

River Mole River Watch

Chairman's Report 01 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

It has been another great year for River Mole River Watch. Much has been achieved in raising awareness of the current condition of our river and her tributaries and in pushing for action to improve river health for the benefit of wildlife and people.

Our main achievement has been the rigorous monthly water quality monitoring carried out by our diligent team of volunteers. This has enabled us to create an impressive, informative dataset of two years phosphate readings and one year of nitrate, ammonia and conductivity data from 33 sites on the main river and tributaries. These data clearly document how the concentrations of these pollutants change with the seasons. As we are using colorimeters reporting data to three significant figures, we can clearly quantify the impact of sewage works and other sources, making these data a powerful tool for publicising the poor state of our river and many of the streams. Of course, the pollutants we measure are only the more readily detectable indicators of a complex soup of pollutants: we know there are also live bacteria, pharmaceuticals, insecticides, 'forever chemicals', industrial chemicals, microplastics, and road run-off. Sediment from fields, construction sites and roads also cause ecological damage.

We were proud to hear this work recognised in Parliament by Epsom and Ewell MP Helen Maguire. In a debate she said *"I commend the River Mole River Watch group in my constituency. Those dedicated volunteers test water quality and report pollution online. Their work is extraordinary, but they should not have to do it alone. Such local groups deserve more than praise; they need a seat at the table. Those environmental champions should have representation on water company boards, bringing community-driven accountability to decision making."*

We now have a wonderful team of 47 committed volunteers. In November many of us from RMRW joined members of river groups from across the country Marching for Clean Water. During the year we trained 13 new recruits, some replacing people who have moved away. Others have helped share the load of those who had been testing two or more sites. Some are ready to step-in at different test sites when regular testers are away. At the AGM we will be issuing more test equipment so that none of our testers will need to share kit between multiple sites.

As well as monthly water quality monitoring, we have carried out special studies including a one-day *E.coli* test at popular paddling sites along the main river from Horley to Cobham. Kat Kavanagh from Water Rangers and Lewis Campbell from South East Rivers Trust trained and helped us. *E.coli* levels were worse than 'Poor' bathing water quality at Horley, borderline Poor-Sufficient at Betchworth, Dorking and Fetcham, and Poor at Cobham.

Lewis from SERT and Josh Hammond from the Environment Agency joined us for a day on each of two of our most polluted streams, the Leigh Brook and Burstow Stream. Over several weeks in the summer two University of Reading students carried out research projects on the Mole, testing water quality upstream and downstream of Dorking sewage works. RMRW volunteers joined a South East Rivers Trust team adding gravel to improve a section of the Gatwick Stream

In the run-up to the General Election we received much attention from the media. BBC News and VRT from Belgium filmed and interviewed RMRW at Horley Sewage Treatment Works with trustee Simon later making an appearance on Have I got News for You. RMRW also featured in a Sunday Times article. Trustee Jess has been interviewed several times by the BBC.

Sadly, over the past two years, we have seen no improvement in water quality in our river and streams. We have become increasingly aware of the many constraints we are battling against. For example, Thames Water's financial problems have limited the funds available for proper maintenance and also for sufficient investment to achieve simply what they are required to do by their Discharge Permits. Completion dates for these projects have slipped in the past year; some by one year, some by two years. As well as the 11 sewage treatment works, we discovered there are more than 300 sewage pumping stations in the catchment. New developments increase the load on all these facilities. As Helen Maguire recently said in Parliament *"River Mole River Watch, a local citizen scientists' charity, has found that smaller pumping stations near new housing developments are seeing a sharp rise in storm overflows. More homes mean more sewage ... and if the infrastructure cannot cope, raw sewage ends up in the River Mole."*

We have supported local groups and individuals campaigning to bring attention and resolution to particularly obnoxious problems including sewage spills from Horley Sewage Treatment Works, Holmwood Sewage Treatment Works and the Leigh Pumping Station. We have met with and provided information to Dorking and Horley MP Chris Coghlan who has been pressing Thames Water for action to resolve these issues.

Trustees are active members of the River Mole Catchment Partnership where we see our role as highlighting the issues impacting the river, particularly pollution and flood management, and as working cooperatively with other stakeholders to achieve improvements. We meet regularly with Thames Water, always pushing for more urgent action to restore river health. We have met with farmers and aim to build relationships with them and with landowners.

Community outreach and education are vital elements of RMRW's mission. This past year we have delivered many talks to local societies, residents' associations, church groups and others. Sue, RMRW Secretary, has given talks at several primary schools in the Dorking area. We hope in this coming year to have more opportunities to engage with schools across the catchment.

Flooding is a particular interest and area of expertise for two of our Trustees – Jess and Simon. Initiatives include working with the developer of the Floodmapper application in order to more accurately predict and inform people of imminent flooding of Mole road bridges. We are also helping Surrey County Council to identify new opportunities for Natural Flood Management.

Last year I spoke about the possibility of joining potential new initiatives including RiverFly invertebrate monitoring and Outfall Safari. Surrey Wildlife Trust and South East Rivers Trust have received funding for RiverFly on the Mole. We put out a call for volunteers to join the first training session which was held in March. Further training courses are planned. We hope that the RiverFly results will be shared with us so that we can relate our chemical pollutant data to this direct index of life in our river and streams.

During the year we received a substantial grant from Gatwick Airport Limited. Our partnership with SES Water has benefitted both organisations – we have been able to use the nitrate checkers provided by SESW and they use the data we collect to plan their rigorous nitrate studies. Many generous individuals donated to our JustGiving account and many of the groups we have given talks to also gave us donations. Thank you to all our funders and supporters.

Over the next year we will continue to progress and develop all the initiatives I have mentioned above. We plan, with members' support, to seamlessly transition to our new River Mole River Watch Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) without disruption to our work. We will continue to press

for action to improve the health of our river for the benefit of wildlife and people. We will seek to build our links with fellow river groups who, like us, are working to improve their river catchments.

Finally, some words of thanks:

Thank you to all our volunteers, partners and supporters.

Special thanks from me to my fellow trustees -

Caroline for her design and website skills – in particular for our beautiful and informative leaflets,

Simon for a huge amount of work coordinating our water quality monitoring programme, analysing and publicising the results, meeting with groups and individuals impacted by the river, developing new tools and partnerships in flood management,

Jess for building our relationship with the University of Reading and for representing RMRW in the media,

Sue, our Secretary, for dealing with all the administrative work, particularly preparing for becoming a CIO,

Kirsten for her work building support on social media,

Martin who was our Treasurer until November last year,

Chris, one of our original water quality volunteers, who has kindly become our new Treasurer.

Nigel Bond – Chairman River Mole River Watch

April 2025