

SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL
Extraordinary Meeting of Council
Held at Walker Theatre, Theatre Severn Shrewsbury at
6pm on Monday 27 February 2023.

PRESENT

Councillors E Roberts (Mayor), B Bentick, R Dartnall, M Davies, J Dean, P Gillam, N Green, K Halliday, C Lemon, P Moseley, A Mosley, K Pardy, A Wagner and R Wilson.

IN ATTENDANCE

Helen Ball (Town Clerk), Amanda Spencer (Deputy Town Clerk), Ruth Jones (Office Manager)
Michelle Farmer (Committee Officer), Sally Nicholson (Mayoral Administrator).

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Ashley Smith (WASP – Windrush Against Sewage Pollution), Prof Becky Malby (Ilkley Clean River Group), Daniel Kawczynski MP, Phillip Dunne MP, Pete Lambert (Shropshire Wildlife Trust), Andy Jones (Shrewsbury Town Fisheries), Jane Asterley-Berry (Up Sewage Creek), Claire Kirby (Up Sewage Creek), Stuart Hill (Severn Trent Water), Michael Keenan (Severn Trent Water), Andrew Fairbourn (Severn Trent Water), Jason Rogers (Severn Trent Water), Marc Liddeth (Environment Agency), Gareth Parsons (Environment Agency), Paul Haywood (Environment Agency), 143 members of the public and four members of the press.

131/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

RESOLVED:

That apologies be accepted from Councillors A Phillips, D Vasmer and B Wall.

132/22 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Shropshire Councillors	Twin hatted members declared personal interests in matters relating to the Town Council's relationship with Shropshire Council
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133/22 PRESENTATIONS REGARDING WATER QUALITY IN THE RIVER SEVERN

133.1 Introduction from Councillor Kate Halliday, who proposed that a public meeting be arranged on this topic.

Councillor Halliday introduced the public meeting and commented that she was really pleased to see so many people in attendance and it showed the strength of feeling about the cleanliness of the River Severn and why they were holding the meeting.

She explained to the audience that in June 2022, Severn Trent Water were invited to a Shrewsbury Town Council meeting to discuss with Councillors the current issues with the river, and their plans to improve them. Severn Trent Water did acknowledge mistakes at that meeting.

In January 2022, a motion improving river quality was passed unanimously by Shropshire Council. Councillor Halliday stated that this issue couldn't be left to the Government to solve, several local areas had made several campaigns regarding the issue, many local campaigns were joining the meeting this evening.

Councillor Halliday went on to explain that Shrewsbury Town Council were here to represent the people of Shrewsbury and to give them a voice. The Town Council itself owned much land around the river, hence its standing in calling such a meeting.

The meeting was a chance to question the people directly involved with the managing of the watercourses and she asked what direction the public wanted the Town Council to take, what more could be done locally to combat the issue.

Councillor Halliday was pleased that representatives were present from Severn Trent Water, Environment Agency and local Members of Parliament to provide a very impartial view of the river.

133.2 The National Campaign – Ashley Smith, Chair of Windrush against Sewage Pollution to provide an update on the national campaign picture.

Ashley Smith began his presentation by giving the audience two options: to leave it to the Environment Agency and do nothing or attend this meeting. The public had made the correct choice by attending this meeting. He stated that nobody could deny the reality of pollution in Shropshire rivers. There was a need to end untreated sewage, improve effluent standards, and make the rivers safe for all. The public needed to engage with the Government on this issue.

Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) were a group of volunteers, investigating the pollution of the River Windrush & her sister rivers. They had discovered that untreated sewage was being dumped into the water, sometimes in huge quantities and for long periods of time. This was happening to rivers across the country. They collected and analysed information on water quality and sewage discharges. Without this work the scale of the pollution would remain hidden.

When the volume of untreated sewage was exceeded, it goes into the rivers or seas and the agencies were permitted to do that. They continued to pollute -- both legally and illegally -- but there was little incentive to fix the problem. The Environment Agency's prosecutions policy ignored many offences. Excess sewage discharges could be permitted in exceptional circumstances, 'such as unusually heavy rainfall'. Even then, it must be treated to certain standards. Their analysis showed that many unpermitted spills went undetected by the Environment Agency. This was partially because they only requested daily data from Thames Water. WASP requested data recorded at 15-minute intervals - giving them a more detailed picture.

He commented that dry spills were when water companies released raw sewage into UK rivers during dry weather which was illegal and breaching the water firms permits. Dry spills were mainly caused by groundwater infiltration, Early spills were when sewage was discharged when a treatment works failed to maintain a minimum rate of treatment. 95% of these spillages go unrecorded.

For many years, new housing developments had been built with no infrastructure, the water infrastructure had not kept pace with developing growth. New housing developments had been joined to existing networks without any care for whether the sewage works, or the pipework could cope. One hundred houses could produce thirty tons of sewage/waste per day. The government itself admitted this in January 2021 when Defra stated that water infrastructure had not kept pace with development growth over decades but showed no real intention of doing anything about it.

Mr Smith went into detail about how combined sewer overflows work and said legal sewage dumping was being normalised. This was a serious public health issue and he said Severn Trent were 'marking

their own homework' when it came to the Environment Agency's reasons for not achieving good status with regard to the health of the river.

He continued by saying that we needed to use planning conditions to force water company upgrades. To engage, support and encourage councillors and council officers and explore the law and identify illegality.

133.3 The Local Picture – Pete Lambert (Shropshire Wildlife Trust) and Andy Jones (Shrewsbury Town Fisheries) provided an update of what was happening locally in the River Severn.

Pete Lambert laid bare the state of the river from a nature perspective. The mission of Shropshire Wildlife Trust was practical conservation towards nature's recovery in Shropshire. He commented that the fault was not just with big institutions and that the public were careless also. There was a need for collaboration with the large companies to resolve the issue.

There was a need to restore habitats adjacent to wetlands and not to build on floodplains.

He explained that the Shropshire Wildlife Trust provided advice and support to landowners on how they could do better, to enhance and protect. They were working with Severn Trent Water as they had joint concerns. They were also working alongside United Utilities to develop a survey method to understand pesticide, fertilizer and manure application rates and timings. This would require liaising with farmers and would go on to inform the delivery of a catchment wide water quality improvement project. They had an active role in supporting farmers including precision spray technology, pesticide handling area.

Shropshire Wildlife Trust had also teamed up with the Town Councils of Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth, the National Trust, Historic England, Telford and Wrekin Council and Shropshire Council to improve over forty hectares of publicly accessible greenspace at seven locations across the region. The Freshwater First Programme had helped Shrewsbury Town Council deliver a number of access and habitat improvements at Monkmoor Meadows.

Andy Jones from Shrewsbury Town Fisheries explained how they had 1600 members in Shrewsbury, providing a fishing facility for them. Pollution was a major problem, seeing a decline in fish stock.

At the Quarry, anglers caught more sanitary products than fish. He commented on the complaints he had received from anglers and told how a little boy had caught a sanitary pad when he went on his first ever fishing trip with his dad by Kingsland Bridge. A fisheries report said that the River Severn was so bad that in some areas anglers were catching more tampons than fish. Top anglers were turning their back on Shrewsbury. He was trying to encourage anglers back to the sport, the young ones were the future. He had tried to revive match fishing which initially went well but now back in decline due to the state of the River Severn. Riverfest and fishing competitions had also been lost. Pollution was killing the sport.

133.4 The Local Campaign – 'Up Sewage Creek'

Claire Kirby of 'Up Sewage Creek' provided an update on their campaign activity to clean up the river. She explained that Severn Trent were discharging raw sewage into the River Severn and their combined sewage outfalls in Shrewsbury Town discharged for at least 21,000 hours in 2020. This was a major crisis threatening wildlife and human health. Since the privatisation of the water industry in 1991, water companies had failed to invest in the sewers system. The situation was getting worse with

increasing pollution of all kinds going up and down the river. Severn Trent Water could continue to pollute the river and receive no fine. She confirmed that Severn Trent Water had put monitors into sewers and there were now water testing crews taking measurements, but no signage had been put out.

She stated that residents shouldn't have to walk through waste on their way into the town, highlighting the issues in her local area of The Flash Gardens/Pig Trough. All of the issues and evidence the group had found had been reported to Severn Trent Water, the Environment Agency and Environmental Health. She asked how Severn Trent Water could continue to pollute the river and receive no fines. A number of campaigners were refusing to pay part of their water bills in protest at the amount of sewage being discharged into the River Severn. She would only pay for fresh water from the tap and not the part of the bill that covered wastewater.

They had marched with 100 people through the streets of Shrewsbury saying they had had enough of seeing the river ruined by human excrement and sanitary waste. They also stated there was frustration that the Shrewsbury MP had not done more to protect the River Severn in Commons debates. It was time for the government to look after the people and the environment and they need to work together.

Jane Asterley-Berry of 'Up Sewage Creek' also spoke to the audience. She thanked all the members of the public for attending and for Councillor Halliday bringing the issue to light. She urged all residents to continue putting pressure on the water companies and the regulators.

133.5 The Political Pressure

Both local MPs had been invited to join the meeting from Westminster to provide an update on their work in Parliament.

Ludlow MP Phillip Dunne stated there was a lack of attention to water treatments which went back many decades. The responsibility lay across a wide range of activities including industrial spillage, phosphates and agricultural waste. The increased use of chemicals and pesticides was a contribution.

Pollution was also a result in growth in development of the population and housing. The water courses couldn't cope with the extra population.

He stated that it was not all the water company's fault, but they had failed to invest further. There was evidence of them trying to do more about it more quickly and that Severn Trent Water did need credit for sorting the situation better than others. There was lots of work happening within government leading to changes in the law.

Mr Dunne MP went on to comment that there had been some very inappropriate politicisation of this issue which was alleging that politicians did not care and that they were voting for pouring raw sewage into the river. He stated this was not true and it was not helpful of some parties to try and make political capital.

Daniel Kawczynski MP echoed Phillip Dunne comments regarding inappropriate accusations. He accused Councillors of making 'wild accusations' and misinforming electorates over raw sewage being dumped in the River Severn. He commented that around the Quarry there had been signs put up saying that he had voted to allow companies to pump sewage into the rivers. There had even been posters put up in his constituency. He said that this was highly irresponsible and misleading. There was already enough misinformation and antagonism. The Mayor asked Mr Kawczynski to clarify which statements he found objectionable, but he stated he would not go down that route. The Mayor

informed him that no Town Councillor had put the posters in place. He told the audience it was important to read the context of the vote that took place in November 2021.

He informed the audience that the Secretary of State for DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) would be visiting on 31 March, addressing various bodies. If any of the public had concerns to raise with the Secretary of State, they could send them to him directly. He went on to conclude that flooding was his priority as the local MP as it was damaging the community and the economy.

(Both MPs had to leave the meeting as they were required in Parliament).

133.6 Severn Trent Water

Jason Rogers from Severn Trent Water provided the audience with a presentation.

Severn Trent Water currently served 510,500 customers across Shropshire. He spoke about the wastewater treatment process and its impact on rivers. They managed 1,000 Sewage Treatment Works, 4,500 pump stations, 2,600 Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) and 93,000km of pipes. They treated 3.1 billion litres of wastewater every day. Although the Victorians were fantastic engineers, they had created a system of combined sewers. On dry days sewers were never more than 10% full and it was rainwater that caused issues with excess volumes needing to be released from the system. CSOs stopped rainwater from causing homes to be flooded. They confirmed that they did want to reduce their usage, but this could not be done overnight.

River health had three areas of focus:

- 1) Pollutions
- 2) Reasons for not achieving good ecological status
- 3) The use of Combined Sewer Overflows

They managed 8100 Environment Agency Permits at their assets and pollutions may occur when they failed to manage their sites to permit conditions. Across Shropshire, their performance had improved with no serious pollutions since 2018 and a significant improvement in Category 3 (minor environmental impact) incidents.

The Environment Agency assesses each body of water and determine who caused the impact and attributes responsibility in the form of an RNAG (Reason for not achieving good ecological status). Severn Trent Water were committed to zero RNAGs by 2030 which was 16 years ahead of Environment Act legislation. In Shropshire they had further improved their contribution with 12.7% remaining with Severn Trent and 87.3% with other sectors.

There were approximately 40 indicators used to assess river ecology in Europe with the Water Industry contributing to three of these. Since privatisation they had reduced Phosphate by 80.5%, Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) by 71.8% and Ammonia by 72.1%.

The above did not mean they couldn't and wouldn't do better – however even when they achieve this, rivers wouldn't be in good status as 85% of other RNAGs were not being addressed and required significant improvement.

Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) were an essential feature of the sewerage system. CSOs impact 2% of the reasons for RNAGs in Shropshire. The government had implemented legislation to reduce

activations, 10 per annum by 2050, at a cost of £45 per customer per year. Across Shropshire they had 139 monitors installed on CSOs providing 4.87 million live data points driving improved performance and protecting customer homes.

Severn Trent had a river pledge which planned to improve the regions rivers:

- Ensure Storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers
- Create more opportunities for everyone to enjoy the regions rivers
- Support others to improve and care for rivers
- Enhance the rivers and create new habitats so wildlife can thrive
- Be open and transparent about their performances and plans.

They had been awarded the highest possible 4* rating by the Environment Agency for the last three years.

The River Severn in Shrewsbury had an average flow of 97,000m³, reaching over 600,000m³ per hour during large storm events with the majority of the sewer system being pre-1970. Between 2021-2022 they reduced the CSO activations by 26% and had plans to reduce this further, ahead of the Government targets.

Regarding local investment they were upgrading six of their Sewage Treatment Works in Shropshire which included a significant investment at Monkmoor. The upgrade of the works would be completed in 2025 and included £11m of investment.

Their Bathing Rivers programme was investing £78m to improve water quality along 50km of river in Warwickshire and Shropshire, supporting the move of two stretches of river towards bathing quality standards. The two stretches of river included the River Leam (Warwickshire) and the River Teme near Ludlow by 2025.

With regards to Biodiversity and Catchment Management they had engaged with 1162 farmers across three large catchments and realising a reduction of 511kg of pesticides which was already ahead of their 2025 target. They had awarded 768 grants worth £3,656,459 match funded by farmers to improve water quality. 98 farmers had also signed up to Swap Your Nozzles which reduced pesticide drift across arable land.

It was emphasised by Severn Trent Water that they were committed to and were investing in Shropshire. Despite only accounting for 12.7% of reasons why rivers in Shropshire did not achieve good ecological status, they wanted to give reassurance that they did have a plan and they were committed to delivering this as rapidly as possible. Their performance was the best in the industry, and they were committed to reducing CSO activations with a clear investment plan now and in the future.

133.7 Ilkley Clean River group

Professor Becky Malby had led the Ilkley Clean River Campaign which resulted in the river Wharf in Yorkshire achieving 'bathing water' status and was considered the benchmark for other campaigners to follow up and down the country. She detailed how they ran their campaign and encouraged the people in Shrewsbury to proceed with clarity to get things done.

The key principles were:

- To find common ground and collaborate
- Check the law – hold to account in public meetings

- Engage from diversity of the town – local politicians and leaders
- Check what is actually happening – water quality, number of spills, public opinion, the law

This river group had achieved Bathing Status, being the first river in the UK to secure this. They had also achieved regular EA water testing published, signs to warn the public, publicity for the problem, investment to clean up basic pollution and seminars and support for campaign groups applying for bathing status.

With designated bathing water status, the Environment Agency was required to undertake weekly testing to assess water quality, signage about water quality, any risks to bathing for the bathing season (May-Sept) and a management plan for the river. There was no requirement to provide any facilities apart from signage and this was the responsibility of the local council. Ilkley Clean River Campaign had worked with Ilkley Town Council.

Water companies must comply with, and regulators must regulate, all sewage to be treated, and for storm overflows (which discharge raw sewage) to only operate in exceptional circumstances.

She commented to the audience that they needed their own picture on water testing. The main contributor was human waste and regular testing was needed.

The sewage systems are poorly maintained, and the water companies can't keep blaming the 'Victorian system'. The reality was that water companies had money to make them better and people needed to be held to account. There were now many campaign groups set up to fight this issue.

134/22 INTRODUCTION TO THE PANEL

A panel of specialists and interested parties had agreed to be part of the panel. Many of them had already made their own presentations to the audience. Additional members who introduced themselves were Stuart Hill (Severn Trent Water), Michael Keenan (Severn Trent Water), Andrew Fairbourn (Severn Trent Water), Jason Rogers (Severn Trent Water), Marc Liddeth (Environment Agency), Gareth Parsons (Environment Agency) and Paul Haywood (Environment Agency).

135/22 SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

In the interests of continued public engagement, it was proposed and seconded and

RESOLVED:

That standing orders be suspended to allow the public to take part in the meeting

(Maximum 30 minutes) and ask questions.

136/22 PUBLIC QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

Councillor Halliday informed the audience that public questions and comments would now be taken.

Ed Lomas, a water specialist reported that much progress had been made between 1997 – 2004, but little since. He questioned why.

Alison Biddulph commented that she was a regular swimmer in the river and was applying for bathing water status. Swimmers were trying to get parts of the River Severn officially designated as bathing water sites so that it would be tested regularly. At the edges of the water, you tended to get

sanitary products, toilet paper etc. She hoped she would get the full support of the Town Council when her application came through.

Ian Ward, one of the Fisheries Match Co-ordinators, commented that over the last five years fishing matches had suffered greatly and that you could smell effluent. People would die if this action continued. CEOs needed to be held accountable.

Sonia Miller commented that she was one of 3700 wild swimmers in Shropshire that swam the River Severn, and the lack of action was putting the health of the group at risk. She stated that members of Severn Trent and the Environment Agency should swim with the group to see what was in the River as Severn Trent Water data was not correct.

Severn Trent replied to say that they had a firm commitment and plans in place to resolve the issues, but it would not be a quick fix. There may be short term options that could be put in place, and they would be investigated.

Lawrence Breakspear, an angler, questioned whether there was a conflict of interest between the Environment Agency and Severn Trent Water when the Environment Agency was investing their pension fund in Severn Trent Water.

John Turnbull asked if Severn Trent Water could provide a map of all the outages like Thames Water had provided and questioned why the Environment Agency only requested testing between 9am – 3pm.

The Environment Agency commented that they were aware of all the issues that had been raised. They would check on flow issues and at the end of next year have monitory data and prioritise action needed. With regards to pollution, they commented that when issues are reported to them, they could only attend serious call outs i.e., dead fish found in the river.

Environment Agency confirmed they would have continuous monitoring and publish data at the end of next year.

Severn Trent Water had issued one of their pledges to impose data transparency by the end of 2023. They reported also the 10% of sampling was outside the 9am-3pm window.

A question was raised by a farmer who asked the agencies to lead by example. Would they lead and strive for a cleaner, better river?

Ash Smith commented at this point, to state that the Environment Agency had access to the same data as he did. It was too little too late and they needed to get in shape as a regulator. When Severn Trent Water opened their eyes and realised the situation, everybody could move forward.

137/22 RECONVENING OF STANDING ORDERS

RESOLVED:

That standing orders be reconvened to allow the meeting proper to continue

138/22 QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM COUNCILLORS

Due to the time constraints Councillors were unable to ask questions or comment further.

139/22 NEXT STEP

Councillor Mosley thanked all for their attendance at the meeting. He commented that a solution needed to be found and further action was needed from Severn Trent Water and the Environment Agency.

RESOLVED:

That the Town Council would discuss this topic further at their Full Council Meeting to be held in March at which a policy would be devised.

140/22 CLOSING REMARKS

In closing the meeting, the Mayor thanked all presenters, all Councillors and members of the public for attending, and also thanked all staff involved in the meeting.