Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Robbie Moore MP
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Cllr Rachel Millward
Chair
Southern Water Local Authority Stakeholder Group
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Our ref: PO2023/25220/JM

6 February 2024

Dear Cllr Millward,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December to the Secretary of State regarding the Environment Agency (EA), water quality and leakage. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

I want to reassure you that improving the quality of our waterways is a Government priority. In April 2023, we published the Plan for Water which marks a step-change in how we manage our waters. This will deliver more investment, stronger regulation, and tougher enforcement to tackle pollution and clean up our water.

In the Plan for Water, the Government set out plans to create a new Water Restoration Fund. Water company fines and penalties will be allocated to the Water Restoration Fund to support a range of projects to improve the water environment.

Addressing your point about greater investment for EA enforcement, the Government recognises the importance of protecting the nation's natural environment and we are investing accordingly. For example, we have boosted funding for the EA with £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity and investigations so that robust action is taken against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits.

Furthermore, the EA can now use new powers to impose unlimited penalties on water companies for a wider range of offenses, following changes to legislation to broaden the scope of the existing civil sanctions regime and remove the previous cap on penalties. These changes will ensure regulators have the right tools to drive compliance and hold water companies to account.

If water companies are found to be in breach of their permits and failing to meet their legal duties, the Government, along with the sector's regulators, will not hesitate to hold companies to account.

Moreover, tougher enforcement demands increased monitoring. The Government directed water companies to increase their storm overflow monitoring in 2013 and 100% event duration monitoring (EDM) coverage was achieved before the end of 2023. The consultation on continuous water quality monitoring also sets out the Government's proposals to further enhance the monitoring of watercourses. The response to this consultation was published on 14 September 2023. This new water quality monitoring programme will directly measure the impact sewage discharges have on the receiving watercourse. It will show not just whether an overflow is discharging but also its impact on the watercourse.

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This data will allow water companies to better target their investments in infrastructure and will allow the Government and regulators to hold them to account.

Monitoring of storm overflows is now at 100% coverage. However, these Event Duration Monitors, like all mechanical-electrical equipment, sometimes fail. The Environment Agency uses 90% as a metric to measure Water and Sewerage Company monitoring performance and in 2022, 83.6% of EDM devices were able to measure storm overflow performance for at least 90% of the recording period. We consider that this is unacceptable and are introducing metrics through the Water and Sewerage Company Environmental Performance Assessment managed by the EA to drive improvements in EDM data return completeness.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,



ROBBIE MOORE MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

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