NORWICH
City Council

Committee name: Scrutiny

Committee date: 19/10/2026

Report title: Norwich Rivers

Portfolio: Councillor Bolton, Cabinet member for a sustainable city (climate and environment)

Report from: Executive director of climate and environment

Wards: 'All wards'

OPEN PUBLIC ITEM

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to:

1. Raise awareness of the problems, opportunities and potential solutions relating to Norwich rivers.
2. Enable Scrutiny Committee attendees to discuss and agree the problems, opportunities and proposed action needed for Norwich Rivers, as an initial scoping exercise to inform the development of a new Rivers Strategy and Action Plan, which will be subsequently consulted on and adopted.
3. Update the committee on Nutrient Neutrality arrangements.

Recommendations

1. To note and discuss the problems, opportunities and solutions relating to Norwich rivers
2. To note and comment on the intention to produce a new Rivers Strategy and Action Plan and adoption of a Rivers Charter and Pledge

Policy framework

The Council has five corporate priorities, which are:

- An open and modern Council.

- A prosperous Norwich.
- A fairer Norwich.
- A climate responsive Norwich.
- A future-proof Norwich.

This report meets the Climate Responsive Norwich and Future-Proof Norwich corporate priorities and the policy set out in the council's Biodiversity Strategy 2022-2032, which is to:

> *Create a city where biodiversity can sustainably recover and thrive, halt species decline and increase species diversity and abundance by 2030 or sooner.*

Introduction

The rivers form a shared complex system with numerous stakeholders involved in their wellbeing. This report brings together information about our rivers ahead of a special facilitated Scrutiny Committee meeting of the council.

The council seeks the collaboration and cooperation of a diverse group of stakeholders to help improve our rivers, which are possibly in their worst ever condition and facing multiple challenges.

The Norwich Rivers Scrutiny Committee meeting aims to mark a turning point for our rivers, by setting in motion actions which will change how our rivers are thought about and cared for.

Executive Summary

This report highlights the strategic importance of the River Wensum and River Yare to Norwich's environmental quality, biodiversity, water security, flood resilience, community wellbeing and local economy.

It identifies a range of significant challenges affecting the rivers, including ecological condition, nutrient, sediment and toxic pollution, highway and surface water runoff, sewage discharges, climate change impacts, over abstraction, invasive species, limitations in water quality monitoring and fragmented governance arrangements. The report also notes the recent Category One pollution incident in August 2026, which resulted in a major fish mortality event and has reinforced the need for coordinated action to improve river health and resilience.

To address these issues, the report proposes that the council takes a leadership role in developing a new Norwich Rivers Strategy and Action Plan, based on the principals of integrated water management and taking a catchment area-based approach.

The strategy will seek to drive effective action by coordinating stakeholders to improve water quality, security, flow and monitoring, reduce pollution sources, enhance biodiversity, strengthen climate resilience and improve public access and enjoyment of Norwich's rivers. In addition to the new strategy and action plan, associated actions are proposed including adopting a Rivers Charter and Pledge.

The structure, recommendations and proposed actions of this report, are based on the following four questions:

a) What are the problems facing the rivers and the communities who use them for recreation and business?

b) What are the wider problems facing the city, resulting from the problems of the rivers in the context of climate change?

c) What are the potential solutions to the problems?

d) How can the solutions be managed, funded and implemented?

Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider the challenges and opportunities presented, support the development of the strategy and associated actions, and endorse the council's role as a lead stakeholder, convenor and coordinator of collective action to secure the long-term recovery and sustainable management of Norwich's river environment.

Report Details

Context

1. Norwich's water environment is characterised by two interconnected river systems, the River Wensum and the River Yare, together with the underlying chalk aquifer that supports them. The River Wensum flows through the heart of Norwich before joining the River Yare at Whitlingham. Although the Wensum is hydrologically larger than the Yare at their confluence, it is classified as a tributary of the Yare. Together, these rivers are a defining feature of Norwich's land/townscape, heritage and biodiversity and play an important role in managing flood risk**,** water security and maintaining environmental quality across the wider catchment.

2. The city has developed around its waterways over many centuries and is characterised by a medieval urban core containing historic buildings, bridges,

quaysides and important archaeological assets. Combined with constrained floodplain areas and dense urban development, this historic environment presents both challenges and opportunities for river management, flood resilience, water quality improvement and environmental enhancement.

3. Norwich also has a network of underground tributaries of the River Wensum – referred to locally as “cockeys” or “lost rivers” – originating from springs and runoff, that were built over, culverted and turned into underground brick drains as the medieval city grew.

4. Parts of the River Wensum are designated as both a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in recognition of its internationally important chalk-stream habitats and species; there being only around 220 chalk streams in the world. Downstream, the River Yare is connected to the Broadland Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar Site and SSSI network, which support internationally important wetland habitats and species. As a result, the quality and quantity of water within Norwich can influence the condition of designated sites throughout the wider catchment.

5. Beneath much of Norwich lies a nationally important Chalk Principal Aquifer, which supports public water supplies, maintains river baseflows and contributes to the ecological health of downstream water-dependent habitats, including habitats within the Broads National Park. The close relationship between groundwater and surface water means that river flows, water quality and security, and ecological conditions are intrinsically linked.

6. The city and surrounding catchment contain several Environment Agency Source Protection Zones (SPZs) associated with public water supply abstractions. These identify groundwater resources that are particularly vulnerable to contamination and require enhanced protection from potentially polluting activities. Consequently, groundwater protection is an important consideration in planning and development management, with certain land uses, drainage proposals and construction activities requiring additional assessment to minimise risks to water quality. Given the close connection between groundwater, river systems and designated ecological sites, an integrated catchment-based approach is required to manage water resources, flood risk and environmental enhancement effectively.

7. Within Norwich, ownership and management responsibilities for Norwich rivers are split between several parties, as summarised here:

    e) The council owns the riverbed of the navigable section of the Wensum between New Mills and Hardley Marshes (near Reedham) and to the

South of Sweet Briar Meadows and Marshes. The council also owns a portion of the Yare riverbed where it runs through Lakenham allotments and a small portion between the pumping station adjacent to Bracondale and Whitlingham Little Broad.

f) The Broads Authority manages the navigation of the Wensum up to New Mills Yard along with three main duties:

   i. Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Broads

   ii. Promoting the Enjoyment of the Broads by the public

   iii. Protecting the interests of navigation

The Broads Authority is also the Local Planning Authority for the tidal River Wensum through Norwich up to New Mills Yard.

g) Various riparian[i] landowners have ownership of the riverbanks, with individual landowners responsible for maintaining the sections of bank they own. These landowners include private parties and Norwich City Council.

h) Environment Agency responsibilities include:

   i. Regulating major industry and waste

   ii. Treatment of contaminated land

   iii. Water quality, resources and flow

   iv. Fisheries

   v. Conservation and ecology

8. Norwich City Council is the lead partner of the River Wensum Strategy Partnership, working with the Broads Authority, Norfolk County Council, the Norwich Society and the Environment Agency. The council adopted a River Wensum Strategy in 2018, following its preparation by the River Wensum Strategy Partnership to enhance the river corridor and improve public access and environmental quality. The strategy includes an action plan intended as a “living document,” which is updated as needed. Projects are identified within the updated action plan and are described as short to medium term deliverable projects supporting the strategy’s vision, along with longer term opportunities.

9. Greater Norwich has long been a national and regional leader in promoting water efficiency through local plan making, reflecting its location within an area designated by the Environment Agency as one of *serious water stress.* Successive local plans have applied the highest standards permitted under national policy, with major new housing developments now meeting the

enhanced 110 litres per person per day requirement. Building on this track record, the GNLP 2045 is exploring whether even higher water-efficiency standards can be justified through updated environmental, water-cycle and viability evidence.

10. The *new* Rivers Strategy proposed in this report will build on and replace the River Wensum Strategy; and include the Yare within its scope. Projects highlighted by the existing action plan will be evaluated and brought into the new strategy as required.

11. This report examines the current condition, management and future opportunities for Norwich's rivers, primarily the reaches within the city of the Wensum and Yare. It considers governance arrangements, environmental pressures, ecological improvements, public access, economic opportunities, and long-term funding requirements and seeks to summarise the rivers' needs, and to engender partnership working, collaboration and collective action.

12. Norwich rivers are a key priority of the council. An even greater sense of urgency has been brought about by the events during the summer of 2026. Following successive heat waves and drought, a rainfall event on 30th July resulted in a significant fish mortality event in the Rivers Yare and Wensum in Norwich.

13. The Environment Agency (EA) classified the event as a Category One major pollution incident which is the most severe classification it uses. The EA consider the most likely cause of the incident to be heavy rainfall flushing contamination from surface water drainage systems into the river. Coinciding with a period of low river flows and high temperatures, this created conditions that significantly reduced dissolved oxygen levels in the water.

    According to the Environment Agency's sewage map on 31 of July, there had recently been sewage discharges at 10 locations of the Wensum and one point on the Yare. At the time of the event, it appears that the tide was incoming and there was no flow into the effected section of the river from the weir at New Mills Yard, due to low river flows. These unusual circumstances potentially resulted in reduced dilution of pollutants, exacerbating the impact on ecology. The incident is subject to an ongoing investigation.

14. The structure and recommendations of this report and the proposed actions, are premised on the following four questions:

    i) What are the problems facing the rivers and the communities who use them for recreation and business ?

    j) What are the wider problems facing the city, resulting from the problems of

the rivers in the context of climate change ?

k) What are the potential solutions to the problems ?

l) How can the solutions be managed, funded and implemented ?

15. The remainder of this report is structured to answer these four questions, with supporting and more detailed information provided in the appendix.

16. **This section summarises the problems facing the rivers and the communities who use them for recreation and business:**

a. Upstream Pressures

i. Natural England's condition assessments continue to identify much of the River Wensum SAC and its underpinning SSSI units as being in unfavourable condition, reflecting the cumulative impacts of multiple long-standing pressures on the river system. Key challenges include nutrient enrichment, particularly elevated phosphorus levels, excessive sedimentation (siltation), degraded water quality, invasive species and hydromorphological (shape, flow and structure) modifications that have altered natural flow processes. Together, these pressures reduce the river's ecological resilience and its ability to support the characteristic habitats and species for which this internationally important chalk river is designated.

ii. Natural England investigations suggest that low flows in some reaches are influenced by a combination of abstraction pressures and wider catchment-scale changes affecting natural hydrological processes. Historic modification of the river has further reduced resilience; extensive channelisation and the presence of numerous mills, weirs and impoundments have over time altered natural river function, habitat diversity and sediment transport processes.

iii. As a result, only around 20% of the river is considered relatively unmodified. Addressing these pressures through catchment-scale improvements to water quality, sediment management, flow restoration and river morphology will be critical to achieving favourable condition for the Wensum SAC/SSSI and creating a more resilient river system capable of adapting to future climate change impacts.

iv. Similar pressures affect the River Yare catchment, where nutrient enrichment, sediment inputs, altered flow regimes and extensive historic modification continue to constrain ecological recovery. As with the Wensum, the river is influenced by a combination of agricultural, industrial and urban pollution, abstraction pressures and

hydromorphological alterations associated with channelisation, mills, weirs and water level management infrastructure. Many Yare water bodies are classified as moderate ecological status or heavily modified.

b. *Biodiversity loss* – Although an extensive species list is beyond the scope of this report, numerous species are in decline and the white-clawed crayfish has become locally extinct in large sections of the Wensum. A more thorough list of species, their condition and potential solutions will be developed as part of the proposed new rivers strategy and action plan.

c. *Pollution*

   i. *Historic Pollution* - Industrial mercury discharge began in 1964 and has accumulated within the Yare sediments. Up to 92 chemical compounds have been identified in the Yare according to analysis carried out by the Wildlife and Countryside Link and the Rivers Trust using Environment Agency data. Data[ii] shows the Wensum is polluted with a range of 'forever' chemicals.

   ii. *Pollution from Highways Drainage in the City*

      1. Urban runoff from roads contributes a different mixture of contaminants, including tyre wear particles (a major source of microplastics), brake dust, zinc, copper and other heavy metals, hydrocarbons, oil and fuel residues, road salts, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and persistent chemicals such as PFAS ("forever chemicals"). During rainfall, these pollutants are washed into surface drains and watercourses where they can accumulate in sediments and affect aquatic ecosystems.

      2. The highway authority is legally responsible for the drainage infrastructure, but they are not responsible for the pollution that washes through highways drains into rivers.

      3. Under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980, local highway authorities have a strict statutory duty to clear surface water to avoid a public nuisance or driving hazards.

      4. Section 100 of the Highways Act 1980 explicitly gives highway authorities the power to redirect this surface water directly into local rivers and inland watercourses.

      5. While the Water Resources Act 1991 normally makes it a criminal offence to pollute watercourses, the law provides an exemption for highway authorities. They cannot be held responsible for pollution in

rainwater run-off.

6. The vast majority of the UK's estimated 25,000 highway outfalls operate without environmental permits.

iii. *Pollution from Car Park Drainage in the City* – Car park drainage presents the same risks and pollution spectrum as highways.

iv. *Pollution from Sewage Spills in the City*

1. Sewage entering the River Wensum and River Yare contains faecal indicator bacteria such as E. coli and intestinal enterococci, together with nutrients including nitrogen, phosphorus and ammonia. It may also contain organic matter, pharmaceutical residues, household chemicals including PFAS and microplastics.

2. Norwich is served by sections of historic combined sewer infrastructure, where both wastewater and rainfall are carried within the same pipe network. During periods of heavy rainfall, these systems exceed capacity, causing Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) to operate. Anglian Water’s CSOs are designed as an emergency measure to prevent sewage backing up into homes, businesses and streets by releasing excess flows into nearby watercourses, including the Rivers Wensum and Yare.

3. Whilst necessary for flood risk management, CSO discharges can affect river water quality by introducing nutrients, bacteria, sediments and other pollutants into the aquatic environment. This is a particular concern for the River Wensum, a nationally and internationally important chalk river, where water quality is critical to maintaining healthy fish, plant and invertebrate communities.

4. The challenge is compounded by several factors. Much of Norwich's sewer network dates from the Victorian era and was not designed for modern population levels, urban development or changing rainfall patterns. Extensive areas of roads, pavements, roofs and other hard surfaces generate rapid surface water runoff during storms, increasing pressure on the sewer network.

5. The frequency and intensity of heavy rainfall events, particularly in a drought when many green surfaces can’t infiltrate water, create greater risk of sewer overload and overflow activation.

6. Data indicates that CSO activity within the Norwich area remains

significant:[1]

Anglian Water Norwich South area data is used to look at total spills. (The area excludes Drayton Rd CSO. This is covered below)

	2025	2024	2023
No. of Discharge Points	26	26	30
Total Hours Spilt	956	1,666	1,051
Total Number of Spills	262	572	471
Avg. spills per Overflow	10.48	22.88	18.84

7. Potential hotspot locations include:

Norwich-Gibraltar Gardens CSO
AWS00464
Spilt 8 times in 2025 for 28.25 hours.
Spilt 6 times in 2024 for 31.25 hours.
Spilt 13 times in 2023 for 35.25 hours.

Norwich Drayton Road No 3 / Bootbinder Road CSO Upstream of Wensum Park
AWS00354
Spilt 16 times in 2025 for 43.5 hours.
Spilt 17 times in 2024 for 35 hours.
Spilt 0 times in 2023 for 0 hours.

Norwich-Fye Bridge (N) SSO
Unknown ID
Spilt 70 times in 2025 for 643 hours.
Spilt 79 times in 2024 for 616.5 hours.
Spilt 0 times in 2023 for 0 hours.

Norwich - Ketts Hill (Nr Cow Tower)
AWS00927
Spilt 35 times in 2025 for 50.5 hours.
Spilt 61 times in 2024 for 94.75 hours.
Spilt 63 times in 2023 for 143.75 hours.

[1] **Wensum DS Norwich | Catchment Data Explorer | Catchment Data Explorer**

Norwich Lower Close (Ferry Lane)
AWS00939
Spilt 8 times in 2023 for 2.07 hours.
Spilt 76 times in 2024 for 63.73 hours.
Spilt 11 times in 2025 for 7.13 hours.

King Street (Previously Known as Turning Basin CSO)
AWS00679
Spilt 26 times in 2025 for 23 hours.
Spilt 57 times in 2024 for 71.5 hours.
Spilt 66 times in 2023 for 87.67 hours.

v. *Oxygen Depletion in Rivers* – During the summer, lower river flows and higher water temperatures reduce dissolved oxygen levels. Organic matter and ammonia from sewage increase oxygen demand, while nutrient enrichment can trigger algal blooms whose decomposition further depletes oxygen. This can stress fish and aquatic invertebrates and is well documented in Environment Agency monitoring and UEA-led research.

d. *Climate Change* – Our changing weather is a significant challenge affecting the rivers. Warmer summer and winter temperatures and periods of increased and decreased rainfall are being recorded, with a continuing increase in extremes predicted by climate scientists.

e. Shared Responsibilities

i. At present, flood-risk responsibilities are shared across several organisations, with Norfolk County Council acting as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA), district councils undertaking planning and land drainage functions, and the Environment Agency managing main river flood risk.

ii. Responsibilities are currently split between county and district councils regarding spatial planning, highways drainage, watercourse management, emergency planning and flood-risk management, particularly within the highly interconnected Wensum and Yare catchments.

f. *Water Quality Measurement, Monitoring and Reporting* – The EA take monthly water quality samples from bridge locations across central Norwich at:

- Whitefriars Bridge – ID: AN-WEN275

- New Mills – ID: AN-WEN260
- Dolphin Concrete Bridge – ID: AN-WEN256A
- Sweet Briar Road Bridge – ID: AN-WEN250
- Hellesdon Meadow – ID: AN-RSN0357
- Hellesdon Mill – ID: AN-WEN240
- Carrow Bridge – ID: AN-WEN280
- Trowse Swing Bridge – ID: AN-WEN285

These are relatively widely spaced sampling locations and monthly sampling can miss short-term pollution events, storm overflows and summer oxygen depletion episodes. There is also evidence that water quality pressures remain despite improvements in wastewater treatment. The UEA Wensum[iii] study found continued failures against Water Framework Directive targets for nitrogen and phosphorus, indicating ongoing pressures on river ecology.

g. *Need for River Safety for Recreational Users*

   i. *E. coli* and intestinal enterococci, which can persist longer in water, are widely used to assess risks to recreational water users. Exposure may cause gastrointestinal symptoms as well as ear, eye, skin and wound infections. These bacteria are used as indicators because their presence suggests that other harmful pathogens associated with sewage pollution may also be present.

   ii. Bathing Water Status does not mean a river is safe to swim in. It means the water is monitored during the bathing season (15 May to 30 September) and the results are made public. A designation itself does not automatically clean up the river and would not increase sampling frequency at other locations or outside of this period.

h. Coordination of Action – Many stakeholders, both professional and voluntary, have interests in the city's rivers and much valuable work is undertaken. However, there is currently no overarching strategy or plan to coordinate action relating to rivers in the reaches of the city.

17. **This section summarises the wider issues facing the city, resulting from the problems of the rivers, in the context of climate change:**

   a. *Water Security*

      i. The functionality of Norwich waters environment plays an important role in ensuring the city has a secure supply of potable water, especially as our climate changes.

      ii. Eastern England faces projected water shortages of 800 million litres of

water per day by 2050 which is the equivalent of a third of current water use in the region[iv].

iii. Norwich's public water supply is obtained from the River Wensum and treated at Anglian Water's Heigham Water Treatment Works; abstraction arrangements have been modified in recent years to reduce environmental pressures on sensitive reaches of the river upstream of the city. Following a review of abstraction impacts on the River Wensum Special Area of Conservation (SAC), abstraction from the Costessey reach was reduced and greater reliance placed on facilities associated with Heigham Water Treatment Works.

iv. In August this year, Anglia Water communicated that River Wensum water flows were amongst the lowest at this time of year since records began in the 1960s, resulting in severe pressure on water supplies and highlighting that considerate public consumption could reduce further potential ecological stress on the river.

v. Local Government East (LGE) reports that water companies are raising concerns about the ability of existing wastewater systems and treatment works to accommodate further development. The challenge is particularly acute in the East of England because it sits alongside a range of other water-related pressures within the region. The East is one of the driest parts of the United Kingdom and has long experienced issues relating to water resources and environmental capacity.

b. *Flooding* – The functionality of Norwich waters environment also plays an important role in protecting the city from flooding. The rate at which rainfall enters the rivers system determines the risk of flooding.

c. *Loss of Species and Habitat* – Norwich's rivers are key nature assets in the city. As well as supporting habitat and species in the city, they act as nature corridors enabling species to migrate between upstream and downstream reaches, into and through the city.

d. *Increasing Salinity in the Yare* – Upstream as far as Norwich, due to rising sea levels, upstream flows from higher tides, tidal surges and lack of diluting downstream flows at certain times of the year.

e. *Increasing Leisure Use* – With warmer summers comes increased pressure on ecology from leisure use of the rivers, particularly the Wensum.

18. **This section summarises potential solutions to the problems**:

a. *Integrated Water Management* – The main underpinning strategy to remedy the problems, is to take an *Integrated Water Management* approach; which can incorporate Sponge City principles.

   The core principles of a sponge city are to retain, store, infiltrate, purify, and reuse rainwater using green infrastructure such as permeable pavements, wetlands, rain gardens, and green roofs, aiming to mimic natural hydrological cycles and reduce flooding.

   This approach requires the whole catchment to be considered from the point of view of rainfall, aquifer permeation, water security and surface water/rivers management.

b. *A Catchment Area Based Approach (CaBA)* – Championed by The Rivers Trust and local partnership, this approach manages river health at a whole-catchment scale. It unites local communities, government bodies and businesses to deliver collaborative, integrated environmental, social and economic benefits.

c. *Water Security* – Key to improving water security is improving distribution and consumption efficiency, reducing abstraction rates and increasing storage/reservoir capacity. Measures including smart metering, implementation of more efficient consumption processes and reducing leakage rates will make Norwich more drought resilient. Anglian Water's Drought Plan 2027 includes further measures to improve water security and resilience.

d. *Norfolk and Suffolk County Council Integrated Water Action Plan* - this £150k plan is currently in the evidence gathering phase with a webinar concluding this stage expected in November 2026. The evidence and proposed actions developed by this plan will inform the new rivers strategy proposed in this report.

e. *Preventing Pollution*

   i. *Upstream Pressure* – Although good work is being undertaken to reduce nutrient outputs there exist many further opportunities to improve the upstream reaches of the Wensum and Yare. A transition away from intensive farming practices to regenerative agriculture, especially for land immediately adjacent to the rivers, would reduce nutrient and sediment loads.

   ii. *City Highways Drainage* – The solution to this problem is to rework the drainage systems which flow directly into the river by diverting the outflows to newly created Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) and

Active Stormwater Management utilising smart sewer systems and storage systems as appropriate for the ground conditions and site constraints.

iii. Car Park Drainage

1. The Environment Agency has a responsibility to investigate pollution incidents relating to car park / petrol forecourt drainage and take enforcement action when needed. There is no enforcement regime to ensure regular maintenance of drain interceptors takes place.

2. A survey will be undertaken to ensure all car parks which drain into the river have interceptors and develop a resulting action plan promoting regular maintenance, possibly by means of a voluntary pledge.

iv. Sewage Spills

1. Avoiding Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) requires reducing the amount of rainwater entering the combined sewer network and increasing the capacity and resilience of existing infrastructure.

2. A key approach is *source control*, which seeks to keep surface water separate from foul sewer systems wherever possible. This can be achieved through Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), including rain gardens, swales, (a swale is a shallow, gently sloping channel designed to slow, capture, and infiltrate stormwater, often lined with vegetation to filter pollutants and reduce erosion) permeable paving, green roofs, street trees and detention basins. These measures slow, store and absorb rainfall before it reaches the sewer network, reducing the likelihood of CSO operation.

3. Alongside nature-based solutions, continued investment in wastewater infrastructure is required, including:

    - Sewer network upgrades.
    - Additional stormwater storage.
    - Improved monitoring and control systems.
    - Asset maintenance and renewal.
    - Surface water separation schemes where feasible.

4. Anglian Water reports the opening of a new Norwich Hub as of April 2026, and planned investment of £1 billion in Norfolk between 2025

to 2030, including improvements to reduce storm overflow spills in Norwich and the wider county alongside major upgrades at Whitlingham Water Recycling Centre.[v]

5. Anglian Water's *Get River Positive Pledge* consists of five commitments:

   - Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers.
   - Create more opportunities for everyone to enjoy rivers.
   - Support others to improve and care for rivers.
   - Enhance rivers and create new habitats so wildlife can thrive.
   - Be open and transparent about performance and plans.

   The pledge is linked to Water Framework Directive (WFD) ecological condition objectives rather than the condition status of statutory nature conservation designations such as SSSIs and SACs.

   Anglian Water's commitment includes that by 2030 its operations will not be a *RNAG (Reason for Not Achieving Good Ecological Status)* within the EA assessments. Environment Agency's RNAG data is from 2022, and this is rolled-forward, on the Norwich section of the Wensum, in some categories from 2016-2018 testing.

6. Reducing CSO discharges will improve water quality, reduce pollution pressures on the Rivers Wensum and Yare, strengthen resilience to climate change by increasing water volumes entering drinking water aquifers and deliver wider environmental benefits for biodiversity and river users.

7. In summary, the CSO challenge in Norwich is driven by the interaction of historic sewer infrastructure, urban runoff and increasingly intense rainfall. The long-term solution is a combination of reducing water consumption, sustainable drainage, targeted infrastructure investment into smart drainage systems and catchment-wide management to keep rainwater out of the sewer system wherever possible.

f. *Improved Water Quality Measurement, Monitoring and Reporting* – The frequency of sampling and number of sampling locations needs to be increased, with data made publicly available.

g. Actively Supporting Species and Habitat

i. The council, in partnership with Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Norfolk County Council and South Norfolk and Broadland Councils, is currently delivering the 3-year *Nature City Norwich* project funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund. This project is developing a community led nature recovery plan for the city, to determine how communities and nature can be better connected through the creation of an urban nature recovery network.

ii. The project is laying the groundwork for future nature recovery and access to nature projects across the city, ensuring that investment and action are well coordinated, targeted and effective.

h. Leadership and Coordinated Action

i. There are currently many valued stakeholders undertaking excellent work to improve river health both within the city and beyond its boundaries. A list of stakeholder categories is provided in the appendix; however, this list is not exhaustive.

ii. There is an opportunity to improve communication and coordination between these groups. The council is also able to coordinate and provide leadership where it's needed, and where it's essential to deliver the required outcomes.

19. **This section summarises how the solutions can be managed, funded and implemented:**

a. In 2025, The Rights of the River Wensum Motion was unanimously passed by Norwich City Council. The declaration formally recognised the river's right to flow, be free from pollution, and support native biodiversity. It acts as a civic standard for future planning, development, and environmental action. This followed a local Declaration of the Rights of the River Wensum 2022 (Hugh Lupton) event organised by environmental groups.

b. In partnership with Norfolk Rivers Trust, the council has recently bid for and won £35k from Natural England's Enabling Nature Recovery fund 2026-27 to deliver a project entitled: *Reconnecting Communities to their Urban Watersheds: Integrating river health, biodiversity, flood resilience and wellbeing.* The project will analyse existing evidence and initiate citizen science initiatives, including flood reporting, water quality monitoring and outfall surveys. This information will be used to identify where sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and river habitat enhancements, could be most effective.

c. In 2025, the council won £0.76m from National Lottery Heritage Fund to deliver the *Nature City Norwich* Project, in partnership with Norfolk Wildlife Trust, South Norfolk and Broadland and Norfolk County Council. This three-year project is developing a community-led nature recovery plan for the city, by identifying opportunities to increase, enhance and connect habitat and improve access to nature, across the urban area of Norwich. The project will also identify new nature funding opportunities. Improving Norwich Rivers falls very much within the scope of the Nature City Norwich project.

d. One potential source of funding to improve rivers is the new Nature Restoration Fund (NRF). Being led by Natural England, the NRF and associated Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) are among the most significant changes to development and environmental regulation in England for many years. They are intended to address issues such as nutrient neutrality, protected species constraints, and habitat impacts through a strategic, area-wide approach to managing development. The NRF will pool nutrient neutrality fees levied on new development to create targeted nature improvement projects. More detail on the NRF and EDPs can be found in the Nutrient Neutrality Update section below.

e. *To deliver the outcomes proposed* in the 2025 Rights of the River Motion, and to lead and coordinate action, the council proposes the following actions:

    1. *Adopt a Rivers Charter* – Which is a declaration that the rivers of Norwich possess inherent value and should be respected as living ecosystems deserving of care, protection and restoration.

    2. *Adopt a Rivers Pledge* – Which is a city-wide commitment to restore, protect and enhance the health of Norwich's rivers, waterways and connected catchments, including the River Wensum, River Yare and their tributaries.

    3. *Develop and Adopt a Rivers Strategy and Action Plan* – Which will include:

        a. The underpinning principles of Integrated Water Management

        b. The underpinning principles of a Catchment Area Based approach

        c. Aims aligned to the problems and solutions set out above and further aims identified during a consultation process

d. A detailed description of the problems and solutions including potential funding sources

e. A rivers risk and opportunities matrix

f. A stakeholder and workstream map to ensure council leadership, coordination and action is effectively integrated with current river and nature workstreams and relationships, and highlighting gaps in workstreams which need to be newly actioned

g. The stakeholder map will identify and clarify legal duties and obligations and ownership of responsibilities

h. Newly identified workstreams and potential funding solutions

i. Ensuring regulatory functions are being effectively applied

j. Applying the new voluntary Rivers Pledge where legislative gaps in regulatory functions exist, to bring about behaviour change amongst consumers, agencies, institutions and landowners adjacent to the river

k. Convening new groups and developing new workstreams where necessary

l. Partnership working to develop and agree an action plan of improvements

m. Developing a rivers action plan with SMART objectives

n. Consultation, engagement and reporting of outcomes at the council's Climate and Environmental Emergency Executive Panel (CEEEP)

Nutrient Neutrality Update

20. In March 2026, a paper was brought to the council's Scrutiny Committee providing an overview of the substantial impact that Natural England's (NE) March 2022 nutrient neutrality guidance has had on development across Norwich and Norfolk. The report detailed the origins of the Nutrient Neutrality (NN) advice and Natural England's guidance that was issued on 22 March 2022, and the affected areas. It also set out the impact the guidance had on the development sector in Norwich and wider Norfolk both in terms of the granting of planning permission and development viability.

21. Importantly it set out changes to the planning system proposed under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 around the proposed *Nature Restoration*

Fund and *Environmental Delivery Plans*.

22. Since the original Scrutiny Committee report was published, a number of mitigation schemes are now operating meaning that development is no longer considered to be ‘held up’ by NN; with developers having access to credits in a competitive market. The cost of the credits remains high however, so development viability is still affected, alongside wider macro-economic impacts. The current system of NN mitigation has also been widely criticised as it only requires development to offset its impact, rather than support true nature recovery.

23. In recognition of the limitations of existing approaches to protect and restore important habitats and species, and that existing arrangements have not been able to reverse the trend of decline, a new Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) and scheme of Environmental Delivery Plans (EDPs) have been proposed. These are among the most significant changes to development and environmental regulation in England for many years. They are intended to address issues such as nutrient neutrality, protected species constraints, and habitat impacts through a strategic, area-wide approach rather than requiring every development to secure its own bespoke mitigation.

24. An Environmental Delivery Plan (EDP) is a plan prepared by Natural England for a defined geographic area. It identifies:

    a. Environmental constraints affecting development

    b. Conservation measures required to address those impacts

    c. The development capacity the plan can support

    d. The cost of the levy developers must pay to fund those measures

    e. The period over which the plan will operate

25. Under an EDP, developers can choose to pay a levy into the Nature Restoration Fund rather than undertaking their own mitigation schemes or buying credits from other mitigation providers. Natural England then pools levies and delivers strategic habitat creation, nutrient reduction, species recovery or other measures at scale.

26. The Nature Restoration Fund was established through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. It is designed to unlock housing and infrastructure delivery, provide greater certainty for developers and local authorities, fund large-scale environmental improvements and achieve outcomes that are intended to be better than the existing project-by-project mitigation approach.

27. The Government's position is that strategic interventions funded through the NRF should deliver an "overall improvement" in environmental outcomes, not simply offset development impacts.

28. The *first* tranche of EDPs is focused on nutrient neutrality catchments in Norfolk because of the long-standing constraints affecting the River Wensum and The Broads. In parallel, Norfolk initiatives such as the Nature for Norwich and Norfolk Water Fund programmes are developing landscape-scale habitat and water quality improvements that align strongly with the NRF model of strategic environmental investment.

For Norwich, NRF and EDPs bring significant potential benefits, including:

a. *Faster Planning Decisions* - Currently many developments must undertake detailed nutrient assessments and secure mitigation before permission can be granted. An EDP could allow developers to simply pay the NRF levy, significantly reducing the complexity and risk associated with nutrient neutrality, speeding up decision making.

b. *Unlocking Housing Delivery* - Norfolk's nutrient neutrality restrictions have affected thousands of homes across the county. Strategic mitigation funded through an EDP could release development capacity that is currently constrained. Whilst mitigation is readily available its cost is still a barrier to development coming forward. This would support delivery of the growth aspirations in the Greater Norwich Local Plan, brownfield and regeneration schemes and affordable housing programmes.

c. *Reduced Burden on Developers and Councils* - Developers will gain certainty over costs, planning officers will spend less time reviewing technical nutrient solutions and legal risks associated with Habitats Regulations compliance will be reduced.

d. *Better Environmental Outcomes* - Rather than many small, fragmented mitigation projects, the NRF should enable projects such as larger wetland creation, catchment-wide nutrient reduction, river restoration, and habitat networks linked to Norfolk's emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

29. Levy rates have been confirmed at £2,675 per dwelling, significantly lower than other credit mitigation schemes currently operating. The EDP and related levy applies only to residential dwellings and no other forms of overnight accommodation. It is expected existing nutrient neutrality processes will continue alongside the new system. Concerns have been raised by some that the amount of levy will not result in significant restoration due to the reduced sum being sought, and that restoration schemes are not directly related to the

NN pollution in rivers.

30. The council's Head of Planning and Regulatory Services continues to work closely with Natural England on the introduction of the NRF and EDP on NN and is keeping apprised of national debate on this subject.

Summary

31. In addition to an update on evolving Nutrient Neutrality arrangements, this report provides context and sets out an initial scope of action for a new rivers strategy and action plan and associated actions. Scrutiny committee members and attendees are asked to contribute during the meeting by raising additional problems, opportunities and solutions they are aware of. The outcomes of the meeting, and further research by officers, will be used to inform an initial draft of the new rivers strategy and action plan, which will be widely consulted on, before being brought forward for adoption.

Consultation

32. This report has undergone consultation with the Leader of the Council, Portfolio Holders and the council's Executive Leadership Team.

Implications

Financial and resources

33. There are no financial or resource implications for Norwich City Council resulting from this report.

Legal

34. There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report at this stage. Legal considerations associated with any future Rivers Strategy, Charter or Pledge will be considered as part of any subsequent decision-making processes.

35. The appended Rivers Charter and Rivers Pledge create no legal rights or obligations for any party.

36. This report has been researched and written by council officers using the best available information at the time of writing. Any errors or omissions identified following publication of this report will be corrected as necessary in the proposed new Rivers Strategy and Action Plan.

Statutory considerations

Consideration	Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:
Equality and diversity	Good quality river environments increase equitable access to nature – particularly in areas of greater deprivation – delivering ecosystem service benefits such as water management, cooling, supporting biodiversity, recreation and improved access to nature. Community involvement can help to widen participation and ensure benefits are shared.
Reducing Inequality Target Areas (RITAs)	The River Wensum is nearby to the RITAs at Mile Cross, Catton Grove, Earlham, North City Centre, West Pottergate and Russell Street. Supporting good quality river environments helps to ensure equitable access to nature and recreation opportunities in these areas.
Health, social and economic impact	Enhancing habitats strengthens ecosystem services such as water management, urban cooling, and mental-health-supporting access to nature. Good quality rivers support climate resilience and support community wellbeing and local green-economy opportunities.
Crime and disorder	No direct implications. However, well-managed public spaces can improve perceptions of safety, while community involvement increases stewardship and positive use of spaces.
Children and adults safeguarding	No safeguarding implications. Safe natural areas deliver ecosystem service benefits that support children, families and vulnerable adults through safer, high-quality outdoor environments.

Consideration	Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:
Environmental impact	The purpose of this report is to highlight opportunities to support the enhancement and protection of rivers across Norwich, including supporting biodiversity, contributing to reduced environmental impact. Rivers generate significant ecosystem service benefits, including habitat connectivity, flood mitigation, climate regulation, nutrient cycling, and supporting recreation and access to nature - all contributing directly to community benefit.

Risk management

Risk	Consequence	Controls required
Failure to adequately respond to short-term environmental incidents affecting Norwich rivers	Reduced water quality, loss of biodiversity and habitat, health risks to river users, disruption to recreational activities, potential economic impacts, reputational damage to the council and partner authorities.	Work proactively with partner authorities including Anglian Water and the Environment Agency to ensure an appropriate response to environmental incidents. Prepare contingency plans to ensure readiness for such incidents.
Failure to support the long-term health and vitality of Norwich rivers	Reduced water quality, loss of biodiversity and habitat, reduced climate resilience, health risks to river users, disruption to recreational activities, potential economic impacts for businesses, reputational damage to the council and partner authorities.	Alongside relevant partners, lead and coordinate an integrated approach to the management of river water quality through development of a Rivers Strategy and Action Plan alongside delivery of the council's Biodiversity Strategy 2022-2032, supporting water quality, flood mitigation, biodiversity enhancement, climate resilience and access to nature.
Lack of clarity regarding responsibilities relating to river health and water quality management	Reduced action to support the health of Norwich rivers and good water quality, due to lack of clear leadership.	Ensure clear agreement of responsibilities between the council and partner authorities in the development of any Rivers Strategy and subsequent actions.

Other options considered

37. A new rivers strategy and plan is the preferred option of the council. No other options exist.

Reasons for the decision/recommendation

38. The recommendation to produce a new rivers strategy and action plan is recommended because a comprehensive and effective approach to improving our rivers is needed and the council is uniquely placed to lead and coordinate change.

Background papers:

Biodiversity Strategy 2022-2032

Appendices:

Appendix A - Draft River Charter

Appendix B - Draft River Pledge

Rivers Stakeholders:

Stakeholder Category	**Key Stakeholders Identified to Date**
Government & Public Bodies	Environment Agency Natural England Broads Authority Defra Wensum Catchment Partnership Broadland Catchment Partnership Norfolk County Council Norwich City Council Greater Norwich Growth Board NCSL Local Planning Authorities across the catchment of the Yare and Wensum:

	Broadland District Council, Breckland Council, Norwich City Council, North Norfolk, South Norfolk, Broads Authority
Conservation & Environmental and Site-specific Organisations	Whitlingham Charitable Trust UEA Norwich Fringe projects The Conservation Volunteers Norfolk Wildlife Trust Norfolk Rivers Trust The Rivers Trust Water Resources East River Wensum Restoration Strategy partners Wensum Riverkin River Rights Network Norfolk Ponds Project Norwich Friends of the Earth Norwich Greenpeace Norwich XR Social and Ecological Justice academics and organisations
Water & Infrastructure Organisations	Anglian Water Norfolk County Council Internal Drainage Boards (Water Management Alliance)
Agricultural Sector	Norfolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Norfolk Environment Food & Farming National Farmers Union (NFU) Upper Wensum Farm Cluster Farmers and agricultural landowners in the

	Wensum catchment Tenant farmers Agricultural unions (e.g., NFU) Agri-environment scheme participants Land management advisors and consultants.
Local Communities & Residents	Local Communities & Residents Local residents and landowners along the River Wensum Friends of Anderson Meadow Parish councils in Wensum catchment villages Recreational users (walkers, swimmers, nature watchers) Norwich Society
Recreational & Commercial Users groups	Tourist Board Visit East England BID Business Improvement District Wild swimmers Anglers and angling clubs Canoeists and kayakers Riverside and river-dependent businesses Tourism operators
Scientific & Educational Stakeholders	University of East Anglia (UEA) Norfolk Rivers Trust Ecologists, hydrologists, and environmental scientists Climate Ambassador Organisation Science Festival Local Schools and colleges using the river

	as an educational resource. Citizen science monitoring groups - CaSTCo
Developers & Land Use Interests	Property developers in the catchment area Planning consultants Construction companies working near the river.
Wildlife & Species (Indirect Stakeholders or more-than-human stakeholders)	Protected species (e.g., water voles, otters, brown trout) Aquatic invertebrates and plant communities Bird species dependent on riverine habitats
Green Finance	Norfolk Water Fund Catchment Regeneration Fund Norfolk Environmental Credits Natural England Grants and Environmental Development Plan Nutrient Mitigation Fund Norfolk Greater Norwich Growth Board Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds Habitat banks in catchment Local Green Finance consultants

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IN TRAN communication for all	If you would like this agenda in an alternative format, such as a larger or smaller font, audio or Braille, or in a different language, please contact the committee officer above.

[i] A riparian owner (or riparian landowner) is a person or organisation that owns land next to a river. In England, riparian owners typically have certain rights and responsibilities, including:

- Maintaining the riverbank and any structures they own.
- Allowing water to flow naturally without obstruction.
- Managing vegetation on their section of the bank.
- Helping prevent pollution or activities that obstruct the watercourse

[ii] https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/23542819.chemical-cocktails-poisoning-norfolks-rivers/
https://www.wcl.org.uk/toxic-chemical-cocktails-in-rivers-across-england.asp
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/0048969791903123

[iii] '*Two decades of the EU Water Framework Directive: evidence of success and failure from a lowland arable catchment (River Wensum, UK)',* R.J. Cooper, K.M. Hiscock, School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/en/publications/two-decades-of-the-eu-water-framework-directive-evidence-of-succe/

[iv] https://wre.org.uk/the-regional-plan/

[v] '*£1 billion investment underway in Norfolk as Anglian Water opens new Norwich hub'*, Anglian Water. https://www.anglianwater.co.uk/news/norwich-hub