

Councillor Zoe Nicholson (Leader)
Councillor Stephen Gauntlett (Cabinet
Member)
Lewes District Council
Southover House
Southover Road
Lewes BN7 1AB

Date: 03 October 2022

By email to Sarah.Lawrence@lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk

Dear Cllrs Zoe Nicholson and Stephen Gauntlett

Thank you for your email of 28 June 2022 regarding discharges from waste-water treatment works into the environment. We understand your concerns and recognise that sewage pollution can be devastating to human health, local biodiversity and our environment.

The water quality and the ecological health of our rivers must improve. The main sources of pollution are agriculture and the water industry and there is a growing threat from plastics and forever chemicals.

Population growth, urban creep, infiltration and changing rainfall patterns have all increased the pressure on storm overflows over recent years. But we are not aware of any constraints on development due to lack of headroom for waste-water treatment works in Lewes District. This would have been considered in Lewes District's and South Downs National Park's Local Plans.

How we are influencing others and changing behaviours

Regarding the impact of discharges on the water environment, we are working with all those who want to be part of the solution. We are:

- Holding water companies to account to reduce pollution, tackle storm overflows and invest more of their profits into the environment.
- Working with farmers to support environmentally friendly farming that doesn't damage water quality.
- Working with the government to develop future laws and policy that will drive better water quality – including through the Storm Overflows Taskforce.
- Working with partners, such as the Ouse and Adur Rivers' Trust, to protect and restore water environments under threat.
- Leading the development of [East Sussex's Environment Strategy](#) and working with the East Sussex Environment Board to improve our local environment.

Environment Agency

Pevensey Office, Coast Road, Pevensey Bay, East Sussex, BN24 6ND
Telephone: 02084745684

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- Responding to serious environmental incidents to stop and reverse damage to our rivers and using reports of minor incidents to target our regulatory activities.
- Carrying out a major industry-wide criminal [investigation](#) into potential non-compliance by water companies at wastewater treatment works.
- Prosecuting the most serious polluters: in 2021 we prosecuted Southern Water for thousands of illegal discharges of sewage which polluted rivers and coastal waters in Kent, Hampshire and Sussex. Southern Water was handed a record £90 million fine. We also prosecuted Plumpton College in 2020 for causing the deaths of more than 1,500 fish, after management failings caused slurry to significantly pollute a tributary of the River Ouse.
- In the foreword to our [annual water company performance report](#), Emma Howard Boyd, the outgoing Chair of the Environment Agency, called for courts to impose much higher fines for serious and deliberate pollution incidents, prison sentences for Chief Executives and Board members whose companies are responsible for the most serious incidents and company directors struck off so they cannot simply move on in their careers after illegal environmental damage.
- Making the case for the funding we need to monitor what's happening to our rivers and coastal waters, enforce the rules that protect them, and enhance nature rather than just slow its degradation.

Action on storm overflows

Storm overflows must only be used under strict permitted conditions that control their environmental impact. We have significantly driven up monitoring and transparency from water companies in recent years, so that everyone can see what is going on. Through the work of the Storm Overflows Taskforce – made up of Defra, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, Consumer Council for Water, Blueprint for Water and Water UK – water companies have agreed to increase transparency around when and how storm overflows are used, by:

- making real-time data on sewage discharges available at bathing sites all year round.
- publishing annual monitoring data on their websites so that progress in reducing their use can be tracked. We will compile this data into an annual report that is easily accessible to the public. This data is also being used at an operational level to prioritise the most frequent spills for further assessment by our officers.

The [2021 Event Duration Monitoring data](#) across England shows the average number of spills per storm overflow was 29 times in 2021, compared to 33 times in 2020; 5% of storm overflows recorded spills of 100 times or more in 2021; and 13% of storm overflows did not spill in 2021. This is simply not good enough - water companies, including Southern Water, need to act now to reduce their overflows to the minimum possible.

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We have also asked all water companies to install new flow monitors on more than 2,000 wastewater treatment works to identify what is happening at those works during the sewage treatment process itself. This has led to the major investigation mentioned earlier and we have requested more detailed data from all wastewater treatment works.

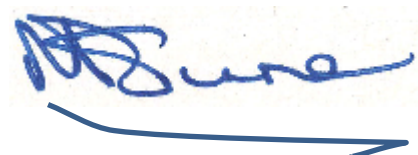
Investment improving our sewerage infrastructure

We expect water companies, including Southern Water, to deliver on the promised £4.6bn investment (2020-2025) to protect and enhance rivers and beaches, redouble their efforts to reduce pollution, protect more properties from sewer flooding and increase resilience to drought. Southern Water has developed [Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans](#) for the catchments in Lewes District's area.

We work with Southern Water across their geography and both coastal and inland improvements are included in their Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP). The current WINEP can be viewed [here](#). Please contact Southern Water directly to understand their programme of works. The actions we have requested are in the WINEP but Southern Water are responsible for undertaking those actions.

I hope that this clarifies the main actions we are taking to fulfil our regulatory role and to work with others to ensure sewage discharges and other sources of pollution to the water environment are reduced in Lewes District and across England.

Yours sincerely



MICHAEL TURNER
Area Environment Manager
Solent & South Downs