



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
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Dear Michael,

Thank you for your email of 7 October to the Rt Hon Ranil Jayawardena MP about Chobham Sewage Works. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Government has been repeatedly clear to water companies that the levels of sewage pollution at present are completely unacceptable and they must take significant and urgent action to tackle them. This is set out in the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, and we welcome your support of the plan.

One of the reasons that there are more reports of these discharges is that the Government has required water companies to monitor more of their overflow pipes. In 2016 only 800 were monitored, by 2020 over 12,000 were monitored and water companies are obliged to monitor all 15,000 by the end of this year. The Environment Act also places a duty on water companies to monitor the water quality up and downstream of all storm overflows and their assets, to determine their impact on our environment. Increasing the transparency of the impacts of discharges will give more tools and information for regulators and the public to hold the water industry to account.

We have and will continue to meet with underperforming water companies to ensure they are held to account against our environmental objectives. The Environment Agency (EA) and Ofwat have recently launched the largest criminal and civil investigations into water company sewage discharges ever, at over 2200 treatment works, following new data coming to light as a result of increased monitoring. Since 2015, the EA has brought 56 prosecutions against water companies securing fines of over £141 million. We have also boosted funding for the EA with £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity so that robust action is taken against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits.

We have also commissioned water companies to identify projects that could be brought forward to accelerate investments in water security, reduce storm overflows and address nutrient neutrality issues. With regulators, we are now assessing 127 proposals from 13 water companies against criteria of deliverability, need and additionality (as we don't want customers to pay twice for projects they should already be doing).

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact me about this important issue.

REBECCA POW MP