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Sent: Tuesday, August 6, 2024 9:40 AM

To: Info <info@witney-tc.gov.uk>

Subject: Our Ref: 33534783

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Our Ref: 33534783

Discharges into watercourses

Dear Sharon

Thank you for your recent letter dated 12 July, expressing your concerns regarding the ongoing sewage issues in Witney and the surrounding areas. I note you're wanting to understand our long-term plans to address the ongoing sewer discharges,

We understand the concern you've expressed about this and agree that we need to do much more to improve our infrastructure and reduce impacts on our watercourses.

Putting untreated sewage into rivers is unacceptable to us, our customers and the environment. That's why we're working hard to make these discharges unnecessary, even when they're legally permitted, with the help of the Government, Ofwat and the Environment Agency. This is something we're taking extremely seriously and you can find out more from the River Health Action Plan on our website [here](#).

What is discharged into the river

I should explain that these discharges are designed to happen automatically when, after heavy rain, more flow arrives at a Sewage Treatment Works (STW) than it can treat or store. We cannot control the amount of flow arriving at the works and trying to do so would cause flooding somewhere else, from the sewers backing up. For this reason, our sewage works are designed so that any surplus, above the amount the site can treat, is diverted automatically to storm tanks and stored until incoming flows reduce and the works once again has spare treatment capacity. Discharges of untreated sewage only take place when the works is operating at full capacity and the storm tanks are full. When that happens, any excess overflows automatically to the river, because there is literally nowhere else for it to go.

Eliminating these discharges is not going to be quick, easy, or inexpensive and we welcome the continued support of our customers and regulators, who are as passionate about this topic as we are, as well as extensive collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders, to achieve the cleaner rivers we all want to see.

In terms of what we are doing about the problem, we are spending £1.25 billion over the period from 2020 to 2025 on maintaining and improving our wastewater network and STWs. This includes increasing treatment and/or storage capacity at a number of sites, including Mogden, Chesham, Witney and many others. Our draft plan for the following five years includes further major improvements towards our ultimate goal of eliminating untreated discharges.

The Thames Tideway Tunnel, which is this country's largest-ever spills reduction project costing £4bn, has completed its construction phase and will become operational next year. The tunnel will intercept at least 94% of the millions of tonnes of sewage that overflows into the tidal part of the River Thames in a typical year from London's overloaded Victorian sewer system. It will also capture all of the 'first flush' from the sewers

after heavy rain. This contains the sediment that is built up during periods of drier weather and causes the most damage.

While we continue to make these improvements, we think it is essential that we let local people know when these discharges start and stop. So we have been issuing real-time notifications of discharges at all of our 468 permitted discharge points, since the beginning of this year. Our interactive map can be found [here](#).

These notifications are helping people to decide whether or not to take part in recreational activities, such as swimming, in rivers. We need to be clear that there are also other potential hazards in rivers, including bacteria and parasites in the water, from livestock and other animals, along with pollution from farming, industry and roads. This is why we support the government's advice on open water swimming, which can be found [here](#).

Dividends

Our shareholders are in it for the long term and are putting money into the business not taking it out. They have not taken an external dividend for six years (since 2017) to prioritise investment in improving service for customers and to protect the environment. Under the current five-year business plan (2020-2025), we will invest £2bn more than we will receive in customer bills.

To support the plan our shareholders subscribed to an initial £500 million of new equity in March 2023 and committed a further £750m in the current AMP, which means business period. In the next AMP (business plan 2025-2030) they have acknowledged a need to invest a further £2.5bn, subject to certain conditions. In aggregate, this would equate to total equity investment of £3.75 billion, the largest equity support package ever proposed in the UK water sector. We have also assumed no dividends are paid to our external shareholders during AMP8 (2025-2030).

Our PR24 plans can be found [here](#).

Thank you once again for raising this matter with us; I sincerely hope the information I've been able to share shows just how seriously we're taking this matter.

Contacting us in future

You may be interested to know, for future reference, you can report some of the most common issues, such as blockages and leaks, on our website [here](#). If no existing issues show up after searching your address, click on the map to start a new report.

For future reference, the quickest way to get in touch to report issues, or for any other advice, is to contact us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#). We're available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Alternatively, should you prefer to call us, our Customer Contact Centre is available on **0800 316 9800**. Lines are always open.

Yours sincerely

(Name Redacted)

Senior Complaints Advisor