

Thames Water – River Chess Association Public Meeting

Chesham Town Hall, 30th May 2014

Present:

Richard Aylard (External Affairs and Sustainability Director, Thames Water)

Amanda Smith (Operations Process Manager, Thames Water)

Jerry White (Head of Asset Management, Thames Water)

Paul Jennings (River Chess Association Chairman)

Alex Chown (Environment Agency)

Approximately 60 members of the public were in attendance.

Paul Jennings welcomed everyone to what he hoped would be a positive meeting, at which a greater understanding of the cause of the on-going discharge of sewage into the River Chess would be obtained and solutions would be described.

(i) The Cause of the Discharges

Amanda Smith provided a description of how the Chesham Sewage Treatment Works (CSTW) operates and its current capacity. Richard Aylard explained that the current discharges, which have been taking place for nearly 4 months, are the result of groundwater infiltration into the sewerage network exceeding the site's capacity. The discharges started on the 5th February when a substantial rainfall event, combined with groundwater ingress, overwhelmed the works.

Thames Water has analysed the groundwater levels recorded at the Ashley Green borehole and its relationship with the level of input to the CSTW. This work has enabled them to identify a level of groundwater above which they would expect to need to start releasing sewage into the Chess. This could act as an early warning system. Based on the current decline in groundwater, Thames Water estimate that the current discharges will cease in one to two weeks time.

(ii) Improvement Works

Amanda outlined works that have previously been carried out to improve the CSTW, including creating additional storage capacity, installing new screens for incoming flows (to reduce risk of blockages) and additional alarms (to provide a faster response to incidents).

Further works are underway, including cleaning out the aeration ditch, installing new floating diffuse aerators and new final effluent screens. Future works include covering skips to reduce litter escaping from the CSTW into the local environment and providing new flood screens to protect neighbouring properties.

With respect to longer-term solutions, Jerry White said that an infiltration management plan will be implemented. This will involve a detailed catchment assessment to identify sources of significant infiltration. These works are expected to take 18 to 24 months. If significant sources of infiltration are identified it may be possible to make modifications to the network to reduce infiltration. If specific network problems are not identified, a possible solution is

to increase the treatment capacity at the works. However, the cost: benefit analysis of any works will be the determining factor as to whether improvements are made. It would be necessary to increase the capacity of CSTW by about one-third to cope with the worst flows of this winter and the expenditure may not be warranted depending on how frequently an event of this severity is likely to occur. Catchment growth will also need to be taken into consideration if any works are carried out.

Thames Water acknowledged that the Chess catchment had not been one of its highest priority catchments because there has not been surface water or sewer flooding of houses. However, the CSTW is now firmly on their radar.

(iii) Questions

Paul said that the problem of groundwater infiltration did not seem to have occurred during 2001, which was the last major flooding event in Chesham. He suggested that a number of factors may have contributed to the emergence of this problem in 2013/14, including failing plant at CSTW and the public disposing of non-flushable items down the drains. Paul asked what the overall plan is and what timeframe it has. Richard said that Thames Water will continue to make improvements to CSTW and will also carry out the infiltration reduction plan. However, the latter will take some time. The plan will be sent to the Environment Agency for comments and will then undergo public consultation. Richard said that Thames Water would appreciate receiving the observations and knowledge of local people through this consultation. Richard said that he would be happy to organise a separate meeting to explain groundwater infiltration and possible solutions at a later date.

Paul highlighted the importance of increasing capacity at CSTW in light of how difficult it can be to identify sources of groundwater infiltration and how expensive the solutions may be. Jerry said that it is not planned to increase capacity based on current population growth forecasts for the next 5 years. However, an upgrade is planned to meet new standards for effluent discharge and it would be appropriate to look at the issues of storm overflows and groundwater infiltration at the same time, instead of looking at the issues piecemeal. Nigel Hill, who lives near CSTW, expressed surprise at this statement, as a Thames Water representative had previously told him at a joint meeting with the RCA that there were plans to increase capacity at the site to match a 7% growth in demand.

A member of the public raised their concern about the paucity of warning signage in view of the large number of people of all ages who use the river for recreation and education. Paul agreed that there is work to be done to develop a protocol so that all relevant authorities are informed of sewage releases. The RCA has produced a draft protocol, which it has sent to the Environment Agency, but Paul will also share this with Thames Water. Richard said that it would be possible to add additional people to the text alert system and that Thames Water can supply information on discharges to the local district councils; however, what they do with the information is up to them. Paul said he felt it important that schools which use the river for field trips should also be informed. Alex Chown said that the Environment Agency has an on-going dialogue with the district councils regarding communicating this type of pollution event to the public.

Richard explained that Thames Water has no public health obligations where sewage is concerned. He emphasised that river environments are not sterile and that there is potential contamination from many sources. Therefore, Thames Water would not put up warning signs during sewage releases, as the public could assume that Thames Water is suggesting that the river is safe at other times. Richard said that the extent to which the risk to health is increased by the sewage discharges is very questionable.

Another member of the public queried how the investment needed to improve the CSTW could fit within the Asset Management Plan cycles and asked whether this would cause a delay in implementing solutions. Jerry explained that it is possible to change plans over the five-year cycle if a cost-effective solution is found. Richard said that the results of the investigation will be made publicly available and he suggested setting up a further public meeting in 6 months for a progress update. Actual capital investment could take place after March 2015.

Someone asked whether the pumps at CSTW need to be replaced. Amanda explained that all the pumps have either been or will be refurbished.

In response to a question asking whether it would be possible to take the excess sewage elsewhere, Amanda explained that this would be very expensive and that there is inadequate capacity at other sites, so it would just move the problem around.

A question was asked as to whether there was space at the CSTW site if a major upgrade was required. Amanda said there was space, but with natural springs on site precautions would need to be taken to ensure that any building works did not have a detrimental impact on the watercourse.

Somebody asked whether the current discharge was breaking any regulations. Alex confirmed that it is a breach of Thames Water's licence and that the Environment Agency is currently investigating and will share information with the public when it is able to do so.

A member of the public whose property is adjacent to the CSTW said that on the 5th February, the site's storm water tanks didn't work and as the site is unmanned there was no-one there until the next morning to deal with the problem. As a result the works came very close to flooding their home. They would like a commitment from Thames Water that it will do more to anticipate the impacts of extreme weather events. Paul added that the majority of incidents that occurred at CSTW during 2013 had taken place on a Sunday and said that the RCA would like to see the plant manned 24 hours-a-day. Jerry said that Thames Water has a programme of reinforcing sites for flood resilience and he will find out whether CSTW is in this programme.

Someone asked whether there would be compensation for people whose livelihoods have been affected by the sewage discharges. Richard asked for anyone who believed they had been affected to contact him directly. Thames Water will look at the evidence with their insurers and respond directly to those concerned.

Richard said that Thames Water were keen to work with any organisations promoting education on subjects relevant to its business, including water efficiency and sewer abuse. It is hoped that there will be funding available to facilitate this in the near future.

Paul thanked everybody for their attendance and said that he looked forward to seeing a firm plan of action from Thames Water at the next public meeting in six months time.

The meeting closed at 8.25pm.