

Storm Overflows Taskforce – Terms of Reference

Background

The original sewers were designed by the Victorians: these contained one pipe to take away sewage, combined with rainwater when it rained. Modern sewers installed since the 1960s contain two pipes, so the sewage collected from homes isn't combined with rainwater.

Combining sewage with rainwater means that during and after heavy or prolonged rainfall or if the groundwater table is high, the capacity of combined sewer systems can be exceeded. When this happens, storm overflows act as relief valves to discharge excess sewage to rivers or the sea. This protects properties from flooding and prevents sewage backing up into streets and homes during heavy storm events.

A growing population and more frequent and heavier storms as a result of climate change have increased pressure on the system, increasing the risk of more frequent discharges of sewage into our rivers and the sea. Storm overflows can have environmental, public health and amenity impacts, which in turn can have adverse socio-economic impacts.

There is decreasing acceptance of any spill of untreated sewage into waterways. This is exacerbated where overflows spill frequently, cause very visible impacts such as littering, or are present in sensitive areas like chalk streams.

There is work already underway to reduce the impact of storm overflows, including monitoring of the frequency and duration of spills, investigations on the most frequent-spilling overflows and the development of Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans to explore current and future risks and potential interventions. This is supported by £3.1 billion of investment in the 2020-2025 asset management period.

But through collective action and a joint ambition we can go further. The Storm Overflows taskforce has brought together representatives from government, regulators the water industry and environmental NGOs. This document sets out the terms of reference for the taskforce.

Purpose

- To develop proposals to significantly reduce the frequency and impact of sewage discharges from storm overflows with a range of ambitions from reducing spills to phasing out overflows.
- To develop short term actions to accelerate progress to deliver an increased ambition on storm overflows.

Outcomes and timelines

- **Phase 1**

- To develop actions to accelerate progress to deliver an increased ambition on storm overflows over the short term (2020-2025).
- To set up a research project that will inform the second phase.
- To develop a joint narrative between all organisations in the taskforce to increase knowledge and awareness of storm overflows, outlining the work that is already being done/planned and further actions we are considering to meet the ambition.
- **Phase 2**
 - To develop proposals to significantly reduce the frequency and impact of sewage discharges from storm overflows with a range of ambitions from reducing spills to phasing out overflows.
 - To develop the mechanisms to deliver the increased ambition.

Membership

- Defra: chairperson and 2 representatives
- EA: 1 representative
- Ofwat: 1 representative
- CCW: 1 representative
- Water industry: 2 representatives - 1 from Water UK and 1 from a water and sewerage company
- Environmental NGOs: 1 representative from Blueprint for Water

Governance

- Within government, the taskforce reports to senior directors from Defra, Ofwat, EA and CCW.
- Within the water industry, the taskforce reports to the Environment Policy Advisory Group, formed of senior representatives from all water and sewerage companies in England.

Meetings

- The Taskforce will meet fortnightly, with exact frequency and timings of meetings at the discretion of the Chairperson in consultation with the group members.
- Quorum shall be the chairperson or their deputy plus two other representatives. Each organisation can provide suitable substitutes if the usual group member is unavailable.
- Meeting materials will be provided 1 day in advance of the meeting.

Stakeholders, observers and advisers

- The chairperson can invite observers and advisers to join specific meetings as needed.
- The taskforce will engage collaboratively with relevant stakeholders to consider their views