East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: Tuesday 9 June 2026

Report by: Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward – Executive Member for Planning and Growth and Councillor Sarah Hopewell – Executive Member for Wellbeing

Report title: Sewage Discharge and Cumulative Impacts on East Hertfordshire's Rivers

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Summary

- This report supports the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's consideration of concerns about the cumulative impact of sewage discharge on rivers in East Hertfordshire, following a Motion agreed by Council on 22 October 2025.

- The report provides context for scrutiny by bringing together background information and the actions resolved by Council, and it facilitates an information gathering session through the attendance of senior representatives from Thames Water and the Environment Agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

A) Welcomes the attendance of representatives from Thames Water and the Environment Agency; and

B) Notes the presentations delivered, acknowledging the information and evidence presented and the responses provided to Members' questions.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 The purpose of this report is to support the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in considering the cumulative impact of sewage

discharge on rivers within East Hertfordshire, following the Motion agreed by Council on 22 October 2025[1]. The report provides context for the Committee's consideration of further evidence presented by representatives from Thames Water and the Environment Agency.

1.2 The recommendations reflect the information gathering nature of this item, with the Committee being asked to welcome the attendance of external representatives and to note the presentations delivered. Any further conclusions, observations or recommendations arising from the evidence presented may be considered by the Committee as part of its future work programme and, where appropriate, reported to Executive or Council.

2.0 Background

2.1 Concerns have been raised by local residents and community groups regarding declining water quality across East Hertfordshire and the frequency of wastewater discharges, including untreated sewage, into local rivers.

2.2 Data published by the Environment Agency indicates that Thames Water released wastewater into the River Lee and its tributaries on 1,060 occasions during 2023. The total duration of discharge events across the catchment amounted to 11,501.7 hours, almost double the recorded figure for 2022 (5,891.3 hours).

2.3 In Cottered, sewage discharge into the River Beane reached 2,222.25 hours in 2023, compared with 1,010 hours in 2022, representing a significant year-on-year increase.

2.4 Members have expressed concern that sewage discharges are no longer confined to exceptional storm events but are occurring frequently during normal rainfall conditions, suggesting a cumulative overload of sewage and wastewater infrastructure.

[1] Agenda item - Motion to protect our rivers by taking into account the cumulative impact of sewage discharge - East Herts District Council

2.5 In light of these concerns a Motion was presented to Council on 22 October 2025 where it was resolved 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 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 so do, 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 Rivers.

2.6 A copy of the Motion is attached at **Appendix A**.

3.0 Reason(s)

3.1 There are a number of actions arising from the Motion, several of which have already been progressed or completed.

3.2 In respect of point 8. above, officers wrote to senior representatives from Thames Water, the Environment Agency and Natural England asking them to attend a meeting of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The invitation was accepted by Thames Water and the Environment Agency who will be in attendance at the meeting scheduled for the 9 June 2026. No one from Natural England was available.

3.3 The attendance of representatives from Thames Water and the Environment Agency provides an opportunity for the Committee to scrutinise the evidence on sewage discharge, understand the respective roles and responsibilities of these key agencies, and explore how cumulative impacts on the district's rivers and communities are being assessed and addressed.

4.0 Options

4.1 The Council has the option to consider, partially consider, or not consider the requests set out in the Motion. Considering the request to invite representatives from Thames Water, the Environment Agency and Natural England allows the Council to respond to Member and public concerns, improve understanding of environmental impacts, and use scrutiny to engage constructively with responsible agencies.

5.0 Risks

5.1 If the cumulative impacts of sewage discharge are not adequately understood or addressed, the Council may be exposed to risk, particularly where environmental protection duties are engaged. Continued public concern may also impact community confidence. Scrutiny and effective engagement with responsible agencies will help mitigate these risks.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 The attendance of Thames Water and the Environment Agency at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting is intended to facilitate informed dialogue, evidence-gathering and accountability, rather than formal consultation.

Community Safety
There are no direct community safety implications arising from this report. However, concerns around sewage discharge and declining water quality may have indirect impacts on public wellbeing, amenity use of rivers and open spaces, and public confidence in environmental protection. Scrutiny of these issues supports the Council's wider role in safeguarding communities and ensuring that risks to residents are appropriately understood and managed by responsible agencies.

Data Protection
There are no data protection implications arising from this report. No personal data is processed as part of the recommendations or the proposed scrutiny activity.

Equalities
The issues addressed in this report apply district-wide and do not disproportionately affect any protected group as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Sustainability
This report directly relates to environmental sustainability, specifically water quality. Scrutiny of sewage discharge and cumulative environmental impacts supports the Council's climate and environmental objectives and its statutory duties to protect and enhance the natural environment.

Financial
There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Health and Safety
There are no direct health and safety implications arising from this report.

Human Resources

There are no direct human resources implications arising from this report. Officer input to support the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be provided within existing staffing arrangements.

Human Rights
There are no direct human rights implications arising from this report.

Legal
There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Specific Wards
All

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 **Appendix A**: Motion to protect our rivers by taking into account the cumulative impact of sewage discharge

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