

**ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
16 OCTOBER 2023
7.30PM – 8.25PM**



Present Virtually:

Councillors Eberle, Cochrane, Ejaz, Haffegge and Hayes

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Brown, M Forster and McKenzie-Boyle

Also Present Virtually:

Andrew Hunter, Executive Director Place, Planning and Regeneration and Kevin Gibbs, Statutory Scrutiny Officer

7. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

Apologies were received from Councillors McKenzie-Boyle, Brown, Hayes and Mike Forster.

8. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Christoph Eberle declared a personal interest in Thames Water as the company he worked for meant he carried out projects for Thames Water occasionally. There were no indications that members would be participating while under the party whip.

9. Public Participation

No submissions had been made by members of the public under the Council's Public Participation Scheme for Overview and Scrutiny.

10. Thames Water review scope

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Environment and Communities Panel introduced the meeting and provided a recap of why this review was taking place in relation to the motion that was agreed at Council on 12 July 2023. It was confirmed that the draft scope being presented and discussed was now at version 3. The scope was shared on screen and read out by the Chair. Following this was discussion of the content of the scope and the Chair made changes on the document during the meeting.

The following points were raised:

- Kevin Gibbs, Statutory Scrutiny officer, provided a recap for the panel regarding the types of review that were undertaken within Overview and Scrutiny. This included a one and done review that mostly looked at policy and larger reviews that were two to three months long. It was acknowledged that occasionally reviews could run for longer. However, concern was raised regarding the length of review that this scope indicated. It was suggested that an approach to address this could be to break the scope and review into workable sections. The

Integrated Enforcement and Enforcement Strategy reviews, completed in 2022 and 2023, were cited as an example and highlighted how recommendations were brought forward in a timely manner.

- It was acknowledged that splitting the review using the key questions in the scope was an option that would ensure work could be completed for presentation at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 29 February 2024.
- A concern was raised that the scope did not clearly identify the problem that needed to be scrutinised. It was noted that the main issue was the lack of understanding around the location and frequency of sewage discharges. This was noted as something to address and would need developing further with an update provided mid November 2023.
- It was noted that the Biodiversity Action Plan has an objective that we should be trying to improve the River Cut, where a lot of overflows happen. A suggestion was made that this could be used as part of the reason for the review. In response to this it was suggested that this was not raised in the original Council motion or in any discussions so far regarding the scope but would not be ruled out as something that could be covered within the review activity.
- The reason for the review was clarified and amended to include the point that in addition to challenging failures of Thames Water it would additionally specify minimising environmental damage through challenging the discharge of sewage into local waterways.
- A comment was made regarding the issue of the impact of contaminated water on human health. This was noted within the scope.
- The importance of differentiating between discharges that are operational or caused by damage was noted adding that this review would focus on operational challenges.
- The key question in the scope '*which options are available to Bracknell Forest Council to effect changes to reduce the frequency and impact of Thames Water operational sewage discharges*' was discussed. A query was raised around the uncertainty of the actual issue around Thames Water and how this would impact on specification of 'changes' that could be made. Citing a trip to a sewage works in July 2023 the point was made that there is limited information regarding how much pollution is being released into the waterways. It was agreed that this would be something the review would look into.
- Advice was given to the panel to consider what the recommendations from the review would look like and work back from that point. A key point to consider was a focus on who would have the power to implement the recommendations and which decision makers could be influenced.
- On the point around Local Neighbourhood plans it was noted that these are at the discretion of Parish Councils and control over them was limited. There may not even be any relationship with sewage or water. Whilst this was acknowledged the point was left in the scope.
- The importance of considering the impact of climate change, specifically the chance of increased episodes of greater rainfall, on the wastewater system was raised as an important point to include.
- A note was made that this review would not be focussing on individual sewer discharges as this would come under damage of sewers rather than operational issues.
- An area of uncertainty noted was regarding the impact of expanding housing developments and the pressures these put on to the water system which can cause sewage discharges.

It was agreed that the scope date would be amended to February/April 2024

A vote was taken and all Councillors in the meeting agreed to accept the amended scope.

The next steps in the process were explained:

- Andrew Hunter, Executive Director for Place, Planning and Regeneration would sponsor the review and once all changes to the scope were made it would be sent to him for final approval.
- As the Overview and Scrutiny commission had already agreed to this review a progress update would be provided at the next meeting on 29 November 2023.
- The Chair of the Panel would schedule a workplan for the review and it was recommended that the next public meeting would focus on looking at the evidence pack and agreeing a schedule of witnesses to bring forward.

11. **Discussion of review methodology**

Due to time constraints and that the review methodology was touched upon during the discussion of the scope this item was put on hold.

CHAIR