



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

OPEN MEETING

Tuesday 16th June at 7.30pm

St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ.
FREE event - all welcome.



River Restoration in the Chilterns

Guest speaker: Adrian Porter
Chilterns Chalk Streams Project.

Adrian is Project Manager at Chilterns Chalk Streams who are instrumental in many river restoration schemes across the Chilterns. As in the case of the Hamble Brook, which is a delicate but heavily modified winterbourne, a typical strategy might include 're-wiggling' the river channel for a better flow regime. Or perhaps, reprofiling the banks to reconnect the river to the surrounding landscape.



©Chilterns Chalk Streams Project
Left: Adrian – as seen on BBC Countryfile

Hear how these techniques have succeeded on our neighbouring rivers and how success was measured. Discover how they might be employed on the Ver over the next decade to improve the condition of our river and the biodiversity of its flora and fauna.

There will also be a short report on the current state of the river, notable wildlife sightings, the latest Ver Valley news and plenty of time for any questions from the floor.

SAVE THE DATES: NEXT OPEN MEETINGS

Tues 20th October 2026 AGM
Lower Hall Dagnall Street
Baptist Church AL3 5EE

Thurs 25th February 2027
Redbourn Village Hall
AL3 7LW

LATEST NEWS

Happy Birthday!

Join the celebrations!

Everyone is welcome to come along to Verulamium Park on **Sunday 21st June**.

Our gazebo will be up from 11am to 3pm, on the open area by the Ver between the Lake and Westminster Lodge. It's a drop in event with river dipping for all the family, a past and present display of VVS material and walkers arriving from the source and confluence around 1pm. Members, friends and non-members all very welcome. Why not bring a picnic?! See more at www.riverver.co.uk



Chalk Stream Challenge

We've launched the River Ver, Chalk Stream Challenge! It offers the opportunity for young people to explore their local river and discover why chalk streams are so special. The Challenge is suitable for schools, Scouts, Guides, similar groups and supervised keen individuals. Not only is there a suggested walk route along the Ver but there is also a choice of additional activities that are tailored to suit different age ranges. See p6 for more...



Bench Crowdfunder

We need your help to replace the much-loved oak bench overlooking the East Ford at Redbournbury. It is a favourite spot on the River Ver Trail, frequently used by walkers and cyclists to take a break by the water, and can provide a quiet place to contemplate the natural world. The Society is leading the fundraising effort and every donation helps. It'll take around £2,000 to pay for a substantial new bench and nearer £4,000 to fund and install an identical replacement. We will be making a significant donation from Society funds but please support this, if you can. Use the QR code or visit www.gofundme.com/f/redbournbury-river-ver-bench



Wet or dry?

It's all too easy to characterise the year's weather depending on the past few weeks. The rock hard paths along the river at the beginning of May suggest a drought. But don't forget, we had exceptional rainfall in January and February, cue the familiar overflowing Lake in Verulamium Park. In fact, over the past twelve months it's all evened out, with rainfall totalling almost 100% of the long-term average. Nonetheless, the Ver always seems to be on a knife edge; three months of wet or dry weather and the challenges quickly emerge. I, for one, will be keeping a nervous eye on the sky over the summer.

Brighter future

The surge in interest in the Ver and the unswerving energy of the Society and its volunteers hasn't escaped the notice of various stakeholders from the wider Colne catchment. With our encouragement and the work of the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project in particular, I hope that this can be turned into various projects to improve flow regime, water quality and habitat. Please make the effort to come to the Bricket Wood open meeting (Tuesday 16th June) to hear more about the opportunities that could be coming our way.

Two goodbyes

Two particularly good friends of the Society recently departed the local conservation scene.

Allen Beechey has left the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project for pastures new. However, we have already managed to tempt him back to train our water vole surveyors. Hopefully, we can continue to benefit from his extensive chalk stream knowledge.



High standards

Talking of the future, here's a special mention for Lee (supported by his team of helpers), as the mastermind of the schools' programme, which continues to go from strength to strength. 500 children have visited the Ver already this year and the next generation have been captivated, learning about the Ver and what makes a chalk stream so special.

More thanks go to Andy who has continued to provide activities for record numbers of volunteers who come to lend a hand. It was only fitting that in February we were joined by the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire as his "Nurture through Nature" year came to a close and he wanted to see our efforts for himself.



Access to nature

Ironically, with the prospect of much development in the South East, it's our desire that nature should be accessible that poses more danger to the river than any threat of abstraction. Take the SANG for example. That's a Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space to you and me. To spare the extra footfall at already pressurised beauty spots, many new developments have to have a SANG, so that their new residents have somewhere else to enjoy the outdoors and walk their dog. Take the case of Redbourn, it's within 12km of the Chilterns Beechwoods, a designated Special Area

of Conservation (SAC). Consequently, as part of their SANG, several proposed housing schemes have selected areas along the Ver, which itself is designated a Biodiversity Action Plan 'high priority habitat'. The quiet life that ground nesting moorhens and wintering snipe have been enjoying for decades will see much increased pedestrian, canine and cycling traffic. This will be thanks in part to the obligatory, access-granting, 4-metre wide crushed granite paths that are frequently part of the deal. A cruel game is certainly unfolding where one area is being protected at the expense of another valued habitat. Is this progress?

Josh Kalms People and Wildlife Officer for HMWT has left the Ver for the Lee. Notably, Josh rose from the ranks of the Action Group on Saturdays to become a water vole guru and peregrine spokesperson!

Our thanks to both of them for their help and support over many years and best wishes for the future.



Josh in the media spotlight
©Peter White



Allen in action

Results for the spring period remain excellent along the whole river, with no trigger breaches reported. A number of sites have recorded their best scores for many months, most including large numbers of Blue-winged Olives. On the other hand, the results on the River Red are confined to freshwater shrimps, rather than a wider spread of the 8 target species.

Luton Lane is enjoying ‘winterbourne’ flow after a brief dry river spell in the autumn. However, Pippa’s score here would be better, were it not for the local Robin who keeps stealing the insects from the tray before Pippa can count them!



Welcome to Wendy, our latest Riverfly recruit



Blue-winged Olive



Frogmore Damselfly nymphs ©Steve Preece

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

Our team of twelve sampled throughout the Ver catchment in both January and April. Generally, the results were of poor or moderate ecological status with high levels of Nitrates responsible for most of the low scores. Consequently, algae of various sorts were reported dominating the river bed in a number of places. More promisingly, several of the samples taken at the end of a very dry April resulted in a ‘good’ score (Redbourn and the Confluence at Drop Lane). It’s quite likely that the long period without rain led to less field run-off and higher quality groundwater dominating the flow.



E. coli testing

E. coli monitoring is up and running in Verulamium Park with a rota of six volunteers stepping up to help. Excellent water quality was detected in the first four tests in March and April. Monthly tests will continue and will be increased if high levels of E. coli are recorded. A page featuring all the results is on the VVS website – or will be by the time you are reading this!



Above, right: Algae-covered gravel at Veolia Road Bridge; E. coli analysing ©Alison Debenham.

CrowdWater launch

We’ve taken up the Environment Agency’s (EA) invitation to monitor the presence of flow in the winterbourne ‘temporary stream’ sections of the Ver. Using a combination of Society Bailiffs, Riverfly monitors and more, we’ll be building a long-term dataset of when and where the river is flowing, trickling, damp or dry – to give a better understanding of the Ver’s flow dynamic.



Verulam End, May 2026 ©Peter Hill

The winter rain precipitated a quick return of the river from Flamstead to Luton Lane and our Bailiff's records were quick to reflect the change once the heavy rain set in. There's no flow in Markyate, the sewage works being the head of the river at present! I note that although the river remains above average near the confluence, at the Hansteads gauging station, it is lower than the past two years. Please read my report in September to see whether we are approaching a drought or enjoying a brimming aquifer!

Plant life

The wet beginning to the year gave many plants an early boost. The bulbs planted in Verulamium Park in the autumn were no exception, with the Snake's-head Fritillaries and Wild Garlic putting on a good show for their first year. The Ver's Water Voles had no objection to the weather either, with plenty of soft banks to dig holes in. Sightings from the bailiffs include reports from the River Red in Redbourn, through St Albans and right down to Frogmore, not too far from the confluence with the Colne.



No flow in Markyate, May 2026 (right) River Hill Flamstead, May 2026 ©Phil Comfort



Water Vole



No fishing

The healthy river flows have led to better times for the Ver's fish. In turn, the Bailiffs are reporting an upturn in poaching activity along the river. St Alban's Council (SADC) do not allow fishing on their stretches through Verulamium Park and Sopwell. Fishing requires a valid rod licence and permission of the landowner. SADC, who will be installing new 'No Fishing' signs shortly, ask that any poaching is reported to the police. Meanwhile our bailiffs continue to remove any hooks, lines, floats and discarded tackle to spare the river's wildlife.



Snake's-head Fritillary



Wild Garlic



Poacher's fishing rod

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	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane	Brian Ellis*	brianparkstreet@aol.com
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill	Bruce Banfield-Taylor*	rjwallis104@gmail.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Steve Larkworthy	steve@larkworthy.me.uk
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Lee Wood*	ember.designs@yahoo.co.uk
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	rjwallis104@gmail.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	rogerphall@hotmail.com
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury	John Pritchard*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Rhona Macdonald & Gareth Pountain	rhonajmacd@virginmedia.com
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass	Vacant	rjwallis104@gmail.com
11. Chequers to Verlam End	John Fisher & Peter Hill	john.fisher2023@outlook.com
		members@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Cathy & Phil Comfort	phil_cathy_comfort@yahoo.co.uk
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.com

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Records, wet and dry

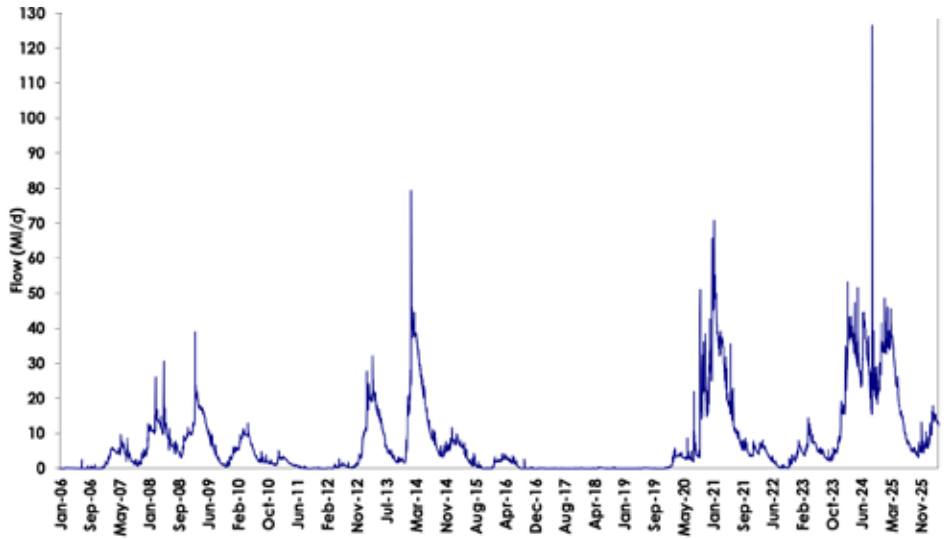
It's easy to forget that January and February were exceptionally wet months with rainfall at 132% and 148% of the long-term average, respectively. This was followed by March at just 58% of LTA and one of the driest Aprils on record, when just 2mm of rain fell. There's a lag of several months before any rain or lack of it, is reflected in the Ver's flow. Indeed, the river's flow has remained 'above average' throughout 2025 and 2026. Groundwater at Ballingdon Farm didn't begin to fall until mid-April which is fairly typical timing for our catchment.

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

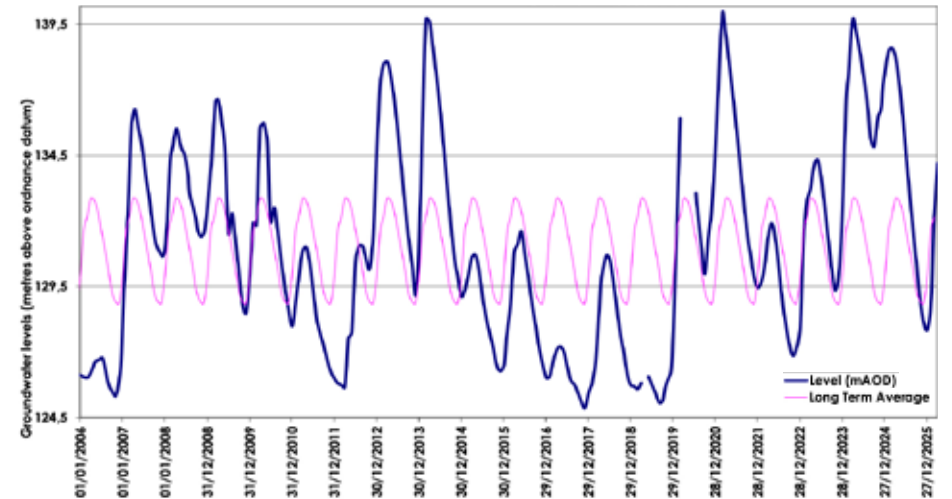


Months	Groundwater measurement at Ballingdon Farm, mAOD [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Rothamstead)
February 2026	128.71 [134.76]	84.4 [+27.4]
March	132.12 [135.58]	27.1 [-20.0]
April	134.20 [135.71]	2.2 [-51.8]
May	134.33 [135.30]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 2006 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm January 2006 to date



From top:
 Dolittle, April 2025
 ©Bill Wolvey;
 Redbournbury, February 2026;
 Hyde Lane, April 2026
 ©Nik Taylor-Pugh;
 Verulamium Park, April 2026
 ©Nathan Budd;
 Drop Lane, April 2025
 ©Charlie Kassel

Verulamium Park 21st June

Please drop in and celebrate our 50th Anniversary between 11am and 3pm. Our gazebo will be sited just downstream of the lake, by the Ver, opposite Westminster Lodge. There will be river dipping for kids of all ages, displays of the Society's history, the River Ver Trail walkers will be arriving (see below) and more. Members and non-members all welcome. If the weather's fine, bring a picnic!



Ver Valley Walking Festival

Join one of the ten Anniversary walks in June to enjoy the river and the surrounding valley. Sign up for the walk(s) you fancy – open to members and non-members alike. There's no charge but we would be delighted if you donated to the Redbournbury bench restoration fund instead.

Tuesday 16th June

The Source Walk 6.7 miles.
Start & finish Markyate High Street

Wednesday 17th June

The Upper Ver Valley 6 miles.
Start & finish Flamstead High Street

Thursday 18th June

The Winterbourne Walk 8 miles.
Start & finish Redbourn Common

Friday 19th June

The Redbournbury Walk 6 miles.
Start & finish Redbourn Common

Sunday 21st June

Walk from the Source at Kensworth Lynch to Verulamium Park 10 miles
or walk from the Confluence at Bricket Wood to Verulamium Park 5 miles.

Tuesday 23rd June

The Three Burys Walk 8 miles.
Start and finish Verulamium Museum

Wednesday 24th June

The Two Cities Walk 3.75 miles.
Start and finish Verulamium Museum

Thursday 25th June

The Watermeadow Walk 3.5 miles.
Start & finish The Clock Tower, St Albans

Friday 26th June

The Confluence Walk 3.7 miles.
Start & finish Riverside Way, Bricket Wood.

For more information and to book visit

www.riverver.co.uk/ver-valley-walking-festival-16-26-june-2026/

The Chalk Stream Challenge

With thanks to Lee, Laura from Chilterns Chalk Streams Project and to the Watercress and Winterbournes initiative for the original concept, we have launched the River Ver, Chalk Stream Challenge! It offers the opportunity for young people to explore their local river and discover why chalk streams are so special.

The Challenge is suitable for schools, Scouts, Guides, similar groups and supervised keen individuals. Not only is there a suggested walk route along the Ver but there is also a choice of additional activities that are tailored to suit different age ranges.

Two loan kits, paid for from donations to the Society – consisting of nets, buckets, trays, ID sheets and magnifying pots – are perfect for exploring the River Ver and discovering what lives beneath the surface.

Above: Take the Challenge; CSC Kit ©Lee Wood



Thankless tasks

Rummaging around in the undergrowth removing rubbish, this time in the vicinity of the M25 and the Ver near Moor Mill, is one of the many volunteering tasks that can go unnoticed. A big shout out to those who spent a damp March morning collecting countless bags of bottles, cans and unmentionables.



A friend of mine recently confessed to a seasonal stress that she calls “Wheatear Anxiety”. I must admit I could relate to this sentiment and would even extend the feeling to a more general “Spring Migrant Anxiety” that perhaps sets in as early as late February! It is a kind of searching, questioning angst that can beset anyone at this time of year as they look longingly for signs of Spring. For many people they find their focus in one particular detail of Spring – maybe a flower, or a particular smell but in my friend’s case, a bird.

For some this fixation may be the return of the Swallows from Africa or the Swifts, screaming across our skies as if they had never left. For my friend, and indeed often for me too, it is the Wheatear and until one is found, a state of mild agitation remains as the search goes on! Wheatears are spectacular birds and a resplendent male encountered in fresh Spring plumage is a feast for sore winter eyes. The males have a pale ash-grey back bordered with black wing coverts and a striking black eye-mask and white supercilium. These grey-black tones are then set-off against a beautiful peachy-cream breast fading to white underparts. They are a bold and colourful burst of freshness from Africa in what, up until that point, has usually been a drab winter scene.

Wheatears arrive back every Spring in late March through to April so why the angst? Part of it must simply be that they embody our broader impatience as we await Spring – a kind of ‘are we there yet?’ refrain. But maybe also there’s the



Wheatear and (right) Yellow Wagtail ©Rupert Evershed



Firecrest ©Christine Henry @happyhensnaps / Instagram

question in the back of our mind, will we see them. Last year saw no Spring records of Wheatear in the Ver Valley and indeed across the county they were scarce in Spring. Thankfully, this year is different with Wheatear appearing at Gorhambury on 24th March with several more since. The seasonal angst is relieved as a piece of the Spring jigsaw drops into place! Hopefully, your Spring is also unfolding in a similarly gratifying way!



Golden Plover flock ©Steven Brown



Common Sandpiper ©Alison Debanham

Notable Ver Valley 2026 Spring Records

- 26th Feb – 4 Bullfinches, Redbourn (JF)
- 1st Mar – 750 Golden Plover, Beesonend Lane (JP)
- 3rd Mar – Firecrest, Verulamium Park – seen subsequently
- 15th Mar – Green Sandpiper along Ver at Redbournbury
- 17th Mar – last sighting of long-staying Mediterranean Gull at Verulamium Lake
- 22nd Mar – Little Ringed Plover flew through Gorhambury
- 24th Mar – first 2 Wheatear, Gorhambury (JP)
- 1st Apr – Bullfinch, Gorhambury
- 5th Apr – first Willow Warbler & 5 Swallows, Gorhambury
- 6th Apr – first House Martin back at Shafford Farm colony
- 8th Apr – Whitethroat, Shafford Farm
- 9th Apr – Oystercatcher, Gorhambury (RH)
- 11th Apr – first Yellow Wagtail – Dolittle Mill (RE)
- 25th Apr – 3 Little Ringed Plover – Sopwell (AW)
- 26th Apr – last 2 Fieldfares, Gorhambury (JP)
- 29th Apr – Cuckoo, Frogmore Lakes (AW)
- 30th Apr – Common Sandpiper Verulamium Lake (AD)

Key: AD Alison Debenham, AW Alan Winn, JF John Fisher, JP John Pritchard, RE Rupert Evershed, RH Roger Hall

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

A warm welcome to the new members who have joined since the last Newsletter taking us to a new record number of 421 households:

James Leslie, Roseanna Larnar, Branden Williamson, Sheila Philpot, Jan Nelder, Claire Mellon, James Clarke, Sarah Daly, Keith Blackhurst, Jonathan Flowers, Peter and Anita Lindeman, Patricia Jennings, Chongkai Ma, Deborah Daniels, Clare Dale, Amy Gillon, Ian Brodigan, Mark Cairns, Charles Day, Ian Skilling, Karina O’Sullivan, Jacqueline Mills, Clare Booker, David Holloway and Nicola Griffiths. May you enjoy being part of the society and participating in its activities to enhance the Ver and its environment.



Not a member?

Only £7 a year to join by standing order.

Full details at riverver.co.uk/join-us



The year opened with a record turnout as thirty-five volunteers gathered at Riverside Way in **January**, bringing enough energy to tackle willow pollarding, refresh last year's brash berms, and map out future water crowfoot translocation sites. Litter pickers swept the banks while bird box teams worked at height.

Our mid-week Flying Squad targeted Markyate, to clear ten bags of rubbish and recycling from a persistent hotspot by the bridge.

February brought another thirty-plus volunteers to Riverside Way. Teams pollarded willows to let in summer light, repaired berms to improve flow and fish habitat, installed bird boxes for National Nest Box Week, built hibernacula, and inevitably collected far too much litter. A smaller mid-week Flying Squad tackled debris at Sopwell after high water swept rubbish beneath the bridge.

March began with seven hardy volunteers taking on the less glamorous task of clearing rubbish near the M25 at Moor Mill, filling bags with bottles, cans and a few unwelcome surprises. Thanks go to the Moor Mill Beefeater team for their warm welcome and use of recycling bins. Mid-weekers returned to Riverside Way to strengthen a woody berm, removing a fast-rooting rogue willow, and completing a new hibernaculum for amphibians and small mammals. The month ended with more than thirty volunteers working between Verulamium Park and Cottonmill Lane, giving the river and its wetlands a generous dose of care by reprofiling a wetland scrape, pollarding, coppicing, brash stacking, habitat improvement and litter removal. It takes many hands and many skills to keep a chalk stream thriving.

April saw the Flying Squad continue their efforts at Frogmore and Kensworth. Since

The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 20th June, Sat 18th July and Sat 15th August, with venues announced nearer the time. Sign up for email invitations to Saturday and/or midweek activity by contacting Andy Gardiner (see below). More details are at www.riverver.co.uk/current-year



its formation in November 2025, the team has contributed 93 volunteer hours and collected 63 bags of rubbish.

April's Saturday working party focused on Sopwell, where volunteers built dead hedges and insect habitats, installed bird boxes, supported both bankside and in-water tasks, crafted hazel "snow shoes" for future ranunculus work, began renovating the Ver Valley bench and information sign, and carried out water vole surveys alongside litter picking.

Thank you to all our volunteers for their dedication and hard work.



YOUR COMMITTEE

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Vice Chairman & Events Manager

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Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

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Committee Member

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Society Archivist Andy Webb

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
<https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/fly-tipping>

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):
0800 376 5325