



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

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Our ref: PO2023/00813/RL

25 January 2023

Dear Cllr Jenny,

Thank you for your letter of 13 January to the Secretary of State about sewage pollution. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The volume of sewage discharged by water companies is unacceptable and I will ensure improving water quality remains a Government priority. I am committed to continue meeting the worst offenders over the coming months.

In August the Government launched the most ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows in water company history. Our new strict targets will see the toughest ever crack down on sewage spills and will require water companies to undertake the largest infrastructure programme in water company history - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years.

Our plan will protect biodiversity, the ecology of our rivers and seas, and the public health of our water users for generations to come. By 2035, water companies will have to improve all storm overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and improve 75% of overflows discharging to high priority nature sites. By 2050, all remaining storm overflows covered by our targets will also have to meet the new requirements on rainfall and environmental impact, regardless of location.

Overflows that are causing the most harm will be addressed first to make the biggest difference as quickly as possible, and water companies will be expected to consider nature-based solutions in their planning. We will review this plan in 2027 to consider both where we can go further, taking account of innovation and efficiencies, and how this programme is impacting bills.

We have increased the number of storm overflows monitored across the network from 5% in 2016 to almost 90% now monitored, and we will reach 100% cover by the end of this year. Through powers in the landmark Environment Act, we will also place duties directly on water companies to monitor the water quality impact up and downstream of all their assets. In the Storm Overflows Reduction Plan, we committed to commencing these duties in 2023. We take robust enforcement action against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has brought 56 prosecutions against water companies, securing fines of over £141 million.

Through our Strategic Policy Statement to Ofwat, we have set, for the first time, a direction to water companies that they must prioritise the environment, including by reducing sewage discharges and their adverse impact. We expect Ofwat to challenge water companies to demonstrate how they will achieve zero serious pollution incidents by 2030.

Since privatisation, water companies have invested £25 billion to reduce pollution from sewage, and water company investment in environmental improvements has been scaled up to £7.1 billion over the period 2020-25. This includes £3.1 billion invested in storm overflow improvements specifically (approximately 800 improvements to storm overflows), of which £1.9 billion has been invested in Thames Tideway Tunnel super sewer.

There should be no doubt about the Government's ambition and determination to prioritise storm overflows and sewage discharges.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact me about this important issue.



**REBECCA POW MP**