

Clean Rivers and Seas Task Force

Dear xxxxx,

Following on from my previous email dated 24 May 2024, regarding storm overflows, I am writing to provide you with answers to your questions, as promised.

1. Re SW managing and controlling the "Citizen Science Project"... Why did SW refuse Sussex University permission to run the testing in designated bathing areas in the Brighton region? Was it to ensure "no official external evidence" was produced?

Southern Water was not asked for permission from Sussex University to run testing in designated bathing waters in the Brighton region. Permission to test is, in any case, not Southern Water's to give. Southern Water does not control what happens at designated bathing waters, which are managed by the relevant local authority. Any agency, organisation or individual can embark on their own water quality sampling at any time (as long as it is safe to do so).

Southern Water was asked to fund a PhD in Water Quality via the office of a local MP, which was refused on the grounds that it was too expensive and that funding a Citizen Science led programme would be preferable. Southern Water is now working with a group of community volunteers who have been equipped with a water sampling device and necessary materials to conduct water quality sampling in Brighton and Hove. We are looking forward to the first independent data that the group obtain and working with them, the council and the MP to improve the collective understanding of local water quality. Similar groups are also conducting their own sampling programmes, which Southern Water fund but does not influence, in Eastbourne, Hastings, Whitstable and the Isle of Wight.

2. Why are you not testing as a matter of course? Should you not be doing this to protect the public and especially children on beach?

The Environment Agency is responsible for water quality testing during the bathing season. Southern Water's responsibility is to make sure it is not having a negative impact on the bathing water. There are several factors that influence water quality of which Southern Water is one. Pumping stations, sewers and treatment works must all be working properly and if issues are identified they need to be fixed. Reducing the amount of storm overflow activity is also critical.

3. How long does it take after a sewage dump to get back to swimmable water?

Southern Water's releases are monitored by the Environment Agency who are also responsible for water quality testing. The classifications that are subsequently attributed to each bathing water indicate to beach users the prevailing water quality. Southern Water does not offer bathing water advice but rather works with local authorities and regulators to provide information about storm water release and operational issues.

In regard to whether it is safe to swim, our guidance is aligned with that of the Environment Agency who state that: *"A short term pollution is bacterial pollution that occurs at a bathing water and is not expected to last for more than 72 hours."*

4. The company was debt free when it was privatised, how much cumulative debt interest has been paid by consumers since then? What percentage of my current bill goes on paying SW's debt interest?

Please find attached to this email further information about our investments since privatisation and a breakdown of customers charges.

5. After swimming on Monday, I had the runs for 36 hours, and it is not the first time. Why should I pay my Southern Water bill when I know, every time I swim, I am running the risk of getting ill?

We understand that people have concerns they have become ill as a result of swimming in sea water near a release. Sea water is not sterile, and already contains bacteria including E.coli from natural sources, as well as dog and bird mess. Additionally, agriculture, and farmland run-off can increase bacterial levels.

Our services and the right to charge for those services is a statutory right contained with the Water Industry Act 1991. Our Charges Scheme stipulates how and when payment for our services must be made. The services that are provided and for which a charge is made are the provision of clean drinking water and the removal of wastewater from customer's properties.

For customers who are unwilling to pay, we have no option but to pursue outstanding charges and details of these will be passed to our Debt Collection Team. If payment has not been received in full by an acceptable means within 14 days of the date of the bill or a Payment Plan has not been created, then our recovery process will continue.

This can result in additional charges having to be paid by you and if Court proceedings are issued, may eventually lead to High Court Enforcement of any Judgment debt. A Default may also be applied to your Credit File.

6 & 7. Southern Water are not interested in our welfare. Why not? Why do you think it is appropriate for Southern Water, responsible for the dreadful pollution of our sea and rivers (leak sewage in our seas for 146,819 hours in 2022), to have a stall at an ECO festival campaigning for clean oceans amongst other things?

We are listening to our customers and working very hard to provide the service that you expect and deserve. Like you, we care deeply about the environment and ensuring wastewater services meet the highest standards. Increased public interest in the sector means real changes are happening.

8. Is Southern Water blameless for ** in the sea? To what extent have the previous actions/ (non-actions) of Southern Water been responsible for **** in the sea? What can Southern Water do to prevent **** in the sea? Why was this not done earlier?**

Our performance has not always been good enough. We are over halfway through our [turnaround plan](#) to improve environmental and operational performance, which is underpinned by a record £3 billion investment between 2020 and 2025. We are significantly reducing the number of pollutions caused by technical failures on our assets and blockages in the network.

We have already deployed over 26,000 [sewer sensors](#) to detect and reduce sewer blockages before they become an issue. This is helping us to make steps in the right direction, demonstrated by our move from a one to two-star [Environmental Performance Assessment](#) rating by the Environment Agency for 2022. We know we need to go further than this though, which is why we are expecting to achieve three stars by 2025 and are working extremely hard to make this happen.

We have a dedicated [Clean Rivers and Seas Task Force](#) already delivering [Pathfinder Projects](#) to find new ways to 'slow the flow' of rainwater and groundwater entering the network. This is an industry leading approach. As well as improving our assets and storage capacity, the team are piloting several innovative schemes including: optimising existing assets (both publicly and privately owned) through partnership working, finding and fixing illegal connections in the community where rainwater is entering the wastewater network, installing nature-based solutions such as wetlands, raingardens, trees and greening our high streets to separate surface water/divert water back to the environment, and trialling rain harvesting devices to slow the flow of water in towns and cities.

Early results have been positive. During one pilot in Havenstreet on the Isle of Wight, where customers were offered slow-draining water butts, the collaborative effort with customers resulted in a 70% reduction of the local storm overflow. In another example, we have worked with the Department of Education to install hundreds of raingarden planters in over 90 schools across the south, removing tonnes of rainwater from school

sites every time it rains. For further examples and to find out what the Task Force has been up to, please visit our [storm overflow pages](#).

9. A staggering 98.6 million litres of water per day (from Ofwat website) were lost each day in 2021/2022. That is actually an increase on the previous year and has not changed at all in recent years. In dry summers this puts added pressure on wildlife when rivers are already low. In 30 years of monitoring leaks why is this figure still so high? With all your education work of telling people to use less water, why haven't you put your own house in order first?

We know leakage is a priority for the water industry, and this is no different for Southern Water. Our network is big and complex, involving 13,870km of water mains, and this brings many challenges when it comes to finding and fixing leaks.

Our teams are working seven days a week to find and fix leaks. We have increased the size of our leakage team, to help us respond to leaks quickly and we are investing more in new technology to find and fix leaks on our network:

In 2017/18 (Amp 7) the way that leakage was calculated was changed and standardised across the industry.

The 2018/19 increase was as a result of a freeze/thaw event, which engulfed much of the UK in March 2018. In events of this nature, we repair all large volume leaks as quickly as possible, but the detection and repair of very small leaks can take much longer as a water network will take time to settle down in its new operational state following any significant weather event. We successfully battled to recover leakage levels over the course of the next 18 months.

In the last few years, the impact of COVID has impacted the way in which customers have drawn water from our network. Residential areas where more people spent time at home, or have subsequently continued to work from home, have been responsible for the consumption of much more water than previously. The opposite was true in commercial premises. This placed a different strain on our network and contributed to leakage incidents.

10. Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource in the UK especially in South-east of England, what is your plan to tackle this and why have you not made big investments in water saving. Such as giving a free water butt to everyone with a garden, investing in compost toilets, using rainwater/grey water to flush toilets? Is this because it is a conflict of interest as many of us have water meters now so the more water we use, the more money you make?

We produce a long-term strategy for how we will meet the future demand for water across our entire supply area and this is set out in our Water Resource Management Plan (WRMP), which was published in 2019. All water companies must publish these plans every five years and our plan sets out our forecasts for water supply and demand for the next 50 years and the solutions we will need to implement to make sure we maintain supplies to customers. Our WRMP can be found on our website here: [Water Resources Management Plan 2020–70 \(southernwater.co.uk\)](https://www.southernwater.co.uk/water-resources-management-plan-2020-70)

In developing our plan, we have considered available surface and groundwater resources, the impacts of climate change and the needs of the environment. We based the core of our demand forecast on planned housing growth numbers from the published Local Area Plans and we have further extended these forecasts to 2069-70.

We recognise that the future is uncertain and so in our plan we have accounted for a wide range of possible scenarios for drought, climate change, population growth and water efficiency including looking at how we can maintain supplies through extreme drought events well beyond those known historically.

11. Given the fact that Southern Water not been investing in the proper infrastructure to deal with all our sewage and is £5.2 billion in debt. Where has all this money gone that we have paid on our bills and why have you now asked the regulator to raise water bills by 74%? At a time when so many people are already struggling to pay for essentials how can you justify this rise?

We are aware of media reports stating that Southern Water is asking Ofwat to approve a 91% increase in bills between now and 2030, we are concerned this risks creating confusion among our customers and communities about the future direction of bills.

Katy Taylor, our Chief Customer Officer, said:

“The figures being reported are loosely based on the bill rise proposals we put to Ofwat during the development of our draft business plan for 2025–30. Ofwat decides the charges our customers should pay, based on what we have proposed to deliver in our plan to meet regulatory requirements.

While we await confirmation from Ofwat on our plan and the correspondent increase in bills, the numbers quoted have been increased by a third party to take into account estimated inflation levels over the next six years.

We share everyone’s concerns about rising payments in the face of a cost-of-living crisis. We have been able to keep bills low, with the average combined water and wastewater bill increasing by only £2 in the past 10 years in nominal terms. We agree with our customers that we must now charge more so we can bring our bills in line with inflation, rising costs and, more importantly, so we can invest more to meet the expectations of our customers, and protect and enhance our environment.

For those that need support, we already provide a 45% bill discount to over 120,00 customers today and estimate that number will rise to around 200,000 by 2030”.

12. Given that Southern Water is largely owned by an Australian investment company how can the company be motivated to care for our water and our countryside in Sussex? Isn't there a conflict between producing a profit and having the responsibility of looking after our water? And the fact that we as customers cannot choose whether to use Southern Water, shouldn't water companies be nationalised?

Please find attached to this email more information about our owners. I do appreciate your concern that Southern Water is a monopoly supplier, but would assure you that the Government, through the 1989 Water act and subsequently the Water Industry Act 1991 (which set out the framework for the privatisation of the water Industry) ensured that the new companies were meticulously regulated with respect to price and service quality. Southern Water, together with all other water and wastewater undertakers, is monitored by the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the Water Services Regulation Authority.

Yours sincerely,

Aaron Severn
Clean Rivers and Seas Task Force