

REGENERATION, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINTY COMMITTEE

9 JUNE 2022

MEMBER'S ITEM: SEWAGE DISCHARGES

Report from: Richard Hicks, Director of Place and Deputy Chief Executive

Author: Jon Pitt, Democratic Services Officer

Summary

This report sets out a response to an issue, raised by Councillor Osborne, concerning flooding.

1. Budget and policy framework

1.1. Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.1) Councillor Osborne has requested that an item on this matter is included on the agenda for this meeting.

2. The Issue

2.1. Councillor Osborne has requested that an item be placed on the agenda and the reasons are set out as follows:

2.2. 'A number of years ago we invited Southern Water to address the Committee on flooding and drainage matters. I am keen for a Member's item to be discussed on the ongoing issues of sewage discharges into the River Medway.

2.3. The issues of major discharges from Sewage Facilities is of particular concern given many Medway residents live, work and engage with our River. Indeed, it forms a key part of the Council strategy and is even embodied on our corporate logo for Medway Council.

2.4. I am keen for Southern Water to be invited to the Committee; via remote or otherwise; to engage on the following questions:

- From records, please supply your most recent estimate of the number of tonnes of sewage thought to be dumped into the River Medway

(Kent). Output: Number and date of record and the reasons (where applicable) since 2017

- From records, please supply details of actions undertaken by Southern Water in conjunction with other agencies or alone, in the past five years to stop dumping of sewage into the River Medway (including fines). Output: Details of action, date of action.
- A clear position statement on future ambitions and targets to reduce raw effluent discharge into the River Medway upstream of the Medway Unitary area and capital improvements to be undertaken.
- A commitment to provide Medway Council with up to date information so we can advise residents on discharges to safeguard public health so that we can advise our residents.

3. Director's comments

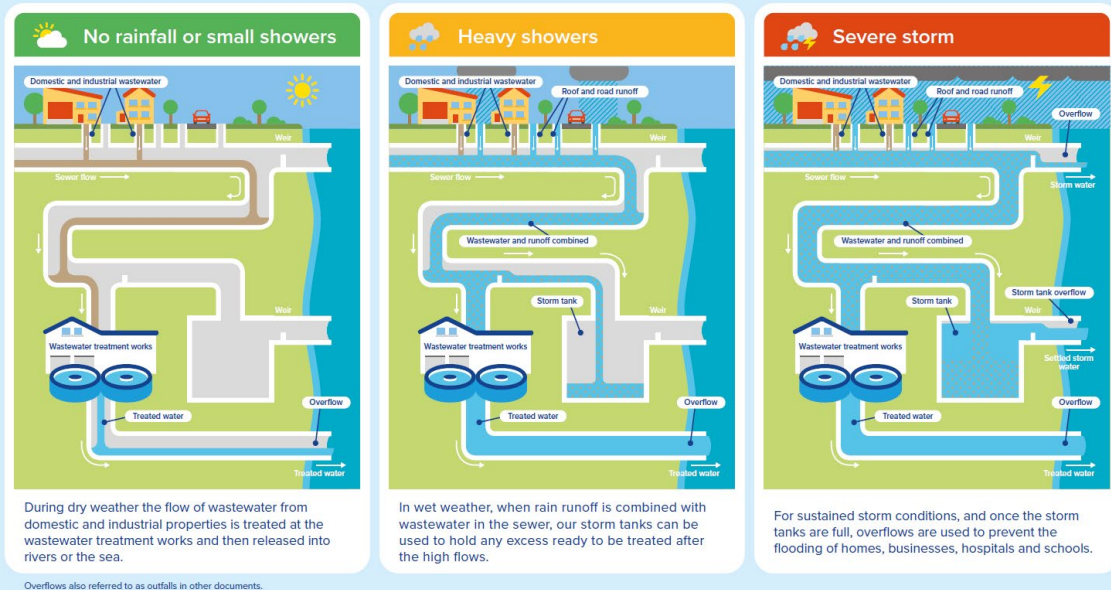
- 3.1. Southern Water has been invited to attend the meeting to provide a response to Councillor Osborne's questions. An initial response is set out below. Representatives from Southern Water will be in attendance at the Committee meeting to answer Members' questions.

4. Response from Southern Water

- 4.1. Sewerage undertakers are permitted by the Environment Agency to only release wastewater under strict conditions to protect homes, businesses. and the environment.
- 4.2. During heavy rain, local sewer networks can struggle to cope with the amount of water entering pipes and storage tanks. When they fill up, we use pressure relief valves built into the network, known as storm overflows, to stop homes and businesses from flooding. These overflows release excess water through outfalls into rivers and the sea.
- 4.3. If a wastewater treatment works receives more rainwater and wastewater than we're able to process, or store, our network could back up causing flooding via manholes, drains and toilets. To prevent this, where we can, we store and filter the surplus through a screen before releasing it into the environment.
- 4.4. Storm overflows typically occur during periods of heavy rainfall and can be around 95 per cent rainwater.
- 4.5. Storm overflows are part of the design of the sewers and are regulated by the Environment Agency. They're used in areas where the sewers were built to carry both wastewater, from homes and businesses, and rainwater from roofs, gardens and roads.

How do combined sewers and overflows work?

Using storm tanks and combined sewer overflows in different weather conditions to reduce the risk of our customers' properties from flooding



- 4.6. Further information on the steps we are taking to reduce the use of storm overflows can be found on our website at www.southernwater.co.uk/our-performance/storm-overflows
- 4.7. A document entitled 'Operational Sites River Medway' lists all sites which are able to release wastewater into the River Medway. All these sites are within a 200m radius of the River Medway. A second document entitled 'Wastewater Releases River Medway' shows all releases of wastewater into the River Medway between 2017 and 2020, together with details of the type of spill and duration. This information will be referred to during the meeting and can be provided to Committee Members after the meeting.
- 4.8. We know that to reduce storm overflow releases, we must find new and innovative solutions to deliver infrastructure that is more resilient and adaptable. That is why we set up our [Storm Overflows Task Force](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-performance/storm-overflows/storm-overflow-task-force) (<https://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-performance/storm-overflows/storm-overflow-task-force>) in November 2021.
- 4.9. The Task Force is responsible for delivering five pathfinder projects over the next two years, as well as delivering a regional plan to reduce storm overflows between now and 2030. To achieve these targets, the Task Force is establishing strong partnerships across our region.
- 4.10. We have also set an ambitious target to reduce pollution incidents to zero by 2040. We are one of the only organisations in our sector to have developed a pollution reduction programme based on extensive data analysis.

- 4.11. Our [Pollution Incident Reduction Plan \(https://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-performance/reports/pollution-reduction-programme\)](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-performance/reports/pollution-reduction-programme) sets out a detailed programme of activities.



4.12. Long term investment plans

- 4.12.1. We have started the development of the first [Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan \(DWMP\) for the Medway catchment \(https://www.southernwater.co.uk/dwmp/medway-catchment\)](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/dwmp/medway-catchment). It is one of 11 river catchment based DWMPs across our operating region covering Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. All 11 of these plans will inform a single overarching DWMP for our whole operating area.

- 4.12.2. DWMPs are long-term investment plans for drainage and wastewater management to ensure the sustainability of drainage infrastructure and systems so they meet the needs of customers and the environment now and into the future.

4.13. Our local and regional investment plans

- 4.13.1. We are committed to improving the South East's precious water environment and we take our environmental duties very seriously. We have come a long way since our transformation programme started in 2017 – and we are going further each day. You can find an overview of our investment plans for 2020–25 at www.southernwater.co.uk/our-investment-areas

- 4.13.2. Our online map provides an overview of our regionwide plans – you can also click on a specific county for a summary of what is happening in your area. For even more information, you can explore our [detailed interactive map \(www.southernwater.co.uk/our-investment-area\)](http://www.southernwater.co.uk/our-investment-area).

4.14. Open and transparent information

- 4.14.1. We are in the process of testing how inland bathing waters need to be included into [Beachbuoy \(https://www.southernwater.co.uk/water-for-life/our-bathing-waters/beachbuoy\)](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/water-for-life/our-bathing-waters/beachbuoy) – where we provide near real-time information about releases of stormwater or wastewater along the South East coast – with a view to rolling out next year and into 2024.
- 4.14.2. We have recently made changes to the appearance of Beachbuoy to make the map easier to understand. These changes are part of an ongoing journey – and more improvements are on the way; In the short-term, we are carrying out work on our sites and systems to improve the accuracy of our reporting. In the longer-term, we are working on adding some inland bathing waters to the map, as well as sharing data on the volume of each release.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1. There are no specific risk implications for Medway Council arising directly from the contents of this report.

6. Legal and Financial Implications

- 6.1. There are no specific financial or legal implications for Medway Council arising directly from the contents of the report.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1. The Committee is asked to note the response to the Member's item provided by Southern Water.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

None

Background papers

Operational Sites River Medway
Wastewater Releases River Medway