

EHDC Motion to protect our rivers by taking into account the cumulative impact of sewage discharge

Proposed by: Councillor Nicholas Cox

Seconded by: Councillor Rachel Carter

East Herts District Council notes that:

- Local residents are deeply concerned about water quality and the impact of regular wastewater discharge, which includes untreated sewage, into our rivers and the impact on wildlife and on human health.¹
- Thames Water released sewage into the River Lee and its tributaries 1,060 times in 2023.
- Environment Agency figures reveal wastewater from toilets, sinks and drains spilt out of storm overflows into the waterway for an equivalent 11,501.7 hours last year.
- This figure is almost double the previous year (2022) when the number of spill hours stood at 5,891.3.
- At Cottered in Buntingford, Hertfordshire, sewage spilled into River Beane for 2222.25 hours in 2023. Discharge hours at Cottered have more than doubled on 2022, when the total number of spill hours was 1,010.²

Releasing sewage into rivers is no longer an emergency-only situation occurring as a result of severe storms, but an everyday occurrence even in 'normal' rainfall, and that we are in a situation of cumulative overload on the sewage and wastewater system.

Not one of the rivers in East Herts District is classed as 'Good' for Ecological or Chemical Status under the Water Framework Directive. The UK has the dirtiest rivers in Europe.³

¹ See <https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/the-risks-of-mixing-with-sewage/> and House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee 2022 quality in rivers report pages 23-25

² <https://www.bishopsstortfordindependent.co.uk/news/hatfield-heath-takeley-little-hallingbury-and-stansted-in-9360170/>

³ See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/17/rivers-in-england-fail-pollution-tests-due-to-sewage-and-chemicals>. Note that the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Water quality in rivers in January 2022 stated "The most recent figures published by the Environment Agency, under obligations originally established by the EU

Affected local wildlife habitats include the Lee Valley Ramsar Sites, Special Protection Areas, and SSSIs, especially Hunsdon and Eastwick Meads.⁴

Whilst there are long term commitments, there are no plans in place which will address the immediate unacceptable situation either locally by Thames Water or by national government.⁵

Additionally, there is no clear statement of position by the Environment Agency, who has overall responsibility, to clarify the cumulative impact of sewage overload on our wildlife and habitats. In Cambridgeshire it has issued position statements on the separate but related area of water neutrality⁶ which have directly led to a pause in development; why not sewage overload?

Both local and national planning policy requires a robust approach to both water quality and pollution and a recent legal opinion from the Environmental Law Firm suggests that cumulative impact should be considered. Thames Water does not currently provide information on cumulative impact to local planning authorities.

East Herts District Council resolves to:

1. Recognise this Council's obligation to protect its rivers in line with its local planning policy, and the National Planning Policy Framework.
2. Recognise that there is clear evidence of deterioration of water quality due to cumulative impact of multiple sewage discharge events or 'sewage overload'.
3. Ensure the evidence base being compiled for the new District

Water Framework Directive, show that only 14% of English rivers met good ecological status and no river met good chemical status. [...] Water pollution remains a major impediment to achieving targets established under the Directive (requiring all European surface water to reach 'good ecological status' by 2015 with a maximum deadline of 2027). The report also warns of plastics, 'forever chemicals' and points out (p.15) that "The presence in rivers of a number of so-called emerging pollutants—such as microplastics, and a range of chemicals, such as pharmaceuticals and narcotics—is not being systematically measured."

⁴ <https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-reserves/hunsdon-and-eastwick-meads>

⁵ Govt commitments (all long-term solutions) are at <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/09/18/latest-water-classifications- results-published/>

⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/topics/environment/nutrient-neutrality-and-planning-system>

Plan fully assesses the cumulative impact of sewage discharge so that this is factored into decisions made in the new local plan, including the overall level of future development.

4. Seek to better understand the cumulative impact of wastewater discharge including untreated sewage and misconnections on the district's rivers, wildlife and the health of residents
5. Continue to take a lead on addressing this issue, working constructively with other agencies.
6. Write to the Environment Agency asking for a position statement in relation to East Herts District, which sets out its understanding of the cumulative impact of 1,060 + sewage discharges per annum into our rivers, or if it is not willing to do so, the reasons why.
7. Ask Natural England when it plans to update its assessment of the Lee Valley Ramsar Sites, Special Protection Areas, and SSSIs, especially Hunsdon and Eastwick Meads.
8. Ask the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to invite senior representatives from Thames Water, the Environment Agency and Natural England to attend an East Herts District Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting to answer questions on sewage discharge.
9. Declare support for River Action's Charter for Rivers⁷

⁷ River Action is a UK organisation which has campaigns against river pollution. Its Charter for Rivers sets out a ten-point plan to restore our rivers by 2030. <https://riveractionuk.com/charter-for-rivers/>