

OXFORD'S SEWAGE CRISIS - PRESS RELEASE FROM THE OXFORD RIVERS IMPROVEMENT CAMPAIGN (ORIC)

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New report reveals big increase in volume of untreated sewage pollution in the rivers around Oxford - weak regulators and Government effectively allow Thames Water to discharge almost at will.

Pollution from untreated sewage in the rivers in and around Oxford has risen substantially since 2018 following the Government's introduction of a looser regulatory regime - and appears to be getting worse.

Details are contained in a new in-depth report from a recently formed campaign group of concerned local residents who are also water industry, business and infrastructure experts.

They argue that the rapidly worsening levels of untreated sewage pollution in the Upper Thames area are being caused by long-term lack of investment in sewage treatment capacity and poor management, coupled with a rising local population.

And they dismiss claims from water companies, regulators and politicians that the primary cause is the increasing frequency of storms and heavy rainfall.

The report, *The rivers around Oxford 2020*, is the work of the Oxford Rivers Improvement Campaign (ORIC) and complements work done by other groups, notably Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP).

The ORIC report draws on publicly available information from the Environment Agency, Thames Water and the National Rivers Trust to collate and analyse data about 148 Sewage Treatment Works around Oxford.

The most striking conclusion is the frequency of untreated sewage discharges. Of the 148 sewage treatment works covered by the report, 104 are automatically monitored.

Of the 104, 31 discharged untreated sewage for more than 1,000 hours a year - roughly 20 hours a week, or three hours a day. Over half discharged untreated sewage for more than 500 hours a year.

Just four of Thames Water's 104 automatically monitored sewage treatment works did not discharge any untreated sewage into our rivers

Furthermore, the report says that the typical or median sewage treatment works in the Upper Thames area discharged untreated sewage for over 500 hours a year in 2020, or ten hours a week, and such events are a regular occurrence.

Unfortunately the situation appears to be worsening rapidly. In 2018 the average duration of untreated sewage discharges from all works for which the report's authors obtained data was 193 hours.

In 2019 that figure rose to 599 hours. In 2020 it averaged 821 hours – more than a fourfold increase in the three years for which data exists.

The justification given by Thames Water for discharging untreated sewage is that it is caused by excessive runoff of rainwater in storms and is permitted by Stormwater Discharge Consent Permits for each works.

However, the report says that given the level of annual rainfall in Oxford, a reasonable level of stormwater discharges should be 25-50 hours a year, so any works overflowing 500 or more hours a year is clearly unfit for purpose or being ineptly operated.

The report's authors also obtained data allowing them to analyse the capacity of 90 of Thames Water's sewage treatment works.

They concluded that more than half of all works for which they had data - 46 works - did not have enough capacity to treat even the current demand (2020), and many more do not have capacity to treat additional sewage flows that will arise in the next few years from the area's house building programme, development plans, and the impacts of more intense storms as a consequent of climate change.

The report traces the worsening problems to an obscure Government decision to change the rules on untreated sewage discharges. Until about a decade ago, water companies had been allowed to do this only in 'exceptional' circumstances.

But the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) issued new guidance to the Environment Agency (EA) and the companies that operate the sewage treatment works.

In future, DEFRA 'advised', Stormwater Discharge Consent Permits (SDCPs) need not be restricted to "exceptional" circumstances and could be employed on occasions that were merely "infrequent". This 'advice' - in effect a ruling - would prove to have major consequences, the impact of which we are seeing today and even more so in the future if no action is taken now.

The report demands a coordinated and immediate response from Thames Water, the regulator Ofwat, and the Environment Agency, along with local councils and national government.

It contains a list of 13 detailed recommendations, including:

- the Environment Agency, Thames Water, OFWAT and all relevant local authorities to agree a detailed plan and timescale for investment to achieve zero pollution of untreated human sewage in the Upper Thames, with punitive and transparent penalties for non-delivery.

- increased funding and powers for the Environment Agency to facilitate investigations and prosecutions, including keeping the proceeds from pollution fines to further improve their regulatory oversight of the rivers.

- planning authorities to require Thames Water and developers to prove there is sufficient sewage treatment capacity before planning permission is granted for new housing or commercial developments.

ORIC member Mark Hull said: "Thames Water's actions have revealed a shocking disregard for the well-being of the local environment and population over many years. In essence, and with the agreement of politicians and regulators, Thames Water is allowed to use the Upper River Thames as a free open sewer and sewage treatment works.

"This report shows a tide of untreated sewage in the rivers around Oxford has been caused by Thames Water's serious failure over the last 10-15 years to invest in adequate sewage treatment capacity, which in turn shows massive and inexcusable regulatory failure by the Environment Agency and Ofwat, backed by an accommodating government department.

"We urge concerned bodies in other parts of England and Wales to replicate this study."

NOTES:

1) Oxford Rivers Improvement Campaign (ORIC) was formed in 2020 in response to growing concerns about the state of the River Thames and River Cherwell in Oxford and the tributaries flowing into them. Specifically, the group was concerned about the abuse of the river network by Thames Water and the environmental and human impact of rapidly increasing levels of sewage discharge.

2) Founding members of ORIC (all Oxford residents):

Bill Kingdom is an international consultant in water supply and sanitation. Previously he was the Global Lead for Water Supply and Sanitation at the World Bank, Washington, DC.

Graham Anderson is a business journalist and publisher specialising in the infrastructure, energy and transportation markets.

Kathy Whysall has an MSc in Pollution Studies and Environmental Control. She is a former Higher Scientific Officer at the National Radiological Protection Board and former Journal Manager at Elsevier Science. She volunteered on the Upper Thames Otter Habitat Project.

Mark Hannam is a management consultant and former senior brewing industry executive. He is also a volunteer assistant lock-keeper on the Thames at Osney.

Mark Hull is a former water industry consultant, and Oxford Brookes University Economics Lecturer. He is the author of a 2017 textbook 'Infrastructure and Utility Economics: the economics of sunk costs'.

Richard Knowles is Chair of Cotswolds Rivers Trust and a former school and university teacher.

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