

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Subject: Final report and recommendations of the sewerage review working group

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Working group members: Councillors Clunie, Adams, Boyle, Bosworth, Brooks, Creamer, Dunkin, Rachael Ellis, Hollingsworth, Paling, Pearson, M Smith and S Smith

Purpose of the report

To present the final report and recommendations of the sewerage review working group.

Background

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a working group to examine the impact of the sewerage discharge into the rivers and waterways in the area and to review options and make recommendations to better the situation. The working group was a result of a cross party motion regarding members concerns around sewerage that was brought to Council on 17 November 2021.

The specifics of the review focused on several items including:

- Discharge of sewerage
- Workings of the catchment area
- Measures to slow down the overflow into waterways. (Drainage ponds etc.)
- Recommendations for additional planning measures
- Potential use of education/resources to raise awareness and promotion of sewerage issues
- Reviewing of the local plan and current guidance to see what the Council already does so recommendations can be made as needed

Information

As highlighted by the variation of the specifics of this review, the issue of sewerage is very broad and runs across several disciplines and areas, all of which fall under the responsibility of several stakeholders. The working group convened for five meetings and were fortunate to hear from all of the key groups responsible for the management, regulation and protection of the waterways. These stakeholders were

invited to ensure the working group had a wide range of knowledge and insight into how the issues were affecting different types of organisations to try and get a well balanced view. The group heard from charities, government agencies, staff from the borough council, staff from the county council and the water company in charge of the wastewater management across Nottinghamshire.

The following stakeholders attended the meetings:

- Mike Avery, Head of Development and Place at Gedling Borough Council
- Kevin Nealon, Community Protection Manager at Gedling Borough Council
- Trent River Trust
- Environment Agency
- Severn Trent
- Wildlife Trust
- Sim Duhra, Climate Change Officer at Gedling Borough Council
- County Council officers

At each meeting, members heard how the sewerage issues affected each stakeholder differently, what measures they currently had in place to combat the issues and what they would recommend to be done to further aid these issues in the future.

Scott McKenzie - Trent Rivers Trust

At the first meeting of the group, members heard from Scott McKenzie, a representative from the Trent Rivers Trust (TRT). The TRT are a registered charity made up of conservation experts with a wealth of data and expertise who work with member trusts to make their shared vision a reality: wild, healthy, natural rivers, valued by all. They use their expertise, reach and member trusts' local knowledge to work with farmers, residents and organisations to provide advice and resources for communities. It was noted that their mission was:

- To help wildlife thrive in and around our rivers, streams and wetlands
- To reduce pollution entering our rivers and streams
- To help people and communities connect and value their river and floodplain
- To restore rivers streams and wetlands improving resilience to climate change

Scott highlighted that the project work TRT undertake fell into four main categories; river restoration, working with nature, land use and water and connecting people and the river. He gave some helpful insight into the issues with our waterways and noted that the majority of residents have very limited knowledge of the waterways and how their actions directly affect the current issues we are facing. He suggested that the Council could do more to encourage and educate residents on the issues.

Sim Duhra – Climate Change Officer at Gedling Borough Council

The second meeting of the group heard from Sim Duhra, Climate Change Officer at Gedling Borough Council. Sim gave an overview of the effects of climate change on

sewerage, noting the limitations the Council had in mitigating these. She advised that the Environment Agency (EA) were the environmental regulator of the water and sewerage sector in England and investigated and dealt with environmental pollution incidents.

It was noted that the Council had limited control over the majority of the sewerage issues across the borough, but could help to reduce some of the linked activities affecting it in a climate change regard by ensuring the carbon management strategy and action plan were being adhered to.

Mike Avery - Head of Development and Place and Kevin Nealon - Community Protection Manager, both at Gedling Borough Council

At the third meeting, members heard from two senior officers from the Council, Mike Avery, Head of Development and Place and Kevin Nealon, Community Protection Manager.

Mike gave an overview of planning policy and procedures, noting that planning permissions for new homes and commercial developments include drainage conditions which need to be discharged by the Council, before development may commence. It was explained that for any application, a Council planning officer works closely with Severn Trent and our Building Control team to ensure the drainage proposals are satisfactory. Developers require a separate consent from Severn Trent to connect any foul or surface water into their network Building Control officers can only issue a completion notice when they are satisfied that appropriate means of drainage for foul and surface water have been provided.

It was advised that the EA were the regulator of Severn Trent and the main role of the Council was to ensure that developments achieve appropriate foul water connection and a sustainable solution for surface water in accordance with planning policies and advice from the EA, Lead Local Flood Authority (NCC), Severn Trent and the Council's Building Control Team.

It was highlighted that more sustainable drainage methods and supporting policy would be the direction of travel for all local authorities, given the severe climate issues being faced which have included recent water shortages in some areas. Mike confirmed that emerging council policy would be mirroring this change and would welcome implementation of promotion of techniques and devices that would help protect waterways overflowing, such as water butts with developers and our residents.

It was noted that there was potential for the Council to use Soakaways on its own buildings and to harvest rainfall for other uses to reduce the amount of water going back into the system. It was agreed that these potential initiatives and the promotion of the benefits of rainwater harvesting across the Borough, would be reviewed as part of the recommendation review process.

Kevin then gave members an overview of how the Public Protection team helped to regulate the issues and confirmed their current enforcement powers. It was noted that Public Protection were no longer responsible for enforcement where drainage issues arose and that this role was now the responsibility of Severn Trent. He confirmed that the council still investigated misconnections and defective drainage in the borough, where needed.

It was explained that if drainage from one property was affecting another property, then the Public Protection team would investigate. It was noted that the council also probe food businesses to disclose their drainage processes to ensure fats and oils are disposed of correctly and that this was a factor when deciding the hygiene rating of each business, helping mitigate public health issues.

In order for members to get a greater understanding of how the treatment of sewerage worked across the borough, they visited the Stoke Bardolph sewerage treatment plant. Members toured the facility and saw first-hand how the sewerage was treated and how different things affected it. It was noted that they learned of the difficulties the facility faced with regards to flushing practices – one example being wet wipes, which do not always dissolve and can cause blockages when filtering the water. It was discussed that an education awareness campaign, led by the council, which confirmed what can and can't be flushed or drained would be beneficial.

Ben Driver and John Rattray - Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust

The fourth meeting of the group heard from Ben Driver and John Rattray of the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust, the leading wildlife conservation charity working to protect and enhance the wildlife and habitats of Nottinghamshire. The charity care for dozens of nature reserves across the county, including a mixture of valuable wildlife habitats ranging from wildflower meadows to ancient woodlands. They engage the local community through events, education and volunteering opportunities and seek to ensure the county is a healthy and wildlife rich place to live.

It was explained that the trust covers many different areas across the country, each of which is their own individual charity under the Wildlife Trust. Although the charities were separated across the different areas, they also collaborated on projects as well. They confirmed there are two Wildlife Trust teams in the Nottingham area (north and south).

Ben confirmed that the trust employed officers that work closely with the local water providers, such as Severn Trent, to improve sewerage works. They collaborate with farmers to mitigate pollution entering the waterways and they also work to identify suitable locations for soak-away ponds or areas with poor embankments that require attention. The Wildlife Trust also offers their advice on planning matters for local authorities such as how a development might impact the local wildlife, suitable locations for water suds and more.

Suggestions for actions by the council were given by the Ben and John, as follows:

- Educate and raise awareness of pollution issues and plan health initiatives throughout Gedling;
- Education on permeable driveways;
- Education on what is flushable/drainable and what is not;
- Sewerage Tanks can be filtered back into bed systems, reducing pollution to clean up the water quality; and
- Water suds are a missed opportunity and help a great deal. More priority could be given to suds where planning developments go ahead.

At the last meeting of the working group, members heard from Richard Hardy (Senior Environment Officer Water Quality at the Environment agency), Ian Smith and Matt Lewis (Managers at Severn Trent) and Joshua Wells (Flood Risk Management Team at Nottinghamshire County Council). It was noted that these last three stakeholders held the majority of responsibility when it came to the management, regulation and protection of the waterways.

Richard Hardy - Senior Environment Officer Water Quality at the Environment agency

Richard gave a presentation to members first, which provided an overview on functions of the Environment Agency (EA), including staffing data.

The presentation provided insight into which facilities in the local area discharged, noting that the main sewage discharges in the borough were Stoke Bardolph, Calverton and Burton Joyce SPS.

It was confirmed that the EA collected lots of data and evidence about sewage discharges and pollution incidents, which included:

- Event duration monitoring data - Storm sewage spill data from water company storm overflows;
- Operator self-monitoring data – Analysis results of water quality monitoring carried out by water companies of effluents discharges to the environment'
- Flow monitoring data about the quantity of effluents that is treated and discharged at water company sewage treatment works;
- The EA have an annual programme of inspections at permitted water discharge sites, this includes Sewage Treatment Works, Sewage Pumping Stations, Combined Sewer Overflows and Water Treatment Works;
- The EA also respond to investigate pollution incidents and collects water samples and evidence of any offences being committed and take enforcement action (Prosecution, enforcement undertakings, notices and warnings);
- There can be many reasons for pollution incidents occurring, for example for water company pollution incidents, the main source is from foul sewers that become blocked.

Richard then broke down the processes of the sewerage system and the difference between separate and combined sewerage and the issues that can arise from them. He confirmed that new systems had separate pipes for foul and surface water and that separate systems reduced the risk of overflowing, however further downstream, it is possible that this new system runs into an older, combined system.

The group heard that some sewage treatment works had storm tanks that provided storage when the incoming flow was greater than capacity to treat. It was noted that if the storm tanks were full and this occurs, the treatment works are allowed to spill to stop the works being flooded and foul water backing up the system and flooding properties. Richard confirmed that all spills were monitored as required by the Government and are controlled through environment permits (discharge permits).

Richard confirmed that the EA administer and regulate discharge permits under the Environmental Permitting Regulations. These permits have various different water quality parameters to adhere to dependent on what is being discharged. It was confirmed that there is no limit to how often a storm overflow operates, providing it is compliant with their permit. If information suggested an overflow was operating when it should not be, such as during dry weather, this was considered non-compliant and the EA would investigate.

Members were then introduced to the environment performance assessments, undertaken by the EA, which were the formal assessment by officers of water providers. It was noted that Gedling's provider, Severn Trent Water, received 4 out of 4 stars – the highest rating.

Finally, members were provided with information on Ranil Jayawardina, the new Environment Secretary, which highlighted the changes his position had introduced. Some of the changes were:

- Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan (August 2022)
- Policy that confirms water companies will only be permitted to discharge from a storm overflow where they can demonstrate that there is no local adverse ecological impact.
- Policy that confirms storm overflows will not be permitted to discharge above an average of 10 rainfall events per year by 2050

Suggestions for actions by the council were given by Richard, as below:

- Blockage mitigation/education on flushable items; and
- More sustainable urban drainage on developments such as soakaways and suds

Ian Smith and Matt Lewis - Severn Trent

Ian and Matt gave members a presentation offering an overview of Severn Trent's ongoing programmes and statistics which included the following:

- Severn Trent provide 8m people across the region with water and wastewater services. Employ over 7,000 people and are supported by an extensive supply chain of around 2,800 direct suppliers;
- They maintain over 49,000km of clean water and 92,000km of sewer pipes;
- They have been awarded the top 4* rating by the Environment Agency for their environmental performance;
- They have launched their river pledges initiative which includes 5 pledges:
 - Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers
 - Create more opportunities for everyone to enjoy the region's rivers
 - Support others to improve and care for rivers
 - Enhance their rivers and create new habitats so wildlife can thrive
 - Be open and transparent about their performance and plans
- They have invested £1.5bn on environmental initiatives including the Great Big Nature Boost. This plans to restore peatland, revive 12,000 acres of land, plant 1.3m trees, and restore 2,000km of rivers by 2030;
- They have a Triple Carbon Pledge 2030: 100% Electric Fleet, 100% Renewable Energy, Net Zero Carbon Emissions;
- They have supported 500 Kick-start placements for 16- to 24-year-olds – many have joined them permanently; and
- They are supporting the post-Covid economy with £566m green recovery investment.

Ian assured members that Severn Trent were very keen to do right by the environment, highlighting their collaborations with other water companies to try and reduce their overall impact on the environment. He then provided information on the main causes for discharges, such as overflows where surface water from heavy rainfall reaches the foul water system, becoming overloaded.

Matt informed members of Severn Trent's Green Structure plans, such as bathing rivers to allow for outdoor water sports and activities, without the concerns of whether discharges have happened. He confirmed this was expected to be an £80 – £90 million investment. It was also noted that as part of their Carbon Neutral Strategy, Severn Trent have been planting trees and introducing wildlife where possible in an effort to reach goals set by the strategy.

It was highlighted that research had shown that water companies on average contribute 23% of harm to local rivers and waterways nationwide, with Severn Trent currently at 17% and expected to fall to 15%. Severn Trent noted they have been

working closely with the agriculture sector, who also contribute towards this, in an effort to reduce their impact on the environment.

Severn Trent currently invest £100 million a year in the sewer network and also continue to identify areas where improvements can be made. A local example of this is the Richard Herrod Centre's car park, which has been identified as somewhere where a tank to store rainwater could be placed, preventing the rainwater from reaching the foul water system.

Suggestions for actions by the council were given by Ian and Matt, as below:

- Where new developments are concerned, it would be ideal if developers could introduce separate systems, preventing surface/rain water from draining into the sewer system. This will relieve the system, reducing the need for discharges in the borough;
- Severn Trent are consulted too late in the development process to offer alternatives or advice on how best to plan for the drainage of new builds. It would be ideal if communication channels could be improved to allow for consultation on drainage matters. Planning forums to liaise with Severn Trent could be of use here as misconnections typically occur when changes are made to existing properties; and
- Educate the public on customer misuse, such as flushing baby wipes

Joshua Wells - Flood Risk Management Team at Nottinghamshire County Council

Finally Joshua informed members of the County Councils responsibilities with regards to local drainage regulations. He noted they ensure new developments respect the drainage hierarchy and liaise with developers to reduce the run off rates via on site rain water storage. As part of this, he noted that it was expected that the use of water suds will increase and that this should help with supporting local wildlife as well.

Suggestions for actions by the council were given by Joshua, as below:

- Improve communication channels, particularly where planning is concerned. He highlighted that building rapport between organisations can encourage innovations, reducing the impact we have on our local environments.

Analysis (member written)

Most of the information gathered during the review has concluded that the most effective things the council can do are:

- help reduce the amount of water going into the sewerage system; and
- educate residents to reduce the disposal of damaging products into the sewerage system

It is helpful to know that there are actions that the council can do in relation to planning new developments which can help in this area. It would be ideal if the council followed the recommendations and established the planning forum so that new developments had the input from all stakeholders at the heart of the initial plans. This could be further aided by other initiatives such as well-placed suds, the use of water butts and rainwater harvesting.

Members are pleased to have had the opportunity to review the sewerage process and to make recommendations and would recommend that the council keeps an eye on discharges into the local waterways, to continue to protect the people of the Borough of Gedling.

Conclusions

It is clear that there are several components that have an impact on the sewerage issues across the borough and that a coordinated approach is needed by several stakeholders. Although the council have no direct control of the management and regulation of the waterways, there are actions that can be taken than can help aid the protection of them.

The council are responsible for getting key messages out to its residents and as such education is at the heart of the actions the council take to aid the situation. The council have a strong communications team who, with the help of relevant departments and external stakeholders, could ensure that key messages can be shared with all residents in the borough in the most appropriate and efficient ways.

Actions by the planning team are also key in ensuring that the council are using their resources and relationships to their full potential to influence drainage requirements. The planning team have the ability to create an open channel of communication between themselves, developers and Severn Trent to ensure collaboration on necessary projects/decisions.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Council:

- 1) Raises general awareness of pollution issues;
- 2) Promotes permeable driveways and surfaces;
- 3) Raises awareness on what the public can flush, endorsing existing relevant campaigns;
- 4) Ensuring that, where feasible, new developments utilise sustained urban drainage systems;
- 5) Consults Severn Trent on all major developments in the borough, to ensure they can give information on best placed drainage sites based on current systems in place;
- 6) Actively engages with Severn Trent through the established Gedling developers forum; and
- 7) Educates residents on money saving ideas regarding the installation of water flow and drainage devices