



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Rebecca Pow MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T 03459 335577
defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/defra

Cllr Martin Tett
The Gateway
Gatehouse Road
Aylesbury
HP19 8FF

Our ref: PO2021/29378/JA

10 January 2022

Dear Martin,

Thank you for your letter of 6 December to the Secretary of State about sewage discharges. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

Between 2020 and 2025, water companies will invest £7.1 billion on environmental improvements in England. Of this, £3.1 billion will be invested in storm overflow improvements. This includes £1.9 billion investment on the Thames Tideway Tunnel super sewer, as well as £1.2 billion of other investment throughout England.

However, I am aware that there is more work to do. I have made it crystal clear to water companies that they must significantly reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows as a priority. Going forward, I want to see water companies spending far more on better infrastructure, and far less on pay-outs to shareholders.

We're the first government to set an expectation on water companies to significantly reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows through the draft Strategic Policy Statement for Ofwat. We have enshrined this expectation in legislation as a new duty in the Environment Act.

This world-leading Act includes a raft of measures to deliver progressive reductions in the adverse impacts of sewage discharges from storm overflows on the environment and on public health.

The following key duties have been made law:

- a new duty on Government to produce a statutory plan to reduce discharges from storm overflows and their adverse impact, and report to Parliament on progress.
- a requirement for Government to produce a report setting out the actions that would be needed to eliminate discharges from storm overflows in England, and the costs and benefits of those actions. Both publications are required by 1 September 2022.
- a new duty directly on water companies and the Environment Agency (EA) to publish data on storm overflow operation on an annual basis.
- a new duty directly on water companies to publish near real time information on the operation of storm overflows.
- a new duty directly on water companies to monitor the water quality upstream and downstream of storm overflows and sewage disposal works.
- a new duty directly on water companies to secure a progressive reduction in the adverse impact of discharges from storm overflows.
- a new duty directly on water companies to produce comprehensive statutory Drainage and Sewerage Management Plans, setting out how they will manage and develop their drainage and sewerage system over a minimum 25-year planning horizon, including how storm overflows will be addressed through these plans.
- a power of direction for the Government to direct water companies in relation to the actions in these Drainage and Sewerage Management Plans. We will not hesitate to use this power of direction if plans are not good enough.

These legally binding obligations on water companies and Government will reduce pollution in rivers protecting wildlife and public health. Elsewhere, there are several other commitments Government has taken in this space including:

- In August 2020 we established the Storm Overflows Task Force to bring together key stakeholders from the water industry, environmental NGOs, regulators, and Government in order to drive progress in reducing sewage discharges. The Taskforce has agreed a long-term goal to eliminate harm from storm overflows.
- We have committed to reviewing the case for implementing Schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 in England, which would set mandatory build standards for sustainable drainage schemes on new developments, and which many have called for. This action has the potential to markedly reduce quantities of water unnecessarily entering the sewerage system.

Amendments from the Duke of Wellington during earlier stages of the Act called for complete elimination of storm overflows and the separation of the drainage and sewerage systems. Some members of the public have also wanted to understand why the Act does not require the complete elimination of overflows.

This is why we have previously used figures from early indications from the Storm Overflows Taskforce, which suggested that complete elimination would cost between £150-£600 billion.

The Taskforce's research has now been published. It confirms that complete separation would likely cost between approximately £350-600 billion, and that limiting the operation of storm overflows so that in a year of average rainfall they do not discharge to inland waters would cost approximately between £160-280 billion. This could increase household bills between £569 and £999 per year.

We are therefore looking at reducing the number of spills to achieve the maximum benefits for the environment and human health whilst minimising the impact on the public's water bills, as well as minimising the carbon emissions and the damage they do to our planet. Defra intends to set out the level of ambition expected by this in the New Year.

The EA recognises the sensitivity of chalk streams. Water quality and ecological failures of the Water Framework Directive are generally attributed to sewage treatment works, agriculture, rural land management and other discharges. Low flows, physical modification and urbanisation are also known to have an impact on water quality, ecology and fish.

In Buckinghamshire, the EA carried out investigations into incidents at the Thames Water Little Marlow Sewage Treatment works. The EA attended the site several times to assess the impact of discharges and compliance against the site's Environmental Permit including the installation of water quality monitors which provided data that the EA was able to access remotely. The EA worked with the Water Company to bring the site back into compliance.

I hope this has provided some reassurance to your constituent that we are committed to improving water quality and reducing harm from storm overflows. Thank you once again for taking the time to contact the Secretary of State about this important issue.



REBECCA POW MP