

Bath and North East Somerset Council

Full Council meeting 24 March 2022

Liberal Democrat Motion on Cleaning Up Our Rivers

To be proposed by Councillor Jess David

Council notes:

1. The recent report of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (Jan 2022) which found that rivers in England are in a mess: "a 'chemical cocktail' of sewage, agricultural waste, and plastic is polluting the waters of many of the country's rivers".
2. That only 12% of the Bristol Avon catchment is classified as having 'good ecological status' with the main sources of pollution being treated sewage discharges and diffuse pollution from farming and land management.
3. That rivers in B&NES are an irreplaceable asset for both people and nature, enjoyed by many for recreation and leisure, and part of the rich landscape character and natural capital of our area.
4. That Bath and North East Somerset Council is a member of the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership which includes Wessex Water, the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council and is working closely with partners to identify and deliver collaborative solutions to improve water quality and improve the water environment for people and wildlife.
5. That not all properties in B&NES are connected to the public sewage system or to private sewers and that some continue to discharge wastewater straight into the river or into non-compliant, polluting soakaways.
6. That Government funding to the Environment Agency to monitor river quality and regulate sources of pollution has dropped by 75% in the last decade.

Council believes:

1. That cleaning up our rivers is important for public health and to protect and enhance wildlife, and that this requires the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders including water companies, farmers, land-owners, developers and businesses.
 2. That investment in our sewerage system must be accelerated so that discharges of untreated sewage, including from storm overflows cease.
 3. That farmers and land managers have a responsibility to monitor and reduce the flow of pollutants (including nutrients and pesticides) from their land into rivers.
 4. That government must provide the funding and powers to enable more effective monitoring and enforcement by water regulators; OFWAT and the Environment Agency.
 5. That water companies must continue to improve the public information they provide on sewage discharges to ensure that it is accessible and as close to real time as possible.
- *Unless where specifically set out in the statute, motions approved at Council do not bind the Executive (Cabinet) but may influence their future decisions.*
 - *Councillors are reminded of their public sector equality duty which requires the Council to consider or think about how their policies or decisions may affect people who are protected under the Equality Act.*

6. That developers and property owners have a role to play in reducing surface water from entering the combined sewer system. Installing sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS), both in new buildings and through retrofitting, and reducing 'urban creep' can help to reduce the load on our sewerage system.
7. That government must legislate to ban the sale of non-degradable and plastic containing wet wipes which are a major cause of blockages and capacity issues in the sewer network. The incorrect disposal of fats, oils and greases is also a cause of blockages.
8. That the capacity of environmental infrastructure (including sewerage systems) must be sufficient to support new housing development and that water companies must engage with local authorities in the preparation of new drainage and sewerage plans.
9. That the Council has a role to play in educating and raising awareness of the many individual behavioural changes that citizens can make to lessen their impact on water pollution and harm to the water environment.

Council therefore resolves:

1. To write to Government Ministers to ask that they:
 - a. Restore funding the Environment Agency to ensure a stronger regulatory regime for river water quality that delivers year on year improvements.
 - b. Increase funding for Catchment Partnerships so that they can do more to engage all partners in the actions needed to improve river water quality.
 - c. Strengthen the legal obligations and powers available to water companies to contribute to improving river water quality.
 - d. Ban the sale of non-degradable and plastic containing wet wipes as a major cause of blockages in the sewage system.
 - e. Introduce incentives for the introduction of SUDS through new build development and retrofitting.
 2. Work with our partners Wessex Water to:
 - a. Accelerate their plan to reduce the environmental and health impacts of discharges from the sewage system, including improving monitoring and information available to the public;
 - b. Ensure that all properties in B&NES are connected to the mains sewage system, have a compliant treatment system or a septic tank, and that all developers are aware of their obligations;
 - c. Identify opportunities for the installation of community-level SUDS that can help to reduce the load on the combined sewer network;
 - d. Engage residents to avoid the use of disposable wet wipes and communicate wider messages about only flushing the three P's (*pee, poo and paper*) down the toilet.
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3. To continue to support the work of the Bristol Avon Catchment Partnership to engage all riparian landowners, including farmers, and local communities in an action plan to tackle pollution and improve river water quality.
4. To refer the topic of cleaning up our rivers to the Climate Emergency and Sustainability Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel for their further consideration and monitoring.
5. Through the planning system:
 - a. encourage the use of SUDS to deal with surface water and reduce the amount of water going into combined sewers;
 - b. explore opportunities through the new Local Plan to reduce 'urban creep' and to avoid or mitigate pollution from intensive farming within catchment areas.

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