

River Chess Association Public Meeting No. 8
21st May 2014, The Dairy, Restore Hope Latimer

In attendance

RCA Committee Members:

Paul Jennings (Chairman)

David Le Neve Foster

Kathryn Graves

Scott Horton

Speakers:

Craig Rance, Thames Water

Don Grant, Chesham Flood Action Group

Allen Beechey, Chilterns Chalk Streams Project

And 26 members of the public.

1. Introduction

Paul welcomed everyone to the meeting and said that there were two major issues affecting the Chess at present: pollution and abstraction. The Operations Manager of the Chesham Sewage Treatment Works (CSTW) was due to be present to explain the ongoing pollution of the river by CSTW, but had been called away to another site due to operational requirements. Thames Water has offered to hold a public meeting to address concerns.

2. Previous Minutes

The minutes of the public meeting held on the 1st May 2013 were accepted as a correct record.

3. Pollution

There has been continual discharge of diluted sewage from CSTW into the river for three months. The RCA was notified by Thames Water two weeks after the discharge started in February. It is the result of water ingress into the sewer system due to high groundwater levels.

The RCA, parish councils and Three Rivers District Council have issued warnings to river users, but the RCA is pushing for a protocol to be put in place so that landowners, river users and the public can be systematically informed. The watercress farm at Ewelme is currently unable to sell watercress due to water ingress on their site. We have had to cancel school field trips to the river and our Trout in the Classroom fish releases are on hold. The long term impact on the river is not known.

We are aware that the Environment Agency (EA) required Thames Water to produce a plan detailing how to address the pollution by the end of April. We believe that the EA are still waiting to receive the plan. In February, Thames Water announced plans to upgrade the CSTW funded through AMP6, with works due to start in 2015, but we believe that Thames Water must plan to further increase capacity at the CSTW, particularly in light of the number of new houses earmarked for the Chesham area in the new Local Plan.

It was noted that this is a separate issue to all the problems experienced at the CSTW in recent months, including storm water discharges, sewage detritus routinely found downstream of the site and flooding of neighbouring land.

4. Thames Water Customer Education

Craig Rance explained that Thames Water is trying to educate its customers as to what should go into the sewage system following an increase in sewage blockages from 48,000 in 2009 to 56,000 in 2012. Sewage blockages not only cause toilets and sinks to stop working, but cause flooding and river pollution. Work includes the provision of fat traps to help people bin fat after cooking and the creation of a new education centre at Maple Lodge to teach children how the water cycle works, including sustainable water use and sustainable sewage systems. Sending fat traps and literature to the worst affected areas for blockages saw a 45% reduction in blockages in these areas. Thames Water representatives are meeting with supermarkets and wet wipe manufacturers to discuss the problems caused by these products, which are wrongly marketed as flushable.

5. Activity Update

Over the last year, the RCA has been engaged in the following activities: lobbying on abstraction; riverfly monitoring; habitat enhancement; education (including Trout in the Classroom, Mayfly in the Classroom, school visits to the river and Restore Hope Latimer memory days); and elver monitoring with the Zoological Society of London.

6. River Chess Plan

The committee is drafting a plan for the river to achieve the objectives of having a clean river with plentiful flow that supports healthy wildlife populations. This will be a document subject to on-going development and input from the public.

7. Chesham Flood Action Group

Don Grant introduced the Flood Action Group, which was set up in December 2013, and aims to represent Chesham residents on local flooding issues. The group is developing an action plan of management issues to be addressed, such as blocked gullies. It was agreed that the flood action group and the RCA have similar aims; to ensure that water is dealt with in a way that is good for the river and reduces flood risk. It is therefore important to ensure that any actions undertaken to improve drainage do not compromise river health, making it a priority that the two groups maintain an ongoing dialogue.

8. Volunteers

The RCA is always looking for more volunteers to help with tasks, such as water vole surveyors, river rangers and volunteer coordinators. Please get in touch if you are interested in helping.

9. Chilterns Chalk Streams Project

Allen Beechey gave an overview of the project and issues affecting the Chilterns chalk streams over the past year, including:

(i) High Flows

The high groundwater levels resulting from the very wet winter of 2013 caused sewage pollution to the Chess, Gade, Bulbourne, Misbourne, Hamble, Ewelme Brook and Hughenden Stream. These issues are still on-going for some rivers.

(ii) Projects

The three year, £70,000 Chiltern Farm Advice Project is now in its second year. It seeks to tackle diffuse pollution in rivers. The Vale Brook, a significant source of sediment pollution into the Chess, will be looked at this year. If you see runoff from fields getting into the river, please take a photo and send it to Allen.

(iii) Habitat Workshops

Originally started with the RCA, workshops showing how to carry out low cost, low tech habitat improvements have been carried out on five Chilterns rivers.

(iv) Colne Catchment Plan

Work is on-going and a web site is being developed to host the plan online. Paul has joined the steering group as a representative of voluntary groups working in the Colne catchment. The RCA will lead on the development of the Chess portion of the Colne plan.