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Open Letter to Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
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29 February 2024

Dear Michael

### **CAMBERLEY STINK 2023 – THAMES WATER REDRESS**

I trust you are keeping well, and especially safe in these increasingly turbulent times, for those in public service, such as ourselves. I note we are due to come together in March to discuss local issues and government actions impacting Surrey Heath residents quality of life, for example the withdrawal of the Household Support Fund imminently, leaving the most vulnerable, less secure at a very difficult time for all in our community.

I'm writing to let you know that I have declining confidence in Thames Water as a reliable negotiating partner and see limited prospects of coming to an agreeable redress for the 12,500 of our residents who lost their summer in 2023, due to the Camberley Stink.

Let's remember, and this is their own account from our External Partnerships Committee chaired by Cllr Rob Lee, that Thames Water took a deliberate decision to move unprocessed waste into an unsuitable facility in order to avoid an environmental or safety incident elsewhere, then proceeded to not provide suitable odour mitigations, reliable resident communications, or post incident community redress, previously promised to yourself and our councillors whilst onsite.

During our follow up meeting with Thames Water representatives, including Al Cochran from their Board, on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2024, you highlighted that OfWAT (Office for Water Services) advised that major incidents like the Camberley Stink, typically saw community projects supported, as a form of redress, in the range £50-100k.

I was clear at the time, that based on both communities losing 6 months of their normal quality of life due to Thames Water, our bottom line was £100k, or £8 per resident: this being roughly equal to the profit Thames Water would make in 6 months from the community in Watchett's and St Micheal's wards. Equally, this is dramatically less than typical court fines resulting from Environment Agency or Health & Safety Executive enforcement action following a major incident, that Thames Water deliberately avoided at our residents expense. My impression was you supported this position as being reasonable and I committed to constructively engage with Thames

Water representatives to come forward with a community project, or projects, to ensure both wards benefited, albeit they placed an additional barrier to progress by saying any community project supported had to link to their business, or the environment in some way.

Since our joint meeting, as you will be aware, on the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024, we had the publishing of the independent Blue Marble report for OfWAT and the CCW (Consumer Council for Water), which was utterly damning of Thames Water's performance throughout the major incident and clearly vindicates our shared position that £100k is the minimum acceptable redress acceptable. Whether residents took much solace from the late apology statement issued by Thames Water after the report publishing, is unknown, though their subsequent lack of action in making an acceptable redress makes the words appear hollow.

Having been passed down the hierarchy, and after three meetings, during which time detailed preparations and estimates were made by officers, we proposed two equal value projects to Thames Water, one in each ward, one linked to their imposed criteria and one not. The Watchett's project would see areas teaming with wildlife by ponds and woods, sympathetically enhanced, made more accessible, benches installed and educational boards provided. The St Micheal's project, where our options are more constrained, would see a multi-sports area built, as well as outdoor gym equipment added, to a much-loved park. Both would be transformational in their different ways improving health and well-being of impacted residents, which seems suitable given the reverse happened due to Thames Water's deliberate actions.

On completion of this preparation work, through alignment with local councillors, and supported by our dedicated officers' efforts, we were informed indirectly that the maximum the Thames Water Board would support was less than 50% of the low point of the range you advised OfWAT indicated would be appropriate in this case.

To put in context, £20k is the equivalent of a bottle of Coke per resident for a summer blighted and lost forever. We have rejected this proposal as insulting to all residents impacted and yet another example of the insensitivity of Thames Water in dealing with this incident, as it can't say sorry properly with good grace. It also does not help with the perception that Thames Water is a state endorsed monopoly that has been consistently under regulated for the benefit of its shareholders and at the cost of the nation's environment, be it rivers, beaches, or in our case, the very fresh air residents breathe.

I wanted you to be aware that I am disappointed with the current status of negotiations and await firm timely agreement from Thames Water to fund both ward projects proposed, up to a maximum of £100k, in line with the top end of the OfWAT recommendation, and consistent with the independent CCW report.

If you could also influence your government colleagues to tighten the lax regulatory system that allowed this to happen, to protect our waterways, coastal environment and ban the Camberley Stink forever, it would be a positive step forward.

Yours sincerely



**Cllr Shaun Macdonald**  
**Leader of the Council**