

**Report to:** Place Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** 24 November 2022

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** Storm Water and Sewage Discharges into the Sea and Water Courses in East Sussex

**Purpose:** To provide an opportunity for representatives from Southern Water to outline the actions the company is taking to reduce the use of Storm Overflows/Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) to improve water quality in East Sussex.

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***RECOMMENDATIONS: The Place Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:***

- 1) Consider a presentation from Southern Water on the work they are undertaking to meet their target of reducing the use of storm overflows/CSOs by 80% by 2030;**
  - 2) Consider the responses to the Committee's written questions from Southern Water, the Environment Agency and Ofwat; and**
  - 3) Consider whether the Committee requires further information on this topic.**
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**1 Background**

1.1 At the Place Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 23 March 2022 it was agreed that the Committee would invite representatives from Southern Water, the Environment Agency and Ofwat (the Water Services Regulation Authority) to a future meeting to discuss what actions Southern Water are taking to reduce the amount of untreated sewage discharged from storm overflows into water courses and the sea following a number of recent incidents.

1.2 Since that meeting there have been further pollution incidents, most notably one due to the failure of the Galley Hill Pumping Station, Bexhill-on-Sea, which received widespread media coverage. In this case and others there have been instances of equipment failure which have caused pollution incidents. Members of the public have questioned the resilience of the water treatment system infrastructure and whether it is being maintained at appropriate levels.

**2 Supporting information**

***What is the problem and what is being done about it***

2.1 In East Sussex there are two water supply companies, South East Water and Southern Water, but there is only one company, Southern Water, that deals with waste water disposal. The main sewage discharge problems arise from the use of storm overflows and combined sewer overflows also referred to as CSOs. In most of the United Kingdom, sewage from buildings is collected with water from roads, roofs, and other hard surfaces. During wet weather, the sewer network can become overwhelmed. To prevent sewers flooding homes and businesses, untreated sewage is discharged into waterways or the sea, via storm overflows or CSOs. This mainly occurs when the sewage system cannot cope with the excessive loads of water passing through the system, but the misuse of the sewer system for disposing of items such as wet wipes or fat, as well as oil and grease in drains, can also add to the problem.

2.2 In England, the Environment Agency issues [permits for individual storm overflows](#) which set conditions for when they can be used and how they should be monitored and maintained. So, under certain conditions it is legal for water companies to use storm overflows, usually after severe rainfall events. Southern Water makes available information on the use of storm overflows on its website, so the public can see in near real time where there have been discharges and their duration ([Beachbuoy \(southernwater.co.uk\)](#)).

2.3 Nationally the Government has published a plan to work with water companies and regulators to stop the harm caused by raw sewage discharges from storm overflows. The [Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan](#) was published on 26 August 2022 by the Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), as a requirement of the [Environment Act 2021](#) and sets the policy for England. The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan contains actions for water companies, the Government and the public to help reduce the impact of storm overflow discharges. Under the plan, overflows that are causing the most harm will be addressed first, and it will be reviewed in 2027 to see what more can be done. The plan says:

- 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 into high priority nature sites.
- by 2050, this will apply to all remaining storm overflows covered by the targets in the plan, regardless of location.

2.4 Southern Water has set up a Storm Overflow Task Force to tackle the issue of discharges and has set itself the target of reducing the use of storm overflows by 80% by 2030. The Committee will have the opportunity to hear from Southern Water on the actions it is taking to reduce the use of storm overflows through a presentation at the meeting.

### ***The role of the regulators***

2.5 The Environment Agency (EA) is the main environmental regulator responsible for setting, monitoring and enforcing environmental permits for wastewater discharges, as well as having responsibilities for monitoring water quality in water courses and the sea. Ofwat (the Water Services Regulation Authority) is the economic regulator which can play a role in water quality management by incentivising water companies through the price control determinations to deliver improvements in the environment such as water quality.

2.6 For wastewater discharges and water quality improvements, the EA sets the required action Southern Water must take to meet its environmental obligations as part of the Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP), which is funded through the Ofwat price control mechanism. Ofwat has also set performance commitments for Southern Water in relation to pollution incidents and wastewater treatment works discharge permit compliance. The EA has the power to prosecute water companies for breaching wastewater permit conditions and Ofwat has power to impose fines or other sanctions if water companies fail to meet the performance measures set for them.

2.7 The EA and Ofwat declined to send representatives to attend the Committee meeting but offered to provide a response to written questions from the Committee. The EA has also offered to provide a written statement and any responses are contained in appendix 1 (*to follow*) of the report.

## **3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 The Committee is recommended to consider the information in the Southern Water presentation on the actions they are taking to reduce the use of storm overflows and consider any written responses submitted by Southern Water, the EA and Ofwat. The Committee is also asked to consider if it wishes to undertake any further work on this topic or request any further information for presentation at a future meeting.

**RUPERT CLUBB**

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**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

None.