Ripon City Council – Summary of Yorkshire Water Discussion

Full Council, 9th November 2026 | Agenda Items 203/26 and 204/26

The Council considered concerns about sewage discharges into Ripon's rivers, with Tim Myatt attending on behalf of Yorkshire Water to respond to questions from councillors and residents.

The Mayor explained that the two agenda items would be considered together and that questions submitted by members of the public would be put to Yorkshire Water through the Chair.

1. Sewage discharges and Yorkshire Water's response

The Mayor challenged Yorkshire Water over the continued discharge of untreated sewage into Ripon's rivers, questioning why practices that would be unacceptable for individuals remained permissible for the water company.

Mr Myatt explained that combined sewer overflows (CSOs) were historically designed to prevent sewage backing up into homes, businesses and streets during periods of excessive rainfall. Yorkshire Water operates approximately 2,200 such overflows, which are regulated by the Environment Agency.

He acknowledged that the continued use of CSOs was increasingly regarded as unacceptable and outlined national targets to reduce discharges.

Yorkshire Water stated that its average number of discharges per overflow was 31.4 at the beginning of the current investment period, with a target of approximately 16 by 2030. Longer-term national targets aim to reduce most overflows to no more than 10 discharges annually by 2050, with more stringent requirements applying to designated bathing waters.

2. Planned investment in Ripon

Yorkshire Water confirmed that two locations in Ripon are included within its current investment programme, one at Blossomgate and another at Borrage bridge.

The proposed works principally involve removing surface water from the combined sewerage network, thereby creating additional capacity to accommodate foul sewage.

However, both schemes remain at the design stage, and Yorkshire Water was unable to provide detailed specifications, costs or completion dates.

Councillors expressed concern that residents could face several more years of sewage discharges before improvements were delivered.

Yorkshire Water referred to a wider £1.5 billion programme across its region during the 2025–2030 investment period, but could not confirm the amount specifically allocated to Ripon.

3. Pollution affecting the River Skell and children's play area

A particularly serious concern was raised about reported sewage discharges close to a children's play area adjoining the River Skell.

The Council heard allegations of untreated sewage entering the river, together with reports of sanitary products, including condoms and tampons, being visible around the discharge infrastructure.

Yorkshire Water suggested that some of the material described might have accumulated on screening equipment intended to prevent solid waste entering the watercourse. However, it could not confirm the precise circumstances.

Mr Myatt undertook to investigate the location and provide a written response explaining what had occurred, what investigations had been undertaken and what remedial action was proposed.

The Mayor confirmed that this response would be shared with the resident concerned.

Yorkshire Water also reported that, of 24 overflows associated with the River Ure, 5 were suspected of experiencing dry-weather discharges during the current year. Investigations were underway.

4. Environmental damage and river restoration

Councillor Barbara Brodigan challenged Yorkshire Water over its wider environmental responsibilities, emphasising that sewage pollution affects biodiversity, wildlife, river ecosystems and the public's enjoyment of Ripon's natural environment.

The Councillor asked what practical steps Yorkshire Water would take to repair existing environmental damage, what resources would be committed and when measurable improvements could be expected.

Mr Myatt referred to partnerships with the Environment Agency and rivers trusts, including work on fish migration, invasive species and wider catchment improvements.

He agreed to provide further written information about environmental restoration activities and opportunities for investment and collaboration.

The Mayor confirmed that the response would be published publicly.

5. Impact of future housing developments

Councillor Tony Duncan questioned whether Ripon's existing sewerage infrastructure could accommodate the significant number of new homes proposed around the city.

Yorkshire Water explained that modern developments generally incorporate sustainable drainage arrangements, including attenuation ponds, to prevent large volumes of rainwater entering combined sewers.

Nevertheless, Councillor Duncan highlighted that additional housing would still increase the volume of foul sewage requiring treatment.

Yorkshire Water maintained that sufficient capacity would need to be created, either by improving infrastructure or removing surface water from existing networks.

It was unable to confirm whether additional sewage storage would be provided specifically in Ripon, but agreed to supply further information on its proposed investment and delivery timescales.

6. Executive remuneration, dividends and accountability

Questions submitted by residents challenged the level of remuneration and bonuses paid to Yorkshire Water's senior executives, particularly against the background of the company's environmental performance.

A resident cited approximately £1.5 million of investment at one Ripon overflow, reportedly reducing annual discharges from 75 in 2021 to 43 in 2025, and asked what additional investment would be necessary to eliminate discharges altogether.

Yorkshire Water explained that investment plans were designed around regulatory targets rather than eliminating every discharge, and that it therefore could not provide an estimate for achieving zero discharges.

The Mayor emphasised that executive remuneration was not simply a question of whether the money could fund infrastructure improvements, but also about public confidence and the message conveyed by rewarding senior executives while customers continued to experience pollution.

Yorkshire Water maintained that remuneration was determined by its owners and that regulatory performance incentives provided financial consequences for the company's performance.

Shareholder dividends and holding-company payments were also discussed, although the precise position on future payments would benefit from written clarification.

7. Other environmental matters

Further questions concerned the use of treated sewage sludge on agricultural land, rainwater harvesting, pharmaceutical and chemical contamination, the environmental consequences of bottled-water abstraction and the control of invasive mink along the River Skell.

Yorkshire Water confirmed that treated sewage sludge continued to be used in agriculture and that the company was involved in national work on pharmaceutical contamination.

It also described partnerships with farmers and environmental organisations and agreed to investigate the question concerning mink control.

The need for clearer public information about the disposal of medicines and chemicals was highlighted.

8. Council resolution

In concluding the discussion, Councillor Crozier thanked Yorkshire Water for attending but emphasised that Ripon required more than assurances of eventual improvement.

The Councillor called for accountability, meaningful action and a clear timetable, proposing that Yorkshire Water's progress should be reviewed in June 2027.

A further proposal was made for North Yorkshire Council's Transport, Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee to examine Yorkshire Water's performance, including the issues affecting Ripon.

The Mayor seconded the proposals.

Both proposals were agreed unanimously.

The Council will review Yorkshire Water's progress in June 2027 and request that North Yorkshire Council's relevant scrutiny committee undertake wider scrutiny of the company's performance.

Follow-up actions

The following actions arise from the discussion. These include explicit undertakings and matters requiring further clarification.

Action	Responsibility
Investigate reported sewage discharge and sanitary waste near the River Skell children's play area, providing findings and proposed remedies	Yorkshire Water
Confirm the two Ripon investment schemes, their scope, anticipated expenditure and delivery dates	Yorkshire Water
Provide further information on suspected dry-weather spills and ongoing investigations	Yorkshire Water
Set out environmental restoration activities, partnerships and opportunities for local improvements	Yorkshire Water
Clarify the effect of planned housing growth on Ripon's sewerage infrastructure	Yorkshire Water
Respond to questions about invasive mink control and related environmental initiatives	Yorkshire Water
Publish Yorkshire Water's written responses for residents	Ripon City Council
Arrange a progress review for June 2027	Ripon City Council
Write to North Yorkshire Council requesting scrutiny of Yorkshire Water's performance	Ripon City Council