

07 March 2024

West Sussex County Council seeks help from local residents to combat flooding

West Sussex County Council is encouraging all householders and landowners, particularly those in more rural areas, to check if they have a responsibility to keep local watercourses free flowing and to help prevent vulnerable areas of the county from flooding.

If a watercourse, ditch, stream, river or culvert runs adjacent to, through or under your land or property (even if it does not fall within your property boundary as set out by your Title Deeds) then you are likely to be what is known as a “riparian owner”. In short, you are responsible for the maintenance of the watercourse to ensure that water is able to flow freely into and along it, so that it doesn’t pose a flood risk.

The legal responsibilities of a riparian owner are to:

- ensure the flow of water is not obstructed or polluted
- maintain the bottom and sides of the watercourse (including managing any trees and vegetation growing on the banks)
- remove any obstructions, such as rubbish, fallen branches or garden waste
- maintain any structures (such as rubbish screens, culverts, weirs and mill gates).

You are more likely to have a responsibility if you live in a rural area due to there not being as widespread a drainage system as in urban areas, particularly alongside roads. Rural roads are especially affected when groundwater levels are high and surface water runs off neighbouring land and property onto them. It is essential that roadside ditches in these areas are kept clear for the water to flow into before it reaches the road and causes surface flooding or even damages the road surface.

Cllr Joy Dennis, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport at West Sussex County Council, said: “Over the last five months we have seen a year’s worth of rainfall. You will have noticed that this has resulted in sustained high levels of groundwater, increased debris in the drainage systems causing blockages, and large amounts of surface water runoff, causing flooding across the county.

“Our Highways team has been busy responding to numerous incidents of flooding. We continue to manage over 140,000 gullies and routinely clear other drainage assets, including our ditches. However, whilst we are working as hard as we can to keep the water network free flowing to reduce flooding, we do not have responsibility for all of the drains and watercourses within West Sussex. For example, we’re only responsible for around 10% of the county’s ditches.

“Residents can play such an important role in combatting flooding by maintaining the drainage assets they’re responsible for, but we’re not expecting them to spend a lot of time or money; simply spending half an hour each month clearing debris and removing any blockages to allow water to flow freely is usually more than sufficient and will really make a difference.

“Well maintained watercourses can significantly benefit our communities by not only reducing flood risk but by also creating great habitats for our wildlife.”

To further help reduce flooding incidents across the network, we plan to deliver £1.9m of drainage works this year. We have also doubled our number of jetting vehicles in response

to extreme weather and have four vehicles available to attend affected sites to clear flooding or investigate issues.

Our drainage gangs continue to work proactively to clear gullies and a ditch clearance programme is operating at sites identified as having an impact on the highway.

We also have approximately £500,000 of small-scale drainage schemes on schedule to be delivered by the end of this month.

To find out more about the responsibilities of a riparian owner and our flood prevention works take a look at our FAQ document: [Riparian Ownership: Frequently Asked Questions](#).

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For further information please contact the news desk on 0330 222 8090 or email pressoffice@westsussex.gov.uk.

For urgent out-of-hours enquiries please call 07767 098415.