



Julie Beilby
Chief Executive
Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Date: 16 March 2023

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Dear Ms Beilby,

Re: Save our Rivers campaign

Thank you for your letter received Friday, 10 March 2023 relating to the Save our Rivers campaign. As I made clear in an open letter to the [Secretary of State](#), our past performance is unacceptable and we are focused on doing better for our customers.

Since being appointed as Southern Water's CEO in July last year, I've made a commitment to improve our environmental performance. We are investing in improving and upgrading our infrastructure including deploying 22,000 sewer sensors to detect and reduce sewer blockages which are a major source of pollutions. While we'll make notable gains between now and the end of this Asset Management Plan period (which finishes in March 2025) to reduce pollution incidents, storm overflows require a different cross-industry approach.

Reducing the industry's reliance on [storm overflows](#) will require billions of pounds of investment and many years to achieve. The law has always allowed for discharges, subject to a regulated permitting system. The way our Victorian sewers are built is that wastewater and rainwater are carried in the same pipe. When it reaches a certain height, it pours into another pipe and out through an overflow. This is part of the network's design to protect homes, businesses and roads from flooding when the network capacity is exceeded due to rainwater or groundwater infiltration.

We know they are no longer acceptable to our customers, local communities, stakeholders and my own colleagues in Southern Water. But preventing their use, without building in mitigating measures or tackling the challenges full on, would lead to catastrophic pollution in our communities. We'll therefore need the water industry, along with regulators, the Government and community groups to come together to achieve the targets set out in the [Government's Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan](#).

In the last 30 years, Southern Water has invested £10bn to improve and increase the volume of wastewater we receive and treat fully from 50% to 95%. We haven't paid any dividends to our shareholders since 2017. Our economic regulator, Ofwat, makes sure that we can only charge our customers a certain amount, which is benchmarked against our peers.

This investment has underpinned the improvement in the quality of our bathing waters from only 28% meeting public health standards, to 80 out of 84 now rated as 'good' or 'excellent'. We're now focused on treating the remaining 5% - measuring it with Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) on outfalls and learning more about the root causes so we can fix the issues.

I'll be laying out plans later this year on how we'll significantly [reduce storm overflows](#). In the meantime, we are working hard on our [Pathfinder](#) projects to find new ways to 'slow the flow' of rainwater entering the network, looking beyond simply building more carbon-intensive infrastructure that won't resolve the issues long-term. Instead, we are focusing on nature-based solutions such as wetlands, [rain-gardens](#), tree planting, greening our high streets and trialling rain harvesting devices, alongside our usual asset and capacity improvements. This will enable us to build a sustainable network fit for the future, which provides a wealth of environmental and social benefits too.

What we learn through working with local authorities, schools, businesses and third sector organisations over the next two years, we'll put into practice at scale from the start of the next Asset Management Period in 2025.

As we work to reduce storm overflows, we'll continue to be transparent with our customers, informing them about our coastal storm overflow releases through [Beachbuoy](#), our near real-time storm release activity tool. While sea water is not sterile and is impacted by several factors from storm releases, agricultural runoff to bird and animal matter and marine activity, we must and will be a catalyst for change.

My senior team and I welcome conversations with local authorities on how we can work together to help our communities and environment thrive. We would be happy to attend a full council meeting or overview and scrutiny committee meeting to talk through our plans. In the meantime our latest [stakeholder newsletter](#) sets out some of the innovative partnership work we're doing to improve our environment.

Please be assured my colleagues and I are absolutely committed to improving our environmental performance and achieving our ambitious goals.

Yours sincerely,



Lawrence Gosden
Chief Executive Officer

Cc Tracey Crouch MP
Tom Tugendhat MP