

INFORMATION BULLETIN

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 18th September 2023



Water Quality - Rivers and Sewage Discharge

Introduction

1.1 This information bulletin provides background to the issue of water quality of our rivers and sewage pollution within them. Water quality and sewage events have been raised by our councillors and our communities around concerns for the natural environment and public health.

1.2 In November 2022, both Councils debated motions around this issue, and resolved to:

This Council resolves to:

Ask the chair of the scrutiny committee to invite senior officers of Anglian Water plus senior representatives from the Environment Agency and Natural England to attend a meeting to answer questions on the current levels of sewage discharge.

1.3 This bulletin identifies who is attending Joint Overview and Scrutiny and their responsibilities, background around storm water flood events in national policy, actions surrounding this matter by Suffolk County Council and information around local water quality issues we are aware of.

Responsibilities

2.1 It is important to note that the Councils do not have statutory duties, or expertise around, water quality and sewage pollution. The following bodies below however all play a part:

- **Defra** – responsible for protecting the natural environment including water quality targets under the Environment Act 2021, and implementation of the 25 Year Environment Improvement Plan.
- **Natural England** – have shared objectives with Defra under the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, with a remit to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment.
- **Ofwat** – regulator of water quality – legally required to act in accordance with the Strategic Policy Statement and duties under the Water Industry Act 1991.
- **Environment Agency** – issue permits to water companies which includes monitoring pollution events, assessing compliance of these permits and making use of monitoring data and taking necessary enforcement action.
- **Anglian Water** – water company operating across our districts, required to meet permits set by Environment Agency to meet challenges set out by Government in 25 Year Environment Improvement Plan

Background

3.1 The Government has been formulating its environment plan since 2018, with legally binding requirements set under the Environment Act 2021 and other previous legislation. In relation to pollution from sewage the following policy papers from Government have set the scene:

- A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (2018) [25-year-environment-plan.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- Environment Improvement Plan (2023) [Environmental Improvement Plan \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan (2022) [Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

3.2 This final plan published in 2022 identified that water companies are being set the following targets:

- By 2035 water companies will have improved all overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water and improved 75% of overflows discharging to high priority sites.
- By 2050, no storm overflows will be permitted to operate outside of unusually heavy rainfall, or to cause any adverse ecological harm.

3.3 It should be noted, however, that this last plan has a current legal challenge lodged in the High Court, on the grounds of its legality against other legislation to ensure adequate water quality is maintained.

3.4 Suffolk Flood Risk Management Scrutiny Sub Committee discussed The Quality of Suffolk's Rivers and Coastal Waters. Anglian Water, the Environment Agency, and Essex and Suffolk Rivers Trust presentations were given around the wider picture of water quality and contributory factors to this, including Catchment Sensitive Farming to reduce nutrients entering waterways. The agenda, papers, recording of the meeting and minutes can be accessed here: [Meeting Documents - Committee Minutes \(suffolk.gov.uk\)](#)

3.5 The committee agreed that a workshop for stakeholders would be held with the objective of responding to the Anglian Water consultation on their Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan and of finalising recommendation on how local authorities could contribute to the drive to improve the quality of river water in Suffolk. The committee also requested information Bulletins from the EA around discharges into Suffolk rivers and water quality in Suffolk's estuaries.

3.6 Our Councils and Suffolk County Council as Lead Local Flood Authority, work together on issues surrounding surface water management on new development granted planning permission. New responsibilities will be formed under Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 that will give more powers to SCC to prevent surface water from entering the wider sewage system. The Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Suffolk Flood Risk Management Scrutiny Sub-Committee wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in October 2022. This letter raised the importance of Schedule 3 of

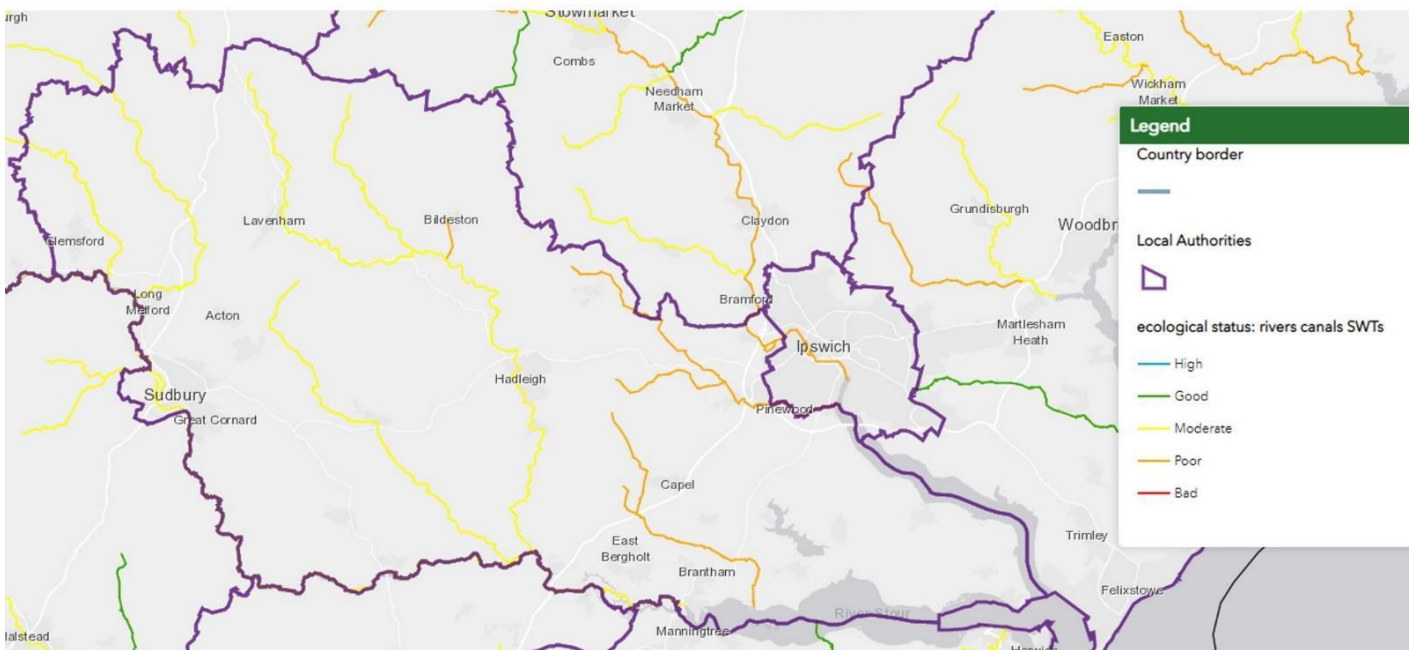
the Flood and Water Management Act and its implementation.

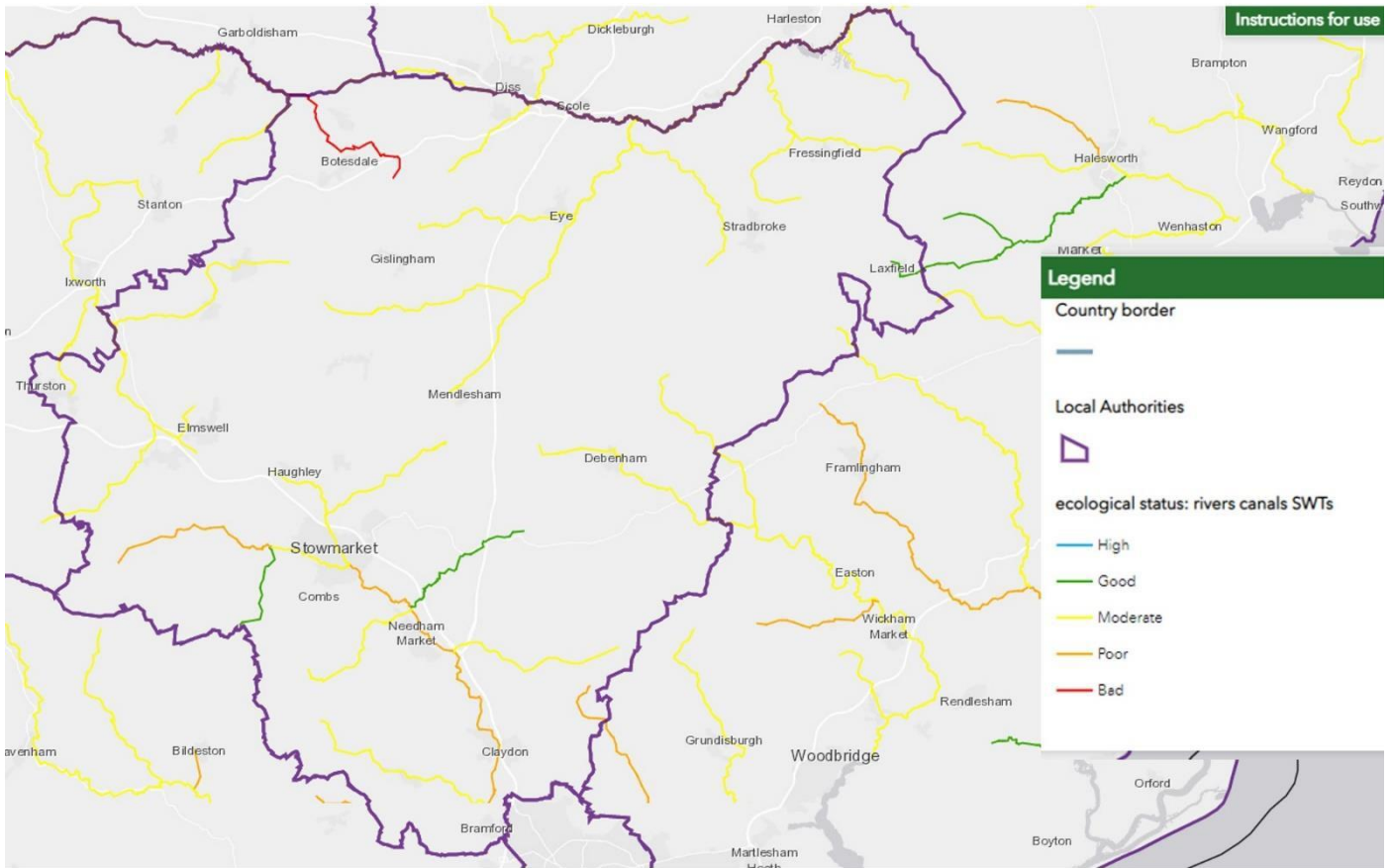
3.7 The Act although enacted in 2010, Schedule 3 has yet to be fully implemented. This schedule introduces Sustainable Drainage Approval Bodies (SABs), which would be SCC for our districts, and in effect gives them more powers to require sustainable drainage systems across more developments. This in effect will reduce the amount of water entering sewage systems and reduce the pressure on these systems at times of high rainfall events.

Local Context

4.1 Our districts have a number of valued waterways, both for their ecological value and also the recreational benefits they bring. The Environment Agency monitors the ecological status of these under the Water Framework Directive. Below are figures indicating the ecological status of rivers and canals in our districts. The majority have 'moderate' status with some 'poor' and one 'bad'. It must be noted however that this relates to more than just storm overflow events from sewerage, and there are a number of contributing factors. But this is provided for a wider context.

Babergh





4.2 Further information on the status of Suffolk’s rivers is available in information supporting SCC’s Flood Risk Management Scrutiny Sub Committee, under ‘Evidence Set 2’ which can be accessed at this link: [Meeting Documents - Committee Minutes \(suffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/committees/scrutiny-sub-committee/evidence-set-2)

Our communities

5.1 Water quality issues have been raised by our communities, notably the River Stour Trust who are seeking to obtain designated Bathing Water Status for a section of the River Stour between Sudbury and Great Cornard. The Councils at officer level support the Trust in seeking this designation, but recognise water quality is a complicated issue that several stakeholders identified above all play a part in. The Councils are however committed to working with these stakeholders to address this issue for our communities.

Conclusion

6.1 Officers have been asked to bring representatives of all the parties with an interest in this matter to O&S to discuss and answer questions. Some bodies have not been able to send representatives to this meeting. Officers do not make any recommendations to O&S members in respect of river water quality or sewage discharge into rivers. O&S members are asked to note the information contained within this report when considering questioning of attendees, of course as well as their own research and experience in this area.

Nick Christo – Corporate Manager for Public Realm
Mark Emms – Director for Operations and Regulatory Services
Tom Barker – Director for Planning and Building Control