

Wiltshire Council

Full Council

15 October 2024

Notice of Motion No. 2024-08 - Wiltshire's Rivers

From Cllr Robert MacNaughton and Cllr Ashley O'Neill

To consider the following motion submitted in accordance with the constitution:

The UK's antiquated and outdated sewerage system is in a poor state. Despite some recent large investments, it cannot cope with the combined problems of increasing population, urbanisation and changing weather patterns. In 2023 there were nearly half a million discharges of sewage and waste waters into our rivers across England and Wales¹. In Wiltshire there were over 7000 such spills for a combined duration of over 84,000 hours².

Sewage problems are nothing new. In 1859 London experienced The Big Stink during a particularly hot summer. The smell of raw sewage in the River Thames was so great that the government finally decided to build a sewage system; the one that we largely still use today.

There were regular outbreaks of cholera leading up to the Big Stink. Cholera comes from drinking water which has sewage in it. Scientists were realising the dangers of polluted rivers at that time and the River Thames was both sewer and the source of the capital's drinking water. Today our drinking water may be clean but the danger from river pollution remains. Tests of the Thames before the Boat Race in March 2024 showed levels of E-coli, a bacterium which is found in faeces that causes many illnesses even life threatening blood poisoning, at over twice the safe level³.

The population of the United Kingdom in 1861 was 23 million and now the population of the UK is nearly three times larger. Yet we are still using a large proportion of the original Victorian sewage system. Investment, and innovation have not kept up with the increase in the population, and the diversification of need.

Many other countries in Europe have managed to successfully update their sewage system but unfortunately, we have not. The main problem is that in many cases both storm water, and sewage go together through one system. They are not separated.

The River Marden runs through Calne. It is an eight-mile-long river, rising in the North Wessex Downs, and falling into the River Avon in Chippenham. It experiences, on

¹ Source: Environment Agency data for 2023 for England and Wales shows 464,356 spills for a combined duration of 3.6 million hours.

² Source: Environment Agency data for 2023 shows 7,117 spills for a combined duration of 84,344 hours.

³ Source: BBC News 27 March shows tests around Hammersmith Bridge indicated an average of 2,869 E. coli CFU (colony forming units) per 100ml. the level should be below 1,000 CFU per 100ml to meet bathing water standards.

average, sewage and wastewater discharge every second of the day, every day of the week, 50 weeks of the year⁴.

Unfortunately, this is not unusual for Wiltshire⁵ as a single overflow discharged into the River Till and from there into the River Wylye for over 6000 hours in 2023.

It is essential for our water companies to improve their performance and invest in upgraded systems, something they haven't been doing enough of.

Ofwat, the regulator has not been robust enough, and water companies have used that to their advantage. In 2022 their debt stood at £60 billion and the costs of servicing the debt account for a significant percentage of consumer bills. For example, 19% of the bills paid to Wessex Water are used to service their debt costs. Water company CEOs have received £41 million in bonuses, benefits and performance incentives since 2020⁶ whilst sewage continues to pollute Wiltshire's rivers.

It is public knowledge that there is a real problem in the way the water companies manage their finances. Accruing more and more debt, ostensibly to invest, brings diminishing returns as interest rates go up.

Motion

- 1) Council is disappointed by the water industry's failure to prevent sewage being discharged into Wiltshire's Rivers. We call on water companies operating in Wiltshire; Wessex Water, Thames Water, and Southern Water to make the required investment to protect our Rivers as a priority.**
- 2) Council requests a meeting with executives of Wessex Water, Thames Water and Southern Water to receive greater clarity on future investment in the overdue upgrades to our sewage systems in Wiltshire.**
- 3) Council calls on Wessex Water, Thames Water and Southern Water to join the Council in engaging with the government and Ofwat to discuss how the burden of the necessary investment in Wiltshire is addressed.**

⁴ Source Environment Agency data for 2023 shows 566 spills for a combined duration of 8,500 hours within the River Marden catchment area.

⁵ Source Environment Agency Shrewton Water Recycling centre recorded 262 spills for 6183 hours in 2023

⁶ See The Guardian/money/ Dec 18