# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Wales Better River Quality Taskforce**  |
| **DATE**  | **05 July 2022** |
| **BY** | **Julie James, Minister for Climate Change** |

Water is one of our greatest natural assets and an integral part of Wales’ culture, heritage and national identity. It shapes our natural environment and landscapes, supporting biodiversity and our ecosystems. As a vital natural resource, water underpins our economy and the effective operation of infrastructure, including energy supply. Access to clean, safe and resilient water supplies is essential also in supporting the health and well-being of everyone who lives, works and visits Wales.

The Welsh Government Programme for Government (2021-2026) sets out the vision and ambition to address the climate and nature emergency. It commits to ensuring that nature and the climate are on the agenda of every public service and private sector business. This requires the integrated management of natural resources to maximise economic and social benefits in an equitable way while protecting all ecosystems and the environment. A thriving water environment is essential for supporting healthy communities, flourishing businesses, and biodiversity. We must act now to ensure that the sustainable management of our water environment benefits the people and communities of Wales today and for future generations.

The infrastructure in Wales to deal with our sewage is under pressure from climate change, changes in population density and distribution, and new development. Without action, these pressures will contribute to an increase in the flows at treatment works, risking an increase in the number of spills from storm overflows the potential to adversely impact on our water environment. Coordinated action across organisations is essential if we are to achieve a change and improvement to the management and environmental regulation of overflows in Wales*.*

Together, Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Ofwat, Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy (the partner organisations) recognise this need for action and have established a Better River Quality Taskforce (the taskforce) to evaluate the current approach to the management and regulation of overflows in Wales and to set out detailed plans to drive rapid change and improvement. Afonydd Cymru and Consumer Council for Water are providing independent advice to the taskforce, offering insight and challenge from a stakeholder and customer perspective.

The goals of the taskforce include

* Supporting the Welsh Government to achieve their environment and climate change ambitions
* Reducing the adverse impact of any overflow discharges on the environment by targeting investment and taking regulatory action where required to deliver improvements
* Working within the existing regulatory framework to ensure water and wastewater companies effectively manage and operate their network of sewers.  Regulators will use their existing powers to drive the right outcomes and hold companies to account.
* Gathering greater evidence of the impact on our rivers through improved monitoring of both the discharge and the receiving water and through this drive towards truly smart networks making best use of technology and real time control.
* Working with the public to tackle sewer misuse.
* Working with the public and stakeholders to improve the understanding and role of overflows in Wales

Tackling overflows is only one of many elements that need to be addressed if we are to improve river quality in Wales. In Wales the water companies have been working over a number of years to improve poorly performing assets, this includes improving monitoring to identify where further action is required. The Welsh Government has made provision for a multi-year multi-million-pound programme of works to improve water quality totalling over £40 million over the next 3 years. We are also driving forward collaborative working between stakeholders and regulators, for example through this taskforce and the nutrient management boards.

Overflows have been identified as a contributing reason for not achieving Good Status in 3.9% of waterbodies across Wales. This is why the Taskforce's immediate focus on overflows will be the first important step on the journey to coordinated and focused action in other areas that will ensure improvements in the sustainable management of the water environment in Wales. This work on overflows therefore forms part of a wider ambition to achieve long term and sustainable improvements to river quality. This ambition will be supported by co-ordinated action to address other areas and sector impacts, such as agriculture, sewer misuse, and pollution from disused metal mines that impact water quality in Wales.

The taskforce has identified 5 areas for change and improvement where additional action is required in order to drive rapid change, improvement, and investment to meet our goals.These plans set out clear objectives and measurable outcomes for delivering improvements to overflow management from the immediate through to the long term.

**Storm overflows**

Reducing impacts from storm overflows is important. We need a cross sectoral, holistic approach to achieve this. The Welsh Government is focusing on sustainable, nature based solutions to divert and remove as much surface water as possible away from the sewerage systems to increase network capacity.

Storm overflows provide a controlled point of relief at times of heavy rainfall. With more extreme weather events occurring, they perform a crucial role in reducing the risk of sewers flooding homes and public spaces, preventing sewage from flooding homes and businesses.

Removing all existing storm overflows would be a long-term multi- billion pound carbon intensive project and would not be the most effective way of improving water quality or be resilient to the increasing pressures from climate change.

We have already taken steps to tackle discharges from overflows. This includes making sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) mandatory on almost all new building developments. This will help relieve pressure on the network by redirecting and slowing down the speed at which surface water enters the sewer system. It will help ensure storm overflows are only used as a last resort.

**Working together**

Tackling overflows is one of the key components of the wider, holistic approach the Welsh Government is taking to improve water quality. We are working closely with delivery partners, regulators and the relevant sectors to identify and implement sustainable solutions which not only deliver on desired water quality for improvement outcomes but also support climate change adaptation, improved biodiversity and deliver against our net zero target.

To progress evidence-based catchment solutions, better information is required about discharge quality from overflows and the impact on the receiving water quality. Improved effluent monitoring at targeted sites, together with event duration monitoring already in place, will enhance evidence available and enable effective targeting and prioritisation of action. Current and future overflow monitoring must also work in parallel with monitoring programmes for pollution sources from agriculture, diffuse and other sectors.

I have been clear that we need to take an integrated catchment approach focussing on multi-sector co-operation and nature-based solutions to drive water quality improvements. By taking this approach and improving community engagement we will be better able to take account of local circumstances and priorities. This will help to address storm overflow discharges while also tackling other causes of poor water quality.

Citizens and local groups can play a key role in helping tackle water quality pollution through providing monitoring intelligence and public awareness. The taskforce will actively work with citizen scientists to understand how their work can support and inform a better understanding of the impact of spills on receiving waters.

These plans will have to adapt and adjust to new and emerging evidence, and public expectations The challenges we face cannot be under-estimated. This will be a long-term project however we need to take action now. All parties must work together and take a ‘Team Wales’ approach that we can tackle the multiple risks impacting our lakes, rivers and streams and deliver real improvements to the quality of our waterways whilst increasing our use of using natural ways of managing our wastewater. This transparency, openness and adaptability is exactly the response we need to water quality issues we face in Wales

I welcome the work of the Better River Quality Taskforce and thank the members for their contributions which has led to the publication of action plans setting out objectives and measurable outcomes for delivering improvements to the management and environmental regulation of storm overflows in Wales.

<https://gov.wales/wales-better-quality-river-taskforce>