

Policy and Performance Advisory Committee – 3 November 2022

Advance notice of questions to Southern Water.

Topic – Discharge into Rivers and Sea

Background –

Southern Water discharged sewage into local rivers and sea in Lewes District over 800 times in 2020, totalling over 11,000 hours of sewage discharge in just one year. Recent figures for 2021 show that on average, the Ringmer Waste Water Treatment Works was releasing untreated sewage into Glynde Reach which leads to the River Ouse and then the sea, for approximately 18 hours per week – 10% of the time. It is clear that releasing sewage into rivers is no longer an emergency-only situation occurring as a result of severe storms, but an everyday occurrence even in 'normal' rainfall, and that we are in a situation of cumulative overload on the sewage and wastewater system.

The Environment Agency has advised that storm overflows must only be used by water companies under strict permitted conditions that control their environmental impact. As background to this issue – please explain what those conditions are and if they have been met this year.

Questions:

- We see regular incidents of foul water being pumped out to sea and rivers which means that bathers cannot swim from many of the beaches along our coast. Southern Water has claimed that it has invested millions of pounds but in fact the situation appears no better than 30 years ago and is now a serious health hazard.
 - Why have discharges increased so much over the last few years?
 - Why is there no capacity in water infrastructure to handle sewage without discharging it into rivers and seas?
 - What is Southern Water doing to create capacity and stop this, and when will it be done? (Cllr Robinson)

- Considering once in 100-year storms are becoming the norm, does Southern Water think its current plans demonstrate successful service planning and who is responsible? (Cllr Robinson and Cllr Ross)
- What are the short/medium/long term plans to eliminate discharges and what is the timescale for these? (Cllr Boorman)
- Given the multiple sources of discharges after rain events in CSOs, drain holes, soakaways etc, what efforts are being taken to ensure that all the relevant bodies concerned are meeting regularly and as a matter of urgency to tackle discharges? e.g Highways Agencies, Farming bodies, Environment Agency etc. How does Southern Water monitor discharges, how is the monitoring calibrated, and how does Southern Water report to the public, regulators and Government on how the targets are met.? (Cllr Bird)
- In particular, what, if any monitoring, does Southern Water carry out of water quality on the Ouse itself and tributaries such as the Bevern Stream, and how often are those readings reported? (Cllr Banks)
- Ditchling wastewater treatment works discharged raw sewage for 225 hours last year. What plans do Southern Water have to tackle this? (Cllr Banks)

- *In response to the Lewes District Council Water Quality Motion November 2021, Southern Water made a commitment -*

'We're leading the industry on self-pollution incidents and making good practice to reduce pollution incidents by more than a half (compared with 2019 pollution incidents) over the next four years and zero pollution by 2040'.

Given the Ofwat fine of £150m for water companies announced on 4th October 2020 for not meeting targets for waste water compliance, pollution incidents and internal sewer flooding (with Southern Water one of the two worst performing having to pay £28 million back to customers in 23/24 bills) - how will Southern Water meet this commitment? (Cllr Bird)

- Is there a coordinated national strategy between water suppliers to address these issues? Is Southern Water seeking coordination from the Government? (Cllr Robinson)
- What actions are being taken to monitor and ensure that the many private and communal septic tanks that discharge into the rivers are technically up to date, upgraded, and monitored for pollution control? (Cllr Bird)

Topic – Financial Impact of failure

Background

Southern Water was prosecuted by the Environment Agency in 2021 and received a record fine of £90m for thousands of illegal discharges of sewage which polluted rivers and coastal waters in Kent, Hampshire and Sussex.

Southern Water bosses were handed bonuses of £1,719,500 in the financial year 2020-2021.

Questions:

- Raw sewage was discharged into the rivers and seas around our area 735 times - the equivalent of 6,060 hours of discharges. On what basis do shareholders continue to receive dividends and bosses continue to receive bonuses when failings occur? How is it right that this record of failure is rewarded? (Cllr Robinson and Cllr Banks)
- What is the estimated cost of the work being done to eliminate discharges? Is it cheaper to pay the fines, than to do the work? (Cllr Ross)
- If coastal and river towns and villages are financially impacted due to sewage discharge should they seek compensation from Southern Water for loss of tourist revenue and the ecological impact? (Cllr Robinson)

Topic – Communicating with the Public and other public authorities.

Background – The communication on sewage discharges does not appear to be working.

For example, when discharges in Seaford happened there was no information on the main Southern Water Website or Social Media accounts to communicate the danger to the public. There was information only on Beachbuoy app, which is still in development.

- How will Southern Water commit to informing the public when these events are happening? How will you inform people via your website, social media, and other channels to inform people or to protect people for the hazardous effects? (Cllr Boorman)
- Given recent legal rulings regarding the questionable data provided to the Environment Agency from Southern Water, can Southern Water explain how they are providing confidence around the data now provided regarding spillages.
- Will Southern Water set up a meeting with Town/Parish Councils and other stakeholders affected by discharge of sewage into waterways, where it can brief them on the plans for the future? (Cllr Boorman)
- How will Southern Water provide targets and updates to all those affected every few years on progress achieved – following the penalties imposed, and advise if the targets are being met or not? (Cllr Brett)

Topic - Capacity in the network

Background –

The East Sussex Environmental Strategy 2020 stated that East Sussex is an area of severe water distress, as demand exceeds supply. Please introduce this section by talking about what the company is doing to achieve a resilient and sustainable drinking water supply.

It is recognised that Southern Water only supplies drinking water to part of the district, the rest is from South East Water. How do the two companies work together?

Questions -

- When was the last time a reservoir was built? What plans are there to build new reservoirs? (Cllr Robinson)
- How much water does Southern Water deliver a day and how is the leakage of 88m litres of water a day explained? (Cllr Robinson)
- Can you tell us about your project with South East Water for water recycling?
- What has your 'Target 100 programme' achieved to date in terms of improving water usage? What are the next steps?

Topic – Impact of Development.

- Background – Lewes Local Plan Core Policy 10 requires development to “Ensure that water quality is improved where necessary or maintained when appropriate (including during any construction process) and that watercourses (including groundwater flows) are protected from encroachment and adverse impacts in line with the objectives of the South East River Basin Management Plan. Where appropriate, the local planning authority will seek the enhancement and restoration of modified watercourses.” (Plan May 2016 Part 1 Joint Core Strategy)
 - Currently, Southern Water is a ‘statutory consultee’ which means it is consulted about planning applications on sewage and wastewater. Responses are on a case by case basis and they do not assess cumulative impact on the system as a whole i.e. whether the development may increase the existing levels of sewage overload.
 - A motion approved by LDC in May 2022 – agreed that from then on Southern Water in its planning consultation responses for major development, would be asked to clarify which treatment works will be managing the sewage; and whether it has the information available to assess the impact on the number or duration of sewage discharges into local rivers or seas, and if it does have this information to share it (noting that this can only be requested not required).
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- How confident can you be that even under the smaller growth outlined in the existing Lewes District local plan there is capacity surrounding combined sewer overflows. I ask this in light of heavy rainfall causing capacity of pipes to be exceeded leading to flooding in peoples’ homes gardens, roads and open spaces – and raw sewage being expelled from Wastewater Treatment Works? (Cllr Banks)
 - What information is available to assess the impact on the number of sewage discharges into local rivers from a development, and how will the information Southern Water has be shared? (Cllr Banks)
 - How will you meet the request from the Council from the May 2022 – to respond in detail on each major development and which treatment works will be managing the sewage and impact on local rivers and seas of the development? (council motion)
 - In an area like **Ringmer**, Southern Water has plants already operating close to their maximum permit capacity, and which are also discharging untreated wastewater regularly (in Ringmer averaging at 18 hours a week) rather than purely in storm conditions. There is further major housing development under construction right now in Ringmer which will certainly add to the sewage load, so can you explain firstly why there is nothing in your current investment programme for this treatment works, and

secondly whether you have calculated what will be the impact of this new development on levels of untreated wastewater discharge. (Cllr O'Brien)

Topic – additional questions

Suggested additional Questions:

- How do you work with the Environment Agency, Natural England and other Government agencies to ensure that the quality of water is improving? How would you like the regulation of water companies and the water industry to improve going forward?
(Cllr O'Brien)
- How will you keep this Committee and Council informed of your performance in the next few months and years?
- Are you willing to join a stakeholder group looking at these issues in a constructive and collaborative way?