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Via email:
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**Councillor Jo Robb
Thames Champion**

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10 November 2020

Dear Mrs Pow,

Congratulations on your appointment to DEFRA's Storm Overflows Taskforce and thank you for your work in this important area.

I am South Oxfordshire District Council's "Thames Champion," responsible for working to enhance cleanliness, biodiversity and access to the River Thames. I am also a year-round swimmer in the river. Over the course of the past year, our District has seen a huge increase in the numbers of people enjoying bathing, paddle boarding and wild swimming in our stretch of the Thames.

Last month, our Council unanimously passed a motion supporting more stringent regulation and enforcement on pollution, cleaner water, accurate real-time and publicly available information on sewage discharges and enhanced public information on water quality.

Please find the text of the motion below.

I am liaising directly with Thames Water and the Environment Agency to achieve the above aims, and in particular, to ensure the public have accurate information about sewage discharges. In addition, I have formed a group of cross-party representatives from more than a dozen councils along the length of the Thames and its tributaries with the aim of campaigning with a united voice for an end to sewage pollution. This week I also asked our local MPs, John Howell and David Johnston, to support Philip Dunne MP's Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill when it has its second reading in Parliament on 15 January.

Sewage infrastructure across South Oxfordshire's stretch of the Thames is facing the dual pressures of increased precipitation caused by climate change and a rapidly increasing population. By 2034, our population will have increased by more than 50% from today.

Our sewerage system is struggling to meet the needs of the present population, let alone that of the future. In the first six months of 2020, treatment works at Benson and Didcot spilled raw or partially treated effluent for more than 800 hours each.

I appreciate the remit of the Storm Overflows Taskforce is to explore short-term actions water companies can take to accelerate progress on storm overflows. In the short-term, accurate public information about storm overflows and water quality is essential. I would welcome – and indeed am campaigning for - the introduction of real-time public data on sewage spills and water quality, *year round*, including outside the bathing season. I would also welcome the upgrade of treatment works and storm overflows through the lining of pipes to stop stormwater infiltration or the increasing of storm tank capacity.

However, long-term solutions and a detailed plan are needed for the protection of our rivers and streams for the coming decades.

Investment in our sewerage systems, the separation of surface and foul water drainage systems from new infrastructure and housing development, the long-term replacement and elimination of combined overflows, nature-based solutions for water treatment, a regulatory system that ensures the polluter pays and transparency and an open public discussion about the state of our sewerage infrastructure and the scale of investment needed to eliminate sewage spills is required.

I look forward to hearing the findings of the Storm Overflow Taskforce and look forward to realising the first steps in cleaning up our rivers but I hope longer-term solutions will also be sought.

I would welcome the opportunity for you to meet with our cross-party group of councillors to discuss your work on the Storm Overflows Taskforce, to explain this important work and to hear the concerns of councillors along the Thames and its tributaries.

With best wishes,



Cllr Jo Robb
Thames Champion
Woodcote & Rotherfield Ward
South Oxfordshire District Council

Motion agreed by Council, 4 October 2020

That Council notes the growing popularity of wild swimming, paddling, kayaking and paddle boarding in the River Thames and its tributaries and, more importantly, the intrinsic value of clean water and healthy, biodiverse rivers. The UK's water companies are permitted to release raw sewage into waterways in specific circumstances, under licence from the Environment Agency. Regulators rely on self-reporting on the part of the water companies and there is no way for river users to know in real time when sewage spills happen. Hundreds of beaches around the UK have

Bathing Quality Water status – this ensures the Environment Agency monitors and reports on water quality throughout the bathing season.

Only a handful of inland lakes in the UK – and no rivers – have Bathing Quality Water status.

A recent report by the Environment Agency found that every river in England is polluted beyond legal limits. Only 14% of English rivers can be considered ecologically healthy.

Recognising the intrinsic importance of the River Thames as a natural asset of national significance and its value to our communities, this Council:

- 1. Asks officers to work with appropriate partners such as the Environment Agency, DEFRA, The Rivers Trust and Surfers Against Sewage to explore Bathing Quality Water status for the River Thames in South Oxfordshire;*
- 2. Calls on Thames Water to draft and implement an action plan for the elimination of Controlled Sewage Overflows (CSOs) across its sewage treatment network;*
- 3. Calls on Thames Water to provide accurate, real-time and publicly available information about sewage overflows into the Thames and its tributaries;*
- 4. Asks officers to work alongside the Thames Champion, Thames Water, the Environment Agency, neighbouring Councils and others to achieve an end to sewage discharges, and the introduction of world-leading water quality legislation, a rigorous, enhanced water-testing regime and accurate up to date information on water quality and sewage spills to make the River Thames and its tributaries “Safe for All.”*