

CLEAN RIVER KENT CAMPAIGN

MEETING HELD ON 21 FEBRUARY: AGREED NOTES OF DISCUSSION WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF UNITED UTILITIES

5 Discussion with representatives from United Utilities

At 5.30pm Ginny welcomed Sharma Jencitis, Area Stakeholder Manager (South Cumbria and Cheshire) and Sion Platts-Kilburn, Wastewater Catchment Manager (North) to the meeting, and asked everyone to introduce themselves. She then invited CRKC and United Utilities to make brief opening remarks to set the scene.

Opening remarks from Isobel Stoddart, Clean River Kent Campaign (CRKC)

Isobel summarised:

- We have developed the Clean River Kent Campaign over the last year – engaged with stakeholders, volunteers, media to raise our profile.
- We have submitted an application to DEFRA for bathing status.
- This involved a survey to collect community views and discussions with local representatives and partners.
- We have published a report of Water Quality Monitoring at 6 sites along the river Kent from Staveley to Sedgwick – we found unacceptable levels of pollution at every site.
- What we now need is action to rectify the situation including:
 - An enhanced water quality testing regime providing real time information all year round
 - Sewage legislation that ends untreated sewage discharge (including in river Kent)
 - Investment and associated targets to restore natural habitats
 - Positive and proactive collaboration between water companies and local communities with transparency and clear actions and outcomes.
- What we will do to take this forward:
 - Further data collection in 2023 to build our understanding of the river Kent
 - Continued engagement / campaigning to achieve results.

Opening remarks from Sharma Jencitis and Sion Platts-Kilburn, United Utilities (UU)

Sharma and Sion summarised:

- The importance for United Utilities of working with partners via the Becks to Bay Catchment Based Approach (CaBA), which is chaired by the South Cumbria Rivers Trust (SCRT).
- This has now established a sub-group specifically the river Kent - the Kent Working Group - also chaired by SCRT.
- CRKC has been invited to join this group and attended the first meeting in January 2023.
- The CRKC Water Quality Monitoring report is an interesting read, and UU looks forward to working with CRKC.
- It is important to understand the catchment of the river Kent.
- UU will also engage with groups such as the Environment Agency (EA), SCRT and the Lake District Foundation as well as Natural England who are leading the "LIFE Programme".
- UU are keen to develop relationships and work with partners.

Q&A Session

1. We asked United Utilities about the statement in “Better Rivers: Better North West” that treated sewage discharges account for only 26% of the “river water quality impacts” and untreated storm overflows for another 4%.

- Where do these estimates come from?
- Is it a national or local estimate?
- What allowance has been made for the under-reporting of storm overflows eg at Staveley?

United Utilities said that the estimates came from the EA.

They did not have any detail about how the estimates had been derived.

However, they said that the estimates were national and therefore did not take any account of local circumstances in the North West or in the river Kent.

They suggested that we should work with the new catchment-based group for the river Kent, the Kent Working Group convened by the South Cumbria Rivers Trust.

2 We asked United Utilities what action they have taken to address the above average surface water runoff into sewers, especially as an above average proportion of sewers combine foul and surface water.

- What progress has been made?
- What are the barriers to progress?

United Utilities explained that rainfall in the North West is “extreme”.

The high proportion of combined sewers was a legacy of industrial development. New developments would separate surface water from foul water and ensure that it drained by other routes.

Retro-engineering is limited by constrained underground space in a village such as Staveley. Replacement plans are being investigated and the timing is uncertain. The present focus has been on tackling storm water overflows.

In response to a further question, United Utilities said that storm water overflows do go into canals eg the Manchester Ship Canal as well as rivers. They do not discharge into the Lancaster-Kendal canal.

And in response to a further question, United Utilities referred to the Freshwater Biological Association’s website for information about algal blooms.

3 We asked United Utilities for their estimate of the investment required at Staveley WwTW to prevent the discharge of faecal bacteria into the river Kent.

- What priorities is United Utilities considering for the next Asset Management Plan AMP8, which will cover 2025-2030. If not Staveley, why not?
- How will United Utilities respond to the Environment Secretary’s announcement on Monday that all water companies would be required to submit new plans detailing where they have issues with storm overflows, what is causing those problems and how and when they intend to fix them?

United Utilities said that water company investment is planned on a 5-year cycle – the Asset Management Plan – which is agreed with their regulators (Ofwat and the EA). Because this is a regulated process, they are unable to give an update on the next 5-year plan (2025-2030).

The business plan will be published in December 2024. Draft plans will not be publicly available.

Footnote: Since the meeting United Utilities has confirmed that “there will be a public presentation of the plan in early summer” – details to follow.

United Utilities confirmed that there will be no investment at Staveley WwTW in the present AMP ie before 2025 despite likely increases in population over this period.

United Utilities accept that the river is polluted with bacteria downstream from both Staveley and Kendal WwTWs but said that this “is not a problem if that stretch of river has not been designated as a bathing site”. They also pointed out that the levels of bacteria were high in Staveley, indicating that agriculture and septic tanks also play a part.

They said that there are “some options available” which will be discussed at a meeting convened by Staveley with Ings Parish Council on 3 March. No further details were provided.

4 We asked United Utilities how they respond to the finding in our community survey (308 responses) that people thought that the responsibility for cleaning up the river lay primarily with United Utilities and the EA.

- What actions are planned to address the concerns of your customers?

United Utilities said that it is challenging times for water companies, but that they are only one of the contributors to river water pollution. They are therefore working with partners. They recognise that customers aren't happy, but the problems can't be solved overnight.

United Utilities is investing £230m via the initiatives set out in “Better Rivers: Better North West”. For example, river champions will be employed by United Utilities to improve the aesthetics of the river eg clearing debris on the river banks. Recruitment is underway in Cumbria.

5 We asked United Utilities about the very serious fish kill in the river Kent in July 2021.

- What lessons has United Utilities learned from the investigation into this fish kill?
- What action is in hand?

United Utilities said that they could not comment as the investigation is ongoing.

6 We asked United Utilities about the EA report “Phosphorus and Freshwater Eutrophication”:

- What are United Utilities estimates of the apportionment of sources of Phosphorus in the Kent catchment across WwTW, septic tanks and agriculture? EA report says 60-70% WwTW, 1-2% septic tanks, 25% land/agriculture, 7% diffuse urban (but notes higher contribution of septic tanks and agriculture may be relevant in rural areas).
- Is there phosphorus removal in place at Staveley and Kendal WwTW?
- If so, what is the level of reduction that you are aiming to achieve? - noting the EA report mentions a “technically achievable limit” of 0.25mg/l P?

United Utilities said that the Environmental Permits issued by the EA regulated the levels of phosphorus (as well as nitrogen and oxygen) in the river water at each WwTW. They do not measure bacteria.

The Permit is “absolute not aspirational”, and they are within Permit at both Staveley and Kendal.

There was discussion sparked by members of the Kent (Westmorland) Angling Association) about the video released a few days ago of pollution in the river and along the riverbank beside Kendal WwTW. Although this level of pollution had been said to be a one off, there was in fact a similar event in 2021.

The Angling Association argue that they monitor the river more than the EA is now able to do, and ask (i) for the river to be cleaned up and (ii) for support for monitoring.

7 We asked United Utilities whether they accept that, although they state that they operate within their EA permit, the regular and continuing discharge of treated and untreated sewage into the river Kent is damaging the ecology of a river with international conservation status as well as posing risks to human health.

United Utilities said that this is not ideal, but that the discharge of treated sewage would always happen. The requirements are reviewed by the EA. Different infrastructure may be required.

They accept that “storm overflows are not the way they want to continue”, although emphasised that they operate within their Environmental Permits.

8 We asked United Utilities about early progress on the commitments given in “Better Rivers: Better North West” which was launched in Spring 2022 in particular:

- Publish investigations for all overflows that operate frequently in 2022
- Hold first Environmental AGM in 2022
- Convene a NW Rivers Summit in 2022

United Utilities said they had held the first Environmental AGM and convened a NW Rivers Summit in 2022. These had involved senior members of partner organisations. No groups such as the Clean River Kent Campaign had been included, and members of the public were not invited.

They were unsure of progress on the commitment to publish investigations for all overflows that operate frequently.

As time was short, United Utilities agreed to provide information about all the commitments for 2022 after the meeting:

- Easily accessible information on storm overflows by 2023
- Work with stakeholders to provide the information people need from 2022
- Publish investigations for all overflows that operate frequently in 2022
- Establish an environmental scrutiny committee of external stakeholders in 2022
- Hold first Environmental AGM in 2022
- Convene a NW Rivers Summit in 2022
- Launch a new partnership to protect water courses with farmers to incentivise farming practice in 2022.

9 A few further comments were made and questions asked without there being sufficient time to discuss them in detail:

- The Environmental Permit cycle and how often these are reviewed by the EA.
- The impact of Nutrient Neutrality – WwTW will be looked at in terms of “population equivalent metrics” which takes account of visitors and business as well as residents – this will influence the next AMP.
- The value of Sondes Monitoring to provide a better understanding.
- The importance of sharing information, including citizen science monitoring data.

Sharma and Sion agreed to send further information by email. They were thanked for their contributions, and left at 6.30pm.

There was a brief discussion following the Q&A session.