

Information note - Storm sewer overflows and river pollution

In Essex and Suffolk, we have many low flow rivers that are gradually improving in water quality status, but amongst the issues still affecting them is the occasional discharge of untreated sewage from overflows into them as a hydraulic safety valve on sewerage systems and downstream water company treatment units.

These outlets are widely known about by the water companies and the regulator Environment Agency (EA), but only the worst examples have been rectified in recent years, with elimination of them in some circumstances. These combined sewage/storm overflow (CSO) systems date back to Victorian times and are an established practise across Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere for providing hydraulic relief in the sewerage network during high intensity storms. The system is designed to prevent flooding of private households and the overloading of sewage treatment works during times when heavy rainfall exceeds capacity, but are now seen as a serious source of pollution in many rivers. The problem has been exacerbated over time by increasing populations and urban development and, left unaddressed, is likely to become worse because of climate change and predicted increase in storms.

We welcome the introduction of a new Private Members Bill, put forward by Philip Dunne MP that seeks to increase the pace at which the worst performing outfalls are eliminated or substantially improved.

In Essex and Suffolk, the EA and others have progressed with significant schemes to eliminate the worst outfalls in some of the major towns, but we are anxious to see a year-by-year improvement in the reported overflow statistics, particularly when it is the small and medium sized towns that frequently discharge into minimal dilution rivers and watercourses. With some of these outfalls, which are often up to a century old, the provision of close aperture screening could be a first step prior to eventual elimination of them. The public can also play their part by decreasing the practise of not disposing of plastics and other non-degradable toiletries down the public sewers.

This is one of a number of issues where we continue to seek improvements to our very fine river systems. We recognise that diffuse pollution from agricultural sources and rural septic tank discharges, also contribute to the moderate to poor river water quality in many of the low flow river stretches across East Anglia.

This bill places emphasis on reporting and eventual upgrading of the sewerage systems across the area, but we also emphasise the need for improved public awareness of these issues so that avoidance of contact with contaminated river water on occasions can be highlighted. For our local water companies we will continue to encourage such sewerage improvements to be regularly included in their agreed spending plans, and we share the views of other environmental organisations that these works must take an increasing priority in future years.

Essex and Suffolk Rivers Trust, October 2020.