



Cabinet

13 December 2023

Item

Public



Report of the River Water Quality Task and Finish Group

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Overview and Scrutiny Chair:	Cllr Joyce Barrow		
Task and Finish Group Chair:	Cllr Kate Halliday		

1. Synopsis

The report and recommendations of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee River Water Quality Task and Finish Group following their investigation looking at pollution of waterways, focused on sewage, and options to reduce or stop this from occurring in Shropshire.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. This is the report of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee arising from the work of the River Water Quality Task and Finish Group. It sets out key findings, conclusions and recommendations of their work considering river water pollution. Whilst the members understand that there are different causes of pollution that affect river water quality including agricultural and highways run-off, they focused their work on understanding more on the causes of sewage pollution and learning from other areas about what works.

- 2.2. This work arose from a Motion to Council and was taken into their work programme by the Place Overview Committee and continued by the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.3. Concerns about deteriorating river water quality, and reports of increasing sewage pollution raised by communities and those who use rivers and waterways, including anglers, kayakers and wild swimmers have highlighted issues nationally and locally. Against this context, the Task and Finish group has looked in detail at the available data and information, and sought evidence and learning from other areas of the country.
- 2.4. The work that the Task and Finish group carried out informed a series of more focused questions to Severn Trent Water and to the Environment Agency, as the water company and the regulator. Whilst there have been responses to a number of the questions, there are gaps that the group would like to be followed-up, and the answers used to inform further work.
- 2.5. They have made 9 recommendations which they believe will contribute to reducing or removing sewage pollution in rivers and waterways, including recommendations:
 - to the Council, and
 - promoting a system working approach across all stakeholders.

3. Recommendations

Cabinet is asked:

- 3.1. To accept the recommendation 1 to 8 set out in section 7 of this report and provide a response and action plan for their delivery, to the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee. If any recommendations are not accepted the reasons should also be reported to that meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Report

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. Whilst there are no direct financial implications from this Task and Finish group report, should Cabinet agree the recommendations then appropriate financial advice on the costs involved should be sought.

5. Climate Change Appraisal

5.1. Work completed by the Task and Finish group has identified the following points which will have benefits for climate change and the environment:

- Reducing run-off, slowing the flow of water in the catchment, and increasing opportunity for absorption
- Tree planting and reed beds to reduce the flow and form nature based pollution traps
- Separating combined sewers e.g. to reduce flow of rainwater into treatment works during heavy rain events
- Promoting rainwater and grey water collection and usage, especially in new developments, to make better use of available water
- Taking highways run-off out of the sewerage system
- Promoting the use of the products of carbon reduction such as biochar from pyrolysis to help reduce pollution entering rivers and waterways.

5.2 The Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee has commissioned a standing task and finish group that has the environment and climate change as its focus. This group will feedback into the committee on key progress and emerging issues and potential areas for deeper dive investigation, including river water quality and flooding. The development of the terms of reference of this standing task and finish group will identify how this group will work with the Climate Change and Carbon Reduction Board.

6. Background

6.1. Following a motion to Council on the 30 March 2023 it was confirmed that the Place Overview Committee, replaced by the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee, would progress a task and finish group looking at River Water Quality.

6.2. The investigation by the Task and Finish group was carried out its work with a strong focus on learning from the available information and from other areas of the country where there has been successes in improving river water quality.

6.3. This has included learning about how Local Planning Authorities can require specific requirements such as sufficient sewage infrastructure and treatment to be met before new housing developments can be occupied (Grampian Conditions), and how Bathing Water Status can help improve river water quality, and the best approaches to realise this.

6.4. They have heard from the Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) campaign group and from Ilkley Clean River Campaign, as well as Phillip Dunne MP Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Shropshire Bathing Water Status campaigners, Surfers Against Sewage, and officers from Shropshire

Council. They have also asked specific questions of Severn Trent Water and the Environment Agency and had a site visit to the Ludlow Water Treatment Works.

- 6.5. Their key findings, conclusions and recommendations are set out in their report, attached at appendix 1.
- 6.6. The group's conclusions and recommendations recognise that, although the significant responsibilities to tackle sewage pollution sit with the water company, Severn Trent Water, and the regulator, the Environment Agency, the Council also has a substantial role to play as a 'Place Leader', and through its own services and responsibilities.
- 6.7. Specific points of focus in the recommendations include:
 - that the Council, as the Local Planning Authority should adopt Grampian Conditions to ensure that all new developments can join wastewater and rainwater infrastructure that has the design and capacity to handle the additional demand.
 - That the Council, as the highways authority, proactively engage with and encourage Severn Trent Water in their progression of works that will increase the separation of rainwater run-off from wastewater, including highways runoff.
- 6.8. Using their learning from other areas, and experiences locally from a range of different situations, the group has also concluded that the greatest impact will be realised by stakeholders taking a system approach; recognising the added value that the sum of all the different parts can deliver.
- 6.9. The Council, as a Place Leader, can enable wider involvement in improving the quality of river water in a number of ways, including helping community groups identify and access small grants that might help fund citizen science work or raising awareness, and supporting applications for bathing water status.
- 6.10. The group also believe that there is scope for the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee to establish a standing task and finish group that has climate change and the environment as its scope. This group would encompass the committees remit for flooding, maintain a focus on river water quality, and track the progress of climate change actions and initiatives. It would report back to the committee e.g. every 6 months, on its evidence based findings, including highlighting any emerging issues or opportunities that might need further investigation, or recommendations to Cabinet.

7.0 Recommendations

The Task and Finish group have identified what they have defined as hard recommendations and softer recommendations. They expect that the hard recommendations will, in most cases, have a more direct impact on reducing sewage pollution and be more measurable in terms of delivery and impact. They form the first set of recommendations below.

Hard recommendations

1. That Shropshire Council, as the Local Planning Authority, should
 - Adopt Grampian Conditions in Shropshire to ensure that new developments will be joined to appropriate infrastructure and access to treatment works with the sufficient current and future capacity in place.
 - Promote the requirement for grey water systems and rainwater capture as part of new housing developments, reducing the use of drinking water to water gardens and clean cars. As part of this, Members recommend that the feasibility of introducing supplementary planning documents (SPD) should be explored and progressed.
2. That Shropshire Council, as the highways authority, should proactively engage with and encourage Severn Trent Water in their progression of works that will increase the separation of rainwater run-off from wastewater, including highways runoff, thereby helping to reduce the risk of overwhelming sewage infrastructure and treatment works.
3. That more monitoring of the health of rivers and waterways needs to take place:
 - Severn Trent Water should increase the frequency of monitoring and reporting to once a week and ensure that testing occurs before and after releases. This data needs to be made available and the results made visible and easily accessible and understandable e.g. using trend charts and maps.
 - System partners, including Shropshire Council, should work with citizen scientists to identify and put in place mechanisms that will allow them to continue to deliver and develop testing and monitoring that enhances the picture of what is happening beneath the surface of rivers and waterways.
4. That Shropshire Council is a 'Place Leader'. Within this there are a number of roles and actions that the Council should take to enable communities to help contribute towards improving river water quality:
 - Identify and provide access to small grants or accessible funding such as through initiatives like civic social crowdfunding that can be used to enable communities to take forward work that results in improved river water quality e.g. funding equipment and lab testing of citizen scientists work, and funding the River Health Checker app.
 - Supporting and enabling initiatives and applications for Bathing Water Status.
 - Assessing the feasibility of managing the River Health Checker App and promoting its use locally with stakeholders in the system and communities.

Softer recommendations

5. That system partners confirm shared outcomes and objectives in relation to river water quality and the environment and use these to jointly and consistently lobby Government to realise a regulatory framework and requirements that encourages water companies and other stakeholders who are part of the system, to target and achieve the best environmental outcomes.
6. That local representatives, including Shropshire Council, should work closely with Severn Trent Water to inform how and where the recently announced investment to reduce sewage pollution takes place. This should include enabling and ensuring

the engagement between agencies and with local communities and help to realise the greatest benefit for the environment of the resources being brought to bear.

7. That system partners work to support increasing the visibility of the data and enabling greater understanding of what is actually happening in Shropshire rivers and water ways.
 - Support the adoption of the River Health Checker App
 - Enable and promote consistency of recording, data structures and access to the data, using those nationally described and adopted by other areas of the country.
 - Encouraging effective use of the data, and promoting the development of visualisation, including engaging with local further and higher education colleges.
8. That, once a reduction of sewage releases has been put in place, Shropshire Council progresses activity, directly through its own services and responsibilities, and through its partnership working as a Place Leader, to reduce the flow of other pollutants from agricultural and highways run-off.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member: All

Appendices

Appendix I: Report of the River Water Quality Task and Finish Group
