



# Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

The Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP  
Secretary of State Environment, Food & Rural Affairs  
Seacole Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF  
T: +44 (0) 3459 335577  
E: [correspondence.section@defra.gov.uk](mailto:correspondence.section@defra.gov.uk)  
W: [gov.uk/defra](http://gov.uk/defra)

11 December 2023

Dear Chief Executive,

Tackling storm overflow sewage discharges is a key priority for both the Prime Minister, myself and, most importantly, the public. The environmental and public health impacts of these discharges to our precious waterways, the water sector's failure to act and, in some cases, criminal behaviour, are unacceptable.

Building on the stringent targets set out in the government's Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, I expect water companies to go further and faster in two areas to secure a measurable reduction in sewage spills in the next 12 months.

## Accelerating maintenance work at sewer networks to tackle high spilling storm overflows

Last year, around 20% of frequently spilling overflows in England discharged for operational reasons such as a lack of regular operational maintenance or dealing with blockages. This is simply not good enough. Ensuring that your sewer networks operate effectively through regular maintenance is a core legal requirement for all water companies. Enhanced maintenance will reduce the number and volume of discharges.

As such, I would like all companies to respond with a better maintenance programme, eliminating this as a cause of storm overflow sewage discharges in the next 12 months, unless in exceptional circumstances. These programmes must include the specific operational maintenance improvements that you will undertake, so that no storm overflow is discharging due to a lack of operational maintenance by 1 December 2024. We expect companies to outline the spill reductions that you will secure in the next twelve months as a result of an enhanced maintenance programme.

To reiterate – this is a core legal requirement that you should already be delivering. With the regulators, I will be closely following the development and implementation of these overdue plans.

## Interim solutions at high spilling overflows

Secondly, I recognise and welcome the success of some water companies in identifying interim measures (in advance of larger scale improvement projects) to reduce discharges from discharging storm overflows in priority sites for the public, and for funding the work themselves. I would like to understand where companies see further opportunities to fund and deliver more interim solutions.

Any immediate opportunities to utilise technology and engineering advances in a cost-effective way to quickly mitigate the impacts on high priority and high public interest sites should be seized. These solutions will help to ensure the harm caused by the storm overflows is addressed rapidly while longer-term solutions are funded, planned and implemented as part of meeting your regulatory requirements and the targets set out in Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan targets.

I would like to remind you of the civic duty that you hold on water. Profit must not come at the cost of pollution, and the public rightly expect that this issue is addressed with maximum speed and ambition. Regulators will take enforcement action where companies breach their legal obligations relating to storm overflows.

I would be grateful if you could write with your plans by 19<sup>th</sup> December. I look forward to discussing these plans at a roundtable in the coming weeks.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steve Barclay', is centered on the page.

**RT HON STEVE BARCLAY MP**