



Huw.Thomas@thameswater.co.uk



0800 316 9800

Mon-Fri 8am-8pm,
Sat 8am-1pm

Cllr Bethia Thomas
Leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council

SENT VIA EMAIL

23 July 2026

Our Ref: 33574916

Dear Councillor Thomas

Sewage overflows – Vale of White Horse

I am sorry you have had to write to us about discharges of untreated sewage into chalk streams within our region. We understand the concern you have expressed about this and recognise why you would want us to bring forward the upgrading of our Sewage Treatment Works (STW).

I need to start by saying clearly putting untreated sewage into rivers and chalk streams is unacceptable to us, our customers and the environment. We are absolutely committed to protecting and enhancing our rivers, for the communities who love them, and we want to make these discharges unnecessary as quickly as possible.

What is discharged into rivers and watercourses

I should explain the discharges are designed to happen automatically when, after heavy rain, more flow arrives at a STW than it can treat or store, or when our sewer networks become overloaded. We cannot completely control the amount of flow entering our sewers or arriving at the works and trying to do so would cause flooding somewhere else, from the sewers backing up. For this reason, the majority of our sewage works are designed so any surplus, above the amount the site is designed to treat, is diverted automatically to storm tanks and stored until incoming flows reduce and the works once again has spare treatment capacity. Once our storm tanks are full, any excess overflows automatically to the river, because there is 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. We have extensive collaboration with local communities and other stakeholders; to achieve the cleaner rivers we all want to see.

Our commitment on this long-standing issue is a key part of our business plan, where we outline our intent to achieve a maximum of 17 spills on average, per overflow per year by 2030, with the overall governmental target to meet of less than 10 discharges on average, per overflow per year by 2050. This will require a significant and long-term investment of £18.4 billion.

Our ambitious plans for our new investment period (2025 – 2030) are based on an £11 billion plan for improvements to our wastewater operations, which will be directed to serve our customers, their communities, and the environment. This investment will support a reduction in the overall number of pollution incidents by 30%, and a cut to overflows of storm sewage by more than a third.

In London, the completion of the £4.6 billion 'supersewer', the Thames Tideway Tunnel, will provide a massive reduction in the need for discharges to the tidal River Thames. The final connections to the tunnel were completed in early 2025. It is now operational and the whole system is protecting the Thames, reducing sewage discharges into the tidal river by 95%.

If you would like to find out more information about how we plan to invest and improve in the health of our rivers you can find our Pollution Incident Reduction Plan and Storm Overflow Action Plan on our website.

While we continue to make these improvements, we think it is essential we let local people know when these discharges start and stop. Since January 2023 we have been providing near real-time notifications of discharges from our permitted discharge points. Our interactive map showing data for all these discharge points 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. However, 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 on the government website, [here](#).

STW upgrades

I understand your frustration under our current plans, the STW at Wantage will not meet HM Government's targets for storm overflows until at least 2040 and recognise your request to bring upgrades forward. Please be assured I am currently liaising with my colleagues across the business to obtain further information on whether this is something we are able to do. Once I have received more information, I will be sure to contact you again.

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

Yours sincerely

Huw Thomas

Head of Engagement – Thames Valley and Home Counties