

Hansard Record : Amendment 200 Debate, Environment Bill in Committee, 17th November 2020.

[https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-11-17/debates/bde0143b-561a-49b6-8503-bcd81b3022a7/EnvironmentBill\(SixteenthSitting\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-11-17/debates/bde0143b-561a-49b6-8503-bcd81b3022a7/EnvironmentBill(SixteenthSitting))

Clause 76

Drainage and sewerage management plans

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)

I beg to move amendment 200, in clause 76, page 68, line 17, at end insert—

“(ca) the water quality and impact of the discharges of the undertaker’s drainage system and sewerage system.”.

This is a probing amendment, tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), myself and others. The last amendment I tabled proposed to change one word and add one letter to the Bill’s proposed environmental improvement plans. This probing amendment adds 16 words to a subsection on drainage and sewerage management plans. Both amendments have in common the shared interests of our environment and us as beneficiaries of that environment.

Amendment 200 focuses on drainage and sewerage management plans. It is an uncomfortable fact for us all that a huge amount of raw sewage is still discharged into our coasts and waterways—200,000 times in the last year, with 3,000 discharges in UK coastal waters between May and September—all of which threatens the quality of the water itself and water users. It is for that reason that 40,000 people signed a petition to end sewage pollution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow was motivated to initiate a private Member’s Bill, which will be heard in the House in due course, and to table this amendment to the Environment Bill.

Surely it is the aim of all of us to stop discharges into rivers, lakes and waterways, as well as into our sea, and to raise our current rating within Europe—although we are leaving the European Union, we are still a geographical part of Europe—from 25th out of 30 for coastal water quality. Only 16% of our waterways meet good ecological status.

Why does that matter for all of us, as users? Ultimately, there are health risks—gastroenteritis, ear, nose and throat illnesses, and apparently even, although I have not seen evidence, hepatitis and E. coli. Those of us who enjoy wild water swimming—in the River Wye, for example, on the Gloucestershire-Herefordshire border—will know that there are times when agricultural companies are pumping discharge into the water and damaging its quality and the experience, particularly for the young.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)

My hon. Friend is making an important point. Does he agree that we need a change in when water companies give notifications of sewage outlets, particularly around the coastline, such as in my constituency and around the Cornish coast? Currently, they do it only in what they call “bathing months”. With better equipment and better wetsuits, we now swim all the year round off the Cornish coast. We have no way of knowing—unless we know that these things happen after heavy rainfall—whether the water is safe to bathe in.

Richard Graham

My hon. Friend makes a striking point. From a human perspective, Cornwall is probably the most used bit of coastline in our United Kingdom. The pressures are considerable and the point that she makes about more people swimming and surfing all year round is important. The restrictions should not just cover the traditional swimming months of May to September. I am sure the Minister will address that point.

Alongside a duty on water companies to ensure that untreated sewage is no longer pumped into the seas, the amendment would tackle a series of other actual and potential issues—for our water quality has implications across the whole ecological system, from plant life to fish stocks, as well as the health of the population. Our surface, coastal and ground waters suffer from significant pollution, as I have illustrated, and they also take that pollution into our seas and oceans. The Government have not made as much progress as we would have liked on meeting the targets established under the EU water framework directive, and the Bill is a step towards making significant improvements.

While diffuse pollution from agriculture, as I illustrated with the River Wye, accounts for 40% of river pollution, wastewater from sewage treatment accounts for almost as much, at 36% of river pollution.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)

As a Parliamentary Private Secretary, I am not always meant to speak, but my hon. Friend mentions the River Wye, which runs through my constituency. It would be remiss of me not to mention that there are many actors in this space. We cannot solely blame farmers in their entirety. The issue needs a whole supply chain response, because it is too important a problem to lay solely at the door of agriculture.

Richard Graham

My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There will not be too much specific finger-pointing with the amendment, nor in the Bill in general. We have already referred to water companies. Agriculture, in the broadest sense, is a challenge along the river that she loves in her constituency so much. There are, of course, others who discharge pollution into our waterways. Everyone has to do their bit; that is why the amendment is so important.

Let us be clear that the drainage and wastewater management plans proposed under clause 76 are an excellent step forward. They seek to improve water company focus, and they send a clear message about improving the safe and environmentally responsible treatment of human effluent. However, there is an omission in the objectives. The amendment would therefore place the obligation on water companies, in their five-year plans, to consider the impact on water quality of the wastewater facilities for which they are responsible.

Sewage is estimated to account for 55% of the rivers that are failing to reach the good ecological status to which I referred. This can lead to pollutants such as organic material, which depletes the dissolved oxygen in the water, and other pollutants such as phosphorus, nitrates, ammonia, pathogens and man-made toxic chemicals entering the water environment.

10.00 am

We should acknowledge that water companies have made significant steps. The water company in my constituency, Severn Trent, has invested a huge amount in improvements. Overall, throughout the country, water companies have committed £4.5 billion between now and 2025 towards environmental improvements. Despite the significant investments already made and planned, the Government—that is, DEFRA—acknowledge that progress has flatlined. The chair of the Environment Agency, Emma Howard Boyd, recently stated that, against environmental standards, the performance of water companies deteriorated in 2018, and was not showing much sign of improvement in 2019. In fact, at the current rate of progress, it is estimated it could take over 200 years to reach the Government’s 25-year environment plan target of 75% of waters being close to their natural state. Therefore, we can all agree that there are opportunities for improvement.

With the interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth and for Brecon and Radnorshire, I have referred to the importance of swimming—both so-called wild swimming and holiday swimming on the coast—and that is an important point.

The amendment would make a very simple change to the Bill. On page 68, in proposed new section 94A(3) to the 1991 Act, after the words,

“A drainage and sewerage plan must address”,

it would insert:

“the water quality and impact of the discharges of the undertaker’s drainage system and sewerage system”.

To be clear, in this context, “undertaker” is a sewerage undertaker, which is the word used for a sewerage company. When I first read it, I was rather confused, but it is the water quality and impact of the discharges of the sewerage company’s drainage system and sewerage system that this probing amendment attempts to improve.

The amendment has considerable support from non-governmental organisations, including Marinet, which has been fastidious in bombarding many Members' inboxes with its support for the amendment. The amendment also has the support of the Conservative Environment Network, which includes some 70 MPs, many of whom support the private Member's Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, who would, had he been here, have made a much more persuasive and articulate case for this probing amendment. I hope they will not be unsatisfied with the key points I have highlighted today.

As it stands, the Bill has much to recommend it, but this particular omission is one that could be put right relatively straightforwardly. I therefore look forward to hearing the Government's response.

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Dr Whitehead

The hon. Member for Gloucester has made a powerful speech in support of the amendment, covering many points that I would have raised had he not done so. The Opposition would have tabled an amendment on this subject had amendment 200 not appeared. We did not, because we saw that a substantial number of Members from both sides of the House had put their names to the amendment, which I think adds to its gravity. Frankly, we felt that if we had proposed a separate but similar amendment, it might have decreased the chances of this one being made, so we kept the position as it was. The one point I would disagree with the hon. Gentleman on is that the amendment should not be probing; it should be a serious attempt, with cross-party support, to get a provision into the Bill that will undoubtedly be to the benefit of the natural environment and its users as a result of changes in water companies' activities.

I want to reinforce what the hon. Gentleman had to say about discharges of sewage and similar activities that have taken place over a number of years. He is right to state that there were more than 200,000 releases of raw sewage into rivers last year. That number slightly underestimates the actual effect of the releases, since some occurred over an extended period rather than being instant. We should think about why that happens.

These are not accidents; they are provisions within the operating arrangements for water companies which allow the occasional release of raw sewage into watercourses. All water companies have an emergency release provision in their operations. They have a system of stop valves that normally separate the sewage from the water, but if the system is so suffused with water at certain points—during a heavy storm, for example—that it cannot cope, those valves are effectively released; the two flows are then mingled. That is the point at which raw sewage may be released into watercourses.

Water companies say that, generally speaking, the dilution of the sewage is such that it does not make a great deal of difference, particularly in heavy storms and similar conditions. That is partly overthrown by the fact that discharges sometimes take place over a substantial period

and are not simply brief discharges into rivers at the height of a crisis like a storm. I do not think that anybody would say that in periods of severe crisis for a water company, those sorts of provisions should be removed, but that provision far exceeds what we might expect.

The discharge of spills came to an incredible 1.53 million hours across the nine English water companies last year. As I mentioned, a lot of the spills are not brief. The water companies could introduce procedures that would ensure that they were brief by improving how they separate out water and sewage, and ensuring that those flows can be combined only in the most critical circumstances. It is evident from what we know about those discharges that that is not the case. This is being used as a safety valve by water companies in many instances, rather than as an emergency, last-stop procedure. It is certainly within the companies' ability to ensure that those safety valves become last-gasp emergency procedures just by improving their procedures to ensure that arrangements for the separation of water are maintained to a higher standard.

As a shadow Minister, I would say that, wouldn't I? However, it is perhaps not surprising, given that this concern is shared pretty much across the House, that other people have said much the same thing. For example, I believe the Minister met chief executives of the 15 water companies in September, at which point she called on them to take further action to protect the environment, reduce leakage and safeguard water supply. She said that

“we discussed a number of issues I feel strongly about, including storm overflows, and how we can work together to see much more ambitious improvements. This country's green recovery from coronavirus can only happen if water companies step up and play their part.”

I could not have put it better, and the Minister indeed put it very well.

The hon. Member for Gloucester, who made an excellent contribution, reminded us that the amendment is supported, and was substantially crafted, by the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow. Other hon. Members pointed out the concerns on this issue in their constituencies and why action needs to be taken. The entire Opposition think that this is a good idea and wish to pursue it, and of course the Minister has made admirable comments on how water companies need to step up their activity, particularly on storm overflows, to get things organised.

Basically, what is there not to like about the amendment, and why can it not just be instantly put into the Bill? It will not detract from anything; it will simply add a layer of urgency to something that we all think needs to be done, which surely is what Bills should be about. They should frame action in such a way that entreaties and suggestions are added to by a piece of legislation that says, “Go and do this over a period of time.”

We not think that this should be seen as a probing amendment. That is a very minor disagreement between the Opposition and the hon. Member for Gloucester, who I appreciate may have suggested that it should be deemed a probing amendment out of sensibility for his own side's manoeuvrability, shall we say, on this issue. In his heart, I think, he would be

absolutely behind the idea that it ought to go in the Bill straight away. I sense that very strongly from the vibrations that are coming across the room.

10.15 am

I hope that on this occasion the Minister can oblige us all and simply say, “Yes, this is a really good piece of work. It ought to be in the Bill.” I do not expect her to say, “Sorry we didn’t put it in the Bill in the first place,” but I expect her to say that we will proceed, either now with the present formulation, or on Report if a slightly different formulation is needed.

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Rebecca Pow

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester for the amendment and for painting such a charming picture of wild swimming in the River Wye, which I should think is quite chilly. I must also refer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow, who has done so much work on this. As my hon. Friend knows, I have met colleagues several times to discuss this very important issue. He quoted some, frankly, fairly ghastly statistics, as did the hon. Member for Southampton, Test. My hon. Friend is right that this matters and he knows, as does our right hon. Friend, that I take it extremely seriously. I think the hon. Gentleman knows that too.

The issue of river health and the impact of sewer overflows is a priority for me. One of my hats is Water Minister. I vowed that I must do something about that while I am in this role, and I am determined to take action. It has been overlooked for far too long. I have discussed that with my officials at great length. I will not say that they thanked me for it all the time, but it is a priority that I believe we have to get right.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester that controlled sewage discharge to watercourses from sewage treatment works are tightly regulated by the Environment Agency using powers under the environmental permitting regulations, so we obviously already have that in place. I want to be clear that when we were designing the current provisions in the Environment Bill on drainage and sewerage management plans, in clause 76, it was a prime objective to tackle the discharge of sewage into our waterways better.

Clause 76 specifically requires that each sewerage undertaker must prepare a drainage and sewerage management plan. *[Interruption.]* Yes, there is a “must”—that got a cheer! The clause also specifically requires that a drainage and sewerage management plan “must” address relevant environmental “risks”—those two words are very important—and how they are to be mitigated. That will include sewer overflows and their impact on water quality.

Although I understand the intention for specific references to address sewer discharges and water quality, it is entirely appropriate in this case to provide a broad definition in primary legislation of relevant environmental risks. The provision needs to stand the test of time and be

fit for the environmental challenges of tomorrow, not just of today. I can say unequivocally and can confirm that I and any future DEFRA Ministers will also have a failsafe power to make directions to specify any other matters that a plan must address. In simple terms, that will ensure that if a plan or plans are not adequate, the Government can take swift action. I will not hesitate to use that power to direct companies if I am not satisfied with their performance to address sewer discharges and water quality. They should consider themselves on notice; in the meeting that was referred to by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test, I pretty much gave that message. I am not messing about.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)

The Minister is making a powerful point. The Opposition have no problem at all with how diligent she is and how conscientiously she does her job. I am just wondering how she would feel if a successor—obviously in many years' time—was not quite as diligent. We need to know that the safeguards are in the Bill. We want them enshrined in primary legislation. If the Minister is so keen on the power and so committed to it, what is the problem with putting it in the Bill?

Rebecca Pow

I thank the hon. Lady for reiterating my commitment. We believe the measures and steps that are here will ensure that that does happen—the sewerage and drainage management plans will come into use and the idea of that will become normal—but there will be an opportunity for a DEFRA Minister to have a failsafe power to make directions to specify any other matters. We also have the Environment Agency keeping abreast of all this. We even have the OEP, at the end of the day. We have so many checks and balances in the Bill that once we get the system going, it should be failsafe.

Richard Graham

The Minister has reiterated her own commitment, which none of us doubts. None the less, as the chair of the Environment Agency has said, despite all the various checks and balances, progress has not been as strong as any of us would have liked. Here is the opportunity to insert the words about

“the water quality and impact of the discharges of the undertaker’s drainage system and sewerage system”.

Even if the Minister believes that the Bill has enough “musts” and enough powers for the Minister to direct, the explanatory notes are not that clear, saying simply that

“The sewerage undertaker is required to set out in the plan what it intends to do to maintain an effective system of sewerage and drainage, and when those actions are likely to be taken”,

then adding, rather vaguely:

“Should other factors become relevant”.

Does the Minister not agree that there is a real opportunity to specify, at least in the explanatory notes, that the water quality and impact of sewerage overflow must be addressed?

Rebecca Pow

My hon. Friend is doing absolutely the right thing in checking up on the issues. I have been doing that myself, in fairness. He mentions the EA. As he said, Emma Howard Boyd, the chair, made it clear that much more is expected of water companies, which includes developing, publishing and implementing specific plans by the end of this year, to reduce pollution incidents. The Environment Agency is on the case. Following my meeting, the Secretary of State is meeting with water companies again very shortly. I repeat that “relevant environmental risks” will include sewer overflows and water quality; I said that just now and I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester was listening. Once that has been established as a risk, it would be very hard for anyone to argue in the future that it was not a risk. That addresses the point made by the hon. Member for Newport West, and I reiterate that point.

Dr Whitehead

The Minister talks about checks and balances, but I am sure she will know that, as far as the checks and balances relating to storm overflows are concerned, more than 60 discharges a year should trigger an investigation by the Environment Agency. Those storm overflows have been released hundreds of times per year by each water company. The Environment Agency relies on water companies to self-monitor their discharges, so the check and balance does not work as well as it should. Does the Minister think that arrangement is sufficient to keep those discharges under control?

Rebecca Pow

I thank the hon. Member for raising that important point; I just want to talk a little bit about the Environment Agency. They are actually part-way through a programme to improve the management of storm overflows. Event duration monitoring gadgets are being installed on the vast majority of combined inland and coastal sewer overflows, and will provide data for the duration and frequency of storm spills by 2025. Approximately 13,000 of the 15,000 overflows will receive this event duration monitoring, so it will make a difference—I am convinced of that. We do, however, accept that there is a great deal more to do.

Let me clarify how important I think the issue is; we do not want to sit around waiting, but to get on and do something about it. In addition to the Environment Bill and the ongoing discussions around making it as strong as possible, I have set up a new storm overflows taskforce to make rapid progress in addressing the volumes of sewage discharge into our rivers.

This has been done at speed and very recently, when all of this “stuff”, as they call it, came to my attention. I would like to thank everyone involved for moving so fast on this. I will set a long-term goal on the storm overflows for sewerage undertakers, which I will talk about in more detail later, but the work on that needs to start now. The taskforce is developing actions that will increase water company investment to tackle storm overflows in order to accelerate our progress.

Daniel Zeichner

The water companies operate in a tightly constrained regulatory framework, always having to balance bills, investment and shareholder returns. What impact does the Minister think her welcome initiative will have on that, and will she be directing them as to either what they do not do instead, or where that investment should come from?

Rebecca Pow

I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge for that, and of course he makes a really important point. All those things will be in the mix for consideration. The storm overflow taskforce has been set up between the EA, DEFRA, Ofwat, the Consumer Council for Water, Blueprint for Water and Water UK. These are all things they are well aware of and will be discussing, and they will be the ones setting out clear proposals to address the volumes of sewage discharge into our rivers. They are working on that now, at speed, and I anticipate we will have a good idea of their list of actions by spring. The hon. Member might say that that is a long time away, but we are already in November; it is actually only a in few months' time. I anticipate that this will be really beneficial and really helpful.

The whole thinking behind the taskforce's action list is to increase the amount of sewage processed at treatment plants, for example through building additional sewage storage capacity, which I think my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester might be pleased to hear, and separate surface water connections for the combined sewerage network.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth for her input; I have met her and others from Cornwall over the issue of surfers, as well as Surfers against Sewage, who do great work highlighting the issues. As I said, the taskforce is looking to all issues to do with water quality and sewerage overflows, which will include bathing water. We are looking into that.

I also want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, who makes a good point—always standing up for her farmers, in that great farming country she is in—and she is absolutely right. We cannot lay all of this at the door of the farmers. There are many causes and they all have to be looked at and tackled, but that is not to say that there is not work to be done with farmers—I believe they know that. Through our new environmental land management scheme, there will be opportunities to work with farmers to reduce pollution. That is coming down the tracks as well and will also help with the whole water pollution issue.

10.30 am

You will be pleased to hear, Chair, that I am going to wind up. I want explicitly to confirm that I expect a key outcome from the taskforce and our new statutory drainage and water management plans will be a sizeable reduction in uncontrolled discharges from sewerage assets such as storm overflows. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester again and ask him to please pass on my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow and others. He is trying to intervene.

Richard Graham

I am very grateful that the Minister has announced this storm overflow taskforce, which is an interesting new group. Taskforces come and go and they have occasionally been used in the past—surely not by this Government—as a sort of alternative to action. One thing that would make us all have greater confidence in the Bill being able to deliver the change that the Minister and all of us wish to see, if she is unwilling, at this stage, to amend clause 76 with the words the amendment suggests, would be if she would consider amending the explanatory notes. At the moment, the relevant sentence reads:

“Any relevant risks to the environment and mitigation measures should be recorded in the plan.”

The Minister could, if she wished, insert “any relevant risk to the environment and mitigation measures, including water quality and the impact of sewerage overflow.”

The Chair

Interventions must be brief. Minister.

Rebecca Pow

Thank you, Chair. I thought my hon. Friend would try and sneak in a final go. I do not blame him for that.

The Chair

He will have a final go in a moment.

Rebecca Pow

Thank you, Mr Gray.

On that note, I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester says about the explanatory notes but I want to reiterate what I said earlier: relevant environmental risks will include sewer

overflows and water quality. Once that has been established as a risk, it will be very hard for anyone to argue that it is not a future risk. I shall leave it there.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow and other Members for all their work, particularly in raising awareness of this issue. I hope, on the strength of the assurance that I have given today, that my hon. Friend will kindly consider withdrawing his amendment.

Richard Graham

This has been a helpful discussion, with Members contributing from all sides. The hon. Member for Southampton, Test is even able to detect vibrations from across the room, which perhaps none of the rest of us has been able to do. As for the key issue in the proposed amendment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow put it very well in a note to me where he said, “This amendment would require water companies, their regulators and overseeing Ministers to have regard to continuous improvement through these admirable five-yearly plans to ensure our rivers can gradually recover from their polluted state to once again become clear and clean for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.” Members on both sides have highlighted how, in their constituencies, that is relevant.

The Minister has tried to reassure us that that is exactly her own objective. I have no reason to doubt that, as she has confirmed it several times. However, it seems to me that were I to withdraw the probing amendment, it would be on the basis of the words she used, which were that the relevant risks would include water quality and the impact of sewerage overflow. It is great that the Minister has made that statement, but we need to see that in the explanatory notes. If she can give an indication that she would consider that on Report, I would be happy on that basis to withdraw the amendment.

Rebecca Pow

I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate words. I am happy to consider making it clearer in the explanatory notes.

Richard Graham

I am very grateful to the Minister for making a significant step to recognising the strength of feeling on this, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Hon. Members

No.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division 29

17 November 2020

The Committee divided:

Ayes: 5

Noes: 9

Ayes: 5

Noes: 9

Question accordingly negatived.

Environment Bill (Sixteenth sitting)

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Division 29

17 November 2020

The Committee divided:

Ayes: 5

Noes: 9

Question accordingly negatived.

Ayes

- [Anderson, Fleur](#)
- [Furniss, Gill](#)
- [Jones, Ruth](#)
- [Whitehead, Dr Alan](#)
- [Zeichner, Daniel](#)

Noes

- Afolami, Bim
- Bhatti, Saqib
- Browne, Anthony
- Crosbie, Virginia
- Docherty, Leo
- Jones, Fay
- Mackrory, Cherilyn
- Moore, Robbie
- Pow, Rebecca