

### CNL BOARD AND THAMES WATER: WORKING RELATIONSHIP

**Summary:** To apprise the Executive Committee of the situation between the Evenlode Catchment Partnership and Thames Water and to seek support for the CNL Board's position

**Recommendation:** That the approach taken by the CNL Board is supported

**Report by:** Mark Connelly (Land Management Lead) and James Webb (Partnership Lead)

### INTRODUCTION

1. This briefing note outlines our current working relationship with Thames Water, some recent events to make you aware of, and our proposed way forward.

### BACKGROUND

2. Smarter Water Catchments (SWC) is a Thames Water funded pilot programme operating in three catchments – Evenlode (Cotswolds), Chess (Chilterns) and Crane (West London). Traditional catchment projects focus on one or two issues such as pesticide or phosphate run-off. Smarter Water Catchments (SWC) tests a wholistic approach to catchment management and can include diffuse pollution, low flows, Citizen Science and public engagement, natural flood management, etc. Thames Water is closely monitoring progress to measure benefits, impacts and cost/benefits. The programme runs between 2020 and 2025.
3. The SWC programme launched in the Evenlode in 2021 with Wild Oxfordshire acting as host for the Evenlode Catchment Partnership. The CNL Board has a seat on the SWC Steering Group, hosts the Education and Outreach Working Group and is a lead partner on the Biodiversity and Landscape Working Group.
4. The CNL Board delivers projects within the catchment funded by Thames Water. The largest of which is Everyone's Evenlode, a major education and community engagement project. We also have funding to survey and restore wildflower rich grassland and to produce catchment mapping.
5. Thames Water, along with other water companies, has increasingly been in the public spotlight over pollution of rivers from phosphates and untreated sewage from storm overflows from sewage treatment works. The River Evenlode has a particular issue with this as there are a total of 19 sewage treatment works, many of which are at or over capacity and therefore regularly operate beyond their permits. The Environment Agency over recent years has not been able to properly monitor and regulate water companies, including Thames Water and OFWAT has not used its regulatory powers. In addition, local authorities have continued to permit development that has contributed to sewage treatment works operating near to or over capacity. Thames Water is facing a large backlog in investment in infrastructure, financial issues and increasing fines. The Levelling up and Regeneration Act 2023 includes Nutrient Pollution Standards to reduce nitrogen and phosphorous pollution from most sewage treatment works by 2030.

### PARTNER CONCERNS AND DIRECTIONAL CHANGE

6. Some Evenlode SWC Partners have increasingly become concerned about accepting funding from Thames Water. Prompted by Thames Water's draft business plan for the next funding cycle 2025–2030, which did not include previously agreed upgrades at 13 sewage treatment works, a special meeting of the Evenlode SWC Steering Group was held on 9

October 2023. CNL representatives could not attend the meeting due to other commitments. The Steering Group took a majority decision to complete the SWC programme as agreed by 2025 and then 'terminate relations with Thames Water'. Thames Water were not involved in the special meeting of the Steering group or given an opportunity to respond. Thames Water were informed by a press release on 24 October and a letter sent to the Chief Executive on 25 October.

7. In their reply on 20 November, Thames Water recognised the frustration of the SWC Steering Group in the exclusion of improvements to sewage treatment works but made the point the changes were made to focus on storm overflows, reduced abstraction and the newly designated bathing water near Oxford, in line with customer's priorities and in line with guidance from the Secretary of State. Thames Water also made the point that the plan is a draft and had not yet been considered by the regulators and remains subject to potentially significant changes.
8. Regulators are considering Thames Water's Business Plan and are due to publish their draft determination in May 2024.

### **PROPOSED WAY FORWARD**

9. Through the SWC Programme, the CNL team has developed a good working relationship with Thames Water and we are concerned at the decision taken by the SWC Steering Group. Whilst we have the same concerns about water quality issues in the Evenlode (and other Cotswold rivers), we do not feel that terminating relations with Thames Water is the best approach. There is much more advantage in continuing to work with Thames Water. The same approach has been taken with National Highways over the A417 Missing Link road scheme with significant success.
10. On 4 December 2023 Andy Parsons wrote to Richard Aylard, Sustainability Director at Thames Water, making the position of the CNL Board clear in that we are happy to continue working with the Evenlode Catchment Partnership and Thames Water to fulfil our SWC commitments. We have delivered our part of the project professionally and to a high standard and we will continue in that way until the end of the project (July 2025 for Everyone's Evenlode). Moreover, we are committed to working in partnership to find the best possible solutions to make the improvements needed to the health of our rivers. We also want to look forward positively with Thames Water to future opportunities that a SWC expansion may bring to the CNL and particularly the continued delivery of the education and outreach work.

### **Supporting papers:**

- None

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