Catchments

What is a catchment?
A catchment is an area of land bounded by hills where water collects when it rains. As the water flows over the landscape it finds its way into streams and down into the soil, eventually feeding the river. Some of this water stays underground (groundwater) and continues to slowly feed the river in times of low rainfall. Every inch of land on the Earth forms part of a catchment. A water body is a discrete part of the catchment where all of the water that falls on the land in an area flows into a stream or river. The Stour catchment is made up of 38 water bodies.

Why are catchments important?
The idea of catchments is useful, as it is the standard functioning unit of the landscape: water, soil, plants and animals are all linked together within a catchment, and activities that occur within a catchment can affect the whole catchment. Healthy catchments are important for human survival, as it is where our food is grown and where all the water we drink comes from. Our catchments provide us with the space and resources drinking water, water for domestic use such as washing, agriculture, industry and recreation and wildlife (with the food and shelter to support it). How we treat the land within a catchment affects both the quality and quantity of water available to ourselves and wildlife.

What is a healthy catchment?
A healthy catchment is one that is able to function as a catchment should. It should be able to filter and clean water as it flows overland and be able to seeps through the ground, so that it can be used by plants. It should be able to support a healthy and diverse ecology. A catchment should be resilient to changes in the natural environment and climate change.

Managing catchments
To manage catchments we need to look at the close relationship between rivers and the land surrounding them. As water moves through a catchment either through the ground or over the surface, it picks up sediments (soil), nutrients and other pollutants such as oils from road surfaces and transports them into the river system. Understanding the interactions between the land and the water is crucial to the successful management of our essential water resources and the protection of our wildlife.