Sewage Action Group for the Lambourn Upper Valley (SAGLUV) covering Eastbury, East Garston and Great Shefford, and now……Weston!

Spring 2025 Report

Now that groundwater levels are subsiding after the winter highs, we can breathe more easily, and take this opportunity to review how we fared with sewage flooding issues during the high risk period of the last six months.

Some of the points this report contains, you may have seen in previous updates, however, together with some new developments that have occurred in the last few months, they are included here to give a more complete picture, in particular for those reading about SAGLUV for the first time.

Summary:

For Eastbury, East Garston and Great Shefford, it's been good news. The last six months have been mainly trouble free, despite groundwater reaching levels higher than when we started needing tankers and the ATAC filter unit in winter 2023/24. However, the sewers were full for many months and there were some close calls on a few occasions. These were caused by either brief heavy rainfall, or blockages which needed one or two tankers for a few hours. There were no major spillages, and limited problems with sanitary facilities.

Although the ATAC filter unit in East Garston was installed and ready, in the end it was not required, and there were no prolonged tanker runs in any of the three villages either. It appears that the relining and manhole work carried out by Thames Water in summer 2024 was largely successful.

There were other factors that contributed to the positive result: The EA weed cutting in Eastbury helped greatly by keeping the river in its banks, and the Eastbury and Great Shefford Flood Alleviation schemes may well have helped avoid sewer manholes from being submerged. West Berks Council's efforts with ditch and grip clearing also played their part.

Encouragingly, TW carried out further intensive camera surveys of their infrastructure to find more infiltration points which will be addressed this year. TW acknowledge that with the aging sewerage infrastructure, there is not a "one fix" resolution, rather a recurring process of investigation, finding leaks, repairing, investigation…. and so on. However, 2024 saw some major steps being taken.

Although for the upper villages the outcome has been positive, further downstream, problems have been encountered at the East Shefford Sewage Treatment Works, and particularly in the village of Weston. This will be covered in detail in the main body of this report, but we are delighted to announce that Dan Rampton has joined SAGLUV to represent Weston, as that village is now included in our remit. We can also confirm that 500m of sewer relining in Weston is imminent.

Although outside of the scope of SAGLUV, it was encouraging to see that the sewage issues in Lambourn also saw an improvement, with only a few isolated spillages, and the ATAC filter unit being utilised for far fewer weeks than previously.

We are cautiously optimistic that with the further development of the new Thames Water Wastewater management structure, which started to be implemented last year, and the priority given to the Lambourn Valley, real progress is being made in resolving our sewage issues.

Background:
SAGLUV:
The Sewage Action Group for the Lambourn Upper Valley is a pressure group, set up with the objective of achieving **clear sewers and a clean river** for the villages of Eastbury, East Garston, Great Shefford, and now, Weston. The link between these four villages is that, along with Lambourn (which includes Membury Services), they are the only sewerage networks that feed into the East Shefford Sewage Treatment Works (ESSTW).

As mentioned in the above summary, we are very fortunate to have Dan Rampton newly appointed on the SAGLUV team to represent Weston. Amongst his other commitments in the area, Dan runs the Weston Farm Trout Fishery, so knows all about pollution issues and regularly monitors the river water quality.

SAGLUV is not a protest group. We don't shout and wave banners, but we do strive to achieve our objective by working closely with Thames Water, developing strong working relationships with key senior personnel, and maintaining constructive dialogue.
We believe that this approach has helped to achieve a number of positive results.

To put into context the above Summary of where we are today:
Over recent years, there has been a great deal of publicity given to the Lambourn Valley sewage issues in the national press and TV, as well as vociferous local complaints, of sewage flooding the streets and residents properties. A number of homes suffered loss of sanitary facilities, such as unusable backed up toilets and ground floor showers.

Unlike many other areas within the Thames Water catchment, where storms lead to sewer flooding, our problems are mainly caused by groundwater flooding.

This is clearly evidenced by the TW Event Duration Monitoring maps for two particular dates:
The first, September 2024 (Fig 1), shows a typical situation after a heavy storm. The red dots indicate untreated sewage discharges at that time, and the orange dots, recent discharges. The green dots are TW sewage outlets that were not currently discharging untreated effluent. The location circled in yellow includes the Lambourn Valley and the grey dot with an X is East Garston Sewage pumping Station that had been switched off and was not discharging (more about that later).

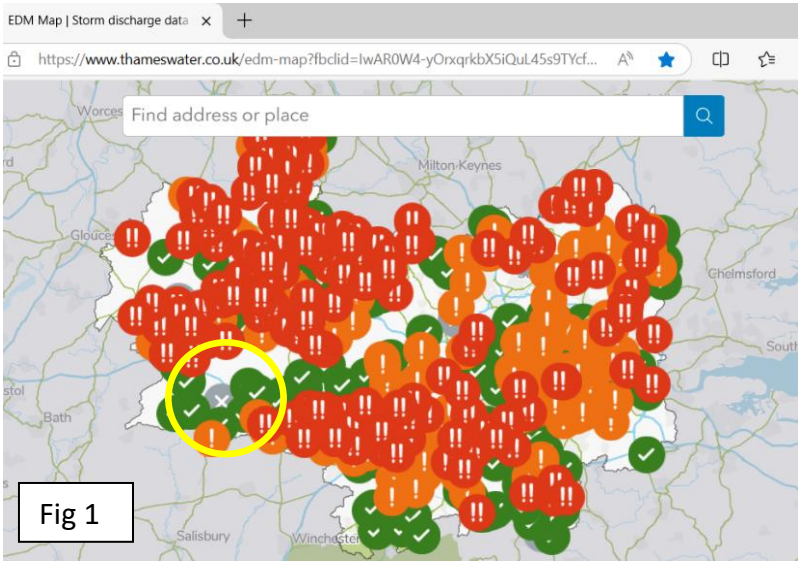
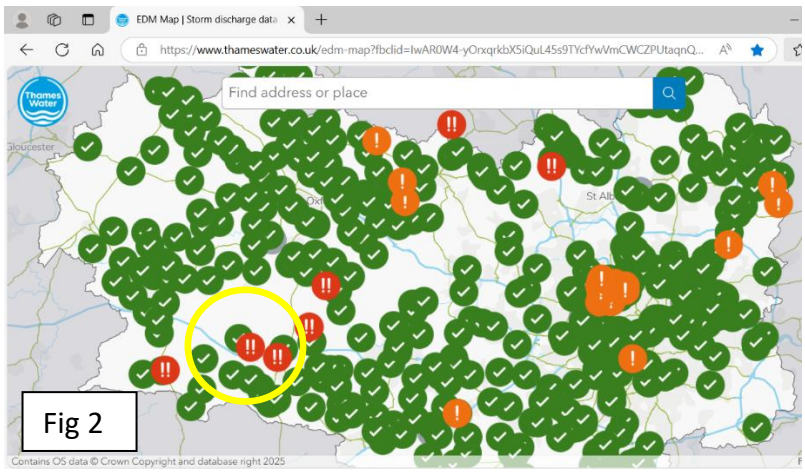


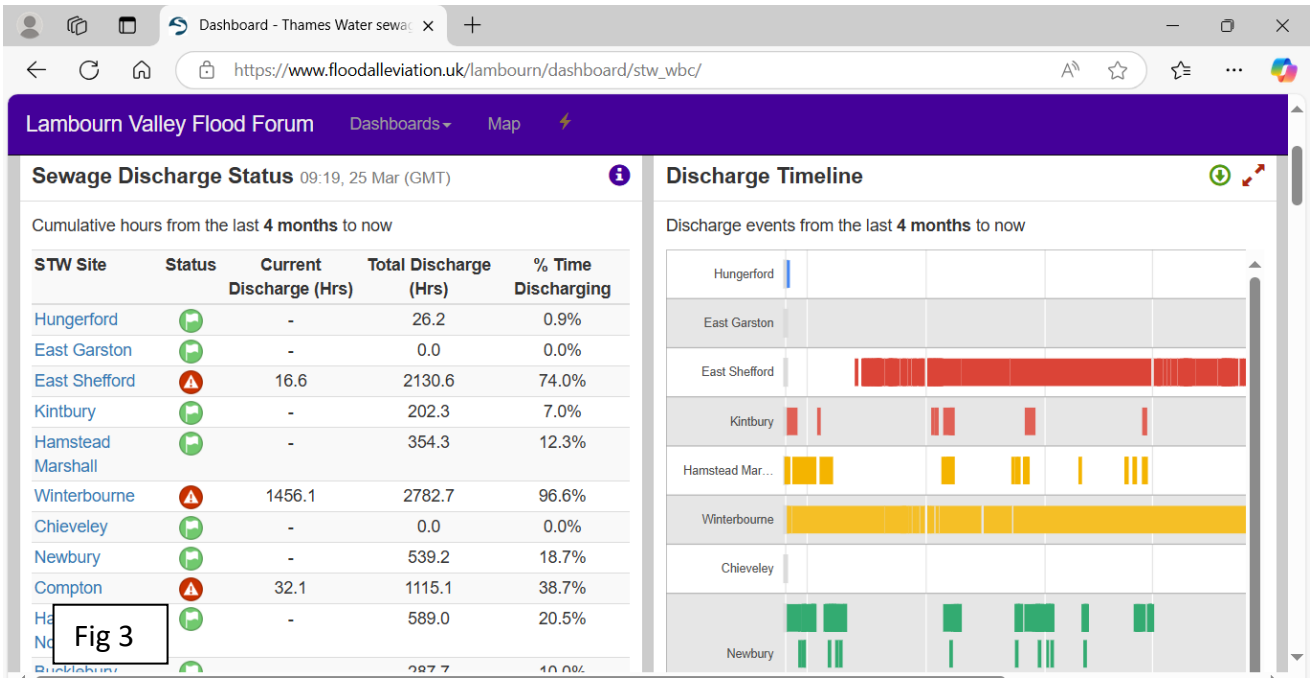
Fig 1

Although partly covered, the next green dot downstream is East Shefford Sewage Treatment Works (ESSTW) which was not discharging at that time. This indicates that although most of the sewage outlets operated by Thames Water were spilling untreated sewage on that day due to storm, East Garston and ESSTW were not. At that time, groundwater level was low at 130m (Longacre OBH), well below the TW red threshold level of 137m when they can expect sewer flooding.



However, looking at the situation in March 2025 (Fig 2), when we were enjoying a dry spell with no rain, but the groundwater level was high at 142.5m, East Shefford STW was discharging untreated sewage, and had been virtually continuously since 13 December 2024. The next TW site downstream also discharging is Winterbourne, also due to groundwater flooding.

A more complete picture of the duration of these discharges can be monitored by visiting the website: [Lambourn Valley Dashboard](#) see Fig 3 below.



Some history:
Sewer flooding by groundwater, and subsequent river pollution in our valley, is nothing new, and for years EA haven't taken any punitive action to stop it. However, the issue has attracted far more attention by Thames Water in recent years and our area is now firmly amongst those at the top end of TW's priority list. Whether this is due to pressure from groups such as SAGLUV and Lambourn Valley Flood Forum, we will never know.

But maybe the pressure we have applied has forced TW to deploy expensive temporary mitigation actions such as tankers to relieve the flooded sewer pipes and filter units, which have proved to be more expensive than relining the pipes. Relining costs about £250 per metre against tankers, rumoured to cost about £2,000 per tanker per day. And there have been fleets of those carrying diluted effluent that is predominantly clean groundwater! It makes a good financial sense to implement the more permanent solution.

In the past, one of the major sources of pollution was the discharge of untreated sewage into the river at the East Garston Sewage Pumping Station (SPS) whenever groundwater threatened to flood the sewer (Fig 4).

Fig 4

When, in 2021, this was highlighted in a letter to Newbury Weekly News, initially, TW denied that it was untreated sewage (Fig 5), and they also stressed that, in any case, they held an EA permit for discharging under storm conditions that gave them cover.

Newbury Weekly News

HUNGERFORD & LAMBOURN VA

Utility firm denies sewage dump claims

Thames Water refutes allegations of pollution in River Lambourn

THAMES Water has denied claims that it has been pumping untreated sewage into the River Lambourn at East Garston.

This newspaper recently reported how a multi-thou-

Fig 5

Mr Wright told the *Newbury Weekly News*: "The real damage to our 'pristine' river is done by... detergents, bleach and all sorts of assorted chemicals, that kill off the insects, flies and other fauna

Questions were submitted via the Environmental Information Regulations (part of the Freedom of Information legislation) which established that:
a. It <u>was</u> untreated sewage, and
b. The EA storm discharge permit did not cover sewer flooding from groundwater infiltration, making TW's discharges a breach of permit conditions.

An apology was later received from the TW spokesperson for their "mistake", but somehow, that never found its way into NWN!

Eventually, the EG SPS overflow was switched off for about a year and although now reinstated, there have been no discharges from it since. However, without that "release valve" in 2023/24, manholes overflowed in the streets. This, we believe, has forced TW to renew their efforts to tackle the source of the problem – groundwater infiltration through leaking pipes. Hence the recent programmes of relining and manhole sealing.

Anyway, whatever prompted the impetus, we'll happily take it!

Further complexities:
Whereas one can generally feel quite justified in pointing the finger of blame at water companies, in our case Thames Water, there is one aspect where, just possibly, there might be a tinge of sympathy for them:
TW are, by law, responsible for treating, and safely disposing of, everything that ends up in their sewerage system.
However, TW cannot be held responsible for what people put down their toilets and sinks, or groundwater that infiltrates the private drains that feed into their network.

When SAGLUV visited the local Sewage Treatment Works recently, we saw a skip load of filtered out "stuff" that should never have been in the system. Wet wipes, and other unmentionables are a major problem, and everyone has heard of blockages caused by "fatbergs" and the like.

We all have a responsibility to avoid such behaviour, and in case a reminder is needed, this link tells you all you need to know. Bin it | Blockages | Help and advice | Thames Water

Private Drains: Generally speaking, private drains are the sewer pipes and manholes that take wastewater from private properties to the main sewer. Home owners are responsible for their private drains. Nothing other than household wastewater (i.e. sewage and water from sinks basins, washing machines etc.) is permitted to be put down the drain. A particular frustration for TW is that private drains can also be infiltrated by groundwater, through cracks and misconnections, which they then have to dispose of. TW have the responsibility to identify where pipes are leaking, but they cannot directly force homeowners to stop the infiltration. They try to persuade, but if that fails, again, generally speaking, TW can resort to going through a complex process by involving West Berks Council who do have the authority to enforce homeowners to stop the infiltration.

Even worse situations sometimes occur, where groundwater is directly channelled into private drains to avoid localised flooding of gardens and properties. Again, this is not permitted, and directly contributes to sewer flooding. SAGLUV raised this particular problem at the last WBC Scrutiny Commission meeting and it was agreed that TW, EA and WBC would meet to discuss this with the objective of finding solutions for such cases. We have not heard of any progress yet.

Yet another complication is rainwater disposal. Building regulations have changed over the years, and now generally prevent rainwater from roofs etc. going into combined sewers, but there are still many older properties that do just that. Under normal conditions it is not a problem, but when the sewers are already fully charged with groundwater, it can sometimes tip the balance, resulting in flooding, albeit usually for short periods. We had cases of that during this last winter.

Latest developments:
Over the past year, during the time we have been in close dialogue with the company, Thames Water have changed their management structure by splitting the areas of responsibility, previously combined, into two: Wastewater (Sewage) and clean (drinking!) water. TW now have a Director who is responsible solely for all Wastwater & Bioresources operations across the whole TW catchment, including London. We are in regular direct contact with the Director and her senior Operations team. We believe that the level of attention that we receive supports TW's claim that the Lambourn Valley is a priority to them.

Likewise, TW's latest news of the creation of a new role of Technical Infiltration Manager, gives huge confidence that they are determined to resolve the groundwater flooding issue.

Weston and East Shefford Sewage Treatment Works (ESSTW):
Although some degree of progress has been made with the first part of SAGLUV's objective "Clear sewers", we are still facing challenges in Weston, and with the "Clean River" aspects.

Weston, Eastbury/East Garston/Gt Shefford, and Lambourn are the three discrete sewer networks that feed into ESSTW.

Thames Water have just completed a £14m upgrade of the plant and TW's Head of Thames Valley Waste Operations recently hosted a visit of SAGLUV members to the site. We were impressed with

not only the technical improvements that we were demonstrated to us, but also the genuine commitment and enthusiasm of the managers and operatives that we met. It's clear to us that they want to do a good job.

This report cannot do justice to all the technicalities, but the headlines are:

- Storm capacity has been increased by 42%. However, this has virtually no impact on groundwater sewer flooding which is generally prolonged over weeks or months, rather than a short and sharp surge that a storm delivers.
- But more importantly, it has significantly reduced the toxic content in the normal effluent discharge, by the introduction of an additional, tertiary treatment process, Actiflo.
- The deployment at ESSTW is the first application, by TW, of this Actiflo technology as a wastewater treatment process, and initial results are very encouraging.

Although we will be gathering more detailed reports on progress in our future meetings with TW, and there are other chemical elements that have to be considered, the table in Fig 6 gives some indication of the significant advances that have been made:

ESSTW Permit Consent Details vs Actual achieved

Parameter	Consent Limits Post 31 Mar 25	Current averages achieved post Actiflo installation
Suspended Solids	25 mg/l	3.3 mg/l
Biochemical Oxygen Demand	15 mg/l	2.3 mg/l
Ammonia as N	3 mg/l	0.24 mg/l
Iron	4 mg/l	0.77 mg/l
Total Phosphorus as P Current consent - Stretch Target - Fig 6	0.25 mg/l (Pre March - 1 mg/l) 0.1 mg/l	0.13 mg/l

In fact, prior to the upgrade, ESSTW was already operating well within the consent limits in a number of parameters. Interestingly, and encouragingly, Thames Water explained why they had chosen ESSTW as the pilot for this new technology when it was already performing at an acceptable level in most respects. They knew that positive improvements could be achieved if it were installed on a poorly performing STW, but to really test it, they wanted to see the level of improvement possible in a STW that was already performing reasonably. That, we feel, shows a positive commitment to finding long term solutions to pollution.

SAGLUV believe that we in the Lambourn Valley are very fortunate to have this new technology deployed in our area.

However, there has been one serious problem.

The problems of winter 2024/25:
In this last winter 2024/25, ESSTW discharged untreated sewage for 2,472 hours, virtually continuously from December 24 to April 25. Yet in winter of 2023/24, when groundwater levels were even higher, ESSTW discharged untreated sewage for "only" 300 hours.

What went wrong? SAGLUV pressed TW hard for the answers.

In a funny sort of way, it's good news.
As mentioned earlier, in 2023/24, in the upstream villages from Great Shefford to Lambourn, tankers were deployed and two ATAC filter units were continuously pumping sewage into the river to avoid it spilling onto streets etc. In practice, these acted as "release valves" to alleviate the pressure on ESSTW.

In 2024/25 the relining and repair work was largely successful, resulting in reduced use of tankers and filter units, and less sewage discharge/spillage upstream of the ESSTW

But it was touch and go with sewer pipes still full. And with no "release valves", that put more load onto ESSTW which it couldn't cope with. Significant infiltration in the Weston area pipes compounded the problem.

Why good news?
As the issues are due to groundwater infiltration through failing sewerage infrastructure, the problem is within TW's control, (albeit with complexities and third party involvement in the case of private drains, as previously mentioned) and predictable, unlike storm or other "Acts of God". The work TW did during the summer of 2024 proved that infiltration can be reduced.

TW's EA Permit for storm discharge from ESSTW does not cover groundwater flooding and TW have to commit to a Management Plan, agreed by EA, to stop the infiltration.

Finally, and crucially, it's generally cheaper to reline pipes than run fleets of tankers or pay hefty fines! The planned 500m of relining in Weston is another step in the right direction.

It's clearly in TW's own interest to implement permanent solutions to stop the infiltration of groundwater into their networks. When that point is reached, we can claim that our objective has been achieved:

Clear Sewers and a Clean River!

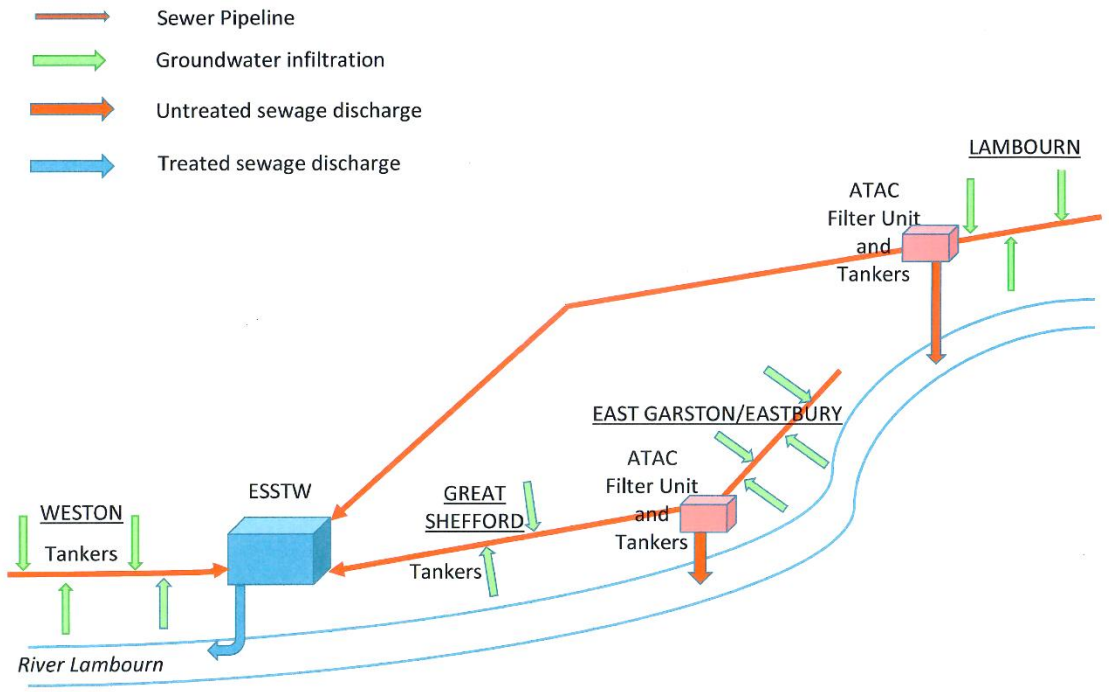
The appended Figs 7 – 10 show, in diagrammatic form, the effects of the relining work on the networks, and the end result we (and Thames Water!) aspire to achieve.

Next Steps:
Although we covered a number of points at our visit to the ESSTW, we will be seeking a meeting with TW Operations Management team in the coming weeks, to review the last six months and any lessons learnt. Also, it will be interesting to hear the full results of the investigations that have been carried out and to hear TW's plans for the work they will do this summer.
We will also be maintaining the contact with the more senior levels at TW for the broader view on progress.

SAGLUV Team
10 June 2025

Lambourn Upper Valley Sewerage Network 2023/24 - Pre 2024 work

Fig 7



Lambourn Upper Valley Sewerage Network 2024/25 - Post 2024 work

Fig 8

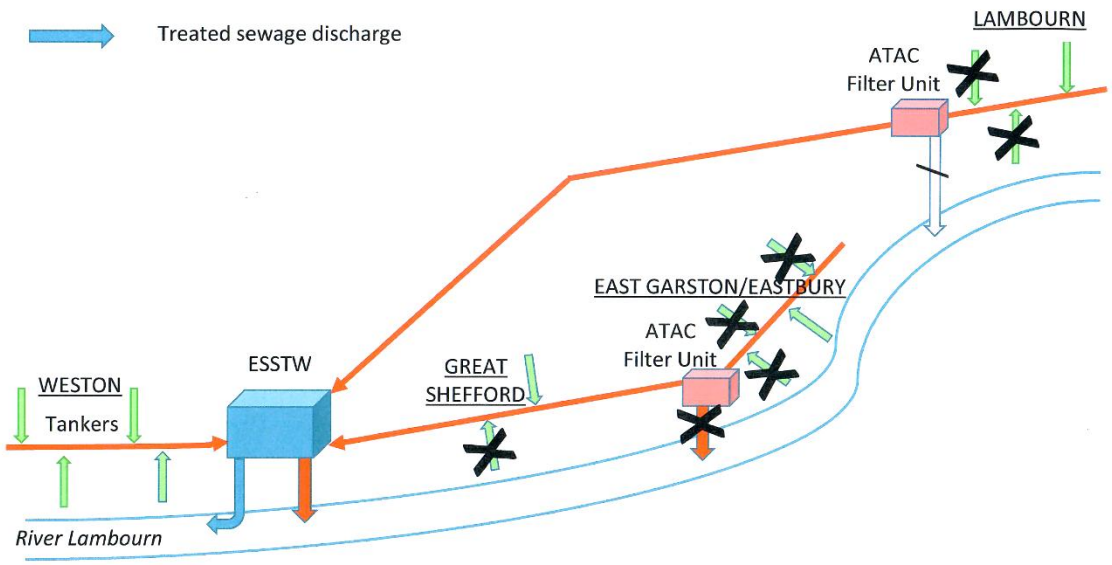


Fig 9

Lambourn Upper Valley Sewerage Network - Post 2025 (?)

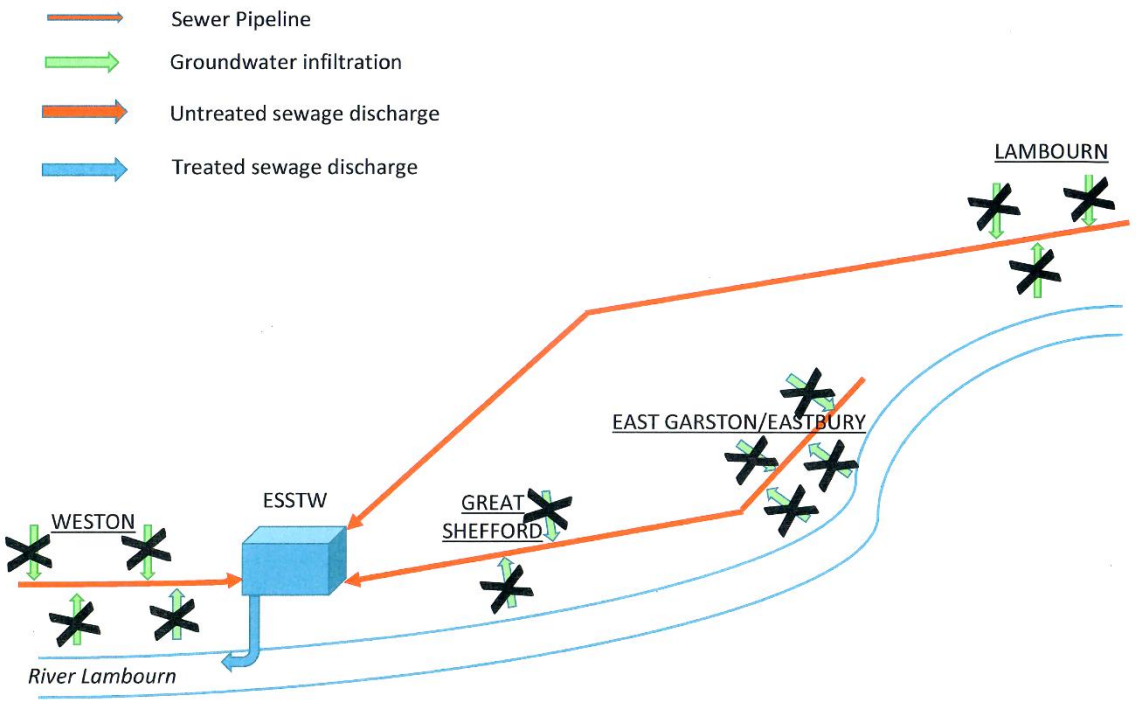
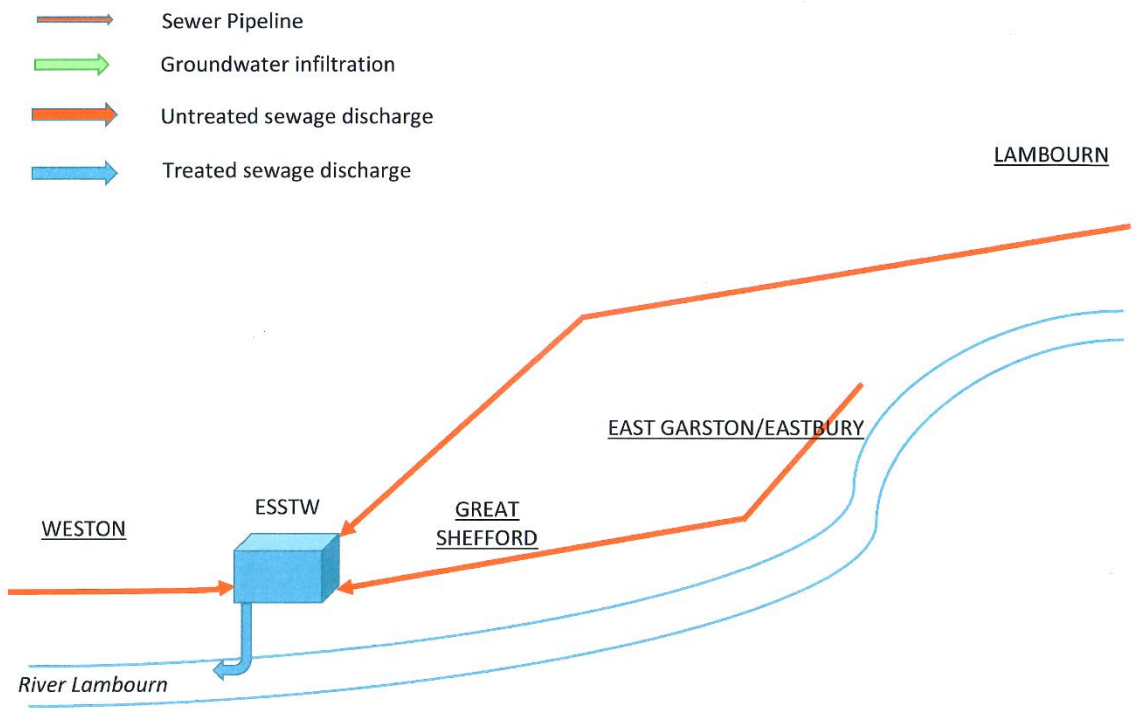


Fig 10

Lambourn Upper Valley Sewerage Network - Clear Sewers and a Clean River