

22 February 2022

Our Ref: 33484064

Pollution

Dear Ms Sexton

Thank for your letter dated 10 February about the untreated sewage being discharged into the River Mole. We appreciate the river is a key landmark, and we recognise the concerns raised by the parish and regard all discharges of untreated sewage as unacceptable. We'll work with the government, Ofwat and the Environment Agency to accelerate work to stop them being necessary and are determined to be transparent. I need to start by saying clearly, putting untreated sewage into rivers is unacceptable to us, to our customers and to the environment. We're absolutely committed to protecting and enhancing our rivers and the communities who love them, and we want to make these discharges unnecessary as quickly as possible.

I should explain, the discharges are designed to happen automatically when, after heavy rain, more flow arrives at a Sewage Treatment Works (STW) than it can treat or store. We cannot control the amount of flow arriving at the works and trying to do so would cause flooding somewhere else, from the sewers backing up. For this reason, the majority of our STWs are designed so any surplus, above the amount the site is designed to treat, is diverted automatically to storm tanks and stored until incoming flows reduce and the works once again has spare treatment capacity. Discharges of untreated sewage only take place when the works is operating at full capacity and the storm tanks are full. When that happens, any excess overflows automatically to the river, because there is literally nowhere else for it to go.

Eliminating these discharges is not going to be quick, easy, or inexpensive and we welcome the continued support of our customers and regulators, who are as passionate about this topic as we are, as well as extensive collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders, to achieve the cleaner rivers we all want to see.

In terms of what we are doing about the problem, we are spending £1.25 billion over the period from 2020 to 2025 on maintaining and improving our wastewater network and STWs. This includes increasing treatment and/or storage capacity at several sites, including Mogden, Chesham, Witney, Bourton on the Water, Fairford and many others. Our plan for the following five years, which is currently being prepared, will include further major improvements towards our goal of eliminating untreated discharges.

In London, the completion of the £4.6 billion 'supersewer' will provide a massive reduction in the need for discharges to the tidal River Thames.

While we continue to make these improvements, we think it is essential let local people know when these discharges start and stop. We've committed to issuing real-time notifications of discharges at all of our 468 permitted discharge points, by the end of this year. This new system is currently being trialled at six sites around Oxford. Details can be found [here](#):

These notifications will help people to decide whether or not to take part in recreational activities, such as swimming, in rivers. We need to be clear that there are also other potential hazards in rivers, including bacteria and parasites in the water, from livestock and other animals, along with pollution from farming, industry and roads. This is why we support the government's advice on open water swimming, which can be found [here](#):

I do hope this letter is helpful in explaining our views on the unacceptability of discharging untreated sewage into rivers, why this happens and what we are doing about it. If you have any questions do please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Robyn Selley

Customer Relations