



**RIVER
POLLUTION
FORUM**

Pan-Parish River Pollution Forum

**Minutes of the Pan-Parish River Pollution Forum Meeting
held on Tuesday 27th February at 19.00
at Houghton Village Hall**

Present: Simon Akroyd (Barton Stacey Parish Council), Ben Battey (River Keeper), Ian Beacham (King's Somborne Parish Council), Ben Biswell (Owner/Keeper, Testcombe Fishing), Jamie Coombes (Houghton Parish Council), Seth Crosswaite (River Keeper), David Drew (Borough and County Councillor), Alistair Dougall (Houghton Parish Council), Pete Farrow (River Keeper), Andrew Forrester (Broadlands Estate Manager), Alice Foster (Longstock Parish Council), Jon Hall (Broadlands River Keeper), Cllr. Alison Johnson (Borough Councillor), Joe Li, Phil Lomax (Nursling & Rownhams Parish Council, and consultant ecologist), Alan Marshall (Stockbridge Parish Council), Alex Melrose (Longstock resident), Lynda Middleton (Houghton Parish Council), Vern Middleton (Houghton resident), Ian Newnham, Howard Taylor (Freelands Estate Manager), Paul Vignaux (Test & Itchen Association Ltd.).

Chair: Lynda Middleton

Minutes: Alistair Dougall

The meeting started at 19.00.

Item Minute

1. Welcome/introductions

Lynda Middleton (Houghton Parish Councillor and Chair of the Houghton Parish River Pollution Working Group [RPWG]) chaired the meeting and welcomed everyone to the inaugural meeting of the Pan-Parish River Pollution Forum. She introduced the other members of RPWG (Jamie Coombes and Alistair Dougall) and Seth Crosswaite (River Keeper, Busk Estate) and Alison Johnston (Borough Councillor) who have helped with the group's work.

2. Apologies

Apologies have been received from Luigi Gregori (Andover Town Council), Joan Harrington (North Baddesley Parish Council), George Marits (Chilbolton Parish Council), Caroline Tomlinson (Appleshaw PCC), and Susan Turner (Shipton Bellinger Parish Council).

3. Houghton Parish River Pollution Working Group (RPWG)

(a) Update

Lynda Middleton explained that the RPWG had been set up by Houghton Parish Council in May 2023 following concerns raised about incidents of Southern Water discharging untreated sewage into the River Test and a request for the Parish Council to purchase a river probe to be sited permanently in the river in Houghton to continuously monitor the water quality. She briefly outlined the work that the RPWG has done, and the background to the setting up the Pan-Parish River Pollution Forum. Houghton Parish Council is now in the process of purchasing the river probe and it is hoped that this will be in place and functioning very soon. The intention is to share data with the Pan-Parish Forum as well as other interested parties.

(b) Current issues in the River Test

Seth Crosswaite updated the meeting on recent sewage spillage events. There have been major issues at Fullerton in recent days. He produced a glass jar of water taken from the river which demonstrated how polluted the water was when the sample was taken. Fish Legal tested a water sample last week and found Ammonia levels of 3.12 micrograms per litre (fish die at 2mp/l) and Phosphate levels of 7 parts per million (4ppm is a dangerous level). This is going down the river and taking out oxygen levels.

The river probe will be sited in the river in Houghton where it is still one body of water (much better than just testing one of the tributaries). It will send alerts when pollutants exceed certain levels. The data can be shared (although expertise will be needed to make sense of the data and put the results into layman's terms for non-specialists).

4. Input from other parish councils/representatives

- Ian Beacham (King's Somborne P.C.): King's Somborne has a bourne running through the village which enters the Test by the John O'Gaunt. Tanks have recently been pumping out water in King's Somborne for 3 weeks because of the ground water levels. The sewage system is inadequate and cannot cope and the Environment Agency (EA) needs to be held to account.
- Alan Marshall (Stockbridge PC): The video taken on Friday (23rd February) of sewage being discharged into the River Test is shocking. It was reported to the EA. They wanted to know the postcode, but sewage outflows don't have postcodes. What3Words identified the location and so a report to the EA could be submitted. Recommends using What3Words for such reports.
- Ben Biswell (Testcombe Fishing): Fullerton is his land. The bulk of the discharges are foam and foaming agents. There are frequent spillages from Fullerton and Chilbolton. It is currently the worst it has been in over 20 years. The maintenance records at Fullerton are appalling and machinery is not being properly maintained.
- Alice Foster and Alex Melrose (Longstock): Have disseminated Nick Parker's video of the sewage discharged into the Test. Also sent it to Caroline Nokes MP but she has just contacted Simon Moody of the EA rather than contacting SW directly.
- Paul Vignaux (Test & Itchen Association): About to contact Caroline Nokes and invite her to a meeting to get better informed. Need to get Southern Water (SW) to be clear about what they are permitted to discharge. There is a lack of transparency.

There are currently lots of organisations such as this new pan-parish forum that all want the same things, but it is very disparate. Public pressure does count but it needs to be harnessed. Want accountability from the EA and SW. There are lots of citizen scientists, but their work needs coordinating and people need to be able to understand the data and to communicate the information and weaponise it.

The ELM Convenor Partnership for Hampshire is a test and trial project funded by Defra to support environmental land management in England. The ELM Scheme is an important part of the Government's new agricultural policy and there is a good case to be made to include rivers in ELMS more widely.

Paul's suggestions:

1. Achieve and promote a better understanding of what is happening to the river.
2. Fighting for better visibility of the forthcoming SW AMP investment and what that means to each village, in practical terms, is a good goal.

3. Understanding what mitigation might be put in place until such time as SW betterment has reached the end state.
 4. Advocating for changes in local, regional and national policies and regulations to allow for more involvement in what is happening in TVBC and the wider Test & Itchen catchment with regard to water and the rivers vis a vis housing, abstraction, waste, environmental mitigations, etc. would also be good.
- Phil Lomax (Nursling & Rownhams P.C.): There has been a private prosecution of SW because of pollution from Nursling Industrial Estate. Phil is a fisherman and an ecologist. Phosphates and nitrates are not visible to the naked eye but can cause enormous damage to the ecology of the river system. Gravel spawning grounds are being smothered by sediment, which is stopping oxygen getting into the gravel beds and this is starving salmon eggs of the oxygen needed to spawn.

By 2030, water companies need to significantly improve their sewage treatment infrastructure, but the Test Valley is not currently in the relevant area although the Solent is and the rivers feed into that.

- Alison Johnston (Borough Councillor): Under the Local Plan, developers have to liaise with SW for developments of over 10 houses, but SW are not a statutory consultee for developments of under 10 houses.

Climate change: the current infrastructure is not good enough. Need to lobby MPs to take action and to ensure that there is the necessary investment in new technology.

Encouraged everyone to engage with the consultation process for the new emerging Local Plan.

- David Drew (Borough and County Councillor): Has put forward a Rule 12 Motion for the Test Valley Borough Council meeting to be held on Thursday (29th February). If carried, the Council will oppose SW's pumping of wastewater into the Test and its tributaries and call on SW to improve the infrastructure and to work with OFWAT and the EA to enable the required investment funding to be released. The motion also calls for all parties to inform and closely engage with affected communities and relevant agencies. It calls for water quality to be monitored and for there to be transparency by publishing all testing data promptly. The meeting will be a public meeting and there is still time for individuals to register to speak at the meeting.

Sadly, TVBC and Hampshire County Council have no levers and little real power in this matter. We also have a situation where the fact that the sewage system cannot cope is not deemed to be a reason to refuse planning permission for developments, which is ridiculous.

- Jon Hall (River Keeper, Broadlands): He has one dog who only drinks out of a bowl and one that also drinks from the river. The dog drinking from the river has been made ill and has had the runs. Other river keepers have also reported their dogs being ill after drinking from the river.
- Ian Newman: South Today and other such programmes regularly report on air quality, why do they not report on water quality. We could approach them to suggest that they introduce this as this will increase awareness. We should also put pressure on the directors of SW.

5. Action plan for the Pan Parish River Pollution Forum

A wider discussion followed where, in addition to suggestions already made in the contributions listed above, attendees suggested various ways in which the forum can campaign to achieve increased awareness and real change to stop the River Test being polluted. These points included:

- Not just lobbying councillors and local MPs but also contacting the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay) and asking for a meeting with him.
- Those who could, were encouraged to attend the TVBC meeting on Thursday and speak at it if possible.
- Issue press releases and seek press coverage: not just local press but national press and TV and radio. (A group of river keepers had had success recently via *South Today* in getting SW to abandon plans to over pump sewage water into the river.)
- Call on MP to introduce a Private Member's Bill to allow local authorities to prosecute water companies i.e. to give local authorities much more leverage in this matter.
- Liaise with the Office for Environmental Protection which was set up to hold the government to account in applying its own regulations and to ensure that the water companies are complying with the law.
- Southern Water signed a Section 20 agreement (in 2016) and agreed to fund data sharing. They have not been held to account on this. We need to lobby and to call for them to be held to account and fulfil this agreement.
- Possibly organise a petition but, if we do so, it would need to be one asking for a specific change to the law or to government policy (After 10,000 signatures, such petitions get a response from the government. After 100,000 signatures, petitions are considered for debate in Parliament).
- Other parish councils to consider purchasing their own water monitoring station/kits for their local river stretches/tributaries. This would increase data collection for the pan-parish group.
- Possibly set up a WhatsApp group.
- Identify a contact or a couple of contacts for the group.

6. Next meeting

It was agreed that draft minutes would be circulated in the coming days with a date for the next meeting.

The meeting ended at 20.55.