

Water companies could face legal action after investigation launched into sewage treatment works

The Environment Agency (EA) and Ofwat have launched a major investigation into sewage treatment works, after new checks led to water companies admitting that they could be releasing unpermitted sewage discharges into rivers and watercourses.

This investigation will involve more than 2000 sewage treatment works, with any company caught breaching their legal permits facing enforcement action, including fines or prosecutions. Fines can be up to 10% of annual turnover for civil cases, or unlimited in criminal proceedings.

In recent years the EA and Ofwat have been pushing water companies to improve their day-to-day performance and meet progressively higher standards to protect the environment.

As part of this, the EA has been checking that water companies comply with requirements and has asked them to fit new monitors at sewage treatment works. This is to make sure the right levels of wastewater are being treated before overflows are allowed to enter the environment.

Following this action by the EA, several water companies have now revealed that many of their sewage treatment works may not be compliant. This would mean that water companies are in breach of their permits and failing to meet their legal duties.

EA and Ofwat are now looking into all water and sewerage companies to assess the scale of the problem.

Any company caught breaching these minimum standards will face a range of possible enforcement action – up to and including prosecution.

Emma Howard Boyd, chair of the Environment Agency, said:

Any water companies in breach of their permits are acting illegally. This is a major issue of public trust. Water company boards must certify every year that they have adequate resources to fulfil their regulated activities. Only now, just before new monitors are installed, have companies reported concerns over potential problems. The EA has begun an immediate investigation of more than 2,000 sewage treatment works and will prosecute where necessary.

The private sector is under increasing pressure to demonstrate

tangible commitments on protecting the environment. This shows why we need robust and well-funded regulation to provide the public, investors and customers with assurances about what is being delivered on the ground. I would like to see the levels of penalties for corporate environmental crime in England go up significantly. More attention should also be paid to the directors of companies that are guilty of repeated, deliberate or reckless breaches of environmental law. Such directors should be struck off and in the most grievous cases given custodial sentences.

Jonson Cox, Chair of Ofwat, said:

Customers pay water companies to treat wastewater and protect and enhance rivers and wildlife. The public will be extremely disappointed if these reports are confirmed. Ofwat takes any reports of water companies breaking the law very seriously.

We have launched an investigation relating to companies' management of their wastewater treatment works which will examine any instance of systemic management failure, or the misreporting of data. If we find reason to act, Ofwat will use our full range of powers to hold companies to account for their failures and to require them to put things right in very short order.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

This new information is shocking and wholly unacceptable. We have been repeatedly clear in Parliament in recent weeks that we need to tighten up existing rules but also raise standards across the board when it comes to protecting our rivers. That means urgently addressing issues of non-compliance, but also going much further to reduce the harm caused by the discharges that should only be happening in exceptional circumstances. I want to see water companies spending far more on better infrastructure, and far less on payouts to shareholders.

I have made my expectations of water companies and their legal duties crystal clear. Water companies must take urgent and immediate steps to abide by their legal duties. I will also be remaining in close contact with the regulators about any fines, prosecutions or other enforcement action that is deemed necessary.

The Government has been repeatedly clear that the amount of sewage discharged into our waters by water companies is unacceptable, and has taken direct

action to accelerate progress in tackling it.

Through the Environment Act, it has introduced clear new duties to legally require water companies to make progressive reductions in the adverse impacts of storm overflows.

Any water companies not abiding by their permits are also expected to take immediate action to urgently address any non-compliance while these investigations are ongoing.

- Full details of the investigation – including specific companies – cannot be shared at this stage as this may prejudice future legal proceedings.
- As part of an increased drive for better monitoring and transparency, the EA has pressed water companies to install monitors so that the frequency and duration of sewage spills into rivers or coastal waters, which should normally happen only during heavy rainfall, can be seen by all. More than 12,000 of England's 15,000 storm overflows now have Event Duration Monitors, and the remaining 3,000 will all have them by end 2023. All the data is published [online](#), so the public can see what is happening in their local area.
- The EA and Ofwat are also now requiring the companies to install new flow monitors on more than 2,000 wastewater treatment works to identify what is happening at those works during the sewage treatment process itself. This will uncover whether the companies are complying properly with the conditions in their permits on the volumes of sewage they must treat before they are allowed to divert any untreated sewage to storm overflows.
- This new monitoring programme is in addition to the many other measures that the government is taking to address the issue of storm overflows. The Environment Act was [passed into law](#) on 9 November. It will improve the performance of water and wastewater companies by introducing clear new duties, in addition to new measures on how the water industry plans for the future. The government tabled an amendment to place its expectations for reduction of sewage discharges on an enhanced legal footing. This bolsters a raft of measures already being taken by Government to deliver progressive reductions in the adverse impacts of storm overflows on the environment and on public health.
- Defra Ministers and Environment Agency representatives have also been [speaking to researchers and campaigners](#) for a number of months about flow requirements and how increased monitoring and technology can improve reporting and planning.
- As part of Ofwat's recent price review, it backed investment of around £1 billion every year for water companies to improve the natural environment by increasing the capacity of the wastewater system to meet growing demand. In July it approved almost £3 billion extra for green recovery plans to deliver lasting environmental improvements.
- Water company boards certify every year that they have the funding, management resources and systems and controls in place to fulfil their regulated activities, including to meet their environmental obligations. They must notify Ofwat if they are aware of anything that may materially

affect their ability to fulfil those duties.

[Integrated Rail Plan for the North and the Midlands](#)

Mr Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement about the future of the railway.

Today I am proud to announce our [Integrated Rail Plan](#). A £96 billion programme which will transform rail services in the North and the Midlands, the largest single rail investment ever made by a UK government. An investment that rather being felt decades into the future, but much, much sooner.

Mr Speaker, this unprecedented commitment to build a world-class railway that delivers for passengers and freight, for towns and cities, for communities and businesses, will benefit 8 out of the top 10 busiest rail corridors across the North and Midlands, providing faster journeys, increased capacity and more frequent services, up to 10 years sooner than previously planned.

Mr Speaker, when I became Transport Secretary in 2019, the HS2 project was already about 10 years old. I was concerned that costs were rising and that newer projects like Midlands Rail Hub and Northern Powerhouse Rail hadn't been fully factored into the plans.

Under the original scheme, the HS2 track would not have reached the East Midlands or the North until the early 2040s.

Clearly, a rethink was needed to make sure the project would deliver for the regions that it served as soon as possible.

This is how the Integrated Rail Plan was born – a desire to deliver sooner – and so the Prime Minister and I asked Douglas Oakervee to lead the work and make recommendations on the best way forward.

One of his key criticisms was that HS2 was designed in isolation from the rest of the transport network.

The original plans gave us high-speed lines to the East Midlands, but it didn't serve any of the East Midlands' 3 main cities, for example. If you wanted to get to Nottingham or Derby, you would have had to go to a parkway station and change on to a local tram or train.

Oakervee made a clear and very convincing case for considering HS2 as part of an integrated rail plan should work alongside local, regional and national services, not just those travelling between our biggest cities.

We accepted those recommendations and asked the National Infrastructure Commission to develop options.

The Commission reported back with 2 key suggestions. First, that we adopt a flexible approach, initially setting out a core integrated rail network. But that we remain open to future additions as long as expectations on costs and timing were met.

Second, that strengthening regional rail links would be most economically beneficial for the North and the Midlands. Connecting towns with the main rail network, bringing hope and opportunity to communities who for too long have felt left behind. And we should seek to bring those benefits to passengers and local economies as soon as possible.

These, then, were the guiding principles behind the Integrated Rail Plan I'm announcing today. An ambitious and unparalleled programme that not only overhauls the inter-city links across the North and Midlands.

But that also speeds up the benefits for local areas and serves the destinations people most want to reach.

Mr Speaker, this new blueprint delivers 3 high-speed lines. First, Crewe to Manchester. Second, Birmingham to the East Midlands, with HS2 trains continuing to central Nottingham and central Derby, Chesterfield and Sheffield on an upgraded main line. And third, a brand new high-speed line from Warrington to Manchester and to the western border of Yorkshire, slashing journey times across the North of England.

Mr Speaker, I've heard some people say we are just electrifying the Transpennine Route. This is wrong. What we're actually doing is investing £23 billion to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail and the Transpennine Route Upgrade, unlocking east to west travel across the north of England.

So in total, this package is 110 miles of new high-speed line. All of it in the Midlands and the North. It is 180 miles of newly-electrified line. All of it in the Midlands and North.

We will upgrade the East Coast Main Line, with a package of investment on track improvements and digital signalling, bringing down journey times between London, Leeds, Darlington, Newcastle and Edinburgh, bringing benefits to the North East much much sooner than under previous plans. And adds capacity and speeds up services over more than 400 miles of line, the vast majority of it in the Midlands and North.

We will study how best to take HS2 trains into Leeds as well. And we will start work on a new West Yorkshire mass transit system – righting the wrong of this major city – probably the largest in Europe – which doesn't have a mass transit system. We commit today to supporting West Yorkshire Combined Authority over the long term to ensure that this time, it actually gets done.

In short, Mr Speaker, we are about to embark on the biggest single acts of levelling up of any government in history. It is 5 times than what was spent on Crossrail, 10 times than what was spent on the Olympics.

It will achieve the same, similar or faster journey times to London and on the core Northern Powerhouse Rail network than the original proposals and will bring the benefits years earlier, as well as doubling, or in some cases tripling, capacity.

Let me set out a few of these investments:

- rail journeys between Birmingham and Nottingham cut from an hour and a quarter to 26 minutes. City centre to city centre
- journeys between York and Manchester down to 55 minutes, from 83 minutes today
- commuters will be able to get from Bradford to Leeds in just 12 minutes – almost half the time it takes today
- there will be earlier benefits for places like Sheffield and Chesterfield
- trips from Newcastle to Birmingham will be slashed by almost 30 minutes and passengers in Durham and Darlington will benefit from smoother, more reliable trains

As the IRP delivers not just for our largest cities, but also for smaller places and towns. Places such as Kettering, Market Harborough, Leicester, Loughborough, Grantham, Newark, Retford, Doncaster, Wakefield, Dewsbury, Huddersfield and Stalybridge could all see improvements, electrification or faster services, benefitting in ways that they would not have done under the previous HS2 programme.

Mr Speaker, we're not stopping there. Today's plan is about those places which connect and interact with HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. The scale of ambition with many of these projects lies outside the scope of this plan.

Just yesterday I opened the first Beeching reversal. Reversing the Beeching acts. And we are going to be doing the same in Northumberland – the Ashington, Blyth, Newcastle line.

We're investing £2 billion in cycling and walking, £3 billion in turn-up-and-go bus services. And 10s of billions to upgrade our country's roads.

Mr Speaker, after so many decades of decline, constrained capacity and poor reliability, finally, this plan will give passengers in the North and Midlands the services they need and deserve.

It's not just about infrastructure, we're going to make train travel much easier as well. Today, I can confirm £360 million to reform fares and ticketing with the rollout of contactless, pay-as-you-go ticketing at 700

urban stations, including around 400 in the North.

Mr Speaker, this is a landmark plan, by far the biggest of any network improvement and focused on the North and Midlands, with more seats, more frequent services, and shorter journeys that meets the needs of both today's passengers and future generations.

And we're getting started immediately today with another £625 million for the electrification between Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, bringing the total on the Transpennine Route Upgrade to £2 billion and counting. And £249 million to further electrify the Midland Main Line between Kettering and Market Harborough with work starting on the Integrated Rail Plan by Christmas, Mr Speaker.

Communities of every size will benefit, right across the North and the Benefit, in many cases years earlier than planned by taking a fresh look at HS2 and how it fits with the rest of the rail system.

We'll be able to build a much-improved railway that will provide similar or better services to almost every destination than the outdated vision drawn up for HS2 over a decade ago.

This plan will bring the North and Midlands closer together and fire up their economies to rival London and the South East. It will rebalance our economic geography. It will spread opportunity. It will level up our country. And it will bring benefits at least a decade or more earlier.

I commend this statement to the House.

[Fish refuges created to protect vital fish populations across the East Midlands](#)

- Environment Agency fisheries team creates refuges for fish
- Protection from predators, increasing juvenile survival

Fish refuges have been created across the East Midlands by the Environment Agency's area fisheries team to offer a haven to vulnerable fish populations.

The project to create and improve existing fish refuges across the East Midlands provides protection for fish, offering habitat, shelter from extreme weather and good spawning opportunities.

Fish refuges help to maintain good fish populations and provide a number of benefits such as shelter for fish, including fry (young fish) and eels, during times of high flows and flood; good spawning opportunities; and

sanctuary for fish from potential predators. The shallow waters warm up quickly in spring, giving fry an improved survival rate so they have a better chance of reaching adulthood.

In total the East Midlands area boasts 16 areas in various rivers, some of which are now 20-years old. The design of the refuges allows the movement of fish into the refuge throughout the year, encouraging spawning activities and juvenile survival. They also provide areas of high vegetation, giving fish protection from predators.

The Environment Agency carries out a maintenance programme of its fish refuges and the 2021 review revealed that a site at the Glazebrook Pond in Sawley, Derbyshire showed a decline and was in need of improvements.

Dan Ellis, Fisheries Technical Officer at the Environment Agency said:

Over a number of years the East Midlands fisheries team has been creating fish refuge areas to boost fish stocks in many of our rivers including the Trent, Soar, Derwent and Maun, which has helped to improve the resilience of our fish populations.

We are also hoping to join with partners in creating new fish refuges in a number of locations across the East Midlands in the near future.

To carry out the work to the Glazebrook Pond, the Environment Agency worked closely with land owners and the local angling club. The work, which was completed in October, has greatly improved fish access in and out of the area, providing benefit to the river fish species and wildlife in the local area.

The project is an example of how local fisheries staff are working hard to improve fish populations and their habitats across the East Midlands, funded by anglers' rod licence income, for the benefit of all anglers.

Notes to editors

- Funds from the Fisheries Improvement Programme is often used to carry out fish refuge work.
- The Fisheries Improvement Programme allows the Environment Agency to identify and invest in work supporting a local, sustainable future for angling. The programme is a great demonstration of partnership efforts, many of the projects completed with the support of land owners, local businesses and fisheries.
- Fish refuges are off-river areas of open water that are connected by inlets to the river. The refuges can be purpose built or established

ponds which are then connected by a channel. These refuges mimic the conditions of a natural floodplain, where there are many such connected waterbodies.

- The performance of the refuges is continually monitored and reviews are carried out on the sites to see if improvements are needed. Data collected from previous monitoring has shown that these refuge sites have provided a variety of benefits for local fish populations, and have proven to be successful.

[Don't get 'Petfished' this Christmas: Chief Veterinary Officer warns the public about deceitful pet sellers](#)

- Public warned against being 'Petfished' and to always research the person behind the pet
- Over a quarter (27%) of UK cat or dog owners say they noticed a suspicious seller or advert while purchasing their last cat or dog
- Defra's Petfished campaign film urges the public to think twice before buying a pet this Christmas

Defra launches its Christmas Petfished campaign today, warning the public against unknowingly buying puppies, kittens, cats and dogs from unscrupulous sellers ahead of Christmas.

A recent survey of UK cat and dog owners found over a quarter (27%) came across a seller or advert that made them feel suspicious of the welfare of the pet, while purchasing their last cat or dog*. The research further reveals the public are at risk of purchasing puppies and kittens from deceitful sellers, otherwise known as being 'Petfished', finding:

- Less than half (43%) of UK dog or cat owners visited the seller in-person in the animal's home when researching their recent pet purchase.
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) pet buyers didn't do any research at all before visiting their puppy or kitten for the first time.
- Under a third (31%) of dog and cat owners feel very confident they could spot the signs of a low welfare puppy or kitten seller.

In addition, a survey of British Veterinary Association (BVA) and British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) members found nearly two thirds (68%) of pet owners were unaware that the clinical and behavioural signs of their pet may be linked to low welfare breeding practices**.

Veterinary professionals and Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) are

urging the public to think twice before they buy, and look out for deceitful sellers who take advantage of increased demand for pets ahead of Christmas.

Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss said:

Christmas can be a difficult time to settle a pet into a new home and it's vitally important that people not only research the breed of animal they want, but also the person selling it to them.

Puppies and kittens bred in low-welfare conditions can often be separated from their mother too soon which can lead to severe health and behavioural problems, heartache and high vet bills for their new family. We urge people to remain vigilant and to always thoroughly research pet sellers before getting in touch.

Bill Lambert, Health and Welfare expert at The Kennel Club said:

Buying a puppy is a huge decision and all prospective owners should do the proper research and have all the facts available so that they can make an informed decision.

We know there has been a surge in demand for puppies during the pandemic. The current mismatch between supply and demand can lead to more people being duped by rogue breeders and scammers, and inadvertently fuelling low-welfare breeders.

To avoid being Petfished, the public are being urged to spot vital red flags when researching sellers, with the help of the acronym S.P.O.T.:

- **Seller – Put the seller's name and details including phone number into a search engine – avoid those with multiple adverts.**
- **Parent – Make sure you see puppies and kittens in their home with their mother.**
- **Old enough – Check puppies and kittens are at least 8 weeks old before you take them home.**
- **Treatment – Ask to see the animal's health records and avoid sellers who can't provide them.**

Defra's Petfished campaign today launches a film warning the public of the

dangers of purchasing puppies or kittens from low welfare breeding practices during the Christmas period. The film features familiar furry friends and urges the public to research the person behind the pet.

[Buying a pet this Christmas?.. Don't get petfished!](#)

More information on what to do before contacting a seller and what to ask when you do get in touch can be found at getyourpetsafely.gov.uk or by searching 'Get your pet safely'.

Notes to editors:

- Petfished is a public information campaign run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in England. It is supported by a range of animal welfare charities, veterinary organisations and commercial partners.
- *Survey from Opinion Matters of 1,009 UK respondents who have ever bought a cat or dog (15.10.2021 – 19.10.2021)
- **Survey of 175 BVA/BVNA members (16.09.2021 – 19.10.2021)
- Commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens were banned in England from 6 April 2020. Known as Lucy's Law, the law means anyone looking to buy or adopt a puppy or kitten must deal directly with the breeder or with one of the nation's reputable rehoming centres.

Additional case studies and quotes from veterinary professionals

Alex Taylor, President of BVNA: case study

Alex has seen an increase in popular breeds visiting her practice clinic. Recently a cross-breed puppy was brought into her clinic for its second vaccination at around 13-14 weeks. Alex realised the dog was suffering with severe breathing issues, and discovered the owner was unaware these breathing difficulties were abnormal puppy behaviours. The owner had bought the puppy from an online seller and paid between £3,000-£4,000. She had not done any research beforehand on types of dog breeds and potential health issues. Around six weeks later, the puppy's breathing difficulties were so severe it was struggling to breathe at all and sadly had to be euthanised.

The demand for particular breeds is so high that sellers churn these puppies out for profit and do not pay any attention to the animal's welfare. It's all too easy as a pet buyer to fall into the trap of buying a kitten or puppy you feel sorry for. Buyers find a seller online and when they meet up with them expecting to see the puppy or kitten with its mother, the seller is alone with just one puppy or kitten which looks poorly. By that point people have fallen in love with the animal and feel the need to 'rescue' it. They hand over the money and are left with an animal with severe health issues, leading to high vet bills.

This happens all year round sadly but there is a stark increase in low welfare bred animals visiting our practice around the Christmas

period. It's important for prospective pet owners to research the breed of dog they are after and think about the costs and needs of an individual breed. A dog is for life, not for Christmas. It's an age old saying but it's true. Dogs can live for around 14 years. It's vital to purchase a pet from a reputable breeder.

Dr Julian Hoad, Clinical Director at Crossways Veterinary Group: Case Study

Julian remembers four times in the past year that a puppy or kitten brought into his vet practice was linked to low welfare breeding practices and had not survived. On two recent occasions, puppies had brought in to see him with the deadly parvovirus. The dishonest seller had lied about the puppies' vaccination statuses, and they had to be euthanised.

Particularly around Christmas, people are desperate to go on the Kennel Club website to purchase a puppy. As the demand for puppies has outstripped the supply however, they can find themselves searching small online adverts that sell pets instead, often bred in low welfare conditions. The buyer purchases the puppy without doing much research, then brings it to our practice because it is unwell, and often that puppy or kitten has to be put down. It's tragic.

People don't realise when purchasing or researching pets that vets are often available to provide practical advice ahead of buying an animal, and also advise whether they will be able to take the animal on to look after its long-term welfare. So the public can check in with a vet and also educate themselves ahead of purchasing an animal using the online resources available.

[Amanda Spielman at the 2021 Schools & Academies Show](#)

It's very good to be here! Technology has had its place over the last 20 months, but this certainly beats talking to you through a screen. Being here today is another marker of how far we've come, and how we're slowly but surely regaining a bit of normality.

But I know no one would say that we're out of the woods just yet. I know this really isn't 'business as usual'. Many of you are coping with so much staff and pupil absences. Doing your best for children at home, children in class, not to mention dealing with on-site vaccinations. So, first of all, I want to

reassure you that we do get that. We know what you're up against. I'll come on to how that's feeding into inspection a bit later.

All that being said, we are seeing many of you happy to be working a bit more normally. And schools really are doing a great job. It's been brilliant to see your optimism, your commitment and your enthusiasm this year.

At Ofsted, we're glad to be working more normally too. As you know, we're back to routine inspections – including outstanding schools.

And I know this is a big step. But it's the right step. Because now's the time to move forward, not back. Given the last 20 months, it's actually never been more important for us to be in schools, seeing what's happening for children; having conversations with teachers; building on what we learned through our visits last year. That's the right thing for parents and it's the right thing for children.

But the long-term impact of the pandemic is still uncertain. And it's often said, but true – children have one chance at an education. So, it's up to all of us – the whole system, including Ofsted – to make sure that it's the best education possible.

I don't need to tell you how critical this period of recovery is. You know just how much children have missed. Some have lost out more than others; almost all have been affected. So at a time when everyone is focused on getting back on track, we have been asked to do our inspections a bit more quickly.

Please, rest assured – we aren't going to be turning up at every school imminently! The acceleration won't start until September 2022, since we've pretty much fixed our inspection schedule for this year. But it does mean that we can reduce the time it takes to get to every school. Some of you have been inspected already this year, and we plan to visit all of you by summer 2025.

This has to be better for children. It gives schools more timely assurance and up to date information for parents, and it'll help government understand how the recovery effort is going.

And so far, we're seeing some encouraging signs that children are bouncing back. And many of you are doing excellent work here, making sure you understand where children are and finding the gaps. Taking careful decisions about curriculum – what's essential for children to know, so they can get back up to speed? What's less important?

We've seen a lot of effort going into re-establishing routines and expectations around behaviour. And it's great to see the efforts going into making school normal and fun – such as getting those clubs up and running.

You might also know that the Department for Education has asked us to do a piece of work looking at attendance. We've looked at the barriers to keeping children in class, and what schools are doing really well here. We'll be reporting our findings soon.

But all schools seem to be dealing with attendance issues beyond what we've seen in previous years. And, as you'd expect, that includes parent anxieties about COVID, and some children who have simply disengaged from education.

But it's clear that the tried and tested ways of dealing with persistent absence still work. Essentially, those of you doing really well on this have kept on doing what you do best: making sure parents understand your high expectations; not letting up when children don't attend; listening to the reasons why, and offering solutions. And focusing, as ever, on making learning really worthwhile, so children want to attend. That's working just as well now as it did before the pandemic.

But, with all the COVID noise in the system, it's fair to say that it's more difficult for you to work out what's going on. While you have been so bogged down with COVID management, it's been harder to spot persistent absence and to deal with it. I spoke to one head, earlier this week I think, who told me, 'we used to be teachers!'

And I share your frustration. I hope it won't be long before you're able to get back to concentrating on running really great schools, without the distractions of COVID.

Another big – and much-needed – step for education has been the removal of the outstanding exemption.

Some of those schools hadn't been inspected for close to 15 years. That's a long time to go without checking that children are getting a good deal. A lot of children have gone through their entire school education in that time. And many parents are left wondering if their child's school is as good as the label.

The exemption was brought in for good reasons. But 10 years on, it's left a rather skewed picture. We've effectively had a one-way accumulator, gathering more and more outstanding schools. Before the exemption was introduced, about 1 in 10 was rated outstanding, and now it's about 1 in 5. It just isn't realistic to expect that every outstanding school has maintained standards over so many years, so I do expect there to be some rebalancing of grades. Outstanding has to mean outstanding. A top grade signals a lot about a school, and it's right that it should be a high bar.

This rebalancing is already under way. Given how much children have missed already, this is absolutely the right time to bring outstanding schools back into the fold. Looking at the early outcomes, actually quite a lot of schools are keeping their outstanding judgement. Some schools have gone up to outstanding too – which is really good to see. But some previously outstanding schools are coming out lower – which was entirely to be expected. Most of these have only dropped one grade.

But around a fifth of outstanding schools have gone down further, mostly to requires improvement. These schools are showing weakness in their quality of education, in aspects such as curriculum design and subject knowledge. For primaries, weaknesses in phonics and reading are a common feature. They

reflect reading curriculums that haven't moved on in a long time, and children not being taught systematically and well. More broadly, we're also seeing weakness in behaviour, as well as in leadership and governance.

I understand that parents might be worried. But if your child's school does have some weaknesses, it's far better to have problems recognised and addressed, rather than having them left unacknowledged.

And overall, the picture is encouraging. I can reassure you that judgements in the COVID world are not showing a pattern of systematic decline. For schools previously rated good or less, the picture is actually pretty good. Most inadequate schools inspected in the first half of this term have improved – quite a few are now good. That's quite an achievement. And it's a similar picture for RI [requires improvement] schools: more than half of those inspected this term are now good.

So, has the shape of inspection changed in the light of COVID? Well, yes and no.

It's been a torrid 20 months, and it's absolutely right that we recognise that. We appreciate what schools have been up against. Even while routine inspection was suspended, we've been in schools regularly, through the last school year as well as this one. We've seen first-hand how tough it's been, and still is.

One of the benefits of the EIF [education inspection framework] is its flexibility, and we've made some changes to meet you where you are. On every inspection, we now always discuss the impact of COVID, so that we can truly understand the issues.

We've also amended our deferral policy, and we do respond sensitively when schools are facing particularly acute challenges. But it's absolutely right that we look at each request individually. Not every school is the same, and we have to make sure – for children's sake – that inspections are being postponed for the right reasons.

After so long without graded inspection, it's natural that there's been a bit of trepidation in some quarters. Though I do know that some of you are more than ready for an inspection, and actually keen to show how much you have improved.

But to reassure you, in its fundamentals, the EIF is still the same. Our focus is still squarely on substance and integrity. Bringing the inspection conversation back to the curriculum – what's taught and how, not just about exam results. Treating you as experts in your field, not data managers.

And our emphasis in the EIF is on dialogue. I know you appreciate these professional conversations. And many schools we've been to recently have responded just as positively as before the pandemic hit, telling us that their inspection was constructive and supportive – just as we want them to be. I've talked a lot about the recovery effort today, and this is where the framework really comes into its own. This is inspection that's right for

right now. A strong curriculum focus when you're thinking hard about what to teach, to get children back where they need to be. Helping you think about your plans, and government and parents understand how recovery is going. That can only be a good thing. It makes the framework perhaps even more relevant than two years ago when it first came in.

And we do still expect schools to have ambitious curricula, with real breadth. But we also know that you've had to make some hard choices. And some of you might have a curriculum that's still in development – so we'll want to understand how you're working on it.

And some reassurance for primaries. Our subject expectations here are proportionate. We don't have impossible expectations of an all singing, all dancing curriculum, or expect you to have a department lead, like a secondary school! But, it is right that all schools – whatever their size – do think carefully about what they teach – and that's what inspectors want to explore.

I also wanted to talk about our [sexual abuse review](#), which we published this summer – I'm sure you have seen it. The findings were shocking. The sheer number of children and young people – especially girls – who said that they put up with harassment and abuse day in, day out, is startling. This is entirely unacceptable behaviour, normalised to the point where children often don't think it's worth reporting. Schools we visited were often underestimating the scale of the problem – either they didn't see it as a big issue, or sometimes were simply unaware it was happening.

No one wants that for our young people, and our review rightly caused people to sit up and take notice. We've asked schools to accept that harassment and abuse are endemic – and to assume that they're almost certainly happening beneath the surface, even if they aren't immediately obvious. The reaction from the education sector has been very positive: I know you take this issue seriously.

And it really is tough as a teenager. I'm sure all of us remember – the hormones, the peer pressure. It's always been this way. But now teens have smartphones. The internet. Easy access to pornography. Layers of complexity that make it so hard for young people to navigate growing up, and to make the right choices.

It's a cultural issue – about attitudes and behaviours becoming normalised. And as I've said many times before, schools can't solve that by themselves. There's a clear role here for government. And, of course, parents are vital too.

Children do need to be taught the right thing to do, and have that teaching reinforced over time. Schools have an important role. Building the right culture. Providing a well-sequenced RSHE curriculum that makes time for open discussion of the aspects that children are finding particularly difficult. So, while schools can't solve all society's problems, good schools, doing what they do really well, can make a difference.

The review recommended a whole-school approach that includes a strong RSHE

curriculum, based on the statutory guidance; making sure that RSHE teachers are committed and well-trained; and better working between local safeguarding partners.

As you'd expect, our findings are feeding proportionately into inspection. Again, this is about culture, as much as about safeguarding – important as that is. We always hope to see a culture where sexual harassment and abuse aren't tolerated, where issues are spotted and intervention happens earlier.

Another piece of work we published during COVID was on [MATs, and the role they played during the pandemic](#). If you haven't seen it, we reported that many trusts have been able to support schools effectively through COVID. The structure and central guidance they provide was clearly helpful for many schools in a time of crisis.

But our research also reminded us about how much decision-making in the system has shifted over the last 15 years – and that, as I've said before, current accountability doesn't entirely fit with the way schools and MATs operate.

At the moment, our view is limited, because inspections only happen at school level, while schools in MATs operate as part of a bigger entity. Crucial decisions can be happening at different levels within MATs.

Inspection needs to keep pace. If it doesn't, we risk having artificial conversations with the people who aren't actually making the decisions. So it's about speaking to the right people at the right levels, and looking at the system as it's working today, not as it ran decades ago.

For schools in MATs, part of their resilience comes from what happens at trust level. And equally, no structure is perfect, and things can and do go wrong. So, it's important that we have the right tools and levers to spot when that's happening.

That's why I'm pleased to be restarting MAT summary evaluations, which have been on hold because of COVID. The programme will give us a more extensive view than we've had before.

So, I have spoken a lot today about the challenges of COVID. There's no denying these are still with us and may be for some time to come. But everything I've seen suggests that you are more than rising to them. Over the last 20 months you have shown how resilient and adaptable you are. Children really are in the best hands.

And for our part, we'll carry on supporting recovery, through constructive conversations in our inspections, reporting what's working well and through our research. We want to help the sector improve and in turn, help children get where they need to be.

Thank you.