



13th April 2021

IT'S OUR WATER!

Call for community ownership and stewardship of our local river catchment areas and water resources

Raw sewage was allowed to flow into English rivers for more than 3 million hours last year. In West Oxfordshire, according to evidence presented to DEFRA¹, we have some of the worst performing sewage works of all the 467 sites that Thames Water manage. Almost half the West Oxfordshire sites have sewage outflows into local rivers for more than 10% of the time they are operating, while Clanfield and South Leigh each reported over 3,000 hours of spillages in 2020. See attached graph².

After a decade of pollution overseen by this Government, why isn't a plan already being implemented to prevent and remedy this situation now? Thames Water should be upgrading sewage treatment facilities to keep pace with a growing population and using the revenue generated by new users and homes in the region. They are moving very slowly and only promising upgrades at certain sites such as Witney over the next few years. The Environment Agency should have been given the resources and freedom by the Government to prosecute and prevent river pollution. Instead, it's floundered.

Witney Town Councillor Andrew Prosser observed that "*Government has significantly cut funding for the Environment Agency and encouraged them to take a light touch when it comes to regulation. In practice this means that they often turn a blind eye to wrongdoings and let water companies get away with regular pollution of rivers and watercourses.*"

"Weak regulation by Defra means that most illegal pollution goes unprosecuted. According to a recent ENDS report³, the Environment Agency has failed to prosecute or fine any violations of the Farming Rules For Water. There have been 243 documented breaches since 2018 - but experts say breaches are widespread and usually go undocumented."

Weak regulation has meant that the privatised water industry in England has been allowed to limit and slow down the investment required to upgrade water and sewage management infrastructure, and keep sewage out of rivers. That wasn't the promise of privatisation when it was sold. It was supposed to lead to greater investment, with low-cost finance raised on international capital markets helping to upgrade facilities and serve the community and customers more effectively.

Witney Town Councillor Andrew Prosser, who works in the environmental sector, believes that the current model of privatised water industry, alongside weak national regulation, has failed. Only community involvement and stewardship in the governance of local water resources will set the right direction to ensure sufficient investment in facilities, and help bring about more effective flood and river catchment management.

"France, Germany – and indeed Scotland – have far more diverse and successful models of water stewardship, and superior river quality. All of these countries have public control of their water resources. Water is a natural resource and water management should be overseen by the communities in which river catchments are found, not by private shareholder interests."

Andrew Prosser says that it may need a change of national government to bring about fully, but he is calling for steps to be taken by the local community to take control and direction of the water resources in the Windrush, Evenlode, and Upper Thames river catchment areas.

“Nobody in our community wants to see sewage flowing into our rivers and natural environment any more. Rather than wait for wholesale change, it may be quicker and more effective for local authorities and citizens to start taking back control of water resources and treatment facilities in smaller river catchment areas, such as the Windrush, Evenlode and Upper Thames catchments.”

“Overall control and direction of water resources could be realised through municipal-led organisations with community and expert representatives, and day-to-day management continuing through appointed water management corporations, just as in other countries such as Germany and France.”

This would transfer the ownership of water resource back to the public, while retaining the existing workforce and industry expertise for day-to-day management. At the same time, downstream companies and water users could pay upstream water management organisations for effective management of the water resource in the river catchment. There are now potential mechanisms⁴ and incentives for transferring funding to finance and maintain infrastructure, both man-made and nature-based, from downstream users, and other beneficiaries of water resources, to upstream stewards of river catchments and neighbouring land. Finance for long-term investment can also be raised through raising public money using municipal bonds, or ‘green bonds’, whereby the investment is targeted at environmental improvement.

Councillor Andrew Prosser goes onto say that *“Before any transfer of ownership takes place, the government and current regulators must ensure that existing owners of the water resource bring all facilities up to legally compliant standards of operation. Until then no new housing developments should be permitted in these water catchment areas.”* Every development adds new pressures on the already overloaded and poorly maintained sewerage and storm water systems and if the new houses are built in the wrong place, they create even more flooding.

As a first small step towards addressing the issue, Andrew suggests *“Until failing infrastructure is sorted, there's no reason why Thames Water and the Environment Agency can't provide the public with real-time information on sewage overflows now.”*

End

Notes to Editor

For more information about this Press Release and for photographs please contact:

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About West Oxfordshire Green Party

The [West Oxfordshire Green Party](#) is a branch of the Oxfordshire Green Party and of The Green Party of England and Wales. We are addressing the issues of our time, taking local action to solve local, national and global issues.

The Branch supports and runs campaigns for Green Party candidates at parish, town, district and county council elections. The membership includes all Green Party members in the Witney parliamentary constituency (which covers the same area as the West Oxfordshire district).

Contact for enquiries or additional information about the Branch:

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¹ <https://environment.data.gov.uk/dataset/21e15f12-0df8-4bfc-b763-45226c16a8ac>

² <https://www.westoxon-greens.uk/-/river-pollution.html>

³ <https://www.endsreport.com/article/1709097/why-farmers-environmental-groups-odds-pollution-rules>

⁴ For signposting to examples see the Natural Capital Committee's State of Natural Capital Report 2020, and advice and reports at <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/natural-capital-committee> ; and the government's response in Section 2.5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-capital-committees-seventh-annual-report-government-response/the-governments-response-to-the-natural-capital-committees-state-of-natural-capital-report-2020>