

Rapid Review Scope

Title	Pollution in Buckinghamshire's Rivers and Chalk Streams
Select Committee Chairman	Cllr Bill Chapple OBE Transport, Environment & Climate Change Select Committee
Scope reviewed and signed-off by	Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager
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Rapid Review Group Membership	TBC
Lead Cabinet Member	Cllr Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change
Lead Service Officer	Karen Fisher, Strategic Flood Manager Other representatives: Ecology Estates Public Health Transport for Bucks (Highways)
What is the problem that is trying to be solved?	<p><i>National context</i></p> <p>The Government's Environment Bill was granted Royal Assent on 9 November 2021. Key provisions in the Bill include:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish new Office for Environmental Protection; • Increase local powers to tackle sources of air pollution; • Protect nature and improve biodiversity by working with developers; • Extend producer responsibility, ensure a consistent approach to recycling, introduce deposit return schemes, and introduce charges for specified single use plastic items; • Secure long-term, resilient water and wastewater services, including through powers to direct water companies to work together to meet current and future demand. <p>During the course of the Bill's adoption, the Government changed its stance on the issue of wastewater following public reaction to reports of raw sewage being pumped into natural habitats. The Bill now states that companies must deliver a 'progressive reduction' in sewage discharges by number, volume and adverse impacts on people and nature.</p> <p>In 2019 water treatment operators discharged raw sewage into English rivers on more than a combined 55,000 occasions, totalling nearly 400,000 hours. In 2021, the Environment Agency reported that untreated sewage was discharged 403,171 times, for over 3 million hours, across England in 2020.</p> <p><i>Local context</i></p> <p>Buckinghamshire has a number of rivers which include: Chess, Great Ouse, Misbourne, Thame and Wye. The county is also home to six chalk streams, which are rare and important habitats for wildlife and biodiversity, and a chalk</p>

	<p>aquifer in the Chilterns. Instances of the discharge of pollution into the rivers and chalk streams have been reported over the years with fines being issued by the Environment Agency to water utility companies. The most recent fine issued was to Thames Water for £2.3m in February 2021 for a pollution incident in 2016. In 2017 Thames Water were fined a record £20m after pumping 1.9 billion litres of untreated sewage into the River Thames in incidents in 2013 and 2014. There were also incidents of detergent being released into the River Ouse in 2018 and sewage was released into the Chess on at least 36 days in 2020.</p> <p>Members of the Transport, Environment & Climate Change (TECC) Select Committee have expressed concerns on the topic since their first meeting in June 2021 and careful consideration has been given to how this can be effectively considered in a rapid review.</p> <p>At Buckinghamshire's full Council on 24 November 2021, an e-petition was introduced which asked that the TECC Select Committee question relevant water utility companies regarding discharge into local rivers and streams. The petition closed on 14 December with 1,221 signatures. At the same full Council meeting, an amendment to a notice of motion was passed resolving that the Leader and Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment write to express concerns to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs • All Buckinghamshire MPs • The Chief Executive(s) of water companies across Buckinghamshire and seek assurance that they will pursue a programme of capital investment that will 'demonstrate improvements in the sewerage systems and progressive reductions in the harm caused by untreated sewage discharges' per the Lords' Amendment.
<p>What might the Rapid Review achieve?</p>	<p>The overarching aim of the rapid review is to better understand the issue of discharge into rivers and chalk streams; the roles and responsibilities of the Council and external organisations; acknowledge work being carried out; and identify opportunities for improvement and/or greater collaboration.</p> <p>It is proposed to hold evidence gathering sessions from February 2021 onwards which would conclude with recommendations being developed and reported to Cabinet and other key partners.</p> <p>The in-depth review would look to address the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To work with partners and water utility companies to understand the extent of sewage discharge into Buckinghamshire's rivers and chalk streams. • To understand the wider picture of pollutants in rivers including runoff from roads and agricultural estates. • To understand the legal parameters of discharge that is permitted and its impact on the county's rivers and chalk streams. • To invite water utility companies and the Environment Agency to discuss and explore closer partnership working between them and the Council. • To consider what make recommendations can be made to the water utility companies and the Environment Agency regarding sewage discharge.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand lessons learnt and actions taken to mitigate incidents following enforcement action by the Environment Agency. • To consider how the 'progressive reductions' referenced in the Environment Bill could be monitored by the Council and/or the TECC Committee.
Is the issue of significance to Buckinghamshire as a whole and is the topic within the remit of the Select Committee?	Yes – there have been instances of high-profile incidents in Buckinghamshire with enforcement action and fines issued. The topic is of concern to members of the public and Councillors as demonstrated by the petition and notice of motion at full Council (mentioned above).
Is the topic of relevance to the work of Buckinghamshire Council?	<p>To some extent however the Council has no statutory requirements in this area other than those required as part of duties on a land owner; have no powers, have no resources (staff nor financial) to be able to follow up on any actions. Work in following through this topic may take staff away from business as usual statutory duties and valuable work to mitigate flooding through projects</p> <p>The Council does not have enforcement powers on this topic but seeks to facilitate discussions between the Environment Agency, water utility companies and stakeholders where necessary.</p> <p>The involvement of Environmental and/or Public Health would be required and a representative from our Estates team to identify the measures we take on our own property and land management to reduce pollution and runoff.</p>
What work is underway already on this issue?	<p>Partnership meetings take place every four months where strategic discussions are had on a range of topics including progression on flood investigations and updates on projects. The Environment Agency and water utility companies attend these meetings and also provide partner updates on their work in Buckinghamshire. The partners also seek feedback on any new strategies or plans being developed.</p> <p>The water companies are developing Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs) and the Strategic Flood Management team has been involved in helping to shape these from a Flood Management viewpoint but not on the water quality perspective, where there is no expertise within the team.</p> <p>Thames Water has initiated a Smarter Water Catchment Project with three pilot areas with aims to raise the quality and improve the habitat of the pilot catchments. The River Chess catchment is one of those pilot catchments and Buckinghamshire Council is partnering on this project and are leading on an Urban Road Runoff study and developing stakeholder engagement on the project. The engagement work is linked to similar work on the DEFRA funded Groundwater Resilience and Community Engagement (GRACE) project although the GRACE project does not deal directly with pollution issues. The GRACE project is working in Chesham and the Chalfonts and is looking at groundwater flooding and infiltration of groundwater into sewer pipes which causes both flooding and pollution issues.</p>
Are there any key	Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee has an ongoing inquiry into

changes that might impact on this issue?	<p>water quality in rivers with a focus on the water industry and urban diffuse pollution.</p> <p>The Council has a Local Flood Risk Management Strategy which is scheduled to be reviewed in April 2022 although this will not have a focus on water quality or pollution.</p>
What are the key timing considerations?	The review would take place as we approach Spring 2022 so any flooding events during the preceding Winter may be taken into account.
Who are the key stakeholders & decision-makers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment Agency • Thames Water • Anglian Water • The Rivers Trust • Chilterns Conservation Board • Any VCSs e.g. River Chess Association • Landowner associations
What are the resource implications in doing this piece of work?	<p>Attendance at evidence gathering meetings – TECC Inquiry Group and Senior Scrutiny Officer, service officer(s) and expert witnesses.</p> <p>Meeting preparation, research and report writing – TECC Inquiry Group and Senior Scrutiny Officer.</p>
What is out of scope?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and development. • Air pollution.

Outline Project Plan

Stage	Key Activity	Dates
Scoping	Agreed by Select Committee	20 January 2022
Evidence-gathering	Anticipated over 4 meetings (estimate)	To commence in February and last through March and April
Reporting	Final Group report/letter with recommendations (signed off by the Select Committee Chairman)	TBC
	Select Committee agree report is submitted to decision-maker(s)	
	Cabinet/Partner considers recommendations. Response reported back to Select Committee.	