

Selaine Saxby MP
Member of Parliament for North Devon
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Sent via email

Monday, 18th March 2024

Dear Selaine,

Thank you for your letter dated 12th March 2024 regarding the Storm Overflow Action Plan (SOAP) and accelerated investment our region.

Having submitted our SOAP plans in the summer of last year, we are pleased that these have been published in one digestible map, so that we can be transparent about our plans to fix the issues surrounding storm overflows and pollutions.

You will be aware from the SOAP website and from conversations with myself and my team that our investment across the region will ensure that 100% of our storm overflows will meet annual targets of less than 10 spills by 2040, a decade earlier than Government targets. This is due to current and future investment, as highlighted in the PR24 Business Plan that we submitted to Ofwat in October 2023.

You have also highlighted the announcement regarding accelerated investment. We are pleased to be committing an additional £32m to tackle storm overflows and enhance environmental initiatives. This latest commitment will see SWW accelerate efforts in reducing storm overflows. I know that the current use of storm overflows is unacceptable and that we have a responsibility to change this, which is what we are doing. This investment is just one example of our commitment to go further and faster and our increased financial commitment and comprehensive initiatives underscore our dedication to environmental protection.

Our accelerated commitments include:

- **Better monitoring:** South West Water will increase monitoring of sewer levels.
- **A Fresher Sewer Network:** In 2024, South West Water will double efforts to clean the sewer network, following successful doubling in 2023, for a cleaner and healthier environment.
- **More Timely Repairs, Every Month:** More frequent repairs with an increase in monthly efforts to maintain and improve the sewer system.
- **Tackling Blockages Faster:** Doubling the installation of power relays at pumping stations, making sure to address and prevent blockages promptly.
- **Investing £25 Million in Cleaner Water:** £25 million will be invested to divert groundwater at 30 key wastewater treatment works, ensuring water is as clean as can be.
- **Keeping the Power On:** Doubling the servicing of generators at Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) to make sure everything keeps running smoothly.
- **Thorough Inspections for Peace of Mind:** Enhanced inspections at all WwTW to ensure better performance.
- **Expanding Storage for Stormy Days:** Adding significant capacity to the network to handle stormwater efficiently, making sure homes and businesses are protected even during heavy rainfall.

As you will be aware, over the past 18 months South West Water has implemented the WaterFit programme, focusing on healthy rivers and seas. The company was one of the first to have 100% monitoring of all 1,342 overflows and the completion of a £100 million storm overflow programme. The company has also invested in additional capacity, groundwater diversion, and wastewater flow schemes.

We have discussed previously how information is shared with the Environment Agency (EA) and outside groups and we now have a dedicated WaterFit Live team to manage and answer queries regarding bathing water quality and WaterFit Live alerts.

The EA's Pollution Risk Forecasts (PRF) only operate during the bathing season, as you will be aware. However, we are in the process of developing an intensive monitoring plan for up to 25 beaches across the South West, which will pilot daily sampling for 365 days from Spring 2024. This will help inform the EA's Pollution Risk Forecast model and may help better inform their decisions on PIRTs (for example, when a potential pollution may have a temporary impact on a bathing beach). In addition, sampling outside of the bathing season, particularly during the winter period, may impose some health and safety access issues regards sampling, and hence we will also be able to determine the practicalities of taking samples during more stormy conditions.

It has been well documented that storm overflows are a legacy of the old Victorian sewage system, a combined system which doesn't separate clean rainwater and wastewater from toilets, bathrooms and kitchens. Overflows were an essential feature of that system to prevent sewage from re-entering homes at times of heavy rainfall. However, rapid rises in population and development over the last two decades have meant that we are today managing a sewage system that requires wholesale changes and considerable investment.

At the point of privatisation, the South West had virtually no sewage treatment infrastructure. Raw sewage was routinely discharged into waterways through crude sewage outfalls. We have worked over years to eliminate these and whilst we now need to remove storm overflows from our operations, over 97% of sewage today is treated and safely put back into the environment.

This was the result of a £13 billion investment programme, which transformed the water quality in the South West. Today, all of our designated bathing waters meet the Environment Agency's stringent standards, compared to just 28% in the early 1990s. However, more still needs to be done.

I hope that this is useful to you. In the meantime, if you or your office require any additional information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with myself or Stuart Madsen-Pilcher in the Public Affairs team.

Yours sincerely,



Susan Davy
Chief Executive Officer, Pennon Group