# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE**  | **Publication of the Storm Overflow Evidence for Wales Report** |
| **DATE**  | **26 October 2023** |
| **BY** | **Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change** |

Our water sector is facing immediate and unprecedented challenges. We must achieve decarbonisation, climate resilience and reverse biodiversity loss, all against the backdrop of the current cost of living crisis.

Today, 40% of Wales’ waterbodies achieve good or better overall status under the classification of the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017, which rises to 44% when looking just at Wales’ rivers. These latest results are 8% higher than the first classifications in 2009. This represents steady progress, but 40% isn’t good enough and I know more can and is being done to improve the health of our rivers.

Our water quality is impacted by a huge number of complex and interrelated factors, including wastewater, urban runoff, misconnections, diffuse rural pollution, physical modifications, pollution from abandoned metal mines and invasive species. To achieve improvements in water quality, the Welsh Government is advocating for a ‘Team Wales’ approach. Our ambitions can only be realised if we have full engagement from government, regulators, and all relevant sectors in Wales working together.

Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) are a crucial part of our water network. They provide a controlled point of relief at times of heavy rainfall, performing a vital role in reducing the risk of sewers backing up into homes, businesses and public spaces. Nevertheless, it is clear the CSO network is struggling. We know from climate projections that, we must be prepared to face longer, heavier bouts of rain on a more regular basis in the future. Climate change together with population growth are placing additional pressures on the system.

Welsh Government has repeatedly said that removing all existing CSOs would be a long-term multi-billion-pound carbon intensive project. It would neither be the most effective way of improving water quality nor the most resilient to address the increasing pressures from climate change. We are concerned with ensuring that no CSO causes environmental harm to the ecological status of our rivers. However, it’s important to note that environmental harm is not the same as spill frequency and we must make sure we continue to focus on the right thing to make improvements to our environment. I recognise that more can be done to minimise where spills are necessary. For example, the Welsh Government has made sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) mandatory on almost all new building developments. This will relieve pressure on the network by redirecting and slowing down the speed at which surface water enters the sewer system. It will help ensure CSOs are only used as a last resort.

In 2022, the Better River Quality Taskforce (BRQT) was established to bring together key organisations to evaluate the current approach to the management and regulation of overflows in Wales. It is made up of representatives from Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Ofwat and water companies, with Afonydd Cymru and Consumer Council for Water providing independent advice to the Taskforce and offering insight and challenge from a stakeholder and consumer perspective. As part of the Taskforce's Environmental Regulation of Overflows Action Plan, the Welsh Government engaged environmental consultants, Stantec, to independently assess the existing policies of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) and Hafren Dyfrdwy (HD) relating to the control of Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) and explore alternative policy options.

Today the [Storm Overflow Evidence for Wales (SOEfW) Report](https://www.gov.wales/storm-overflows-wales-report) was published. The report does not contain recommendations, rather it compares the costs and benefits of different policy options for the regulation of CSOs. These options will help to inform the Taskforce in developing both achievable and affordable targets to prevent ecological harm in Wales’ waterways. The Report – and tackling CSOs – are only one aspect of the holistic approach we are taking to improve water quality and we need to prioritise action where it will have the most impact.

Our impact-led, evidence-based approach is also partly driven by the role customer bills will inevitably play in long-term efforts to tackle water quality, as highlighted by the Report. We need to strike a balance between taking effective action whilst keeping bills affordable, particularly given the current cost of living crisis. Welsh Government is very clear that we expect water companies to deliver the highest standards of service to their customers, and where water companies fail to manage pollution effectively, we expect the appropriate enforcement action to be taken.

However, we all have a role to play in protecting the health of our waterways. The average water consumption in Wales is higher than the current UK average. If we can reduce our consumption, we can support the reduction in CSOs operating. We can also help to maintain the sewer network and reduce blockages by not disposing of food waste or wet wipes through the sewer system. A UK-wide consultation has recently been launched on the banning of plastic containing wet wipes.

We need a resilient water sector that delivers for customers, the environment and wider society, today and for future generations. The Better River Quality Taskforce will now consider carefully the report and identify next steps. In the meantime, the Taskforce has issued the following statement:

*“We welcome the publication of the Storm Overflow Evidence for Wales Report, which signifies an important milestone in our Environmental Regulation of Overflows Action Plan. While the report does not include any recommendations, it does set out a series of evidence-based options for managing storm overflows in Wales. In order to achieve the results we need for managing storm overflows, there are no short-term fixes; we need to take a long-term approach. We will now carefully consider the options to scope out the appropriate next steps, including how the options could align with the proposed business plans for 2025-30 submitted by water companies to Ofwat on 2 October.”*