

HEP Briefing Note

Subject: How Winchester City Council Manages Water

Service Area: Special Maintenance

Date: 15th June 2026

Matters for the Committee to Consider

1. Public awareness and community resilience

Does the Committee believe there is more the Council could do to improve residents' understanding of flood risk, individual preparedness and the roles of the different agencies involved in responding to water-related incidents?

2. Learning from local experience

Would the Committee support a review of recent flooding events to identify any lessons learned and opportunities to further strengthen the Council's operational response arrangements?

3. Making the invisible visible

Given that much of the Council's work in managing water takes place behind the scenes, are there opportunities to better communicate the value of this work and increase public understanding of the services provided?

Purpose

To provide councillors with an overview of Winchester City Council's role in managing water across the district, including flood risk, drainage, wastewater treatment and environmental protection. The note also explains how this work supports delivery of the Council Plan and contributes to creating healthy, resilient and sustainable communities.

Introduction

Water has always shaped Winchester. From the River Itchen running through the heart of the city to the network of drainage infrastructure that supports our communities, how we manage water affects residents, businesses, our environment and our local economy.

Managing water well is not simply an operational issue. It is fundamental to delivering many of the ambitions set out in the Council Plan. It helps protect homes and businesses from flooding, supports sustainable growth, safeguards our important natural habitats and ensures that our communities are better prepared for the impacts of climate change.

Winchester City Council does not hold all the statutory responsibilities relating to water management. Those responsibilities sit across several organisations. However, the Council has an important role to play and, in some areas, a very direct operational role. This briefing note sets out what we do, where others lead, and how partnership working is essential to keeping Winchester safe, resilient and thriving.

Supporting the Council Plan

The Council's approach to water management supports a number of the priorities within the Council Plan.

Healthy communities and quality of life

Protecting communities from flooding helps people feel safe in their homes and supports the continued vitality of our towns and villages. The Council's work in managing river levels, maintaining flood infrastructure and responding during periods of severe weather contributes directly to community resilience.

Tackling the climate emergency and protecting our environment

The changing climate is increasing the likelihood of more intense rainfall events and placing greater pressure on existing infrastructure. Our approach focuses not only on responding to these challenges but also on protecting the district's internationally important chalk streams, sensitive habitats and biodiversity.

Homes for all and sustainable growth

Through the planning process, the Council helps ensure that new development is supported by appropriate drainage arrangements and that growth does not increase flood risk elsewhere. Good water management is therefore an important part of delivering sustainable communities.

Living well and a well-run council

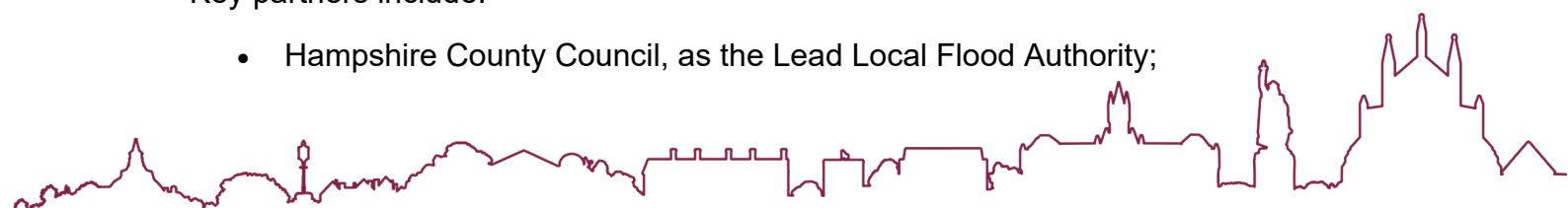
Whether operating wastewater treatment works, maintaining flood defences or working with partners to resolve local issues, the Council continues to provide practical services that matter to residents whilst making best use of its resources and expertise.

Winchester City Council's Role

Water management is a shared responsibility. The organisations involved each have different powers and duties.

Key partners include:

- Hampshire County Council, as the Lead Local Flood Authority;



- the Environment Agency, responsible for flood forecasting, environmental regulation and the management of main rivers; and
- Southern Water, which manages the public sewer network and wastewater infrastructure serving most residents.

Within this wider framework, Winchester City Council's responsibilities focus on several key areas:

- managing river flows through Winchester;
- providing drainage advice through the planning process;
- operating council-owned sewage treatment works;
- supporting local flood response arrangements; and
- undertaking limited water quality monitoring.

Whilst these responsibilities are more targeted than those of some of our partners, they remain important in protecting communities and supporting the district's future growth.

River Management and Land Drainage

Historically, Winchester City Council was the Land Drainage Authority. However, following the introduction of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, many of those responsibilities transferred to Hampshire County Council.

Around 95% of former land drainage functions now sit with the County Council. Winchester City Council nevertheless retains responsibility for managing watercourses that it owns or controls.

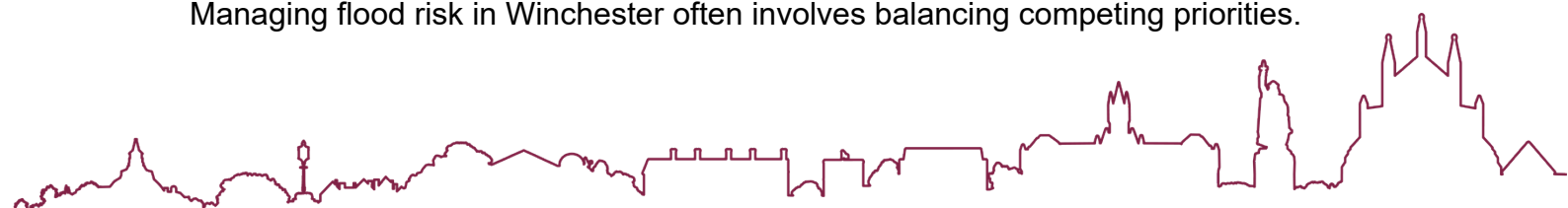
This includes active management of sections of the River Itchen through Winchester, from Winnall Moors through to Winchester College. Officers oversee a complex network of channels, weirs, sluices and culverts that require regular attention.

One of the most important aspects of this work is daily monitoring. River levels are checked each morning, with officers assessing conditions and determining whether adjustments to sluices or other interventions are required.

Much of this work happens behind the scenes and is rarely visible to residents, but it plays an important role in reducing flood risk across the city.

Flood Risk Management

Managing flood risk in Winchester often involves balancing competing priorities.



The Council seeks to protect homes, businesses and infrastructure whilst also recognising the environmental importance of areas such as Winnall Moors, which is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

River levels are managed within agreed operating ranges. As levels increase, officers may adjust sluice gates or redirect flows through different channels. In more extreme situations, floodplains may be allowed to function as intended, temporarily storing water away from developed areas.

Alongside these operational interventions, the Council has invested in flood defence infrastructure.

Localised measures, including flood boards, walls and temporary defences, provide protection to some of the city's more vulnerable locations.

The Durngate Flood Defence Scheme has further strengthened Winchester's resilience. Completed in 2021, the scheme provides a city-wide line of defence and includes flood storage capacity of approximately 250,000 tonnes of water. It was designed to provide protection against a one in one hundred year event and has not yet been required.

The Council also maintains a limited stock of sandbags. Their use is prioritised for council assets and vulnerable residents where no alternative support is available.

Planning and Sustainable Development

One of the most significant ways in which the Council influences water management is through its role as Local Planning Authority.

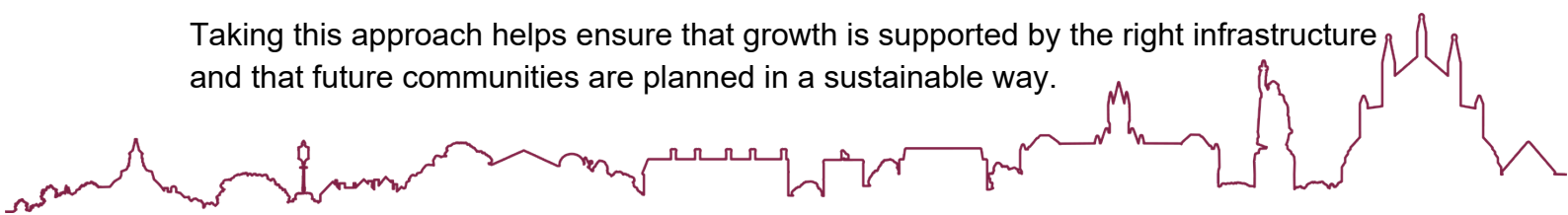
Every planning application is assessed to understand whether the proposed drainage arrangements are appropriate and whether the development could increase flood risk.

For major developments, Hampshire County Council provides specialist advice on surface water drainage. Winchester City Council continues to review foul drainage impacts and the broader implications of development proposals.

National planning policy requires developments to demonstrate that they will not worsen flood risk elsewhere. Developers are expected to follow the drainage hierarchy, prioritising infiltration methods where possible before considering other discharge arrangements.

In practice, this often means incorporating sustainable drainage systems and attenuation measures designed to slow the release of water and replicate more natural drainage patterns.

Taking this approach helps ensure that growth is supported by the right infrastructure and that future communities are planned in a sustainable way.



Surface Water and Flash Flooding

Flash flooding is becoming an increasing challenge as rainfall patterns change.

Locations such as Winchester High Street can experience flooding during intense downpours when large volumes of water enter the drainage system over a short period of time.

The Council undertakes a range of activities to help manage this risk, including monitoring and maintaining culverts and, where appropriate, lowering river levels ahead of forecast storms to create additional capacity within the system.

It is important to recognise, however, that many of the factors contributing to flash flooding sit outside the Council's direct control.

Flooding can result from highway drainage issues, pressures within the sewer network or the sheer intensity of rainfall overwhelming existing infrastructure.

The Council therefore has both an operational role and an important role in working alongside partners to understand local issues and identify solutions.

Wastewater Treatment

Winchester City Council owns and operates approximately 45 small sewage treatment works serving around 3,500 homes across the district.

Whilst the vast majority of residents are connected to Southern Water's sewerage system, these sites provide an important service to a number of rural communities.

Larger treatment works operate under Environment Agency permits and are subject to regular monitoring. Compliance levels remain consistently high, with performance typically achieving around 99% compliance.

Most treated discharges enter the ground through infiltration systems, although some sites discharge to local watercourses.

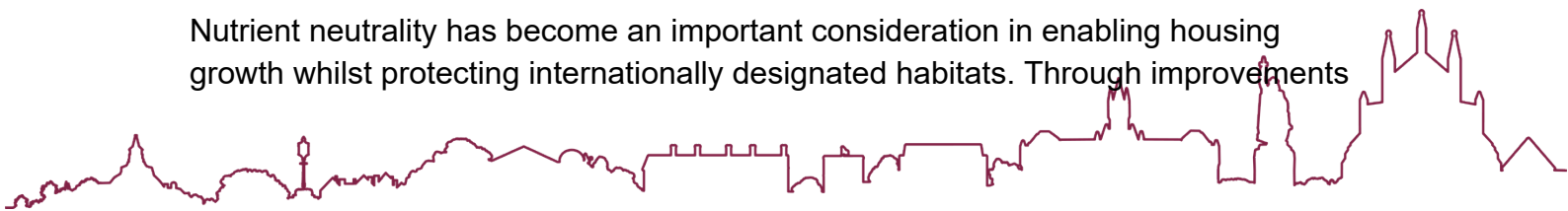
Maintaining these facilities ensures that communities continue to receive reliable services whilst protecting the wider environment.

Water Quality and Nutrient Management

The Council's direct role in drinking water quality is limited. The principal exception is the borehole supply at Itchen Stoke, which is monitored in conjunction with the Environment Agency.

The Council also has a role in supporting the delivery of nutrient neutrality requirements.

Nutrient neutrality has become an important consideration in enabling housing growth whilst protecting internationally designated habitats. Through improvements



to treatment infrastructure, the Council has opportunities to generate nutrient credits that can be used to support development in appropriate circumstances.

This work demonstrates that environmental protection and economic growth do not have to be mutually exclusive. With the right approach, both objectives can be achieved.

The Winchester district falls within three river catchments in relation to nutrient neutrality – the East Hampshire, Test, and Itchen catchments. Within the East Hampshire and Test catchments, new housing development is required to be nutrient neutral for nitrogen. Within the Itchen catchment new housing development is required to be nutrient neutral for both phosphorus and nitrogen.

The council is currently working on developing a programme of mitigation solutions to reduce nutrient pollution and facilitate the delivery of new development within the Winchester district. The council is upgrading its wastewater treatment works (WwTW) within the district to generate nitrogen and phosphorus mitigation and generate additional revenue through the sale of credits. The council is also supporting the Solent Mitigation Partnership (SMP) and other third-party developers to develop additional mitigation schemes within the district.

There is a separate paper on Nutrient neutrality at this meeting.

Working in Partnership

No single organisation is responsible for every aspect of water management.

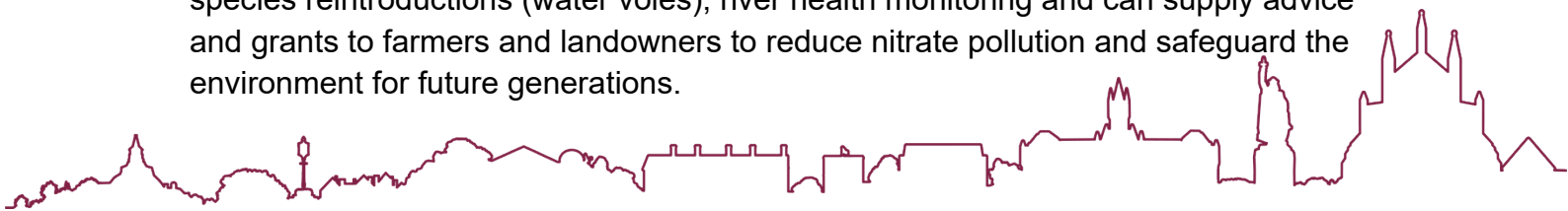
Success depends upon strong partnership working between Winchester City Council, Hampshire County Council, the Environment Agency, Southern Water and other stakeholders.

The Council's role is often to bring local knowledge, practical experience and leadership to these discussions, ensuring that the interests of Winchester's communities are properly represented.

As pressures increase through climate change, ageing infrastructure and future growth, these partnerships will become increasingly important.

The council is part of the East Hants Catchment Partnership and the Meon Valley Catchment Partnership, combining stakeholders to work towards the improved preservation, enhancement and management of these river catchments. These groups aim to protect and enhance the landscape, biological and cultural heritage and the ecosystem services that are delivered.

These catchment partnerships are involved in projects such as habitat restoration, species reintroductions (water voles), river health monitoring and can supply advice and grants to farmers and landowners to reduce nitrate pollution and safeguard the environment for future generations.



Conclusion

The Council's role in water management is both practical and strategic.

On any given day, this may involve monitoring river levels, operating treatment works, reviewing planning applications or working with partners to prepare for periods of severe weather.

Taken together, these activities help protect residents, support sustainable development and safeguard the natural environment that makes Winchester such a special place.

Much of this work happens quietly and behind the scenes. However, it underpins many of the outcomes that matter most to our residents and supports the delivery of the Council Plan by helping to ensure that Winchester remains a safe, resilient and sustainable place to live, work and visit.

Key data sources

Flood warnings and alerts (from Environment Agency)

[Flood alerts and warnings - GOV.UK](#)

Groundwater levels (from the Environment Agency)

[Groundwater Graphs - Hampshire](#)

River levels in Winchester (from the Environment Agency)

[Winchester, Hampshire - Find river, sea, groundwater and rainfall levels - GOV.UK](#)

Water quality data monitoring (from the Environment Agency)

[Map Explorer | Water Quality Explorer](#)

Data showing the performance of nutrient improvement schemes at housing sites.

[Housing Performance - Winchester City Council](#)

