

NOTICE OF MOTION BY COUNCILLOR READ UNDER STANDING ORDER

NO. 6

Councillor Read, seconded by Councillor Rees, moved a Notice of Motion in the following terms:-

The Council notes:

In July 2019 Exeter, along with hundreds of other Councils, declared a climate emergency. This declaration was strengthened in April 2021 by including biodiversity. The Rivers Trust says 'Rivers are in the forefront of our climate and nature crisis. For habitats to adapt and recover from climate shocks, we need healthy rivers'. The Council has an obligation to protect its rivers and the City Council's Harbour Board has, as one of its core values "We will lead in environmental stewardship of the Port." The Exe Estuary has the highest protection status afforded to it and is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area because it supports internationally important populations of birds such as the Slavonian Grebe and the Avocet, as well as Dunlin, Oystercatcher, Blacktailed Godwit and more.

The issue of sewage pollution of rivers and the sea is rightly high on the public and political agenda as the Environment Agency recently revealed that not one English waterway, including rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters is in good ecological and chemical health at present. Pollution from water treatment plants and agriculture are the key sources of the damage. Meanwhile the Environment Agency recently shockingly announced that the target to clean up the majority of England's rivers, lakes and coastal waters has been pushed back 36 years, from 2027 to 2063. To date, only stretches of two rivers in the UK have been granted bathing status, a section of the River Wharfe and of the Thames.

This Council resolves to:

1. Recognise that there is clear evidence of poor water quality in the Exe due to cumulative impact of multiple sewage discharge events or 'sewage overload'.
2. Ask Exeter City Council to request from South West Water that an evidence base is compiled that assesses the cumulative impact of sewage discharge on ecological river health, and in addition the impact of polluted water on wildlife and biodiversity along the banks of the river should be monitored.
3. Ask Exeter City Council to invite the Chief Executive of South West Water plus senior representatives from the Environment Agency and Natural England/Natural Resources Wales to attend a meeting to answer questions on the current levels of sewage discharge.
4. Ask Exeter City Council to contact the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the regional director of the National Farmers' Union for clarification on action being taken by local farmers to prevent agricultural waste flowing into the river.

5. Ask Exeter City Council to request that South West Water from this date onwards, in its planning consultation responses for major development, to clarify which treatment works will be managing the sewage; whether it has the information available to assess the impact on the number or duration of sewage discharges into local rivers or seas, and if it does have this information to share it (noting that this can only be requested not required).
6. Request Exeter City Council to lobby both our local Members of Parliament, the Local Government Association and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ban sewage discharges into swimming areas and where protected wildlife lives.

In presenting her Motion, Councillor Read made the following points:-

- the River Exe was an enormous asset to Exeter and was recognised to have a huge benefit to the health and wellbeing of Exeter's residents and of great importance to wildlife;
- the Exe catchment area has 77 sewage pumping stations taking away wastewater from homes and businesses. It has both separate (foul or surface water) and combined (foul and surface water) networks. When there was severe rainfall, storm overflows of both types act as built-in pressure relief valves and allow flows to be discharged into rivers and seas. Storm overflows were permitted by the Environment Agency;
- there were 299 overflows in the Exe catchment area and 167 Event Duration Monitors installed to monitor spill frequency. South West Water's Level 2 Draft Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan for the Exe 2020-2025 did not provide details about the volume of raw or treated sewage discharged into the waterways. Also, this report provided the number of 'pollution events' but no details on the impact on wildlife. In addition to this, agricultural runoff, badly managed septic tanks, road runoff and misconnected domestic drains all impacted adversely on the health of rivers in general and the Exe specifically;
- there was very little data published by South West Water on biological monitoring of the health of the Exe. An Exeter City Council report on 'Naturalising Exeter's Rivers' produced in October 2021 focused on the Northbrook stream, which flowed directly into the Exe. A baseline survey found that water quality in the stream is damaged by sewage entering it from misconnections, storm overflows and leachate from the landfill site. The Environment Agency agreed to monthly monitoring of the Northbrook from May 2022 and this sort of survey was needed for the whole of the Exe catchment as a matter of urgency;
- in 2021 at Dunsford Road there were 44 discharges into the River Exe over 62 hours; at Countess Weir there were 47 discharges over 123 hours and at Lower North Street there were 71 discharges into the Higher Leat over 214 hours;
- there was no way of knowing the volume of sewage discharged. Moreover, there were also many overflows of treated and untreated sewage and domestic misconnections which are not measured or recorded at all. In addition, there was frequent spillage into the river from agricultural chemicals;

- the Environment Act 2021 made it a statutory obligation for the Environment Agency to monitor water quality up and downstream of sewer overflows and make annual reports on storm overflow discharges. South West Water had over 1,600 storm overflows to monitor and so at present they are concentrating on Combined Sewage Overflows that spill more than 10 times a year. They had agreed a target with the Environment Agency to reduce spill frequency below this by 2045;
- the population of the Exe catchment in 2020 was 283,000 and was projected to grow to 373,000 by 2050. The catchment was also impacted by the influx of tourists during the summer, with an increase of 37,000 or 13 % over the existing resident population. Planning applications needed careful scrutiny so that the projected discharge of sewage is taken into account in all new developments; and
- Exeter deserves a clean, biodiversity-rich river, canal and estuary with healthy populations of many different species of birds, a thriving mussel industry, returning salmon and lots of people coming to the area for ecotourism. This would create new jobs and income for the area. Reducing and eventually eliminating sewage from the river could be an important step on this journey.

Councillor Rees, in seconding the Motion, welcomed the shared vision for a clean and healthy River Exe and hoped that the actions proposed would lead to an improvement in the river's biodiversity and help reverse the decline in the quality of the water.

Councillor Williams, as the Portfolio Holder for Recycling, Waste Management and Waterways, supported the Motion and referred to an event she had attended in 2022 entitled "Our Water: From the City to the Sea" involving a number of groups campaigning for cleaner water.

Councillor D Moore, as co-leader of an opposition group, welcomed the Motion and referred to the provision in the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 in respect of the adoption of drainage systems. She emphasised the importance of ensuring that the planning system was sufficiently robust to ensure the right connections for surface water to run off into public sewers as part of conditions for housing developments before construction commenced.

A Member, in supporting the Motion, referred to a failed amendment prior to the passing of the Environment Act 2021 to place a legal duty on water companies in England and Wales to undertake improvements to the sewerage systems.

Councillor Read, in concluding, thanked Members for their support stating that she looked forward to the responses from the bodies identified and suggested that the issue could be considered at a future Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Read commended the Motion to Council.

The Notice of Motion was put to the vote and CARRIED unanimously.