

To: Cabinet
Date: 13 November 2024
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Update on the development of the Oxford River Charter (and Council engagement with Thames Water)

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations for Cabinet consideration and decision
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Katherine Miles, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Anna Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford
Corporate Priority:	A well-run council
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2024-28
Recommendation(s): That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report	

Appendices	
Appendix A	Draft Cabinet response to Scrutiny recommendations

Introduction and overview

1. The Scrutiny Committee met on 4 November 2024 to consider an update briefing on Thames Water for Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee. It was recommended that the Committee note the update report followed by an opportunity for discussion, and agree any recommendations.
2. The Committee is grateful to Councillor Anna Railton (Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford) and Mish Tullar (Head of Corporate Strategy) for attending the meeting to answer questions.

Summary and recommendations

3. The Head of Corporate Strategy introduced the report providing an update on the Council's engagement with Thames Water, noting two consecutive years of poor

water quality and the Council's intent to conduct a detailed investigation into pollution sources.

4. The Committee asked questions to clarify Council and Environment Agency responsibilities, particularly in relation to gaps in oversight of local waterways and flooding risks. Queries were also raised about the status of water quality initiatives, road runoff management, and the council's role in regulating domestic water misconnection issues.
5. The Committee sought updates on the Council's ongoing communication with Thames Water and discussed ways to strengthen stakeholder engagement to address resident concerns more effectively.
6. The Committee noted the need for clearer boundaries in responsibility between the Council and other agencies, as well as legislative gaps in water management and environmental protection. The Committee highlighted the importance of maintaining regular and meaningful engagement with Thames Water, particularly regarding water quality and sewage flooding. The Committee also discussed the impact of deregulation on water companies and raised concerns about road runoff as a pollution source, suggesting areas for Council action to support overall water quality improvements.
7. While the Committee acknowledged that ongoing discussions with Thames Water have been useful, they suggested a more structured forum where Council Members could present resident issues directly, setting clear meeting terms to ensure productive, goal-oriented conversations with Thames Water.

Recommendation 1: That the Council formally requests a structured meeting with Thames Water, for Council Members to put forward resident concerns about water issues in the city, and for officers to provide support in proposing the structuring of the meeting.

8. The Committee also acknowledged legislative challenges surrounding water quality and flood management, noting that deregulation may hinder the Council's ability to enforce standards. Concerns were raised regarding the extent of Council's investments in storm water management and runoff and gutter clearances in cases of flash flooding. It was noted that Council needs to consider a focus on this with a degree of urgency, in the context of the climate emergency and disaster planning, as demonstrated by the recent flash flooding in Spain. It was recommended that the Council invite MPs to a focused meeting, framed around the Council's River Action Plan, to bring attention to legislative gaps, promote coordinated efforts to safeguard Oxford's water resources, and advocate for policy changes to improve water company accountability.

Recommendation 2: That Officers develop a proposal for council to convene multi-stakeholder dialogue event between Members, local Members of Parliament, industry and other water quality stakeholders to inform the content of a future Oxford City River Action Plan, to identify coordinated efforts to safeguard Oxford's water resources for the future.

9. In addition, the Committee discussed issues of river pollution due to misconnected properties, emphasising the Council's environmental health team enforcement

responsibilities including within its own housing stock and those that it regulates such as in HMOs and selective licensed properties, as well as in housing association properties. Reviewing and clarifying the Council's role in this area, and learning from good practices elsewhere in the country, would better position it to prevent future misconnections, establish proactive measures to identify and take action to reduce domestic pollution sources, to safeguard local water quality.

Recommendation 3: That the Council commissions a review by Officers to clarify its powers, obligations and the potential actions based on good practice to: identify and enforce existing domestic misconnections in residential properties that the council has control or influence over; and to prevent future misconnections, in order to safeguard against water contamination.

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