

Debate Pack
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Performance of South West Water

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 8 February 2023 at 9.30am on the performance of South West Water. The debate will be opened by Simon Jupp MP.

Regulatory and policy framework

There are three main regulatory bodies that monitor the performance of water companies in England:

- Ofwat, the economic regulator;
- The Environment Agency, the environmental regulator; and
- The Drinking Water Inspectorate, the drinking water quality regulator.

As part of its role as economic regulator Ofwat limits the prices that water companies can charge customers. Prices are reviewed every five years and, during the review process, water companies commit to delivering certain service levels. Performance commitments cover various areas, including customer service and environmental protection.

The Government provides policy direction to Ofwat through strategic policy statements, which set long-term priorities for the water industry. Ofwat must act in accordance with the statements when carrying out its duties, including when agreeing performance commitments with water companies.

Water companies must also comply with a range of environmental legislation and targets. For example, the [Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan](#) requires water companies to eliminate the adverse environmental impact of sewage discharges by 2050.

Assessments of South West Water's performance

Ofwat and the Environment Agency publish annual reports measuring water companies' performance against their performance level commitments and environmental obligations.

In their most recent reports, covering performance in 2021, both regulators gave South West Water (SWW) their [lowest performance rating](#). They

highlighted the number of pollution incidents as a particular area of concern. SWW was also criticised for a [lack of capital investment](#).

As a result of Ofwat's assessment the company will be required to pay a [fine of £13.3 million](#) in the form of lower bills for consumers.

1 Background

1.1 Regulation of the water industry in England

The water industry is highly regulated. All water companies in England and Wales hold an ‘appointment’ as a water undertaker (or sewerage undertaker as relevant), which is subject to conditions with which the companies must comply. This is also referred to as a licence. Copies of each undertaker’s licence are available on the Water Services Regulation Authority’s (Ofwat’s) [webpage on licences](#). Ofwat, the economic regulator for England and Wales, is responsible for enforcing the licence conditions.

In addition to their licence conditions, water companies must comply with a range of water quality, environmental and economic legislation. There are three main regulatory bodies that monitor performance and enforce compliance by companies:

- Ofwat sets limits on the prices that water companies can charge customers, which are reviewed every 5-years. The price review process is the main regulatory tool to incentivise companies to deliver on performance levels on, for example, customer service and environmental protection. Companies must submit business plans to Ofwat setting out how they will meet their agreed performance standards and statutory obligations. The current price review covers the period 2020-2025. Ofwat is currently consulting on the next price review.
- The Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) is the drinking water quality regulator for England and Wales. The DWI provides independent reassurance that drinking water supplies in England and Wales are safe and that drinking water quality meets the strict standards set out in legislation.
- The Environment Agency (EA) is the environmental regulator for England. The EA oversees water company compliance with environmental legislation. This includes regulating and monitoring sewerage discharges, non-drinking water quality, and the use of water resources (abstraction).

Further information can be found in the Library briefing, [Economic regulation of the water industry in England and Wales \(June 2020\)](#).

1.2 Government policy

The Government provides policy direction to Ofwat through strategic policy statements. Ofwat must act in accordance with the statements when carrying out its functions in England and Wales and is required to report on the steps it has taken in response.

On 28 March 2022, the Government published its latest [strategic policy statement for Ofwat](#). It replaced the previous statement issued in 2017 and sets out four key priorities:

- protect and enhance the environment;
- deliver a resilient water sector;
- serve and protect customers;
- use markets to deliver for customers.¹

Under each of these four key priorities the policy statement sets out what the Government expects from Ofwat and water companies. For example, under ‘protecting and enhancing the environment’ the policy states that the Government expects Ofwat to:

- challenge water companies to demonstrate how they will improve environmental performance to meet Environment Agency requirements in the Environmental Performance Assessment;
- challenge water companies to demonstrate how they will achieve zero serious pollution incidents by 2030;
- challenge water companies to demonstrate how they will significantly reduce the frequency and volume of sewage discharges from storm overflows, so they operate infrequently, and only in cases of unusually heavy rainfall.²

Further information is available in the Library’s debate pack, [Strategic priorities for Ofwat \(May 2022\)](#).

Ofwat is currently consulting on performance commitments for the next price review period, PR24, covering the years 2025-2030. In line with its duties, Ofwat will seek commitments that deliver on the Government’s

¹ Defra, [Strategic policy statement for Ofwat](#), 28 March 2022

² Defra, [Strategic policy statement for Ofwat](#), 28 March 2022

priorities. It says that it will encourage companies to set “stretching” performance targets that go beyond Government expectations.³

Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan

To prevent sewers from becoming overwhelmed when the system is unable to cope with a surge in volumes of water, combined sewer overflows (CSOs) or storm overflows are permitted. When in operation, storm overflows discharge raw untreated sewage (although significantly diluted) into waterways and the sea.

On 26 August 2022, the Government published its [storm overflows reduction plan](#) as required under the Environment Act 2021. The plan sets out actions for water companies, the Government and the public to take to help reduce the impact of storm overflow discharges.

Two of the headline targets contained in the plan are:

- By 2035, water companies will have: improved all overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and improved 75% of overflows discharging to high priority sites.
- By 2050, no storm overflows will be permitted to operate outside of unusually heavy rainfall or to cause any adverse ecological harm.⁴

Further information can be found in the Library briefing, [Q&A: Storm overflows discharge reduction plan \(October 2022\)](#).

Ofwat says that for the next price review period it will:

- challenge all wastewater companies to reduce serious pollution incidents to zero by 2025-26;
- expect all wastewater companies to reduce their use of storm overflows and go further where their legal obligations require;
- where appropriate, challenge companies to go beyond the proposed annual average target of 20 spills per overflow by 2025, without additional expenditure allowances.⁵

³ Ofwat, [Delivering UK government priorities for the English water sector through our 2024 price review final methodology](#), 13 December 2022, p2

⁴ Defra, Storm overflows discharge reduction plan, 26 August 2022, p10

⁵ Ofwat, [Delivering UK government priorities for the English water sector through our 2024 price review final methodology](#), 13 December 2022, p3

2

Assessments of South West Water's performance

South West Water provides water and sewerage services to Devon, Cornwall, and parts of Somerset and Dorset.⁶

Ofwat and the Environment Agency monitor water companies' performance against a range of metrics and rate them annually. [Discoverwater.co.uk](https://www.discoverwater.co.uk) provides an overview of how the industry is performing.

2.1

Overall performance ratings

Ofwat

As part of the price review process Ofwat and water companies agree a set of performance commitments. Ofwat monitors the industry and publishes annual reports summarising water companies' progress against the commitments. Its most recent report, the [Water company performance report 2021-22](#), was published in December 2022.

South West Water (SWW) was given the lowest of the three ratings – 'lagging behind' – alongside five other companies. Ofwat concluded that it was performing below its commitment level in five of the twelve categories:

- Customer satisfaction;
- Number and duration of interruptions to water supply;
- Water quality;
- Pollution incidents;
- Treatment works compliance.⁷

It performed at or above its commitments for other metrics, including reducing leakage and mains asset repairs.

Ofwat says that it will require underperforming companies to present action plans setting out how they will improve performance.⁸

⁶ The Library's [water companies dashboard](#) can be used to look up which companies serve a particular constituency.

⁷ Ofwat, [Water company performance report 2021-22](#), December 2022

⁸ Ofwat, [Water company performance report 2021-22](#), December 2022, p6

Companies that miss their performance targets can face financial penalties, which are taken off customers' bills (meaning those customers pay less) in the following financial year. This is intended to compensate customers for lower-than-expected service levels. Conversely, companies that outperform expectations can charge more. Based on its overall performance in 2021-22, SWW will be required to reduce bills by a total of £13.3 million in 2023-24. This was the fourth-highest reduction in the industry, after Thames Water (-£51m), Southern Water (-£28.3m), and Yorkshire Water (-£15.2).⁹

Total final determination adjustments to price controls to be applied to customer bills in 2023-24 £m, 2017-18 FYA CPIH prices

Company	Price control
Severn Trent Water	101.743
United Utilities	24.154
South Staffs Water	3.019
Bristol Water	0.63
Portsmouth Water	0.423
SES Water	-0.269
Hafren Dyfrdwy	-0.417
Affinity Water	-0.77
Wessex Water	-2.59
South East Water	-2.828
Northumbrian Water	-3.614
Dŵr Cymru	-7.999
Anglian Water	-8.509
South West Water	-13.336
Yorkshire Water	-15.227
Southern Water	-28.294
Thames Water	-51.033
Industry total	-4.917

Source: Ofwat, [Sector overview: Final determinations of in-period outcome delivery incentives for 2021-22](#), 15 November 2022

Environment Agency

The Environment Agency (EA) compares performance between water companies through its Environmental Performance Assessment. It looks at performance across six metrics, including pollution incidents and delivery of the [Water Industry National Environment Programme](#), and assigns each company an overall rating out of four stars.

⁹ Ofwat, [Sector overview: Final determinations of in-period outcome delivery incentives for 2021-22](#), November 2022, p3

The [Environmental Performance Report 2021](#) was published in July 2022.

SWW was given the lowest rating, one star.¹⁰ Performance fell from 2 stars the previous year. Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the EA, wrote in the report's foreword that the 1-star rating means "their performance was terrible across the board."¹¹

She highlighted the EA's monitoring and enforcement action in response to the industry's "shocking" performance on pollution:

We are increasing inspections of sewage treatment works; insisting that the companies put monitors on all their storm overflows, both on the network and at sewage treatment works and make the data public; and we have also begun the country's largest ever investigation into environmental crime, involving all the companies, where we are looking at whether they have knowingly and deliberately broken the law in relation to the treatment and discharge of sewage.¹²

Ofwat announced in June 2022 that, as part of the [investigation into sewage discharges from wastewater treatment works](#), it had opened an enforcement case against SWW.¹³

2.2 Specific performance measures

Pollution incidents

Ofwat highlighted pollution incidents as a particular area of concern for SWW, saying that the company had seen "sustained poor performance over a number of years."¹⁴ In 2021 SWW saw 86.58 pollution incidents per 10,000km of sewer, compared to a performance target of 23.74 incidents.

In response to the report, SWW commented to local media that it had reduced pollution incidents by 33% compared to the previous year.¹⁵

¹⁰ EA, [South West Water EPA data report 2021](#), updated 22 July 2022

¹¹ EA, [Water and sewerage companies in England: environmental performance report 2021](#), updated 22 July 2022, Chair's foreword

¹² EA, [Water and sewerage companies in England: environmental performance report 2021](#), updated 22 July 2022, Chair's foreword

¹³ Ofwat, [PN 24/22 South West Water latest company targeted in Ofwat investigation due to environmental performance](#), 28 June 2022

¹⁴ Ofwat, [Water company performance report 2021-22](#), December 2022, p23. South West Water is abbreviated to SWB in the report.

¹⁵ Cornwall Live, [South West Water branded among worst polluters in UK in Ofwat official report](#), 12 December 2022

Pollution incidents performance in 2021

Incidents per 10,000 km of sewer

Company	Actual performance	Commitment
Anglian Water	33.75	23.74
Dŵr Cymru	22.90	23.74
Hafren Dyfrdwy	39.84	137.00 ¹
Northumbrian Water	22.98	23.74
Severn Trent Water	21.81	23.74
South West Water	86.58	23.74
Southern Water	93.63	23.74
Thames Water	24.87	23.74
United Utilities	17.71	23.70
Wessex Water	20.60	23.74
Yorkshire Water	27.36	23.74
Sector	31.05	

Notes: It is considered inappropriate to set Hafren Dyfrdwy the common performance commitment level because this would require the company to have very low numbers of category 3 incidents in absolute terms due to the small size of its sewerage system.

Source: Ofwat, [Water Company Performance Report 2021-22](#), December 2022

The EA categorises pollution incidents according to their environmental impact:

- A category 1 incident has a serious, extensive or persistent impact on the environment, people or property and may, for example, result in a large number of fish deaths.
- Category 2 incidents have a lesser, yet significant impact.
- Category 3 incidents have a minor or minimal impact on the environment, people or property with only a limited or localised effect on water quality.

The table above includes pollution incidents from all three categories.

In total, there were 62 individual “serious” water quality incidents (categories 1 and 2) in England and Wales in 2021. Of these, 14 were with Anglian Water, 12 with Southern Water, 12 with Thames Water and 8 with South West Water.

Storm overflows

Discharge from the sewerage network into the environment is only permitted to occur when there is elevated flow in the combined (sewage and

surface water) sewerage network due to rainfall/snowmelt. This is known as storm overflow.

Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) record the number of times there has been a discharge of storm sewage and for how long each discharge was for. This system started in 2016 with a small number of individual storm overflows. Since the coverage has increased in each year and reached 89% in 2021. Complete coverage of the network is due to be completed by 2023.

While this increase means the data give a more accurate reflection of the total, it also means that the trends in the data do not give a meaningful reflection of trends in the actual amount of storm overflow. You can find more background on the monitoring system [here](#).

The latest EDM data is for 2021 when there were over 372,000 individual storm sewage spill events with a combined duration of 2.6 million hours or 2% of the operating time of each overflow on average. The average duration of each event was 7.4 hours.

South West Water had 42,484 individual storm sewage spill events with a combined duration of 0.4 million hours or 4% of the operating time of each overflow on average. The average duration of each event was 8.3 hours.

Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) of storm overflows for 2021

Company	Spill events	Average number of spills per storm overflow with spill data	Total duration (hours) of monitored spill events	Average duration (hours) per monitored spill event	Percentage time operating [spilling] per overflow
Anglian	21,351	25.6	194,594	9.1	2.7%
Dwr Cymru	3,567	29.5	17,163	4.8	1.6%
Northumbrian	36,483	25.3	220,560	6	1.7%
Severn Trent	59,684	24.7	461,135	7.7	2.2%
South West	42,484	38.9	351,785	8.3	3.7%
Southern	19,077	20.2	160,984	8.4	1.9%
Thames	14,713	31.9	163,090	11.1	4.0%
United Utilities	81,588	41.8	540,753	6.6	3.2%
Wessex	23,524	22.4	151,258	6.4	1.6%
Yorkshire	70,062	33.6	406,131	5.8	2.2%
Totals / Average	372,533	29.4	2,667,452	7.4	2.0%

Source: Environment Agency, [Event Duration Monitoring - Storm Overflows -2021](#)

Water supply interruptions

Water supply interruptions are caused primarily by large mains bursts. The industry-wide performance commitment was 6 minutes and 8 seconds per property.

South West Water's performance was below the performance commitment with interruptions of 13 minutes and 40 seconds per property. SWW cite the impact of an interruption caused by a third party as a primary contributing factor to its performance.¹⁶

Water supply interruptions in 2021-22		
Minutes per property		
Company	Actual performance	Commitment
Anglian Water	00:09:48	00:06:08
Dŵr Cymru	00:16:12	00:06:08
HafrenDyfrdwy	00:37:28	00:06:08
Northumbrian Water	00:11:45	00:06:08
Severn Trent Water	00:12:39	00:06:08
South West Water	00:13:40	00:06:08
Southern Water	00:09:22	00:06:08
Thames Water	00:11:03	00:06:08
United Utilities	00:07:58	00:06:08
Wessex Water	00:04:12	00:06:08
Yorkshire Water	00:10:38	00:06:08
Affinity Water	00:03:43	00:06:08
Bristol Water	00:02:31	00:06:08
Portsmouth Water	00:02:21	00:06:08
South East Water	01:12:33	00:06:08
South Staffs Water	00:03:15	00:06:08
SES Water	00:02:58	00:06:08

Notes: It is considered inappropriate to set Hafren Dyfrdwy the common performance commitment level because this would require the company to have very low numbers of category 3 incidents in absolute terms due to the small size of its sewerage system.

Source: Ofwat, [Water Company Performance Report 2021-22](#), December 2022

Sewer flooding

Internal flooding is when properties are flooded with sewage. The internal sewer flooding performance commitment levels for 2021-22 was 1.63 internal sewer flooding incidents per 10,000 sewer connections.

South West Water was one of only four companies that achieved this and had 0.76 incidents per 10,000 sewer connections, which is also below the sector average of 2.43 incidents per 10,000 sewer connections.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ofwat, [Water Company Performance Report 2021-22](#), December 2022

¹⁷ Ofwat, [Water Company Performance Report 2021-22](#), December 2022

Internal sewer flooding performance in 2021-22

Incidents per 10,000 connections

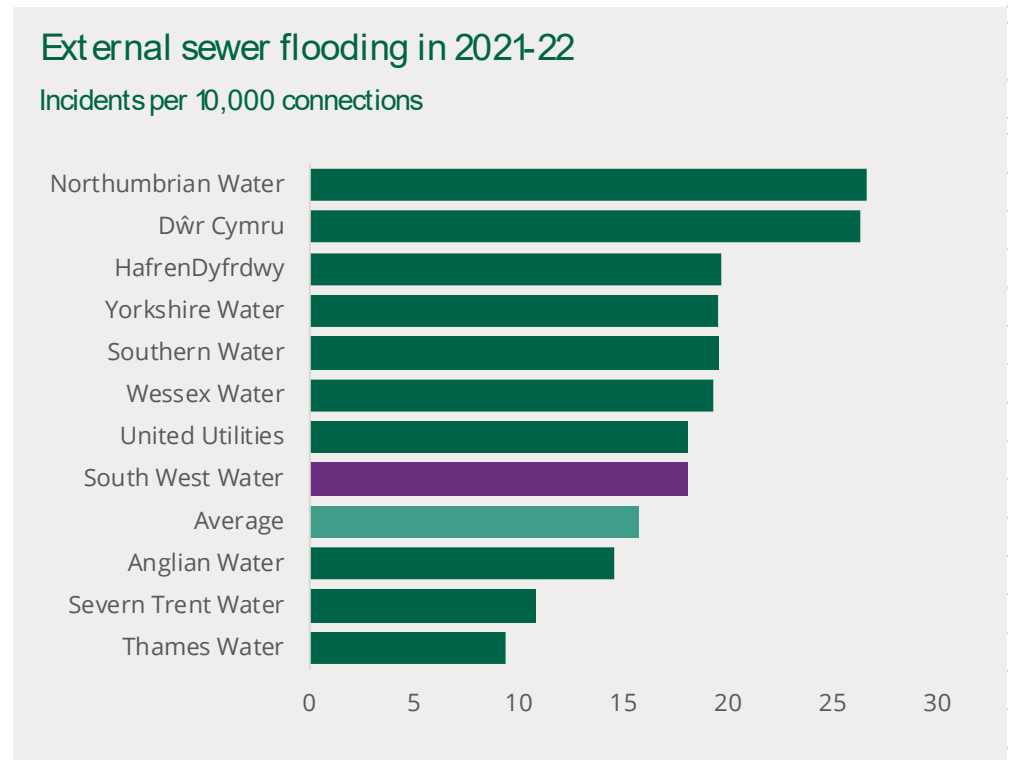
Company	Actual performance	Commitment
Anglian Water	1.73	1.63
Dŵr Cymru	1.36	1.63
HafrenDyfrdwy	2.34	1.63
Northumbrian Water	1.84	1.63
Severn Trent Water	1.61	1.63
South West Water	0.76	1.63
Southern Water	3.04	1.63
Thames Water	3.46	1.63
United Utilities	2.98	1.63
Wessex Water	1.43	1.63
Yorkshire Water	2.83	1.63
Sector	2.43	

Notes: Thames Water estimates that the number of customers affected by sewer flooding during storms in July may be higher than reported. It is currently working to identify customers who may have been impacted to update the 2021-22 figure.

Source: Ofwat, [Water Company Performance Report 2021-22](#), December 2022

External flooding is when private land or gardens are flooded with sewage. The average external sewer flooding for 2021-22 was 15.7 external sewer flooding incidents per 10,000 sewer connections.

South West Water was above this average with 18.1 incidents per 10,000 sewer connections.



Source: Discover Water, [Sewer flooding](#)

Investment

Ofwat also criticised SWW for its lack of investment. Under the price review system, companies have an allowance for investing in improvements to their networks, known as enhancement expenditure. Of the 17 water and wastewater companies in England and Wales, 15 underspent their allowance. SWW was the second lowest spender, investing 46% of its allowance.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ofwat, [Water company performance report 2021-22](#), December 2022, p33; Times, [Water companies fail to splash out on improvements](#), 6 December 2022

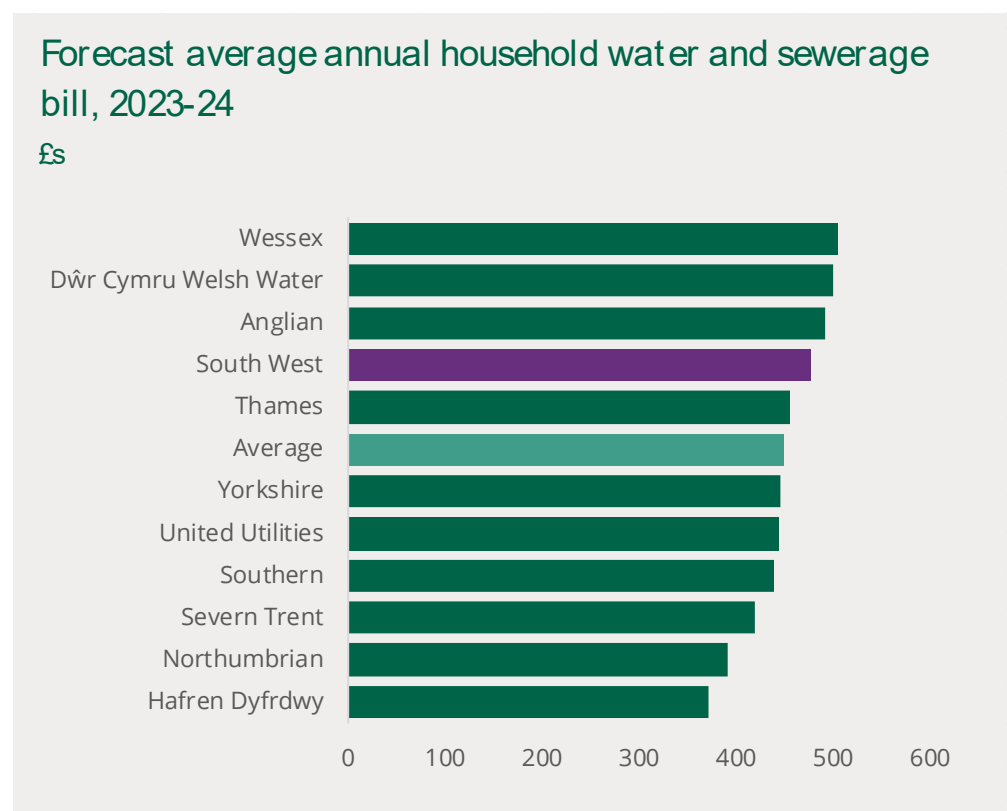
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Average bills

Water bills vary between different companies because the costs of delivering infrastructure and services are different in different regions.

The forecast average annual combined bill for water and sewerage across households in England and Wales is £448 for April 2023 to March 2024. Of this, £215 includes the average annual water bill and £233 is the average annual sewerage bill.

South West Water was above this average with a forecast annual water and sewerage bill of £476.¹⁹

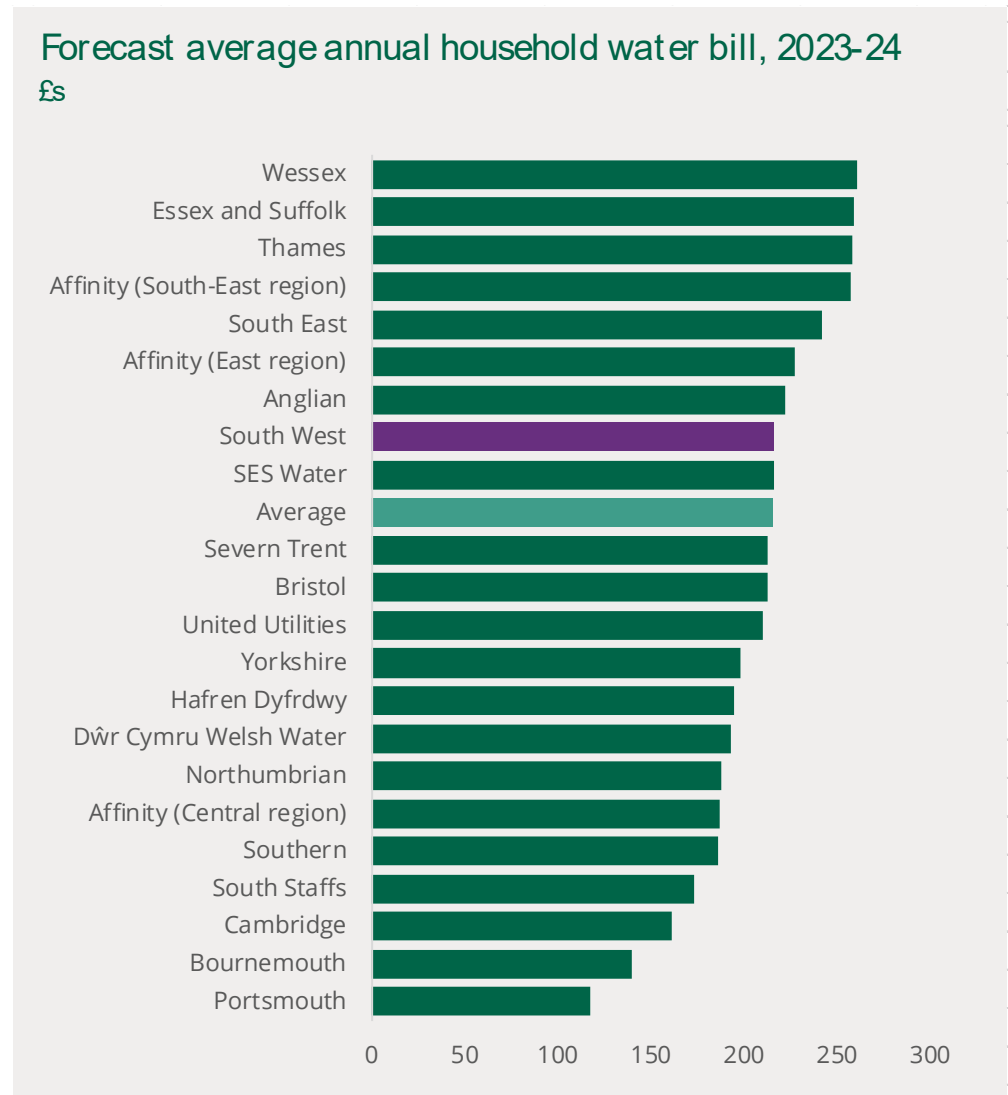


Source: Discover Water, [Average annual water and sewerage charges across England and Wales households](#)

¹⁹ Discover Water, [Average annual water and sewerage charges across England and Wales households](#)

3.1 Water bills

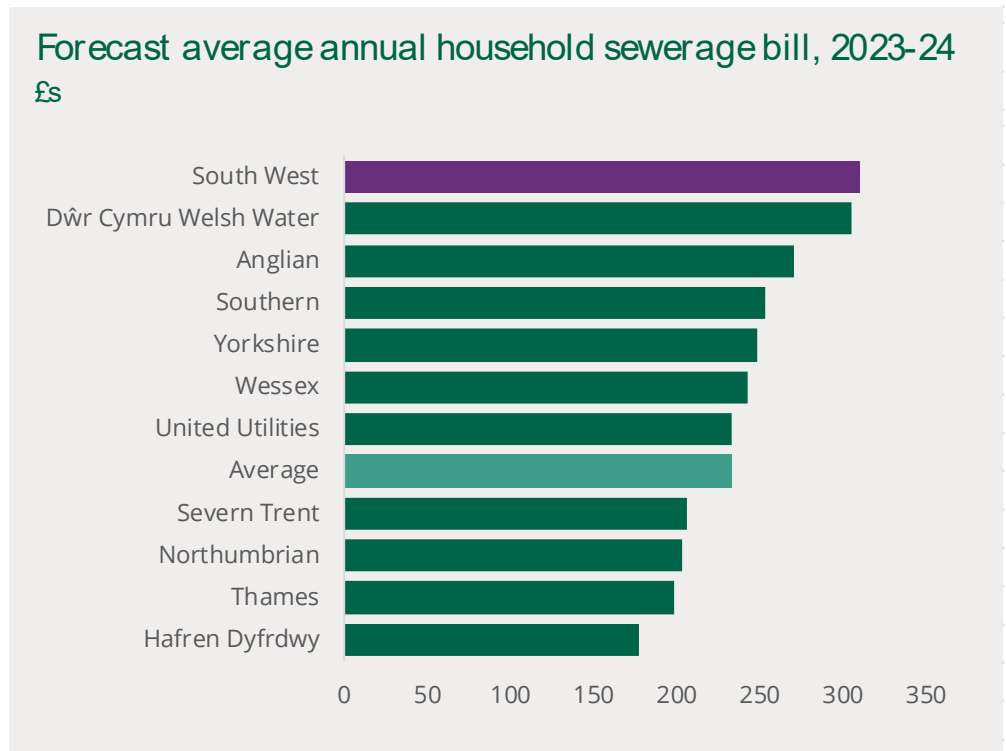
For April 2023 to March 2024, the forecast average annual bill for water in England and Wales is £215 and for the South West Water company it is £216.



Source: Discover Water, [Average annual water and sewerage charges across England and Wales households](#)

3.2 Sewerage bills

For April 2023 to March 2024, the forecast average annual bill for sewerage in England and Wales is £233. The South West Water company has the highest sewerage bill of all water companies which is £310.



Source: Discover Water, [Average annual water and sewerage charges across England and Wales households](#)

4 Parliamentary material

4.1 Debates

Commons Urgent Question: [Sewage Pollution](#)

HC Deb 6 September 2022 | Vol 719 c111-

Lords debate following repeat of response to Commons Urgent Question:

[Sewage Pollution](#)

HL Deb 7 September 2022 | Vol 824 c256-

Lords Question for Short Debate: [Water Companies: Environmental Pollution](#)

HL Deb 19 July 2022 | Vol 823 c1875-

Lords debate: [Sewage Disposal in Rivers and Coastal Waters](#)

HL Deb 7 July 2022 | Vol 823 c1089-

Commons debate: [Ofwat: Strategic Priorities](#)

HC Deb 9 June 2022 | Vol 715 c1013-

4.2 PQs

[South West Water: Fines](#)

Asked by: Foord, Richard

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how many fines were issued to South West Water since 1 January 2019.

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how much has issued been to South West Water in fines since 1 January 2019.

Answering member: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The following fines have been imposed on water companies directly by Ofwat and as a result of prosecutions brought by the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

Fines imposed on all water companies

Year	Number of prosecutions / fines	Total fines
2019	8	£6,756,725
2020	3	£852,000
2021	8	£102,490,001
\	11	£4,448,083

In addition to fines, water companies face other financial penalties such as financial undertakings from companies secured by Ofwat following enforcement cases. These include rebates to customers and money paid to charities and community groups.

Water companies can face financial penalties if they underperform against performance targets. Ofwat recently announced penalties for 2021-22, with almost £135 million being returned to customers. A breakdown of these penalties by water company can be found at: Final determinations of in-period outcome delivery incentives for 2021-22.

HC Deb 18 January 2023 | PQ 97686; PQ 97687

Commons exchange of questions: [Environment Agency Budget: Sewage Discharge](#)

HC Deb 12 January 2023 | Vol 725 c685-

Afzal Khan Whether she has made an assessment of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency’s budget on levels of sewage discharge. (902942)

Kate Osborne Whether she has made an assessment of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency’s budget on levels of sewage discharge. (902960)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow) The volume of sewage discharged by water companies is absolutely unacceptable. Improving water quality is a high priority for the Government, which is why we have launched an ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm sewage overflows in water companies, the biggest in history. It is also why we have increased our monitoring from 5% in 2016 right up to 19% now. It will be 100% next year. Interestingly, one might want to note that under the Labour party there was no monitoring at all, and that the Environment Agency has received £2.2 million each year for the last three years specifically for water company enforcement to ensure that robust action is taken against illegal breaches.

Afzal Khan I thank the Minister for that explanation. Across the country we are faced with the unprecedented dumping of raw sewage into our waterways, including into the Platt and Gore brooks in my constituency. It is good to hear the Minister's plans to provide more money, because at the end of the day there needs to be sufficient funds for enforcement so that those who pollute our waters are held to account. What further will she be doing to ensure that that happens?

Rebecca Pow I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises the plan we have put into operation, because the like of it has never been seen before. I reiterate that it is our increased monitoring that is bringing to light the fact that permits are being contravened and sewage is going into our rivers. That is why we have cracked down and put in the biggest programme ever to tackle it, with our targets on storm sewage overflows and £2.2 million for the Environment Agency over the last three years for enforcement. It is taking cases, and the extra funding it got the last time around has enabled it to do more inspections.

Kate Osborne I have raised previously in the House, and in letters to Ofwat, the Environment Agency and Northumbrian Water, the disastrous impact on waterways in my constituency of the continued pollution by Northumbrian Water. Sewage was dumped every four minutes during the Minister's years as a junior Minister, with nearly 3 million hours of sewage discharged into waterways and the sea during her tenure as Minister with responsibility for water. As Environment Minister, will she now take action to stop the pollution? When will she publish the clean water and biodiversity targets, as required by the Environment Act 2021?

Rebecca Pow I have made it absolutely clear that sewage going into our waters is totally unacceptable. That is why under my tenure as Environment Minister—actually, it began with the previous Environment Minister, now the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey)—we set in motion the monitoring that did not happen under Labour, the storm overflows reduction plan, the targets in the Environment Act and the new direction to Ofwat. We are bringing everything together under one hat to tackle this issue once and for all. Because of the work we have done I launched an investigation, which is being undertaken by Ofwat

and the EA—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working very closely with them. That is uncovering all these incidents. Trust me, we will be clamping down.

Mr Philip Hollobone May I welcome the massive and unprecedented increase in the monitoring of illegal sewage discharges, and in particular the welcome steps taken by some water companies for live monitoring so that people can see in real time where sewage is being put into our rivers illegally?

Rebecca Pow That is yet another measure that has been put in place. There is a requirement now for water companies to report all discharges from storm sewage overflows with dates and deadlines, but some water companies have gone over and above. They already have that in place and some companies, in particular around the coast, are reporting annually. [*Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 1MC.*] That is proving extremely useful for anybody who wants to know the condition of our water. All of this will improve.

Selaine Saxby Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the Environment Agency for testing the water around our coast? I know she met South West Water earlier this week. Although I recognise that there is work still to be done, on the beaches around my coastline it has significantly reduced the storm overflow. The superb surf beach of Croyde has seen its water quality raised from good to excellent for the first time. It is important to celebrate those successes and to support the businesses that rely on those bathing waters for their futures.

Rebecca Pow My hon. Friend is such a strong advocate for her area. I absolutely love going swimming down there. She is right that the latest statistics show that 72% of our bathing waters are classed as excellent, which is brilliant for our tourism industry, particularly in her area.

Mr Speaker I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon I thank you, Mr Speaker, and your officers for allowing the time for this very important session; it is appreciated. When we met here in December, I asked the Environment Secretary if she had met water bosses to tackle the Tory sewage scandal that has had turned Britain into an open sewer. We are facing huge water leaks, drought and sewage pumping out across the country, and not a single English river free of pollution. Yet it was not seen as a priority that she clean up her own mess, because as a previous Environment Minister she literally opened the floodgates. Now she has finally met water bosses, can she say what firm commitments have been secured to finally end the Tory sewage scandal?

Rebecca Pow I have been meeting regularly with water companies, as has the Secretary of State. In fact, we had a joint meeting just last week with the five poorest performing water companies. That was a very feisty meeting, as

can be imagined. The water companies are being held to account. We now have the data we need, thanks to the monitoring and the programmes that this Government are putting in place, which were not in place under all those years of the Labour Government. It is no good standing up there and scaremongering. At the end of last week I met South East Water, and this week it is South West Water. [\[Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 2MC.\]](#)

[Water Industry: Competition and Regulation](#)

Asked by: Richard Foord

South West Water, which covers both my constituency and that of the Minister, has been given a one-star rating by the Environment Agency because of water pollution. It is clear that Ofwat cannot properly regulate some of the wayward companies that continue to pay out huge sums in dividends while failing our communities. Does the Minister agree with me that Ofwat should be abolished so that we can create a new regulator that actually has some teeth?

Answered by: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for environment, food and rural affairs

The answer to that is no. We are working very constructively with Ofwat. It can fine a water company that is found to be in breach 10% of its turnover. It has used fines, and Environment Agency fines have significantly increased over the last year as well. I am certain that working with Ofwat, so that it works with the water companies to bring them into line, is the right way to approach the issue, and that is what Ofwat is doing.

HC Deb 17 November 2022 | Vol 722 c807

[Sewage](#)

Asked by: Sobel, Alex

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how many sewage treatment works are operated by each water company in England; and how many of these have temporary storm storage tanks with sufficient capacity to prevent overloading of the treatment works.

Answering member: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

At some sewage treatment works, where the permitted treatment capacity may be exceeded due to rainfall, storm tanks form part of the treatment

process to limit spills of storm sewage (mixture of sewage and rainfall) to the water environment. These discharges are permitted by the Environment Agency under the [Environmental Permitting Regulations](#).

The number of sewage treatment works and permitted storm tanks at sewage treatment works for each water and sewerage company in England are set out in the table below:

Name of Water Company	Number of Sewage Treatment Works¹	Number of Storm Tanks at Sewage Treatment Works²
Anglian	1120	363
Northumbrian	358	121
Severn Trent	975	372
South West Water	628	163
Southern	382	181
Thames	379	235
United Utilities	562	187
Wessex	397	189
Yorkshire	594	177
Welsh Water (England)	104	19

1. Information from the Environment Agency Water Information Management System
2. Information from the Event Duration Monitoring – storm overflow – annual returns published by the Environment Agency [Event Duration Monitoring - Storm Overflows - Annual Returns - data.gov.uk](#)

The requirement for storm tanks is that they must settle out solids and have a minimum capacity of 68litres/head served or a storage equivalent of 2 hours at the maximum flow rate to the storm tanks.

In the current water company investment programme for the period 2020 to 2025 there are 534 sewage treatment works where there will be upgrades to storm tanks to meet the requirements. Information on these upgrades from

the published Environment Agency [Water Industry National Environment Programme](#) is summarised in the table below:

Name of Water Company	Number of Storm Tank Improvements
Anglian	217
Northumbrian	24
Severn Trent	39
South West Water	74
Southern	Not Available
Thames	64
United Utilities	4
Wessex	31
Yorkshire	69
Welsh Water (England)	12

HC Deb 02 November 2022 | PQ 71261

[Sewage: Waste Disposal](#)

Asked by: Thomas, Derek

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what assessment he has made of the extent to which recent increases in the price of emptying septic tanks have been caused by reduced competition in the market for processing.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Defra and the Environment Agency have worked with South West Water through the Cornwall operators group to increase capacity and flexibility for the acceptance of tankered waste.

Tanker waste companies in Cornwall must use the local water company sites for legitimate discharge/disposal of tankered septic waste at least until providers can offer other legitimate routes for disposal. Water company rates are higher than previous non-compliant land spreading sites, but the prices charged should reflect the cost of legitimate disposal.

HC Deb 21 September 2022 | PQ 45332

[South West Water: Rebates](#)

Asked by: Pollard, Luke

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether he plans to cease the £50 Government contribution to water bills for South West Water customers in 2022-23.

Answering member: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

As confirmed with South West Water in December 2021, we have extended the water rebate for those in the South West until 31 March 2023.

HC Deb 21 June 2022 | PQ 17120

[Water Companies: Sewage Discharge Monitoring](#)

Asked by: Lord Oates

My Lords, is the Minister aware that last year South West Water discharged raw sewage into rivers and beachfronts 43,000 times over a period of 350,000 hours, including for 3,709 hours into the River Otter in Honiton, for 1,872 hours into the River Exe in Tiverton, and for 1,482 hours into the River Axe in Axminster? Will the Government end this scandal by imposing a sewage tax on water company profits to fund necessary upgrades, and will they ban water company bosses claiming bonuses until that is done?

Answered by: Lord Benyon

I think that was a very good choice of geography. The noble Lord will accept that this is an absolute priority for this Government. People who live in that part of the world, in places such as Tiverton and Honiton, are right to want a Government who will clean this up, but who have a plan to do it without raising their bills to unaffordable levels. That Government are this one.

HL Deb 21 June 2022 | Vol 823 c124

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News items

FT [subscription required]

2 February 2023

[Water company prosecutions fall in England despite thousands of pollution warnings](#)

Mid-Devon Advertiser

1 February 2023

['It is simply wrong to say that any MP voted for this' says MP Anne Marie Morris](#)

BBC News Online

29 January 2023

[Protests over Devon and Cornwall storm overflow pollution](#)

Cornwall Live

13 January 2023

[No sign of hosepipe ban being lifted in Cornwall despite heavy rain](#)

West Somerset Free Press

19 December 2022

[South West Water's parent company to share £20 million with customers](#)

Cornwall Live

3 December 2022

[South West Water branded among worst polluters in UK in Ofwat official report](#)

BBC News Online

29 November 2022

[South West Water told to deal with waste water discharges](#)

Falmouth Packet

3 October 2022

[South West Water to pay money back to customers after failing to hit targets](#)

Falmouth Packet

16 September 2022

[South West Water in court over water 'unfit for human consumption'](#)

Devon Live

1 September 2022

[Lib Dems blast South West Water bosses after sewage dumps on beaches](#)

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