



# Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

N°151  
FEBRUARY 2023

## OPEN MEETING

Thursday 23rd February, 7.30pm  
Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW

In person meeting – all welcome  
at this FREE event.

### Evaluating ancient chalk streams with modern science

Guest speaker:

**Professor Kate Heppell**

Queen Mary University of London/  
Chilterns Chalk Streams Project



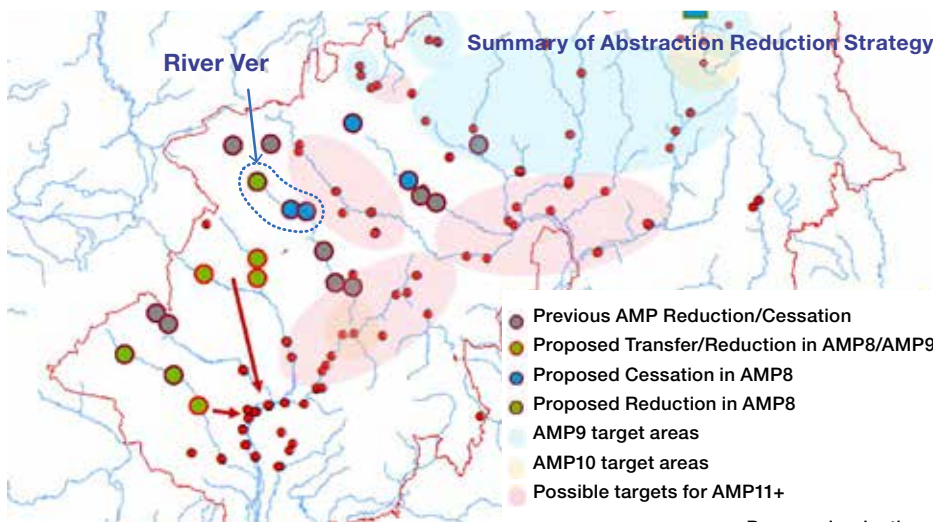
Right: Kate Heppell and helpers on the Chess

Come and take your seat for a fascinating insight into what sondes placed in a chalk stream can tell us about water quality. What's more, Kate will be explaining how that data can be useful to drive improvements in river ecosystem health. The Smarter Water Catchments initiative is leading the way on the River Chess. The River Ver could be next!

The evening will open with reports on the state of the Ver and the latest news on abstraction, wildlife and more. After a short break for refreshments, we'll hand over to our guest speaker.

*(Please note the date of this meeting was originally scheduled for a Tuesday but is definitely on Thursday 23rd when we welcome Prof Kate Heppell who was due to speak at the AGM back in October.)*

## LATEST NEWS



Proposed reductions  
©Affinity Water

## Future improvement?

A wet autumn has been good news for the Ver with rising groundwater and run off from the land maintaining above average flow in the river. In the longer term, as many of our members will know, Affinity Water is proposing

to reduce abstraction significantly at the top of the Ver Valley by 2029. This should lead to a more resilient river with more water, more often – exactly what the Society has been campaigning for since its formation in 1976.

AMP = Asset Management Plan

## SAVE THE DATES

### Next Open Meetings:

**Tuesday 20th June 2023**

at St Stephen Parish Centre,  
Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ, details tbc

**Thursday 19th October 2023**

**AGM.** St Michael's Parish Centre  
AL3 4SL, details tbc

Welcome snow! Dec 2022



**The Ver has been looking fuller and healthier since the summer's drought dominated the last newsletter. Looking downstream near Redbournbury, even the most hard-hearted can surely see why we all care!**



### Abstraction Reductions

Affinity Water's draft Water Resources Management Plan for the period 2025-29 proposes the complete closure of our long-term nemesis - Friars Wash pumping station! And additionally to close Redbourn pumping station and reduce the take at Kensworth. This would leave just 1 million litres a day (Mld) abstracted from the catchment upstream of St Albans – a welcome boost for the river.



Affinity Water's consultation on the plans is open until 20th February and members should already have received an email from me asking for them to respond and support these abstraction reductions. I would suggest that further points are made to ask for other local chalk streams to receive similar reductions – and more quickly than in the 20+ years timescale indicated in Affinity Water's plans.

This could be achieved in a shorter timescale with an even more robust leak preventions policy; speedier investment in supply infrastructure and less reliance on huge consumer water saving where government continues to prevaricate when it comes to a hard-hitting national communications initiative.

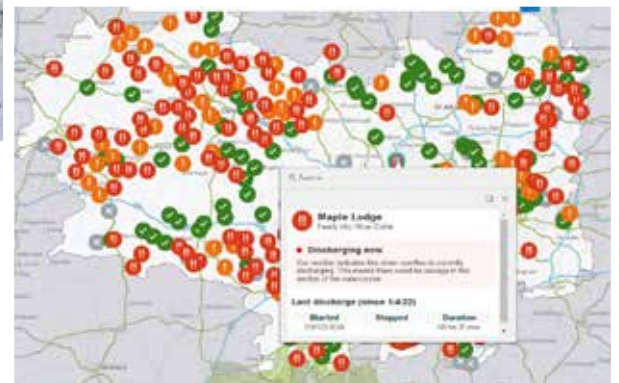
### Sewage Spills

We are in meaningful discussions with Thames Water to properly uncover what went wrong at Markyate Sewage works in 2021 and how it might be fixed. Thanks mainly to Windrush WASP correlating Event Duration Monitor (EDM) data and rainfall statistics at least 30 'dry spills' have been uncovered. It's scandalous that local groups like ours have to keep such a close eye on their local river and push for solutions.

In the meantime, a significant step forward is Thames Water's new real time map which shows spills as they happen. (That spares Sue, our local

### Help Our Team!

Our group of busy volunteers is always in need of a hand to do good things for the Ver. You don't need to be on the committee to help out. If you fancy looking after our bird boxes, doing a stint as webmaster, organising the water monitoring programme or co-ordinating our Riverfly data, please get in touch.



bailliff, from climbing over the fence and walking across a soggy meadow to take a look!) So far in 2023, nothing at Markyate or Caddington, which are in the upper Ver Valley. However, Maple Lodge at Rickmansworth where most of the sewage from Redbourn, St Albans and beyond is processed has been spilling has clocked up over 100 hours this year. Check out the site at [thameswater.co.uk/edm-map](https://thameswater.co.uk/edm-map).

### Road Run-off Challenge

This remains one of the largest threats to the Ver and other rivers – all the plastic from tyres and chemicals associated with motoring making their way into the water-course. The pollutants inhibit the growth of invertebrates and even the inert grit contributes to smothering the bottom of a chalk stream. There's plenty of scope to make improvements, though perhaps a stretch too far for the Society's immediate resources. A challenge has been issued to St Albans District Council via the Overview and Scrutiny



Committee to set the wheels in motion and neutralise the threat. Our wader clad members would certainly be happy to contribute an 'outfall safari' to identify all the spots where the run-off is entering the Ver.



Reports from our volunteers reveal a very mixed picture, although invertebrate counts have improved since the parched conditions of August. On the Red and Ver in Redbourn autumn scores were disappointing, reflecting poor water quality. The Redbournbury to Gorbambury section has the best spring-fed clear water and invertebrate life was generally healthy. Through urban St Albans insect numbers have dropped off dramatically and it remains a challenge for the monitors to hit their trigger levels. Downstream, from Frogmore to Drop Lane, the numbers returned to more healthy levels.

Continuing thanks to our 16 monitors who are out every month taking kick samples from the Red and Ver. One monitor had a welcome break in December as brown trout redds were spotted and of course we don't want to disturb delicate eggs or alevins.



Spot the trout near its redd; Hoglouse from a poor quality section; A Caseless Caddis from a healthy section ©Max Hebington



Riverfly invertebrate monitoring is a form of Citizen Science in which trained volunteers monitor the health of rivers across the country. Each site has a trigger level set dependent on the number of species and their usual abundance. If the score falls below the trigger level this usually indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

**WATER QUALITY MONITORING**

by JOHN PRITCHARD

A warm welcome to the new team of volunteers who have stepped up to take quarterly Ver water samples – from Markyate to confluence with the Colne. We just need 3 more to fill all the spots. If you fancy sampling in Markyate or near Moor Mill, please get in touch. The programme is useful but rudimentary, only testing for Phosphates and Nitrates plus a turbidity score. The scores so far have ranged between moderate (as a result of nitrates and high turbidity) and very good ecological status. The value of having volunteers regularly in the field was demonstrated when



Pollution on the Red

a short-lived incident of a cloudy, oily substance polluting the River Red was discovered. A Community Fund donation from Waitrose has covered a significant portion of the annual programme cost.



Our thanks to Waitrose

**MEMBERSHIP**

by PETER HILL

**A warm welcome** to our new members: Angela Mellen, Hilary Forbes, Gabriel Roberts, Mark Percival, Tricia Gibbons, Amanda Derrick, Michael Pearson, David Maltby, Haslina Ali, John Reeves, Mark Adams, Catherine Carpenter, Ian Sparrow, Angela Jones, Stephen Larkworthy, Tom Sayer and Christopher Turner. We hope that you will enjoy the Society's events and with your fellow members support the actions to improve the Ver and its environment.



Not a member?  
It's only £8 a year to join.  
Full details at [riverver.co.uk/join-us](http://riverver.co.uk/join-us)

# Increased flow

Thank you to Bailiffs who continued to measure, report and sometimes get their wellies wet in Autumn rains and icy December conditions. As flow has increased along the valley and the winterbourne river slowly re-emerges we have just received news that it's meandering beautifully through one of its most natural stretches, at Porridge Pot. Good flow is reported at appropriately named Waterend Lane through to Sopwell and beyond at Park Street and the Confluence, where the latter two flow measurements tripled. These increases are in part at least, supplemented by run-off, indeed the Red tributary too 'was swollen with run-off from the M1'. Although generally 'murky' during rain, when showers ceased the water clarity was much improved with typical gravel exposed by increased scouring action of flow. Silting at sides and in deeper channels continues, smothering precious habitat.

## Fish spotted!

In Verulamium Park a large shoal of Gudgeon 'brownish grey, same as mud and silt' was spotted hunting for insect larvae and shrimp in the gravel bed. Good to see, as nationally they are declining. Further downstream a shoal of metallic Chub sought shelter under overhanging bramble and tree roots. Something rarely spotted on the Ver were Brown Trout on redds



– impressions in gravel formed by females in which eggs are fertilised and defended by males. Observing fish behaviour teaches much about habitat diversity along a healthy chalk stream.

Occasional Mallard, Pochard and Shoveler ducks, Little Grebes, Water Rail and Common Snipe were spotted as Cormorants navigated the valley overhead. Reeves' Muntjac are more conspicuous on bare riverbanks but although very pretty they unfortunately cause issues by preventing coppice regrowth and stripping Ivy.

As December mists rise from the Ver creating 'a wonderful backdrop' no



wonder that chalk streams have long been gathering places. Wishing a year of good fortune for its people and wildlife!

Misty morning on the Ver; Bailiff Roger; Reeve's Muntjac; Murky River Red. Photos ©Melanie Woods, Joe Randall



## LIST OF BAILIFFS

Below is the list of the team and their stretches. Please say hello if you see them when you are out and alert them if you notice any issues.

1. R Colne to Moor Mill	Sue and Martin Frearson*	sue.frearson@virginmedia.com
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane	Dick Downs	d.downs2@toilets.org.uk
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill	Bruce Banfield-Taylor*	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Lee Wood	ember.designs@yahoo.co.uk
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury	John Pritchard*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Jane Gardiner	janegardiner@madasafish.com
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass	Robert May*	bmay@hoggend.com
11. Chequers to Verlam End	John Fisher & Peter Hill	john.fisher@btconnect.com
		members@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Sue Rowe	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

\* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.



# Rain at last

The September to November rainfall has started to have some effect on aquifer and flows.

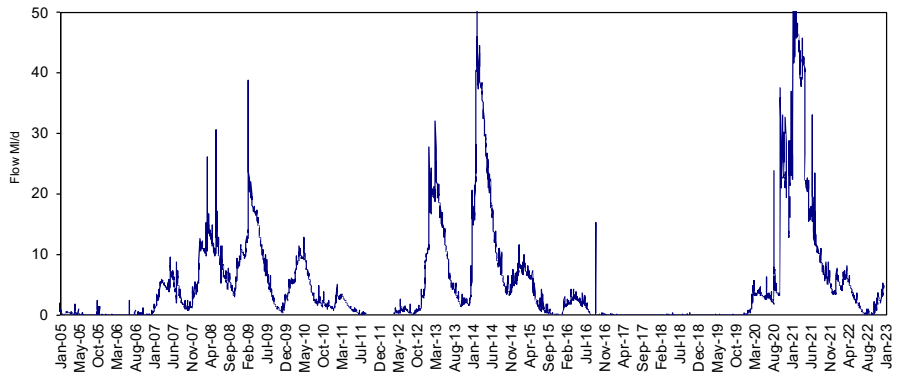
2022 as a whole had only 87% of the average rainfall with more sun and higher temperatures than normal, indeed it was the hottest year ever recorded! We still need a continuing wet January, February and spring to give the Ver the best chance for the rest of the year.

The aquifer has turned the corner and is on the up again. December and January figures are above that of November but lower than the months of last summer and well below the mean.

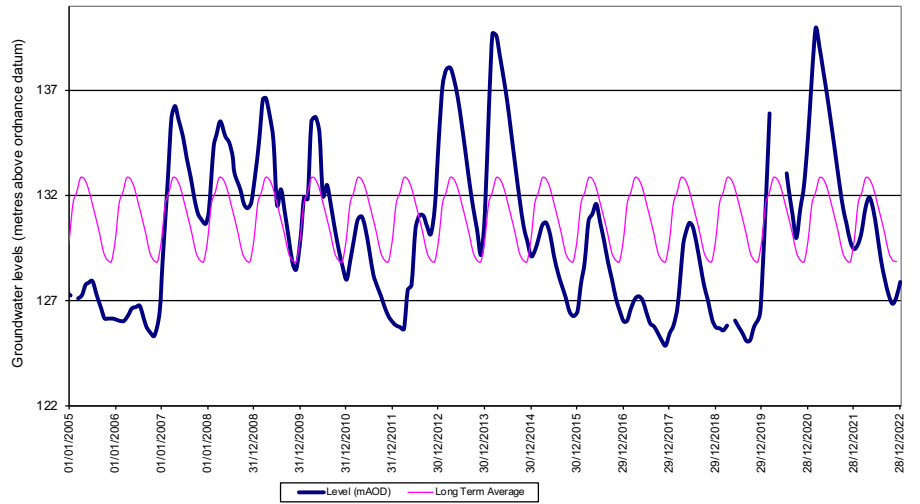


Months 2022-3	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [ $\pm$ average] (figures from Rothamstead)
October	127.30 [130.47]	101.0 [+19.7]
November	126.89 [130.43]	131.7 [+50.4]
December	127.16 [130.61]	67.9 [-7.7]
January	127.96 [132.54]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



We are grateful to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

From top:  
 Redbourn Golf Course – Ver just starting to flow 12.01.23 (note clean gravel, thanks to work by Paul Geary);  
 Porridge Pot still dry 12.01.23;  
 Porridge Pot flowing 16.01.23 ©Peter Hill;  
 Muddy waters, Redbournbury 01.23

Right:  
 A very wet Verulamium Park 01.23 ©JetBlackSquares Smartphone Photography Safaris



Walks

Spot the difference! At last, we have a brand new set of River Ver Trail signs to mark the route of the 28km walk along the River Ver from source to confluence with the Colne. It's over 10 years since the originals were put in place and, as you can see, they are long due replacement. The Society has funded nearly 50 eye-catching footpath flags and our friends and volunteers will be putting up these bright blue signs over the coming months. Many thanks to St Albans and Districts Footpaths Society, the Chilterns Conservation Board and others who have contributed to the cost.

If you'd like to discover the River Ver Trail and the eight other fascinating walks in the Ver Valley take a look at the downloadable maps at [riverver.co.uk/walks](http://riverver.co.uk/walks).



Red Azolla Weevils

The Red Azolla in the Dolittle Mill area, between Redbourn and Redbournbury, has disappeared for the winter. Together with the Environment Agency, we'll be watching the former mill tail race for signs of its re-emergence in the spring. The current thinking is that the Azolla eating weevils, released as a biocontrol solution over 10 years ago, emerge a little later than the plant and that might account for the proliferation of the plant last year. Although Red Azolla is a non-native invasive species, it prefers backwaters, and doesn't appear to pose a significant threat to the Ver.



Joe out looking for stories. ©Melanie Woods

Tales of the Ver

A lot of water has flowed under St. Michael's bridge over the years and as a member of the Society you are now doing your bit to make sure it stays that way for future generations. But what part has the Ver played in your life? Do you have a story that you would like to share with your fellow members about the river? It could be an amusing personal recollection, historical memories of the Ver or something you witnessed on the river that has rarely been seen. Whatever it is, we're like to hear it and perhaps publish it in a future newsletter or on the website for others to enjoy. Send me your story with photos if you have them to me. I look forward to hearing from you. Joe Randall, Secretary. Email: [joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk)

£250 donation

Many thanks to Matt Bigg and the St Albans Sixer summer event for choosing to donate £250 to the Society as a worthy local community group. We provided a number of marshals to keep the runners on the straight and narrow as they navigated between local hostelries. We'll be making good use of the donation to replace our ageing high-vis vests, worn as we work along the Ver.

Left: Hand-picked marshals ©Lee Wood

EVENTS

As the Newsletter goes to print, the details of Events in 2023 are still being finalised. However, there will be a litter pick near Redbourn on Sunday 26th February. Please check the website for full details of this and other events. [riverver.co.uk/events-list-2023](http://riverver.co.uk/events-list-2023)



Winter vole news: any wise Water Vole has been underground keeping warm!



## Butcher Bird

We had a very rare bird in the Ver Valley last month. When I say “we”, really it was just a keen photographer, Dave Hutchinson, who saw a distant bird land in an oak tree near the Redbournbury Fishery. Thinking it looked interesting, he took a couple of shots with his big lens and was astonished to see the image of a Great Grey Shrike on his camera display. It perched high up in a tree before dropping to the lower branches. Dave could not relocate the bird that day or the next, when others also searched for it too. It seems that this was just a bird flying through, probably on its way to France or beyond.

Apparently, this is the first Great Grey Shrike recorded in Hertfordshire since 2016. Great Grey Shrikes breed in Northern Europe but there are no proven breeding records in the UK. The old country name for shrikes is “butcher bird” because of their habit of impaling uneaten prey on the thorns of bushes. I have only seen this once and that was a mouse hanging from a bare hawthorn bush in the Brecks near Grimes Graves. Like most shrikes this bird has the black eyebrow and the hooked beak of a raptor which I think gives them an evil look.

Great Grey Shrike  
©Dave Hutchinson;  
Barn Owl ©Steven  
Brown; Snipe  
©Barry Trevis



## Snowy weather

The cold spell with about five days of snow cover will have made it hard for our local Barn Owls to find prey. Indeed, a dead Barn Owl was found at Kettlewells farm in mid-January and from the ring number we were able to determine it was one of a clutch of four we had ringed from a box at Verlam End near Junction 9 of the M1 in June 2019. It's now in our freezer(!) awaiting dispatch for an autopsy to find the cause of death. Encouragingly, I was very pleased to get a report of a pair seen together since the snow, near Redbourn Golf Club.

On the plus side of the cold spell, Snipe were attracted to the unfrozen edges of the Ver and I saw several near Redbournbury. I am always on the lookout for the smaller Jack Snipe and I have never had a really



convincing sighting in the valley. I did get to see one recently on the Lea at Lemsford where Barry Trevis, the HMWT Warden, took this wonderful picture of a Snipe and Jack Snipe together (note the contrasting size and bill lengths). Lemsford is a great place to visit as from the hides you can get really close views of typical chalk stream birds.



## OBITUARY

by JOHN FISHER



### Ernie Leahy 1942-2022

Sadly, as the autumn newsletter went to print, we received news of

the death of Ernie Leahy, just short of his 80th birthday. I have happy memories of many hours spent in fields with my best ever birding mate, Ernie who I first met when our kids started school over 40 years ago.

Ernie was a longtime member of the Ver Valley Society, serving on the committee for a number of years too. He was bailiff on the stretch behind the Chequers Inn along to Dolittle Mill.

He was also a Riverfly monitor taking a kick sample each month at several spots on the river.

Ernie was also an accomplished wildlife artist. Many of his pictures were of birds and other wildlife seen in and around Redbourn and along the Ver Valley. The illustrations were frequently used in the newsletter and the sharp-eyed will have also spotted them more widely afield, including on information boards in Verulamium Park and on Redbourn Common.

So many of us will miss Ernie but of course most of all Jan and his family. Thanks, Ernie, for sharing your knowledge with me over the years.

Right: A Bittern painted by Ernie





**Riverside Way.** In September the group met in Drop Lane to deal with two adjacent trees that had fallen dangerously across the river as well as starting to pollard the willow trees. It took some care to remove the trapped debris and allow more water to flow down the river and start to reduce the water level. The branches were cut back and either brush stacked or used to refill an adjacent deflector. Whilst this was going on in-channel the other team pollarded the first of the willows at the top of Riverside Way.

**October.** The team returned to Riverside Way and completed the



willows scheduled for pollarding. Inevitably they finished the morning at the bottom of the Way and it was a slow walk back!

**Sopwell Nunnery Green.** The main task November was to pollard the willows below the Alban Way bridge and to reduce the encroaching tree saplings on the riverside. Most of the activity is not in the cutting but in reducing the cut material so that it can be neatly brush stacked. We had a great team who did a good job with the brush.

**Redbourn.** Snow and the cold were the big challenge for the December

in-channel work by wiring in the tree trunks and the fill material into the deflector and cutting top-heavy willows in the channel. The other three teams made their way progressively down Riverside Way pruning the

## Spring 2023 Programme

**Sat 18th February, 10.00–12.00**  
Gorhambury. Venue & tasks tbc.

**Sat 18th March, 10.00–12.00**  
Frogmore. Venue and tasks tbc.

**Sat 15th April, 10.00–12.00**  
Venue & tasks tbc.

See [www.riverver.co.uk/current-year](http://www.riverver.co.uk/current-year) for latest details and if you'd like come along, please contact Richard Wallis in advance (see contact details below).

meet at the rear of the Chequers Inn. Most of the working party were concentrated on the opposite bank. The task was to reduce the encroaching alder to improve the light levels in the river. With no easy access it was a challenging task to negotiate a path through years of fallen debris. We also had teams cutting off precarious overhanging branches and checking the Red and Ver for significant blockages. Fortunately, all the teams managed to finish just in time to enjoy a celebratory Christmas drink.



## YOUR COMMITTEE

### Chairman & Communications

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### Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

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01727 868919 (*eve/wkends only*)  
[treasurer@riverver.co.uk](mailto:treasurer@riverver.co.uk)

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[mfrearson@ntlworld.com](mailto:mfrearson@ntlworld.com)

### Committee Member

Lee Wood  
07879 496220

### HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline:  
0800 80 70 60  
(Report all environmental incidents)

EA Floodline: 0345 988 1188

Flytipping reports  
St Alban's Council:  
01727 809019  
email:  
[wastemanagementservices@stalbens.gov.uk](mailto:wastemanagementservices@stalbens.gov.uk)

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):  
0800 376 5325