.5 The LLFA officers have been working with GMCA to assist on a GM Highway SuDS guide. Stockport Council have been working on one too, and by incorporating SuDS to drain highway, diffuse highway pollution will be reduced that would normally end up polluting our rivers. We encourage Green Streets to assist with Climate Change effects.

## **10. Upper Mersey Catchment Partnership (UMCP)**

- 10.1 As part of officers' role in working with the partnership, works around the Poise and Micker Brooks are being delivered through different partners and we are supporting this. At present, schemes are planned to remove small weirs in Ladybrook Bramhall. This helps water quality and river biodiversity. Fish, such as Trout, can gain better access to the rivers and provide natural habits along riverbeds that help clean water.
- 10.2 There is best value in using charities and friends groups both attached and interested in the Partnership work. This is supported by the Council, and these can provide trained River Rangers and River Guardians working on or alongside our rivers.
- 10.3 The Mersey Rivers Trust are assisting the Council in delivering NFM schemes this year in Cheadle and Marple Bridge. We will also be on site in Hazel Grove. The financing from the scheme was funded through developed Council bids using GMCA Local Levy. We plan on completing more schemes and have developed over 100 opportunities across the borough.
- 10.4 MRT also play a key role in helping the Council enter negotiations. This can be with landowners as well as making significant contributions in liaising with landowners

and Golf Clubs. They have helped the Council particularly in Hazel Grove and Romiley.

## **11. United Utilities activity near Otterspool Road, Romiley**

- 11.1 Council owned greenspace was impacted following an incident involving a sewage spillage incident near Otterspool Road, Romiley involving a United Utilities (UU) infrastructure failure.
- 11.2 The small field/meadow located off Otterspool Road, Romiley is part of the Greenspace portfolio and is managed by Stockport Council.
- 11.3 The site was previously identified for a new woodland creation in late 2022 and during site assessments a sewage leak was identified which was reported to UU in February 2023. The Arboriculture and Countryside Team received notification from United Utilities on 2nd March 2023 of a potential leakage and they subsequently gave permission for United Utilities to enter the site and undertake necessary repair work on 12th April 2023. The Team received confirmation on 12th June 2023 that the repairs were complete. The creation of a woodland creation on this site was postponed.
- 11.4 2.3 UU undertook a site assessment and identified that some infrastructure which had failed and they subsequently arranged a repair and site clear up which was undertaken in summer 2023 and later confirmed with the following statement "UU are continuing to monitor the performance of the sewer network across the Otterspool Road area to gather info for any future projects", which has removed to issue of public safety and returned the site to previous condition.
- 11.5 The Council are committed to site management and so due to the easement for pipe access and the limited size available for planting, it will be maintained as a meadow and through future investment, enhanced to an improved wildflower meadow.

## **12. Recommendations**

The Area Committee is recommended to:-

- (1) Note and comment upon the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained within the Local Scrutiny Review Final Report.
- (2) Note the information provided in relation to the United Utilities activity near Otterspool Road, Romiley and the continuing monitoring by United Utilities.
- (3) Note that the site Otterspool Road, Romiley is now being managed as a meadow.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

**There are none**

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Sue Stevenson on telephone number Tel: 0161-474-4351 or alternatively email [sue.stevenson@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:sue.stevenson@stockport.gov.uk)