

Costs of Thames Water's sewage tunnel will be more than Wembley and Olympics combined, argue detractors

The plan to build a £3.6bn "super sewer" to collect the millions of tonnes of raw sewage that overflows into the river Thames after heavy rain must be rethought to save money, the leaders of 14 city councils will tell environment minister Richard Benyon on Monday



In an unprecedented move, the councils have set up a commission of "independent" experts to examine Thames Water's case for the 20 mile long tunnel which could cost more than Wembley and the Olympic stadium and park together.

Benyon will be told that the scheme will cost all 14 million Thames Water customers - one in four of all ratepayers in England - an extra £10 a month "for life" and, in the councils' opinion, will not fix the problem of drains overflowing sewage into the river. The leaders argue that there are greener and cheaper alternatives.

"At a time when our public services are under intense pressure, Londoners cannot afford to effectively write a blank cheque for this scheme without proper scrutiny, accountability and debate. Doing nothing is not an option, but we need to consider the possibility that there are better alternatives. On a recent trip to Chicago I heard how very few world cities are approaching it in this way - many realise that a tunnel-only option is not the best solution," said Hammersmith and Fulham Tory council Leader Stephen Greenhalgh, who has led the pressure for a rethink and whose council will fund the commission.

The councils, who downplay the pollution caused saying it is only 5% of the flow into the river and only happens four times year, have appointed prominent Tory peer Lord Selborne, a former member of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and Lloyds bank director, to chair the commission which is expected to report back within months. "The key question is whether this multi-billion pound project is the best solution to making the Thames cleaner or whether there are sensible alternatives that are cheaper, greener and less disruptive," said Selborne.

Thames Water, who will also meet Benyon, counter that the 39m tonnes of raw sewerage that gets into the Thames every year is now an environmental health hazard, killing fish and carrying dangerous pathogens. The company says there are now as many as 90 incidents a year, with pollution getting worse as London experiences more frequent and intense storms.

"Alternative options would cost more, be more disruptive and would not meet the environmental standards required," said a spokesman.

Pressure for the tunnel to be completed is intense because Britain is in violation of Europe's urban wastewater treatment directive, which could bring fines of up to £37,000 a day. Brussels has agreed to suspend the fines because preliminary work has started on the project. It is uncertain how the EU would respond if a complete change of plan further delayed the project, or if the coalition government, on the back of the commission's report, ordered a public inquiry which could take many more months.

The scale of the disruption needed to build the giant sewer along the bed of the river and to connect it with dozens of outfalls along the river banks has angered many resident groups, who fear they will lose the use of public spaces for many years. Under Thames Water's current proposals, the park and children's playground at King's Stairs Gardens in Rotherhithe would be one of the project's main construction sites while a 100ft-wide shaft is dug to connect tunnels from other parts of the city. London mayor Boris Johnson and the botanist David Bellamy have objected to the super-sewer taking over the park.

The company hopes to apply for planning permission later this year and begin main construction of the Thames Tunnel towards the end of 2013, with completion in 2020 . However, it will need the consent of all riverside councils