

Annex 1 - Health of Our Water Networks

1.1 This report has been produced to provide information for debate and review by the members of the Place Scrutiny Committee, any recommendations for further consideration will be prioritised and taken through the appropriate governance channels.

1.2 The following areas are considered:

- Report on health of the watercourses and sewage management and infrastructure and insight into the current partnership and investment to improve water quality

2.0 Yorks River Network

2.1 The city of York is in the Vale of York on the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss. Centred on this urban core, our administrative area extends to include villages of varying sizes and largely rural land with the River Derwent forming the eastern boundary. Whilst the River Derwent drains an area of more than 2000km² it forms only a very small part of our administrative area and it is not considered in this report, although it is recognised that there are areas of ecological sensitivity on the lower parts of this river catchment and we should support partners in its management wherever possible.

2.2 The River Swale, Ure and Nidd, which form the Ouse just upstream of York drain more than 3500km² of the North Yorkshire Council area with significant agricultural, commercial and residential areas impacting on the quality of the River Ouse through York through regulated and unregulated discharges.

2.3 A number of significant tributaries drain the urban areas of York directly into the Rivers Ouse and Foss, these include, but are not limited to, Holgate Beck, Blue Beck, Burdyke, Germany Beck, Osbaldwick Beck and Tang Hall Beck. Many of these tributaries flow through agricultural areas in the cities outskirts and more densely populated housing and amenity sites in the city.

3.0 Organisations with Roles That Influence River Quality

3.1 A complex network of connections to the watercourses including agricultural drainage, sewerage infrastructure, highways and direct connections from property developments. These all have the potential to

impact on river quality and make assessment, enforcement and remediation difficult for the many actors involved in their management.

3.2 The organisations with roles that influence river quality are currently:

- Regulatory and Enforcement Bodies
- Ofwat sets performance standards and targets for water and sewerage companies.
- The Environment Agency establishes water quality standards, monitors river conditions, conducts inspections, and enforces regulations to address pollution and protect water resources. Ultimately the Environment Agency are responsible for river quality and it is their responsibility to hold polluters to account, not the Council. (See Appendix 3 and 4 for further information on the Environment Agency roles and responsibilities).

The regulation and enforcement, however, is set to change owing to the need to update and align the various regulators with responsibility for the water sector. To this end the Government recently commissioned the Cunliffe Review ([*Independent Water Commission, 2025*](#)) providing a series of recommendations including the restructuring of the current roles and responsibilities of OFWAT, the Environment Agency (EA) and the Drinking Water Inspectorate into a single 'super' regulator.

Some key highlights that relate to water quality improvement of Yorks waterways include:

- Better links between environmental outcomes and funding decisions
- Improved monitoring e.g. ending the removal of self monitoring of waste water treatment discharges to 'open monitoring'
- Setting a clearer set of standards and enforcement for agricultural pollution

There are 88 recommendations from this report and a water reform bill is now making its way through parliament with the expectation that it will become legislation and a new 'super' regulator will be in place in 2027.

- Water and Sewerage Company

- Yorkshire Water manages sewerage infrastructure, including treated effluent discharges and combined sewer overflows (CSOs).
- It works collaboratively with partners, including City of York Council (City of York Council), to reduce storm overflow impacts and improve river quality.

City of York Council is collaborating on a number of projects to help manage CSO storm water discharges. (Further detail on Yorkshire Water's roles and responsibilities can be found in Appendix 2.)

- Delivery and Partnership Organisations
 - Catchment partnerships and river trusts deliver improvement projects, enhance habitats, and coordinate local action.
 - They secure government funding and support volunteer involvement.
- Local Authority Role
 - City of York Council has no direct statutory duty for river water quality but contributes through planning controls, managing fly tipping, advising businesses, and maintaining highway drainage systems.
- Property Owners and Businesses
 - Responsible for managing private drainage and ensuring correct connections to sewer or approved discharge points.
 - Misconnections to surface water systems can cause pollution and can be complex to resolve.

There are key concerns from communities over the impacts of agricultural practices and sewage impacts and there is increasing scrutiny on the need to improve the water quality of our watercourses.

City of York Council is working through the Defra-funded catchment-wide strategic flood risk management project, [Ousewem](#), to strengthen the evidence base around the factors that influence river health across the wider Ouse catchment. This includes work with the University of York to improve understanding of the scale and impact of agricultural runoff on rivers, alongside assessment of the effects of combined sewer overflows (CSOs), helping to build a clearer picture of where interventions may be most effective in reducing pollution runoff and supporting better water quality.

While Ousewem's core focus is flood resilience, its modelling, research and partnership approach also supports a more joined-up understanding of how land use, drainage and river systems interact, creating opportunities to deliver wider environmental benefits. Alongside this, the York rivers trail will help make these issues more accessible to residents, schools and visitors by showing how upstream and downstream places are connected, including links between flood resilience, nature-based solutions and water quality. Through interpretation, digital content and schools engagement, the trail can complement Ousewem's technical work by helping build public understanding and stewardship, while supporting continued collaboration with partners including Yorkshire Water.

Nationally the water industry are placing a significant emphasis on the component of highway drainage that their overflows carry and that the disconnection of these inputs is vital to manage these issues especially if water bills are not to be significantly increased. There will be pressure on highways authorities in light of this. It is likely that for YORKSHIRE WATER to achieve their targets they will need to remove surface water from the city centre's Victorian era combined sewers. This will require City of York Council collaboration across various departments.

To this end the City of York Council are working closely with YORKSHIRE WATER to seeking to identify and secure funding for the interventions that remove surface water from the existing combined sewer system whilst at the same time deliver co benefits, including reduction in flood risk, biodiversity and public realm improvements. Collaborative initiatives include:

- A Yorkshire Water led initiative to Implement an '*Integrated Water Management Plan*'. City of York Council and Yorkshire Water intend to co-produce a plan to map blue green opportunities identifying locations for the removal of surface water from the combined sewer system which will include/consider council properties and highways. This opportunity mapping will complement and support the City of York Council's soon to be revised Local Development Plan and in particular an associated Blue Green Strategy that is being developed as part of the Local Development Plan.
- More generally City of York Council and Yorkshire Water intend to align (where possible) over time ongoing capital investment,

programmes, timelines including regeneration schemes across the city to support co delivery of projects. This will require support and input from a range of council departments to ensure that City of York Council can benefit from co investment and support the delivery of schemes to remove surface water from the Yorkshire Water combined sewer system.

Wider planning legislation such as biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery strategies provide a framework for our officers to link projects and programmes of work that will support a rich and varied biodiversity in and alongside our rivers. Further information can be found [here](#).

Our work relies upon the network of 'friends' groups such as the Friends of Clifton Backies, Hob Moor or Clifton Ings amongst others and other voluntary groups such as the River Foss Society who galvanise the knowledge and input of local activists, academics and specialists extending the reach of council services and informing ours and partners programmes of work.

In some cases charitable groups such as The Friends of St Nicholas Fields have grown beyond their original geographic boundaries – early work focussed on the establishment of the St Nicks Local Nature Reserve – and now inform and lead on a range of projects across the city. City of York Council have worked with the group in the development of the Green Corridors York project which has delivered river channel restoration work in Hull Road Park. The group are working with the cities Internal Drainage Boards to inform their maintenance work to enhance and maintain riverside environments.

York's Drainage Infrastructure

A number of different organisations have responsibilities for managing our cities drainage infrastructure, in many instances a number of organisations have a role in drainage solutions and complex investigations are often required to identify all issues.

Our communities can often find the range of actors involved in the delivery of drainage responsibilities difficult to understand, a combined approach and partnership working is essential.

The organisations with responsibility for managing drainage infrastructure are:

- City of York Council
As a Lead Local Flood Authority - Surface runoff, ordinary watercourses, groundwater
As a Highway Authority - adopted highway drainage
As a landowner – drainage infrastructure in housing sites, public realm, and other community areas
- The Environment Agency – Drainage and flooding from Main Rivers
- Internal Drainage Boards – Drainage and flooding of ordinary watercourses within the boards area
- Yorkshire Water – Drainage and flooding from the public sewer network

Home and business owners have responsibilities regarding private drainage assets and riparian responsibilities adjacent to ditches and rivers. However, it can often be difficult for communities to understand who will take the lead in drainage matters based on the fragmented roles detailed above. City of York Council and Yorkshire Water are actively seeking a means of supporting residents and businesses to do their bit in terms of removing surface water into the Yorkshire Water system and thereby reducing the pressure on the combined system and the resultant pollution issues.

The effective drainage of our urban areas through the management of sewerage systems and highways drainage infrastructure is regulated through the planning process and predominantly the actions of Yorkshire Water and City of York Council as the Highway Authority.

All new developments and major re-developments are required to develop an effective drainage strategy through the planning process. The National Planning Policy Framework places a presumption in favour of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) which mimic natural process to manage runoff from developments and a hierarchical approach to determine a regulated discharge to a receiving waterbody or drainage system. The City of York Council Lead Local Flood Authority utilises national and local guidance to ensure developers model and design drainage features to ensure no flood risk to the future occupants of the development or neighbouring communities. The revised National standards for sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) were published in the summer of 2025 been and these have been incorporated into the [Councils SuDS Guidance](#). This has included:

- a requirement for new developments to intercept the first 5mm of rainfall before discharging to surface waters or piped drainage systems. This is important as this will capture the 'first flush', which is recognised as contributing/leading to pollution run off.
- A requirement to reuse water at source e.g. rainwater harvesting leading to a reduction in water use. This can, where implemented, reduce surface water discharging to the public sewer and in addition encourage water reuse conserving water supplies as a result.

Internal Drainage Boards, Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water advise and are consulted and provide further consenting and agreements.

Yorkshire Water provide agreements to developers to connect to their sewerage system or requests that they adopt new sewerage assets within developments when constructed to industry standards.

A section within the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, known as Schedule 3, would have required the establishment of a SuDS Approving Body (SAB) to manage the delivery of SuDS in new developments. This has not been enacted as yet and the Council are awaiting further guidance from Central Government. In the interim the aforementioned national suds guidance has been implemented. Further information can be found [here](#).

York's sewerage system is formed by a historic core of combined sewers, newer separate surface and foul drainage networks serve wider parts of the city and are required across all new developments.

Yorkshire Water have worked with the Lead Local Flood Authority to investigate issues and target investment. Areas of flood risk are being looked at as part of ongoing work between Yorkshire Water and City of York Council. Many issues can arise across the network due to extreme weather conditions, blockages or infrastructure failure, it is essential that residents report these issues directly to Yorkshire Water to ensure a response but to also provide information for the justification for investment to remedy wider or repeat issues.

City of York Council's Highways Drainage gulley maintenance programme has been developed to target available funding to key priorities across the network.

The highway maintenance road hierarchy which assesses road usage, presence of amenities, number of accidents and other key criteria is used to target cleansing funding alongside other key issues such as known flood risk areas or tree lined streets. City of York Council has about 45,000 highway gullies and with the current budget allowing for 3 drainage tankers we can clean around 13,000 gullies per year.

Gullies in priority streets are cleansed annually, major roads every 2 years, streets requiring parking suspensions every 3 years and a 5 year programme of cleansing is in place for non priority assets. Reported issues are cleansed reactively within hours or days. The Well-Maintained Highway Infrastructure code of practice recommends a data led approach which prioritises the highest risk areas, The data gathered by front line operatives on handheld tablet devices allows the teams to confirm the layout of our highway drainage assets and a contemporary record of the maintenance of the network, this is essential to target investment.

Approximately 2000 of the 45,000 gullies on City of York Council's network don't work and require repair. With current levels of investment, City of York Council can repair about 50-100 gullies per year, these are targeted according to the effect they have and whether they cause risk of property flooding or risk to road or footway users. Repairing and improving drainage before road surfacing is also prioritised in order to maximise the lifespan of the surfacing, this is because standing water on a road is a key reason for early surfacing failure.

Due to changing weather patterns preventing flooding is going to become more challenging in the future, the key risk is from more frequent intense summer storms falling in isolated areas. These storms

test the drainage system's maximum capacity and any blockages or damage can quickly become apparent and result in the system being overloaded.

Currently all available funds for City of York Council Highway Drainage Capital Programme are devoted to repairing infrastructure and reducing risks of flooding from the highway.

The aim of the Council is to develop a SuDS Design Standard Framework that will enable City of York Council to adopt and maintain more blue green SuDS features associated with highways improvements, new highway developments and other City of York Council assets/property. This will complement other elements of the Council's plans including the local transport strategy and public realm improvements.