

Motion – Reducing discharges from combined storm overflows (CSOs)

Councillors Carol Birchmore, Cllr Donald Berry, Cllr Andrea Booth, Cllr Des Duncalfe, Cllr Glyn Marsden, Cllr Ken Simpson, Cllr Mike Smith and Cllr Mary Walsh.

Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) have been seen by the water sector as a necessary 'safety valve' in the sewer system to prevent sewage backing up during periods of extreme rainfall.

Experts within the water sector disagree on the level CSOs are being used within their permitted conditions, and how much they are abused as a cheap alternative to treating sewage.

CSOs combine raw sewage with other pollutants in rainfall runoff from pavements and roads, they discharge a wide range of contaminants such as faecal pathogens (including bacteria resistant to antibiotics), industrial chemicals, sanitary products, pharmaceuticals, microplastics, heavy metals, oils, and solids such as wet wipes. This cocktail, discharged into our rivers, has negative impacts including:

- Risk to public health through contact recreation in rivers and potential risk via airborne bacteria and pathogens.
- Chronic and acute effects upon aquatic wildlife.

The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan updated: 25 September 2023, relating to the Water Industry Act 1991, presents a target that water companies will only be permitted to discharge from a storm overflow where they can demonstrate that there is no local adverse ecological impact. It is difficult to believe that you can discharge into any body of water without an "adverse ecological impact", and it is important that this stipulation is not seen to only apply to rural idyl sites but rather to assign ecological importance to all water bodies. The report gives a target as limiting pollution, to ensure that all storm overflows would only be used in the rare case of unusually heavy rainfall, if at all.

In December 2023 the Government reported that 100% of storm overflows across the water network in England have now been fitted with Event Duration Monitors (EDMs). As a result of the monitors being fitted, the Environment Agency is now able to provide data for each of the CSOs. They can identify number of spills (discharges) and the total number of hours the spills lasted. The map makes it easy to view the data and it provides the location of each of the CSOs. The map shows that there are around 27 frequently used CSOs within Bury MBC which includes around 8 in Radcliffe positioned along the River Irwell. The data for 2023 shows increasing discharges compared to 2022, and 2021 when monitoring of CSOs was first introduced.

The data from the EDMs shows that the number of "spills" in 2023 from CSOs at Blackford Bridge WTW and the CSOs along the River Irwell in Radcliffe is 702, for a total duration of 6,845 hours, which is equivalent to 285 days or 78% of the time. Despite the weather in 2023 being wet, this does appear to be excessive and very worrying. It almost feels as though the River Irwell is being treated as an open sewer.

Unfortunately, The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan appears to concentrate on areas where open swimming takes place, giving them top priority status but surely it is not

acceptable to ask residents in densely populated areas to endure such high levels of pollution in our rivers.

The recent actions of the [Labour Councillors in Bury and Rochdale, and Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham, regarding the Pilsworth Landfill site](#)...~~The recent actions of the councillors in Rochdale regarding the Pilsworth Landfill site~~ show that Councils can raise awareness of environmental issues and ask large companies for action plans to address them. Through this motion we would like to achieve the same level of public consciousness of this issue and prompt the Government and other stakeholders to ask for action on this issue.

This Council welcomes the new Labour Government's proposals to take speedy action on this issue too. Including:

- Requesting Ofwat make sure funding for vital infrastructure is ringfenced and can only be spent on upgrades benefitting customers and the environment. In addition, that any money not spent is refunded to customers and not given as bonuses for bosses, dividends or salary increases.
- An expectation that companies to change their 'Articles of Association' – the rules governing each company – to make the interests of customers and the environment a primary objective.
- Proposing that customers gain new powers to hold water company bosses to account with new customer panels that will allow water users to summon board members and executives.
- Proposing, subject to consultation, that the amount of compensation customers are legally entitled to when key standards are not met will more than double.

This Council resolves to:

- ~~Request a meeting with United Utilities and local councillors to discuss concerns and explore local solutions to the discharging of sewage into rivers which either flow through or feed into rivers that flow through Bury MBC.~~
- ~~Write to our two local MPs outlining the concerns raised about the effective regulation of United Utilities and continued spills/discharges from CSOs.~~
- ~~Write to the Regulator the Environment Agency asking that priority is given to addressing the discharge into all rivers not simply those in river bathing areas.~~

~~Write to the Regulator the Environment Agency requesting direct engagement between concerned members to establish what they are doing to improve water quality in our Borough and prevent further unnecessary spills~~

1. Invite United Utilities to address members before a full council meeting to discuss concerns and explore local solutions to the discharging of sewage into local rivers.
2. Write to our two MPs to congratulate the new Environment Secretary for taking urgent action to address these concerns and request that water companies must stop discharges from CSOs by 2035.
3. Continue the exemplar relationship with the Environment Agency that we have and work with them to address these concerns.

