

Councillor David Rouane
Leader of the Council
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Milton Park
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Our ref: 15051
Your ref:
Date: 9 August 2022

By email:
David.Rouane@southoxon.gov.uk

Dear Mr Rouane

Regarding the availability of information on sewage treatment capacity and the volume of sewage discharges

Thank you for your letter of 20 July 2022 to our Chief Executive, Sir James Bevan. James has read your letter and asked me to respond on his behalf. He will also receive a copy of this response.

Ofwat are the economic regulators of the water industry and sewage treatment capacity is regulated by Ofwat, so your specific question should be directed to them. I have set out below the context regarding water company regulation and actions the Environment Agency is taking.

The Environment Agency supports efforts by all parties to increase transparency and availability of data to help all those concerned play their part and contribute to reducing pollution.

Water companies and sewage

Water companies must operate their assets in line with their environmental permits. Water companies are required to report any breaches of their permits. That is their legal duty and responsibility. If we become aware of discharges operating outside the permit conditions we will take enforcement action. That action will depend on the nature of the offence, up to and including prosecution. Any breach of the terms or conditions of an environmental permit is a criminal offence. In each case we look at all of the circumstances surrounding a breach and apply our published Enforcement and Sanctions policy. It can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environment-agency-enforcement-and-sanctions-policy>.

On 18 November 2021 we and Ofwat announced the launch of a major investigation into sewage treatment works, after new checks led to water companies admitting that they could be releasing unpermitted sewage discharges into rivers and watercourses. The press release can be found here - **Water companies could face legal action after investigation launched into sewage treatment works - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)**. A recent update on the investigation

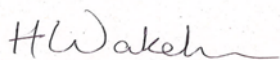
can be found here - **Environment Agency investigation into sewage treatment works - Creating a better place (blog.gov.uk)**.

Storm overflows are designed to discharge sewage to rivers or the sea at times of heavy rainfall or snow melt to prevent it backing up into homes and streets. But higher population and climate change means they will discharge more often. The Environment Agency is working actively with the water companies and others to ensure overflows are properly controlled and the harm they do to the environment stopped. Increased monitoring and reporting of storm overflows are part of the solution. It means everyone can see exactly what is happening, and will help drive the improvements and future investment that we all want to see, with £1.1 billion of investment already planned for the next four years.

Across the sector there are around 14,346 storm overflows operated by the 9 water and sewerage companies. Since 2013 we have required the water companies to install Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) on storm overflows (to monitor how often and for how long they are used). Water companies have an obligation to monitor all storm overflows by December 2023. We have published the **EDM storm overflow annual return dataset (data.gov.uk)** received from water companies. This shows how often and how long the monitored storm overflows operated during 2021. Water companies provided spill data for 12,272 storm overflows. The 2021 dataset also includes water company reasons for performance issues with monitors and reasons for high spill counts.

Monitoring of the sewerage network has increased 14-fold in the last five years - from 800 overflows monitored in 2016 to more than 12,000 in 2020. The remainder will be completed by the end of 2023. In the next four years water companies will undertake 800 investigations and over 800 improvement schemes to storm overflows. The Storm Overflows Taskforce – made up of Defra, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, Consumer Council for Water, Blueprint for Water and Water UK has agreed to set a long-term goal to eliminate harm from storm overflows. On 9 November 2021, the Environment Act became law and includes new legal duties to tackle storm overflows. The Government has consulted on its Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan and this is due to go before parliament in September, as required by the Environment Act 2021.

Yours sincerely



Helen Wakeham
Deputy Director - Water Industry Regulation