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Dear Sir George

Thank you for your email of 22<sup>nd</sup> September to the Secretary of State on behalf of your constituents about sewage and storm overflows. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The Government has made it clear to water companies that the current number of sewage discharges is unacceptable. Tackling storm overflows is a priority, and this Government is firmly committed to delivering a step change on action to protect public health and the environment from storm overflow discharges.

This is why on 26<sup>th</sup> August we published [the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan](#) which sets out the Government's plans to revolutionise how water companies tackle the number of discharges of untreated sewage. Water companies will face strict limits on when they can use storm overflows and must completely eliminate the harm any sewage discharge causes to the environment. This will be the largest programme of work to tackle storm sewage discharges in water company history.

- Under the Plan: 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 to high priority nature sites;
- By 2050, this will apply to **all** remaining storm overflows covered by our targets, regardless of location.

Our Plan balances ambition with impact on consumer bills. Our Plan will see £56 billion capital investment, and an estimated £12 average increase in customer water bills between 2025 and 2030. This is also why the Government has introduced a review point in 2027, so we remain as ambitious as possible, while balancing impacts on bill payers. The Government will not hesitate to set faster delivery timelines for targets if costs reduce.

The Government included a duty in the Environment Act 2021 to publish a report on the feasibility of completely eliminating sewage discharges nationally. The [Storm Overflows Elimination Report](#) shows achieving complete elimination on a national level was unfeasible, due to the financial cost and the impact on customer bills.

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The report found that achieving complete elimination through separation of all storm water pipes from sewage pipes could cost up to £600 billion and increase annual water bills by up to £150 in the next price period (2025 – 2029). Achieving complete elimination using a combination of increasing network storage and using Sustainable Drainage Systems could cost up to £200 billion and see a water bill increase of up to £50 in the next price period.

Elsewhere, the Government is ensuring that further action is being taken in this space including:

- The Strategic Policy Statement for Ofwat also sets an expectation on water companies to make progressive reductions in the adverse impacts from storm overflows, including reducing their frequency and volume.
- Between 2020 and 2025, water companies will invest £7.1 billion on environmental improvements in England. Of this, £3.1 billion will be invested in storm overflow improvements specifically.

The landmark Environment Act has placed our ambition on a statutory footing, setting a duty for water companies to achieve a progressive reduction in the adverse impacts of discharges from storm overflows. The Act also ensures that water companies are more transparent, requiring the publication of spill data in near real time and the monitoring of water quality impacts upstream and downstream of all storm overflows and wastewater treatment works.

We have committed to publish a review on the case for implementing Schedule 3 of the [Flood and Water Management Act 2010](#) in autumn 2022, which would set mandatory build standards for sustainable drainage schemes on new developments, and that many have called for. This action has the potential to markedly reduce quantities of water unnecessarily entering the sewerage system.

We are holding the industry to account on a scale never done before. We have increased the transparency and now, almost nine in ten storm overflows have monitoring devices installed, and all 15,000 overflows will have monitors by the end of 2023. This technology provides vital information about the use of storm overflows, and has helped to inform a major industry-wide criminal investigation into potential non-compliance by water companies at wastewater treatment works. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has brought 54 prosecutions against water companies, securing fines of over £139 million. On 9<sup>th</sup> July 2021, Southern Water was handed a record £90 million fine after pleading guilty to thousands of illegal discharges of sewage that polluted rivers and coastal waters in Kent, Hampshire and Sussex. The fine will be paid solely from the company's operating profits, rather than customer bills.

There should be no doubt about the Government's ambition and determination to tackle this issue. We fully recognise that the current failure of water companies to adequately reduce sewage discharges is unacceptable and that much more must be done to protect our rivers.

Yours sincerely



**TRUDY HARRISON MP**