Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the River Water Quality Task and Finish Group

9 November 2023

Acknowledgments

This cross party Task and Finish group work has been undertaken with passion and clear focus by the members involved. They have considered the issues from different perspectives and sought to come to balanced and evidenced conclusions and recommendations. They would like to express their thanks to the full range of organisations and individuals who have helped them explore the issues, learning and opportunities. The list of those who have helped to inform the work is attached at appendix 1.

Members of the Task and Finish Group

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1. Context

Clean, healthy rivers are essential to Shropshire's prosperity and wellbeing. In recent years there have been complaints that water quality in rivers has deteriorated. The chief contributor in urban areas are the frequent and intermittent discharges of raw sewage when it rains. These combined sewage outfalls (CSOs) contribute to the deterioration of water quality and biodiversity and have a negative health impact on those who use the river for sport and leisure activities, such as those who swim in the river.

According to local Angling Clubs fish stocks have reduced by 60% in the last 10 years. Data released by the Environment Agency show that Water Companies discharged raw sewage into English waters 400,000 times in 2021, an increase of 27% on the previous year. In January 2022 a motion on improving river quality was passed unanimously by Shropshire Council.

The Environment Act (2021) requires water companies to ensure progressive reduction of the adverse impact of discharges, and introduces additional monitoring and reporting obligations. However, it does not give water companies a timetable to invest and update the sewage system, and there remains no legal duty on water companies not to release sewage into our waterways. It is therefore important that Shropshire Council plays an active role in holding key partners to account, and looks at opportunities to enable, encourage and enforce actions that will help to reduce sewage being released into waterways.

River water quality is a fast-moving topic area with national and regional developments and announcements being reported on a frequent basis. Some examples of recent announcements from 2022 and 2023 are included in appendix 2.

2. Scope of the work

It is recognised that there are a number of different factors that impact on the quality of river water including agricultural sources and highways. However, this piece of work is focused on the impact of sewage discharges into waterways.

This focus has been taken because of the local and national focus on these matters and the developments taking place by Government and by water companies including Severn Trent Water locally.

It will be important that the Council is well placed to understand the options and opportunities and to identify where the Council can play a role in helping to realise improvements in its area.
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3. Objectives

- To understand the nature of the monitoring and infrastructure improvements that have been made and the impacts that this has achieved.

- To understand how weather conditions can impact on river water quality and sewage discharge and how this is reflected in the results for Shropshire.

- To better understand the infrastructure requirements that remain necessary and ask water companies to provide timescales for mitigating the effects of sewage [and other pollutants] being discharged into our rivers, and to discuss the funding of capital schemes and possible access to additional funding.

- To better understand the monitoring of these discharges, identifying the opportunities to ensure that there is comprehensive coverage across Shropshire and that the reporting of any results is easily available, and more open and transparent.

- Through the planning process, identify the options and opportunities to hold developers and the water companies to account including the provision and funding of adequate sewerage provision for the large increase in housing proposed in the draft Local Plan.

- To make recommendations to best place the Council to identify, pursue and lobby for the best outcomes for river water quality (related to the release of sewage) for Shropshire communities.

4. What has the Task and Finish group done?

Members carried out their work to deliver their objectives using a range of approaches. This work is summarised below, and the key findings and conclusions and recommendations that have arisen are set out in their report.

Members researched data and information on river water quality in Shropshire using websites including the Environment Agency and the Rivers Trust. This provided them with a view of the assessed states of the rivers and waterways, the types of pollution that had been identified, as well as maps and visualisations of data that helped to identify the locations where the highest number of incidents occurred. They used their findings to inform the questions and lines of enquiry, which they refined as they carried out their work

To inform their understanding further they spoke to witnesses from other areas of the country as well as putting questions to key individuals and organisations. The full list of witnesses is attached at appendix 1.

Members of the Task and Finish Group also undertook a site visit to Ludlow Sewage Treatment Works to combine meeting with officers from Severn Trent Water to hear responses to the questions they had shared, and to see first-hand how a treatment site works and learn more about the developments planned for the location. They were aware that Ludlow was one of the sites in Shropshire applying for bathing water status.

5. Key Findings

Members observed that when looking at the impact of pollution on rivers and waterways it was important to look at the catchment areas and the different factors that can influence water quality in a geographic place, such as the area that the Council is responsible for. Relationships with the different companies, local authorities, regulators and communities are key to understanding, preventing, managing, and removing the risk of such pollution occurring.

In carrying out this work the Members have heard a lot about how improvements are being made in the Shropshire Council area, but they have not received much additional or new perspectives. In particular, they have highlighted not being any clearer on the timing and location of releases of sewage (especially dry releases) when there should be concern in communities and raised awareness about using waterways, or receiving confirmation of when access to the data and the visualisation will take place.

Preventing pollution is best
The members confirmed, at the earliest stage in their work, that they recognised that there are a number of different sources of pollution to waterways, including agriculture, highways run-off, and sewage.

They have focused on sewage in this work but have taken account of agriculture and highways run-off as it has come up in their investigation. Consideration of the Environment Agency data on the health of rivers and waterways highlighted that in the Shropshire Council area the health of the River Severn was rated as better than the tributaries, and that outside of the more urban areas the impact of agriculture was higher.

Evidence considered by Members highlighted the need to focus on the prevention or removal of the risk of pollution to rivers and waterways. There were many different contributions to this, ranging from:
- education and awareness raising about changes that could be made in the home and what goes down the drain,
- through to interventions in the catchment area that could slow run-off and reduce flooding such as planting trees between agricultural land and waterways,
- to physical changes to infrastructure in more urban areas e.g. separating waste water and rainwater run-off to reduce the impact of rainfall events on treatment capacity and the triggering of storm overflows resulting in sewage entering water courses.

Addressing pollution as close to source as possible was also highlighted, particularly in terms of agriculture and highways.

<u>Using Planning to reduce the impact of new developments</u>

Members considered the experience of the Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) campaigners who had worked in their area to highlight the issues and causes of sewage pollution in the River Windrush, raising these with the water treatment company and their Local Planning Authority, and achieving the adoption of Grampian Conditions.

The purpose of these conditions is to ensure that the infrastructure that is required is in place before the main development is commenced, or before the housing can be sold. In the case of this Task and Finish group work a condition might delay the delivery housing until sufficient infrastructure is in place to handle additional wastewater that is separate to run-off.

Members also learned that Grampian conditions can be applied development by development on an individual basis, or they could form part of Planning Policy. The conditions would be applied to the network area. Members recognised that this would need to be confirmed locally for Shropshire Council.

In all cases it would be important to evidence the issues in the area that demonstrate why the conditions would be required and the actions that would need to be taken to address them.

They understand that these conditions can be applied to smaller and larger developments, and from the experiences shared with them, that the application of the conditions can work best where the water company asks the Local Authority (LA)/Local Planning Authority (LPA) to apply Grampian Conditions outside of the area of the development i.e. outside of the land that the developer has control over. WASP advocated a collaborative approach to find the best solution, with the LA aiming to put the developer and the water company face to face.

An alternative is that the Council can ask the Water Treatment Provider for advice, but it can make its own decision and can apply the Grampian Conditions without the water company making a request.

<u>Use of water and climate change</u>

The group highlighted the value of slowing the flow of water through the environment and enabling greater absorption as part of sustainable drainage, and how this can reduce the risk of wastewater and sewage entering waterways.

Linked to this, and as part of planning requirements, are the ways that the Council can encourage more sustainable use of water. Some examples could be looking at how grey water systems and rainwater capture as part of new housing developments, can be used to reduce the use of drinking water to water gardens and clean cars.

Members suggested that the feasibility of introducing supplementary planning documents (SPD) should be explored and progressed.

Education

Education is a feature of prevention, but it was also raised throughout the work of the Task and Finish group and has therefore been highlighted separately. Members identified that it fulfils a range of important functions including:

- Raising awareness of the risks, issues, and indicators of pollution of rivers and waterways and developing a 'respect' for our collective environment so that improvement is sustained;
- Encouraging and embedding empowerment, engagement with, and ownership of local places and the actions that local people and communities can take;
- Highlighting the roles, responsibilities and opportunities of all of the different organisations, groups and individuals

Members heard of different types of education and awareness programmes. Two examples are:

Yellow fish, which is a scheme to raise awareness about sources of water pollution and the quality of water in streams, rivers, lakes or ponds. Yellow fish are stencilled next to drains to remind people that what is put down a drain impacts aquatic life. Members made a strong link between this awareness and changing behaviours that resulted in sewers becoming blocked and increasing the potential for flooding and overflows and outfalls to occur, including putting fat and wet-wipes down the drain.

And

River Health Checker App, developed by the Environment Agency and Shropshire Wildlife Trust with CREST at the University Centre Shrewsbury. The app provides a route for observations and data on chemical testing, observations of the state of the river/waterway, invertebrates, and wildlife, and a function that prompts the user on what to do in a potential pollution situation. Members heard that the expected costs of launching the app and covering annual costs should be between roughly £3,000 to £4,000, although the costs would need confirming and exploring in greater detail.

Response and mitigations

Through their work members learned about and confirmed the importance of keeping separate, wastewater and run-off. This was easier to factor into new developments and associated infrastructure, but equally important to design this into the replacement of combined sewers.

Equally relevant is the reduction of run-off, particularly in more urban areas, to lower the volume of water entering the sewers. Members learned of initiatives in other areas of the country such as Mansfield, where hard standing was being replaced with more porous surfaces along with greening of the physical environment.

In a significantly rural place, like Shropshire, Members commented on the opportunities to reduce flooding and associated pollution by slowing the flow of water across the land, and to capture pollution and slow run-off from highways. They discussed using natural solutions such as planting trees between farms and agricultural land and waterways, and reed-bed filtration, as well as options such as the use of bio-char arising from the introduction of green technology such as pyrolysis, to trap pollutants.

Bathing Water Status and Standards
Evidence gathered through this work, including from experiences in Ilkley and from Surfers Against Sewage identified that whilst councils can apply for bathing water status, it was often best for the applications to be brought forward and led by the community. This included the identification of the sites. It was explained to the Members that by being community-led the applications would likely be better supported, have greater community ownership, and be more sustainable.

Members were aware of bathing water status applications to Defra being made for Ludlow and Shrewsbury and learned about the value of the roles of Shropshire Council and the town councils as landowners and as key local supporters, and the value of seeking and getting support from MPs.

Working as a system
Realising sustainable improvement to river water quality will be best achieved by all stakeholders from communities to councils, to water companies and regulators working together and delivering their parts of the system. Members identified that achieving improvements cannot be done in isolation.

In this context, there are mutual opportunities and shared outcomes between the stakeholders, whether communities, public sector organisations such as the council, regulators and the private sector. They come with different drivers, but all have their part to play. This 'system' approach should promote working in partnership.

A specific example that the group considered was the separation of wastewater and rainwater run-off, particularly where it would require both the water company and the Council as the highways authority to act together.

Effective engagement by all stakeholders with each other and local people and communities

Within this system way of working it will be essential to understand what is important at all levels, especially where it is acknowledged that individuals and communities play a key role – whether in the way they use water and what they put down the drain, or in the role they might fulfil like citizen scientists, who are increasingly playing a role in monitoring the health of waterways and identifying where pollution is taking place.

In this context engaging effectively with local communities will be significant in helping to get buy in to changes, possible disruption as a result of changes to infrastructure being made, and to encourage different preferences and choices to be made to achieve a lasting positive impact. Equally important will be doing the engagement in the right way, so that the messaging and language is clear and consistent, and it is coordinated across all of the different stakeholders in the system, informing their individual remits as well as the whole.

The regulatory/licencing environment

Members heard from witnesses that the regulatory environment drives behaviours in a certain way, with water companies working within these parameters and delivering what the licence requires, rather than progressing beyond them and pursuing the best for the environment.

Related to this is the monitoring, reporting and visibility of data required of the water companies. Members highlighted whether the frequency and timing of the monitoring and reporting was sufficient and took place at points that would truly show the impact of releases on river water quality. They noted that it remains very difficult to understand what is truly happening in our rivers.

Changing role of agencies and organisations and the role of the community

The work of the Task and Finish group has provided Members with growing insights about the changing roles of agencies, organisations and the community in relation to the scope of this investigation, and beyond.

Recent years have indicated a strengthening focus on the role of the Council as a 'Place Leader' and shaper, increasingly being an enabler. Evidence that the Members heard from other areas that have been progressing work to improve river water quality who highlighted that the support of councils to changes was instrumental to success. Some particular examples, included support from councils through:

- their direct responsibility as the local planning authority, adopting planning requirements such as Grampian Conditions, to ensure that infrastructure and treatment capacity was in place, and

- supporting applications for bathing water status in writing to Defra and by providing access and facilities, and
- providing small amounts of funding e.g. contributing to the costs of testing by Environment Agency recognised laboratories of the results of work by citizen scientists.

The pandemic provided evidence of the resilience and capability of communities. The Members heard about how this is being demonstrated in relation to tackling river water quality and particularly sewage pollution.

Members learned about how communities have been fundamental to achieving the successful changes in Ilkley and Northwest Oxfordshire. The role and leadership of community campaigners who used their energy and focus to raise awareness and push for action was combined with the emergence and growing purpose and impact of citizen scientists who brought their enthusiasm, knowledge, skills and experience to monitor and evidence the health of waterways and highlight pollution.

The growing role of the citizen scientists was commented on by Members, making links to the impact of reduced funding on the ability to respond to all reports of pollution by the Environment Agency (EA). Members were aware that the EA was focusing its resources to respond to the most serious cases of pollution, and that citizen science could help to fill the gap.

There was recognition that the community has a wide reach as well as strong ties to their place, and given the right tools, support, and opportunity, they could play a key role in monitoring pollution and raising awareness, helping to bring issues to the attention of organisations such as the Environment Agency.

When discussing the River Checker App with officers from the EA, Members learned about the many different citizen science groups that are working in their areas across the country who were developing recording of their data, making their data accessible, and the visualisation of the information. The discussions with the EA reinforced the need to not try to have a single tool or approach for all areas, but emphasised the importance of ensuring that there was consistency in the robustness of data collection and data structure that would enable data integration and analysis of greater depth and across wider geographic areas.

Members felt that the shared accessibility of the data could offer opportunities to engage places of further and higher education and the environmental sector in developing analysis and visualisation, as well as scope to inform innovation in prevention and mitigation of the pollution of waterways.

6. Conclusions

From the very start of this piece of overview and scrutiny work the members of the Task and Finish group were very much aware of the role and responsibilities of Local Authorities. They were also mindful of the different key contributors to pollution in waterways. They agreed to focus on sewage but would take account of matters and opportunities relating to agriculture and highways run-off where they came-up.

Through their work the Task and Finish group have concluded that whilst direct issues relating to regulation and holding to account on matters of water pollution, including through sewage, fall outside of the remit and responsibility of the Council, it does have direct impacts on the Council, communities that the Council enables and supports, and can create demand for services that the Council delivers.

There are also aspects of the Council's role, responsibilities and decision making that can help to reduce the risk and occurrence of pollution to waterways and enable and strengthen the voice and position of communities on environmental matters. In this final point, the Task and Finish group have drawn some parallels with the Council's role in relation to tackling climate change.

Influence through Planning
Members have concluded that opportunities exist for the Council to have direct influence on the sufficiency and capacity of wastewater infrastructure and treatment plants to handle additional needs from new housing developments.

Learning from other areas of the country suggests that the adoption of Grampian Conditions can provide the opportunity for the focus on ensuring that housing is not developed in isolation of the capacity of the infrastructure and services that need to be in place, in this instance, to cope with additional demand for wastewater and run-off and minimise the wider environmental impact of the development.

From a climate change position, planning requirements for new developments could also be useful in helping to reduce water usage to help make better use of grey water and rainwater.

Confirming and strengthening the role of Shropshire Council as a 'Place Leader' and enabler
As described evidence indicates that on the matters that the Task and Finish group have considered there is scope for the Council to grow in its role as a Place Leader. This is both strategically e.g. jointly leading the River Severn Partnership, in its role as the Local Planning Authority, and for more specific and community focused issues and initiatives e.g. providing small amounts of funding for specific activity.

Members believe that the Council does not need to deliver all things, but should be active in providing direction, and supporting and enabling initiatives that deliver its priorities and the shared outcomes of the system partners.

Increasing the application of 'system working' to all areas of service delivery
Members of the Task and Finish group believe that the issues that have been considered in this work will be better solved by recognising the different 'cogs' in the system that are either contributing to or can help to address the issues.

Each of the different parts of the system, e.g. the Water Company, the Environment Agency as the regulator, the Council as the Local Planning Authority and a 'place leader', developers, and local communities, play different roles and have different organisational and personal powers, responsibilities, and ways to impact and deliver their shared outcomes. Members believe that by working together and each doing their piece of the whole, the system partners will deliver change more quickly, more efficiently and have a more sustainable impact.

Effective Engagement
Engaging effectively with local communities will be a key driver of success, helping to garner support for changes, raise awareness of issues and plans to address them, and to promote ownership, for example in the monitoring of the health of waterways and identifying where pollution is taking place, and personal and community responsibility including what goes down the drain.

Maintaining effective engagement of the community and between the stakeholders will be both the foundation of working in this system way, and getting this right and investing in maintaining it should be a system priority.

As well as using the outputs of engagement to inform plans, to increase the sustainability and the embedding of change, the circle needs to be closed, This will include demonstrating the outcomes, progress and impact, and in doing so recognising how the different contributions have delivered successes.

Changing roles and voice of communities in environmental and other matters
Members have concluded that roles are changing due to a number of different factors and influences including changes to funding e.g. to the Environment Agency, which are forcing prioritisation of activities. They heard about how people in communities have knowledge, skills, experience, interest and energy in communities and how these have been used to great success in different areas of the country. The different

stakeholders need to collectively embrace and work with each other to achieve the sustainable change that is required.

Frequency and timing of monitoring by water companies
The group has highlighted that they believe that the visibility of the health of rivers and waterways in Shropshire is not as good as it should be, and that this would be helped by more frequent monitoring. More monitoring in general and in more tactical and targeted ways will help to generate a clearer and more transparent view of what the health of waterways is, what is having an impact, where, when, how and why, and whether the actions taken and investment made are having the impact expected.

Members believe that more monitoring by the water companies will help with this, both in terms of increasing the frequency to weekly, and to ensure that there is monitoring before and after releases so that the direct impact on the quality of the water is known and shared. This would be particularly relevant for dry releases, which Members understand should not be taking place, and where they did, could have greater impacts on the quality of the river water due to the reduced flow and reduced dilution of the released sewage.

Helping make the health of Shropshire waterways accessible and visible
The group believe that there is real potential offered by the River Health Checker App to raise awareness, enable the collection of data and information on the health of waterways, as well as provide guidance on reporting potential pollution incidents.

Members felt that the app provides the opportunity to raise and embed a love of the environment and ownership across all parts of communities, where school children to retirees, from interested amateurs to people with significant training and professional backgrounds, can all contribute in their own way.

Consistency in data collection and structure
Members endorsed the importance of supporting and promoting a standardised approach to the collection and recording of data arising from the work of citizen scientists. They concluded that this was important in enabling data from different areas of the country to be brought together to develop richer and deeper data sets, and to engage with further and higher education, and the environmental sector.

Bathing Water Status
Members confirmed their support for applications for Bathing Water Status and were pleased to be able to help progress with Shropshire bids during their work. They recognised the role that applying for and achieving the status has as a means to drive

awareness, focus attention and energy, and keep the pressure on the water industry and the other parts of the system to prevent and minimise pollution of waterways. They also concluded that Shropshire Council had an important role to play in supporting bathing water status applications rather than leading them, and that the applications were better made through the community.

Working in partnership with Severn Trent Water to achieve shared outcomes
Operating in a 'system' way will require the Council to continue to, if not increase, working in partnership with Severn Trent Water, as the water company in the area, to identify more opportunities deliver shared priorities and outcomes. Learning from pilot projects and initiatives identify that this could include:

- Looking at Council assets and car parks and the green environment more widely, to make changes that would slow run-off and increase absorption, contributing to reducing flooding and the risk of flooding. This is likely to be more relevant in urban areas, but there may be opportunities in all areas that the Council covers.
- Promoting work to separate combined sewerage so that surface run-off can be diverted and reduce the flow into sewage works, and the need for Combined Sewer Outfalls (CSOs) to be triggered or better still, required.
- Understanding opportunities for different stakeholders to use their spheres of influence to help system partners to share key messages and advice to people and communities which would help to achieve positive shared outcomes. An example shared with members was enabling access for a water company to raise awareness with householders of the misconnection of household appliances such as washing machines or dishwashers resulting in wastewater potentially entering into the wrong drains (where combined sewers are not in use).

Transparency and reporting of progress and impact
All partners in the system should be able to be clear about how what they have been doing contributes to the shared outcomes as a whole, what difference this has made, what they plan to do and what impacts these are expected to have.

The frequency of these updates should be aligned to the delivery plan timescales of the system as a whole and of the individual system partners, with an emphasis on when impacts and progress are planned to be evident to communities. These should also take account of any established or emerging national or organisational reporting timescale requirements.

All of this should be reported in a way that means that communities can understand what is planned, what has been done, and what has happened as a result. Therefore,

this needs to be consistent with the language and priorities of local communities to ensure that:

- the messages are relevant,
- they provide mechanisms for communities to raise issues effectively and be assured that they have both been listened to, and more importantly heard by the system partners,
- they enable the stakeholders to communicate their progress and priorities in ways that meet their own requirements.

<u>Embedding river water quality within Overview and Scrutiny of climate change and the environment</u>

Within achieving the transparency described above, the opportunity should be taken to establish a mechanism, such as a standing task and finish group, for overview and scrutiny to track climate and environmental topics and issues. This would include river water quality and flooding, keeping abreast of plans and developments, the results of monitoring, and impact and progress on these matters across the relevant stakeholders.

This has a strong fit with supporting the Council in its role as a place leader on these matters and would also allow the follow up on questions and lines of enquiry raised by the River Water Quality Task and Finish group that were not able to be answered during the work done. It could encompass the remit of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee in terms of flooding and climate change, and in doing so have a view of strategic working taking place, including the River Severn Partnership.

The group would need to maintain a consistent view across the topics and would need to feed its findings and any recommended points of focus back to the committee to be considered for inclusion in the work programme and possible deeper investigation.

7. 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.

<u>Hard recommendations</u>

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.

<u>Softer recommendations</u>

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 it's 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.

9. That the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee form a standing group that tracks climate and environmental topics and issues including river water quality and flooding, keeping abreast of plans and developments, the results of monitoring, and the impact and progress across the relevant stakeholders. To inform it's work it may specify key measures of activity and progress that it wants to review. The group should meet every 6 months and report back into the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee twice a year.

Witnesses that the Task and Finish Group heard from

Witness	Organisation
Dan Wrench	Shropshire Council
John Bellis	Shropshire Council
Hayley Deighton	Shropshire Council
Professor Mark Barrow	Shropshire Council
Professor Becky Malby	Ilkley Clean River
Vaughan Lewis	Windrush Against Sewage Pollution
Geoff Tombs	Windrush Against Sewage Pollution
Phillip Dunne MP	Member of Parliament for Ludlow/ Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee
Kirsty Davies	Surfers Against Sewage
Alison Biddulph	Shrewsbury and Ludlow Bathing Water Status
Marc Lidderth	Environment Agency
Guy Pluckwell	Environment Agency
Lydia Ashworth	Environment Agency
Tim Smith	Severn Trent Water
Jason Rogers	Severn Trent Water
James Ratcliffe	Severn Trent Water
Gareth Mead	Severn Trent Water
Zack Holbrook	Severn Trent Water

Examples of River Water Quality Announcements

To start to address the issue of cleaner water Severn Trent, in 2022, announced the Green Recovery programme which works towards a goal of 15km (9.3 miles) of bathing quality waters by 2025. This includes the River Teme in South Shropshire. Severn Trent have also pledged to double the amount of bathing rivers in its region in the next 10 years.

In April 2023 there were a range of announcements that both informed and impacted this Task and Finish group work:

- Government plans to lift the cap of £250,000 for penalties for firms that release sewage into rivers of the sea. [Part of 'plans to make polluters pay' – including from plastics, and chemicals used in farming].
- Severn Trent Water have been given the green light by Defra, Ofwat and the Environment Agency to bring forward £95m worth of improvements to get started before the next 5 year cycle starting in 2025. (250,000 smart meters to help customers reduce demand and tackle leakage, increase reservoir capacity and improving monitoring at 80 sewage treatment works].
- Severn Tent Water made progress on work to protect rivers 1 year on from Get River Positive with 100% monitor coverage of storm overflows, and announced that 84% of reasons rivers are not achieving Environment Agency status is down to other sectors:

Severn Trent Water press release 31 March 2023

Severn Trent has today shared progress one year on from announcing its commitment to protect and improve in the health of the region's rivers. Results show impact from its operations has reduced by one third in one year and the water company has completed the installation of 100% of monitor coverage across the region.

Central to Severn Trent's commitments is the pledge that its operations will not be the reason for any stretch of river in its region to be classified as unhealthy by 2030. Environment Agency (EA) data released today (31 March 2023) shows this figure is now 16% down from 24%, with the remaining 84% attributable to other sectors.

The 2022 Event Duration Monitoring data shows that on average storm overflows were used for 1.15% of the total year - a 47% decrease in the operational time of 2021. In addition, whilst rainfall across the region was lower (13% less than in 2021) through improvements and investments, activations have reduced by 26% compared to the previous year and duration reduced by 46% on average.

Severn Trent is moving faster, in some cases 20 years ahead of targets set out by regulators and the Get River Positive pledges have made a difference across its region over the last 12 months including:

- *Investing £100 million a year on improving infrastructure*

- *Making significant progress on the £78 million Bathing Rivers programme to improve 50km of rivers in Warwickshire and Shropshire and the £25 million project to help prevent sewer flooding and river pollution across the Gloucestershire town of Stroud*
- *Installing 100% of monitors on storm overflows by the end of 2022, recording data every 2 or 15 minutes, providing more 300 million data records over the course of a year*

On Monday 2 October 2023 Severn Trent Water made further statements on the investment they will be making:

Severn Trent has today announced it is investing £12.9 billion in its water and sewage network, as part of ambitious plans submitted to water regulator Ofwat, whilst keeping bills affordable and good value for customers.

The multibillion-pound programme is set to create 7,000 new jobs between 2025 and 2030, which will have a positive lasting impact for decades to come. It also means that for every household, Severn Trent will invest £2,400 back into the region, transforming the way more than four million customers are served across the Midlands.

The major announcement comes after 68,000 customers helped to shape the plan so that it delivers the outcomes its customers care about most - it will guarantee a secure water supply for generations to come; storm overflows will cause no harm to rivers and customers will receive sector leading service, with a promise that customers won't pay for anything twice.

Investment in the water system is essential to ensure the security of water supply in the future and will deliver significant improvements in the region's water and sewerage system. The plan is underpinned by a £550m financial support package, which means financial support for around 700,000 people to help pay their bill - more customers than ever before - and around one in seven customers in the region. We understand this support is the most extensive in the water industry, from the information we had at the time we submitted our plan, and the numbers supported exceeds those we forecast to be in water poverty by 2030.

Liv Garfield, CEO at Severn Trent, unveiled the £12.9bn investment plans *and said: "By 2030 we will have transformed our network to continue to provide our customers with the best service that can be relied on. At the heart of this ambition is a commitment to ensure a sustainable future – from healthy rivers, to providing jobs of thousands, less leaks and a water supply to deal with the impacts of climate change and population growth whilst making sure that no customer ever worries about affording their water bill.*

"We've listened hard to our customers; not only will we make sure we keep building on our strong sector leading track record, but we'll be more than a water company. This

investment will make sure we have a positive economic, environmental and social impact for decades to come for the communities we serve."

Highlights of the 2,000-page plan include:

- *To help with climate change and population growth – which is set to grow by 12% to nine million in the Midlands by 2050 - Severn Trent will lay new water mains almost the length of Lands End to John O'Groats twice over and provide an extra 100 million litres a day from new water sources.*

- *Severn Trent has already reduced its impact on waterways by a third in the last year alone and today's announcement confirms a further almost £7 billion investment in its wastewater treatment, including plans to go faster to improve storm overflows – three a week, every week and means spills will be stopped five years ahead of Government targets. More River Rangers will also be recruited to continue to improve the health of waterways and to boost biodiversity*

Severn Trent has the second lowest bill in England and Wales - £29 below national average, and this plan will make sure that bills continue to be affordable and offer the best value. From an average of £1.15 a day today, to £1.42 a day by 2030, people will receive a high quality and reliable clean water and wastewater service that customers can count on, and new record levels of investment where it is wanted – doing the right thing for the environment and society. For context, water bills are today the equivalent 1.2% of disposable income, increasing to 1.3% by 2030.

The plan builds on Severn Trent's strong track record of delivering large scale investment projects, as well as being recognised for the fourth year running, with highest four-star rating for environmental performance by the Environment Agency and recognised by Ofwat as being sector leading for financial resilience in a region where there hasn't been a hosepipe ban for 30 years.

The £12.9 billion investment will create up to 7,000 jobs in the water company's extensive supply chain and directly in the business and will also enable thousands of new work experience placements, apprenticeships and internships.

The plans submitted today to Ofwat will now be reviewed, and final business plans for 2025-2030 will be confirmed in April 2024.

Full details of the plan can be found at: www.stwater.co.uk/about-us/our-plans-2025-2030

River Water Quality Task and Finish Group – Additional questions to the EA, STW and Shropshire Council

Question	Recipient		
	EA	STW	SC
How have treatment works in Shropshire been expanded over the past 10 to 20 years? • Which sites and locations has this happened at and what was done in the expansion/upgrade? • How future proofed were these activities – how long were/are for these changes expected to meet demand (how much additional capacity gets built into developments)? • Were any of these expansions/upgrades identified through links made Lo the Local Plans and large housing developments? • If so, please confirm which ones and how the Local Plan/details of the housing development informed the scope and scale of the work undertaken.		✓	
What horizon scanning do you do to understand expected/forecast demand, to forward plan infrastructure and treatment works capacity and testing locations and requirements?		✓	
What triggers a response and inclusion in your Asset Management Plan e.g. Local Plan or developer confirmation of work starting?		✓	
What level of investment is going to be required to ensure that there is sufficient storm storage in place in Shropshire communities, particularly where it's a Victorian system?		✓	
To what degree do you forecast asset requirements based on existing CSOs etc? What consideration takes place of probable and potential new/increased demand on infrastructure and treatment works?		✓	
What are the current and future programmes of improvement and development of infrastructure and treatment works in Shropshire that affect or impact on Shropshire rivers and waterways, • What are the locations that work is taking place or is planned to take place and when? • What work is being or going to be done at each site? • What the net benefit of each improvement/development will be to the river/waterway system overall as well as locally, and • whether it's about being ready for the future to meet standards or growing demand, or putting a finger in the dyke to address current issues?		✓	
For the development of new treatment facilities or upgrades/redevelopment of existing sites, please identify which of the following best reflects practice and planning and why: • Addressing gaps in current capacity? • Meeting forecast future demand based on known or expected demand? • : achieving current minimum standards?		✓	

Question	Recipient		
	EA	STW	SC
• Targeting future expected standards? • Implementing the technological developments and innovation to achieve the best possible standards?			
Please provide information that sets out annually for the last 5 years any significant events in Shropshire and the locations e.g. spillages and prosecutions	✓		
What would the EA need to be informed of to trigger an event?	✓		
What proportion of the total events nationally, and in Shropshire, do the EA think they are informed about? Please provide this as different data sets.	✓		
What would help the EA to deliver the levels of activity/standards that they would like to achieve? Both in terms of their own activity, and the outcomes for waterways and communities.	✓		
How do the EA engage with Citizen scientists? What do they do with the data? Are there any pinch points that impact on using the data provided and what could be done to alleviate them?	✓		
What impact would reducing flooding closer to the source and slowing the flow in the catchment have on pollution in rivers/waterway in Shropshire – particularly sewage, but also from agriculture and highways run-off?	✓		
What number of investigations are currently underway in Shropshire? What are the trends over the past 5 years? What were the causes for each investigation?	✓		
Is the testing and related data provided by Water Companies adequate in terms of timing of the testing taking place in relation to events, locations e.g. upstream/downstream of outfalls and CSOs, and what is covered by the testing? What would better testing data look like and what benefits would it provide?	✓		
What evidence would the EA require to change policies re: standards for timing, location and content of testing?	✓		
What data and testing are you asked for? When are you asked for it? If it is unplanned what triggers collection of the data/testing? Is this the right data to show the true issues?		✓	
How independent of management is the testing and reporting that takes place?		✓	
When was the last time that your organisation felt that water quality in rivers and waterways in Shropshire was good? What has changed since then?	✓	✓	
Does the EA triaging of incidents and the fact that category 2 incidents are usually identified through an EA officer visit, mean that only category 1 incidents are truly responded to?	✓		

Question	Recipient		
	EA	STW	SC
How are wider pollution sources identified and responded to e.g. those that that may be located on a site that only pollutes a watercourse when the site is flooded?	✓		
Are there standards in place for unplanned/irregular discharges of sewage e.g. of timeliness of testing and location of testing? What could help to improve the monitoring of the impact of unplanned discharges?	✓	✓	
What are your/your organisations thoughts on Bathing Water Standards and Bathing Water Status?	✓	✓	
What is the probability and associated risk of (sewage) pollution entering groundwater? Does pumping river water to replenish aquifers have an impact on this? How is/should/could this be monitored, managed, mitigated against?	✓	✓	
How bad is pollution of waterways at CSOs in Shropshire? How does it differ across water courses and across Shropshire and why?	✓	✓	
Would your organisation be interested in being part of a Shropshire focused multi-agency task group to look at identifying solutions to "frequent flyer" CSOs and their proximity to environmentally sensitive areas?	✓	✓	✓
Is the pharmaceutical pollution from treated water and sewage monitored and impact measured? If not how could this be done and what actions need to be taken?	✓	✓	
What alternative methods of treating sewage/wastewater, including nature-based techniques, can or should be used as part of new or expanded/redeveloped treatment works? • Which of these approaches reduce or remove levels of pharmaceutical pollution? • Are any of these approaches suitable to be implemented/introduced to Shropshire? • What needs to be in place for them to be suitable (e.g. infrastructure/topography/location in relation to waterways or floodplains/support from other agencies/support from communities etc)? • How, where and when is this or could this happen in Shropshire?	✓	✓	✓
Looking at other areas of the country – Thames Water asked the Local Planning Authority (North West Oxfordshire District Council) to implement Grampian conditions to ensure that infrastructure and treatment works capacity can respond to and match demand arising from new development. Is this something that your organisation would want to ask of Shropshire Council/would want the Council to do?	✓	✓	