

22 June 2022

Ofwat response to wastewater company river water quality action plans

In March [we wrote to wastewater companies in England](#) asking them to set out how they were going to act to start tackling storm overflow issues and improve river quality as a priority to deliver an immediate reduction in harm and to rebuild customer trust. We have significant concerns about the excessive use of storm overflows and the impact this may have on local watercourses, biodiversity and communities. We have responded to these plans below, highlighting immediate commitments and areas for improvement, taking account of PR24 and Ofwat's ongoing [wastewater treatment works investigation](#).

Immediate commitments from wastewater companies

We are pleased to see that several companies have made ambitious public commitments to achieve reductions in the use of storm overflows, increase monitoring and improve transparency over the next few years. In particular, Anglian Water, Severn Trent, South West Water and Northumbrian Water all commit to achieve an average of 20 storm overflow spills per year by 2025 and to ensure company operations are not responsible for water bodies not achieving Good Ecological Status by 2030. United Utilities and Wessex Water have also made commitments to reduce use of overflows by 2025.

These commitments are a clear indication of what the sector can achieve in the short term to tackle harm caused by storm overflows. Storm overflows that are regularly spilling due to unresolved operational problems, including asset configuration, pump failures and power failures, are within companies' gift to resolve now and we expect all companies to address these issues as a priority in line with their legal duties to effectually deal with the contents of sewers. Recent data from companies as part of the [Event Duration Monitor Annual Return](#) (2021) highlights that the root cause of a significant number of spills can be traced back to operational and maintenance issues - this is not good enough.

We ask all companies, but particularly those that have not yet set themselves ambitious goals, to revisit where they can make immediate and significant gains through operational or maintenance improvements and how this could help them deliver better outcomes sooner.

Where storm overflow discharges are the result of companies failing to meet the legal obligations that we are responsible for enforcing, we will not hesitate to take action. All wastewater companies are still being scrutinised as part of our ongoing investigation on how

they manage their sewage treatment works and we have opened five enforcement cases against specific companies.

We were also encouraged to see commitments from some companies to engage more transparently and proactively on their environmental performance with their customers and key stakeholders. This is an important opportunity for wastewater companies to demonstrate leadership, ensure there is much greater transparency and rebuild their relationships with their customers. We will be working closely with CCW as they monitor company actions, and we will support them to challenge companies to do more where they can.

Challenging companies through PR24

We expect that the commitments made by leading companies will help to set performance benchmarks on storm overflows at PR24. Companies that fail to act now to reduce overflows may well face more challenging improvement targets at PR24. As part of PR24, we will consider how we can incentivise and enable companies to further reduce harm caused by overflows to achieve targets set by Defra in its Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan, along with their new storm overflow duties introduced by the Environment Act 2021, once in force.

Broader action

Looking ahead, a broad range of solutions will be needed to achieve the necessary reductions in harm caused by storm overflows, including addressing the volume of rainwater entering the system and the problems in the sewer system caused by unflushables.

As companies further develop and refine their plans, we must not lose sight of the opportunity to unlock wider environmental benefits. We would like to see companies take this opportunity to improve their ways of working, and look to innovate, work collaboratively and implement nature-based solutions where appropriate. Achieving this will not happen overnight so it is vital that Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans, WINEP and business plans developed for the price review are robust and enable companies to deliver wider environmental goals, and at the same time maximise the impact and value for customers, society and the environment.

Appendix 1 – Wastewater company data and commitments

	Storm overflow spills – commitments for 2025	River water quality	Data transparency
Anglian Water	20 spill average	Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers by 2030	
Hafren Dyfrdwy	None	Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers (no timeframe provided)	
Northumbrian Water	20 spill average	Have plans in place to eliminate all impediments to rivers achieving good ecological status caused by operations (no timeframe provided)	Near real-time data on all storm overflows by 2023
Severn Trent Water	20 spill average	Ensure storm overflows and sewage treatment works do not harm rivers by 2030	
South West Water	20 spill average	1/3 reduction in impact on rivers by 2025, and plan to target zero harm by 2030	Near real-time data on all storm overflows by April 2023
Southern Water	None	80% reduction in storm overflow spills by 2030 (no baseline provided)	
Thames Water	None	50% reduction in storm overflow spills by 2030 against 2020 baseline	Live sewage discharge notifications by 2023
United Utilities	1/3 reduction in spills against 2020 baseline*	Aim to deliver a significant reduction in impact caused by storm overflows and sewage treatment works by 2030	Near real-time data on all storm overflows from 2023
Wessex Water	25% reduction in duration against 2020 baseline**		Near real-time data on all storm overflows by 2024
Dŵr Cymru	None	Help ensure 420km of rivers in Wales and Herefordshire are improved to help achieve 'good ecological' status by 2025	Near real-time data on all storm overflows by 2025
Yorkshire Water	None		Near real-time data on all storm overflows by 2025

*Ofwat analysis based on EDM data (2020) – 39 spill average

**Ofwat analysis based on EDM data (2020) – 177,776 total duration of spill events

Appendix 2 – [Environment Agency data](#) alongside data from [Hafren Dyfrdwy](#)

	Average spills per storm overflow in 2020*	Total duration of spill events in 2020 (hours)	Average duration per spill in 2020 (hours)
Anglian Water	25	170,547	10
Hafren Dyfrdwy	27	12,340	10
Northumbrian Water	22	178,299	5
Severn Trent Water	27	558,699	9
South West Water	38	375,372	9
Southern Water	21	197,213	10
Thames Water	40	215,886	12
United Utilities	59	726,450	6
Wessex Water	30	237,035	8
Dŵr Cymru	34 (in England)	21,300 (in England)	5 (in England)

Yorkshire Water	30	420,419	6
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* [Event Duration Monitoring - Storm Overflows - Annual Returns - data.gov.uk](#)