

**ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
22 NOVEMBER 2023
6.30PM – 7.58PM**



Present:

Councillors Cochrane, C Eberle, Haffegge, Hayes MBE, McKenzie-Boyle and Watts

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Brown and Ejaz

Also Present:

Sarah Thornley and John Bryden from Thames 21

Dr Michael Hutchins from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology

Councillor Virgo

12. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

Apologies were received from Councillors Brown and Ejaz

13. 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.

14. Public Participation

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

15. Introduction from the Chair of the panel

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Environment and Communities Panel welcomed the guest witnesses, Sarah Thornley and John Bryden from Thames 21, Michael Hutchins from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and Cllr Virgo. An introduction from the chair provided a recap of why the panel was looking into the issue of Thames Water and the main questions the review was hoping to address. These were, what options were available to Bracknell Forest Council to effect changes that would reduce the frequency and impact of operational sewage discharges? What collaborative options existed with other affected local authorities?

16. Witness session

John Bryden, Head of Improving Rivers at Thames 21, provided a brief introduction to the work of Thames 21 which covered the following points:

- It was set up twenty years ago with a focus on restoration of ecosystems, achieved through a collaborative approach.
- Partnerships include work with local authorities, community groups, other NGO's (Non-Governmental Organisations) and other water companies.

- Success of the organisation was celebrated through acknowledgment of the prestigious Ashden Awards for climate innovation for their joint work creating nature-based solutions to address flood risk and improve water quality.
- With partners they have pioneered the development and delivery of nature-based solutions to improve the quality of water which included constructed wetlands. It was explained that these could be described as large sustainable drainage systems in public spaces, capable of treating pollution from the drainage area including sewage and road run off pollution. Communities are involved and have an input in these which provided a community hub in addition to improvement of the green spaces.
- The development of a road runoff solution pollution tool was noted. Currently covering the London area it was confirmed that this would be extended to cover Bracknell Forest Council boundary area. This tool identified pollution pathways into the river and guides and prioritises where and how nature-based solutions can be used to tackle road runoff pollution.
- Catchment planning was noted as an important way of working, specifically developing collaborative action across communities, authorities and NGO's to drive implementation.

Sarah Thornley, Head of Improving Rivers at Thames 21, provided more detail as follows:

- Noted that the catchment partnership had set up a working group for Bracknell which included the involvement of some Bracknell Town Councillors, Ranger team members and some local community groups.
- This had led to local projects in the Bracknell area which included the outfall safari in 2022 and work on a successful bid for community action for the Cut which focused on volunteer led days to restore a section of the Cut that runs through Garth Meadows.
- The importance of citizen science was noted.

Dr Michael Hutchins from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology introduced his work as an environmental scientist with a speciality in river water quality:

- Has worked with Thames 21 to develop initiatives and research that would positively affect the river environment.
- Between 2013-2016 was involved in a Research Council funded project which monitored river flow and water quality of the Cut in Bracknell, this data was made public.
- Set up models that simulated the hydrology river flows and water quality which would be capable of looking at the impacts of different management interventions.
- Interested in the potential of sustainable urban drainage and nature-based solutions, not just for improvement of water quality but also the impact these had on air quality and improvement of public health.

17. **Update from Cllr Virgo**

Cllr Virgo provided an overview of a visit to a Thames Water Sewage works on 17 May 2023. The following was noted:

- A small group of Councillors attended a visit in response to a problem of sewage spills.
- During the visit they learned that the site was fully automated with a few workers who operated the system. Regular water samples were taken to ensure the organic filtration process was working to a satisfactory level. This filtration system could be affected by chemicals in the sewers.

- Storm water was retained in holding tanks and slowly released into the system when the flow was reduced. It was noted that there was one tank out of action which would need investment to be operational again.
- Cllr Virgo noted an observation that he felt additional holding tanks would have relieved the situation of heavy rainfall which he felt would become more of an issue with climate change.
- During the visit the Thames Water representative confirmed that the sewage works could cope with a population of 250 000. Cllr Virgo pointed out that issues were arising from heavy rains and surface water that entered the system which resulted in discharges into the water course and environmental damage.
- Copenhagen's water system was praised as it used pipes for land drainage into one system and pipes for sewage into another system. It was later pointed out by John Bryden that this system is in use across most of the Thames Basin and it causes the inflow of water into the sewage treatment works. He noted that rainwater should be directed to the river.
- Land drainage was raised as an issue.
- Older housing stock and inadequate infrastructure were noted as issues.
- After pressure from Councillors, Thames Water responded to issues of sewage discharges into the Cut by agreeing to clean pipes and install a monitoring device at Bracknell Road. However, the monitoring device was not deemed necessary after they had cleaned the pipes.
- Oxfordshire council have addressed an issue around the water bill and rights to connect by having an agreement whereby planning applications of twelve or more houses require approval from Thames Water regarding sewage arrangements and upgrades to a system. Cllr Virgo noted that this information had been passed to the Chief Executive to be discussed at the Berkshire Leaders group.

18. Questions

After hearing evidence from the witnesses, the following discussion took place and questions asked:

- John Bryden, Head of Improving Rivers at Thames 21, raised some points related to the misconnection of surface water and sewage pipes. Whilst these are fixed by Thames Water because of pollution investigations there is no record of the fixes. Without a history of fixes a business case for more proactive solutions in relation to these issues can't be developed.
- A point was noted about The Big Event, a project which Sarah Thornley, Catchment Partnership Development Officer at Thames 21 alongside Bracknell Forest Councillors was involved with, which deals with waterways across the borough. As this project was still in development and required agreement from the Climate Change Board further details were not shared but the Chair of the Environment and Communities panel was invited to the next meeting.
- A question about planning policies was asked, specifically if any of the witnesses in attendance were involved in developing policies that could be implemented at the planning level. In response:
 - Cllr Virgo agreed and commented that there was no control over developers right to connect to the sewage system and not enough checks were in place to control or check connections.
 - John Bryden, Head of Improving Rivers at Thames 21, responded with the point that development can be positive if implemented correctly and noted that having policies in place were critical to ensuring effectiveness. Retrofitting an area with sustainable drainage systems will help address issues but this needs to be done at scale across the whole urban infrastructure. Therefore, policy and practice around retrofitting and

financing in addition to planning and development, was deemed necessary to ensure delivery of healthy neighbourhoods. It was also noted that it would be beneficial if Thames water provided better integration and communication of risks and solutions.

- It was acknowledged that the Cut is one of the most polluted rivers in the Lower Thames Region and this could be made worse by climate change. A question was asked regarding what proportion of pollution was due to treatment work discharges rather than from surface water drainage and how much of this pollution was Thames Water able to influence. Whilst unable to provide quantitative data in response to the question it was acknowledged that most of the pollution would come from treated wastewater. In the Cut there was less dilution from surface water and low flow which contributed to the high concentration of pollutants. Misconnected households were also cited as an issue which was significant in low flow rivers or during drought times.
- A question was asked about whether the volume Thames Water can discharge into the cut could be controlled through licensing or other regulatory means. The response was that as this was an existing licence they would have the right to discharge. If they were to apply for funding to upgrade the treatment works, then this would need to be approved by the Environment Agency and Ofwat so upgrades to enhance treatment processes could be made.
- Dr Michael Hutchins, from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, was asked if there was any funding available or further research planned within Bracknell Forest. In response it was confirmed that the main focus was at a national level and they would be applying for European coordinated funding programmes with a focus on green infrastructure which was relevant for Bracknell. There was also confirmation that as an organisation the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology would be working with Thames Water to develop understanding of the problems of pollution.
- In response to a question to Dr Michael Hutchins, from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology regarding sharing research finding it was acknowledged that the research was publicly available, links would be shared.
- Thames 21 were asked to elaborate on a centralised pollution logging system that they were working on. The River Ranger tool was developed to create a data set that would provide historic references of any times that pollution was spotted and logged, this was noted as something that Thames Waters current tool doesn't provide. Whilst the tool was live there were ongoing conversations around how to successfully streamline it to avoid duplication of efforts. The main aims of the tool were to provide transparency of data and information. The link to the tool was provided.
- A point was made that a question to Thames Water should be asked around how they encourage the public to report issues. A further question was raised regarding whether there were any consultations with affected parties, such as local boroughs, where decisions could be influenced. In response to these questions, it was noted that Thames Water were holding a 'your water your say' event on 30 November 2023 which would allow the public to hear about plans and ask questions.
- It was asked whether Thames water can make investment decisions independently within a regulatory framework. In response it was noted that business cases developed required the approval of the Environment Agency and OFWAT. It was noted that OFWAT don't always consider the environment or take local considerations into account. An example given to illustrate this was the Evenlode Catchment Partnership where Thames Water were prepared to upgrade around fifteen sewage treatment works but the funding was refused by OFWAT. This highlighted an issue where the governance framework was not open and transparent.

A question was asked about citizen science in relation to water quality sampling, specifically costs and time involved and whether it was something that local groups could undertake. It was confirmed that yes this was something community members could undertake and there were a range of citizen science initiatives available. A common programme for monitoring water quality was available through Thames 21 and they would provide in situ tools which gave instant measurement results. They also ran river fly training courses to monitor river health and this had recently taken place in the Bracknell Forest Council area.

19. **Summary of evidence**

The Chair and panel thanked the witnesses for attending the meeting and all agreed it had been an interesting and beneficial session.

CHAIR