

Your Ref: Motion – Raw Sewage Discharges

9 November 2023

Mr Harry Catherall
Chief Executive
Oldham MBC
Level 3, Civic Centre
West Street
Oldham OL1 1UG

via email to: harry.catherall@oldham.gov.uk

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter sharing details of a recent motion passed by Oldham Council.

I apologise for the delay in responding; it appears that your letter was posted to an address in Trafford, therefore, we never received it, however, our address is as shown above.

I am pleased to provide responses to the points raised by the Council and give some more context around the management of storm overflows.

Please be assured that we at United Utilities are listening and planning to do much more when it comes to managing storm overflows and their impact on the water environment. We have already brought forward plans to invest £1.5 billion to reduce spills and our investment proposals for 2025 to 2030 would see one of the largest environmental improvement programmes in the country.

Storm overflows have long been a feature of sewer systems since Victorian times, capturing and holding rainwater running off roofs, roads and hills. At times of heavy rainfall, this water, mixed with treated sewage, is released into the environment instead of the risk of it flooding homes, gardens and businesses. Storm overflows act as a pressure relief valve for the sewer system.

Because we have the biggest network of combined sewers, which take in both rainwater and sewage, more heavy rain running more quickly into our sewers means they fill up much more quickly and activate more often.

We have heard what people think - no one wants to see sewage, no matter how diluted, finding its way into rivers and the sea any longer. We recognise we need to change how the sewer network is designed to cope with this, especially with the impact of climate change with more intense rainfall and a growing population.

To tackle this, we are looking at how we can reduce the volume of rainwater which gets into the sewer system in the first place, slowing it down. By doing this, we will then have more capacity to store and then treat the additional water.

Reducing the frequency of storm overflow operation will take time. We have over 2,200 storm overflows and 79,000km of sewers and we estimate the cost to reduce spills to no more than 10 per overflow per year will be around £19 billion up to 2050. But we are already making improvements and, in the last two years, we reduced spills by 39%. Our proposals to 2030 will see us invest £3 billion to improve over 400 storm overflows, cutting spills by a further 40%.

In Greater Manchester we plan to invest £740m to reduce activations of 105 storm overflows, including 4 overflows in Oldham. In 2018 we spent £80m to upgrade Oldham's Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) to improve water quality in the River Irk, and we are currently investing £12.8m at Saddleworth WwTW to improve the ecological status on a stretch of the River Tame.

We are working in partnership with the River Tame Working Group to develop an action plan to manage catchment issues, including litter/fly tipping, pollution, and habitat improvements. Our River Rangers will also be working across the water catchment to improve the environment and river water quality and engage with local community groups.

In addition, with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Environment Agency, we have agreed to collaborate on the delivery of an integrated water management plan, with the aim of reducing the risk of flooding across the city region. Together, we have set out objectives and actions from now until 2050 to transform how we manage water as a natural asset to:-

- create climate resilient places, whereby our infrastructure will be resistant to our changing climate;
- respond and adapt to flooding and droughts, ensuring local people understand risk to themselves and know their responsibilities to help manage them;
- increase capacity and collaboration throughout the water management sector.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Council to discuss this matter and to provide more information. In particular, in addition to our own plans we are very keen to explore how we can work in partnership to better manage rainfall when it comes to new developments or managing highways. For example, we have already provided North West developers with over £40m in discounts over the past four years to incentivise the building of water efficient homes which release less water to sewers. We are keen to see more sustainable urban drainage solutions installed to help hold rainfall back.

We do not underestimate the key role United Utilities and, more generally, the Water Industry has to play in river health. Water companies are poised to invest £60 billion in one of the largest infrastructure programmes ever undertaken to meet new environmental requirements, as set out in the 2021 Environment Act.

This scale of investment, to transform how the wastewater network operates, is so large that it would not be possible for customer bills alone to fund it. The current regulatory model allows us to raise funds up front from shareholders, allowing us to get started straight away on the improvement work, with customers paying for the investment in small bill increases over the lifetime of the new infrastructure, which could be over 50 years or more. The rate that bills will increase will be decided by the economic regulator, Ofwat, to ensure that bills are kept affordable.

I trust my response provides further information about this important, challenging environmental issue. I hope this is something we can work on together to address.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Louise Beardmore', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Louise Beardmore
Chief Executive