

# Press release: Water company to pay a record £975,000 towards environmental improvements following sewage spills on Dorset coast

- Highest ever Enforcement Undertaking in England
- RNLI lifeboat crew complained after sailing through raw sewage
- Local community will benefit from £400,000 towards flood defence scheme
- Nature reserve, RNLI and projects to improve water quality will receive payments

More than 142,000 cubic metres of sewage was discharged into the sea during illegal spills in 2016 and 2017. The windfall will be used to fund environmental improvements in and around the coastal town of Swanage.

The package offered by Wessex Water, the highest ever in the UK, includes £400,000 towards a local authority flood defence scheme in Swanage, £400,000 to Dorset Waste Partnership to fund the development of a doorstep recycling service for domestic fat, oil and grease, £100,000 towards the Dorset Litter Free Coast and Sea Project, £75,000 to the Durlston Country Park and Nature Reserve.

The company also offered £25,000 compensation to Swanage RNLI Lifeboat Station as an impacted third party, taking the total pay-out to £1 million.

Wessex Water made the offer as part of a legal agreement known as an Enforcement Undertaking (EU) which is a form of Civil Sanction. An EU involves a company or individual offering to put right what went wrong and compensate people and the environment. After careful consideration, the Environment Agency accepted Wessex Water's enforcement undertaking on the basis that the company accepted breaching the legislation and payments totalling £975,000 would secure improvements to the environment including flood defence and measures to tackle fats, oil and grease – which can cause pollution to rivers and coastal waters if poured down the sink.

Mark Sitton-Kent from the Environment Agency said:

When water companies damage the environment by illegally polluting water the Environment Agency will take tough enforcement action against them including civil sanctions.

This record pay-out will secure a range of environmental improvements for the local community, tourism and future water quality.

Swanage town centre falls within a flood risk zone where temporary defences

are deployed to help protect local business and property. The contribution offered by Wessex Water will benefit local residents and businesses by improving the level of flood protection in the town.

The financial contribution to Dorset Waste Partnership (DWP) will fund the development of a doorstep recycling service for fats, oil and grease. The money will be used to help determine the facilities needed for the service and fund additional resources to assist with recycling. The donation to Durlston Country Park will enable provision of equipment for animal surveys and raise awareness and promote management of the rich local environment.

The financial pay-out arose from a series of unconsented discharges from Swanage Sewage Treatment Works into Swanage Bay where it is estimated more than 142,000 cubic metres of sewage was discharged into the sea.

## **Notes to editor**

As owner and operator, Wessex Water admitted failing to comply with the site's environmental permit on various dates between 31 July 2016 and 3 August 2017. One of the sewage spills occurred during the 2016 Swanage carnival weekend and another was witnessed by a local RNLi lifeboat crew who complained to Wessex Water and the local authority after sailing through a plume of raw sewage off Peverill Point on 1 August 2016.

The continuing discharges prompted the local council to erect warning signs on Swanage beach on 5 August 2016.

The permit for the treatment works allows for discharges from 3 separate outfalls. Discharges should only occur when flows exceed limits specified in the permit. The works had previously operated to a high standard, but its performance deteriorated around the time of the discharges resulting in a loss in storage capacity.

A storm on 1 August 2016 caused extra flows to enter the works resulting in unconsented discharges into Swanage Bay. The pollution occurred because there was no where to store the incoming flows. Wessex Water failed to report the discharges until 3 days later. Swanage Sewage Treatment Works works is now operating in compliance with its permit and has been since April 2018.

The previous highest EU was £650,752 paid by Costcutter Supermarkets Group Limited to WRAP (The Waste and Resources Action Programme) charity in 2017 for offences under the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 2007. The highest previous financial contribution from a water company EU – which was £375,000 paid by Northumbrian Water Limited in relation to pollution incidents from one of its sewage pumping stations between 2015 and 2016 – which was formally accepted in December 2016.

The Environment Agency has previously accepted 4 other EUs from Wessex Water, the highest of which was £200,000 for an EU relating to Wick St Lawrence, Somerset. The money was split between a number of charities and organisations to help fund environmental projects.