

The work of the Environment Agency

The current priorities of the Environment Agency

The job of the Environment Agency is to create a better place. We do many things to that end, but the two biggest are reducing flood risk and protecting the environment. Following the recent Spending Review we have just got our financial settlement from the government for the next three years, and it will be those two things on which we spend most of our time and money over that period.

We will reduce flood risk by building more new flood defences and maintaining our existing ones; by warning and informing people when flooding threatens; by responding to flood incidents to protect and support communities when it happens; and by providing planning advice to reduce any flood risk from new development.

Flood defence works. Last month the nation faced something we have not seen before – three named storms inside a week. While some 400 properties did sadly flood over that period, our flood defences meant that over 40,000 homes and businesses which would also have flooded did not. And nobody died. Compare that with 1953, when an East Coast storm surge killed over 300 people.

And over the last decade, while storms and rainfall have progressively worsened due to climate change, we have actually seen a reduction in the numbers of properties flooded as a direct result of the government's investment in flood defence. That is why the EA is proud to have completed on time, on target and on budget our last six year flood defence building programme which has better protected 300,000 homes, and why we are now embarking on a new six year programme that is twice the size in terms of cost, more than 50% bigger in terms of the numbers of flood defence schemes we will build, and which will better protect well over 300,000 additional homes and businesses as well as a lot of vital national infrastructure.

As for our other major role, protecting and enhancing the environment, we will do that over the next few years by monitoring the state of our air, water and soils, by regulating the industries which pose the biggest pollution risks, by enforcing the regulations which protect the environment, and by responding to significant pollution incidents to help stop the damage, clear up the mess, identify the cause and if necessary take action against those responsible.

With the new money we have got from the Spending Review we will also step up our efforts to improve water quality, including by increasing the number of inspections of the two main sources of water pollution – farms and sewage works; and by investing in the big water transfer schemes the EA runs which help reduce drought risk.

The impacts of climate change for the UK and the challenges these present

Underpinning everything we do is the biggest issue of our age: the climate emergency.

Climate change is driving heavier and more violent rainfall, which is overloading our sewage systems more frequently, leading to more discharges into rivers; overwhelming urban drainage systems more often, causing more surface water flooding in our towns and cities; raising sea levels, causing higher risks of the most dangerous kind of flooding – coastal flooding; washing more soils into our rivers, damaging farmers' livelihoods and increasing flood risk; washing more contaminants into our rivers, causing greater pollution; and driving hotter temperatures and lower summer rainfall, causing higher drought risk, harm to water quality and death to wildlife.

So if we want to protect and enhance the environment, we need to tackle climate change. The Environment Agency is playing its part in that, by regulating down the emissions of greenhouse gas that cause it, by running the government's new UK Emissions Trading Scheme, by helping communities adapt to the effects of climate change by building more flood defences and by creating places which are more resilient to its effects through our planning role. We are also trying to walk the walk ourselves with our own commitment to make the EA a net zero carbon emitter by 2030.

The challenges and opportunities around tackling water pollution from sewage

Let's start with the state of our waters. The picture is mixed. Some things are better than they were. Largely down to tougher regulation, there are now far fewer serious pollution incidents damaging our waters than three decades ago, sewage treatment works now discharge much lower amounts of harmful chemicals into our rivers, and the bathing waters around our coasts are in the best condition they have been since we started monitoring them. As our waters have improved, nature has recovered. Otters, which were almost extinct by the 1960s due to the pesticides then in our rivers, have now returned to every county of England.

But the state of our waters is not nearly good enough. Only 14% of our rivers meet the criteria for good ecological status, and that figure has stayed the same for the last several years. That's because we are still seeing too much pollution from sewage, farming, industry and road-run off. And some things are getting worse, with new threats to our waters, including microplastics and so-called forever chemicals.

The way to get our water quality to the state we want is to start by recognising that everyone has a role to play. The polluters – largely water companies and farmers – need to obey the law, stop polluting, and pay the full cost of cleaning up any damage they do. The politicians, the public and the media need to keep up the pressure on the polluters to clean up their act. The EA and the other regulators need to regulate robustly and have the

powers and resources to do so. And all of us need to treat water better and use it wisely.

Over the last couple of years the issue of sewage pollution in our rivers has shot up the agenda. Most of the sewerage systems in England are combined sewers: they carry both sewage and rainwater in the form of runoff from roofs and drains. At times of heavy rainfall the system can become overloaded, and that risks sewage backing up into homes and streets or clogging the treatment works. The system is designed to prevent that by discharging diluted sewage to rivers or the sea when the system risks being overwhelmed during heavy rain. But a growing population and climate change means these combined sewers are discharging more often, and people are increasingly reluctant to tolerate that.

What is the EA doing about this? We:

- have set clear limits in the water companies' environmental permits on when they can discharge untreated sewage into rivers or the sea (only in the event of heavy rainfall or snow melt) and specified how much sewage their treatment plants must be able to treat in order to avoid as far as possible discharging untreated sewage in times of high flow.
- monitor the performance of the water companies against these permits, and seek to ensure that they stick to them; have required the companies to put monitors on their overflows and their treatment works, and are making that data available to the public, which is putting more pressure on the companies to clean up their act.
- have prosecuted water companies for the premature operation of overflows, and are now running a major criminal investigation into whether the companies' sewage treatment plants are all complying with the rules, which may well lead to prosecutions. We always press for exemplary sentences where there is significant harm or deliberate intent, and recently secured a record breaking £90m fine against Southern Water.

There are opportunities here. In the long term, to create a better sewage system that does less damage to the environment. In the shorter term, to improve the behaviour of the water companies and enlist public support to ensure that our waters are protected. One idea, put forward recently by the House of Commons' Environmental Audit Committee, is to build a network of citizen scientists to help monitor our rivers and inform the action we take to protect them.

I like the concept. I like the principle it embodies: that all of us are responsible for the state of our waters. I like the practical benefits it could deliver: better understanding, in real time, of what's happening in our rivers allowing us to act better and faster. And I like the way it could do a lot with a little: at a time of scarce resources the way to do things better

with less is do them together. So we are looking at whether we could do something on those lines.

The implementation of the Environment Act and role it will play

The Environment Act came into force in November. It is a good thing. It is one of the main mechanisms to deliver the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, which has at its heart the ambition that we will be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.

To help achieve that, the Act requires the government to set long-term legally binding targets for air quality, biodiversity, water, resource efficiency and waste reduction. Those targets will place a legal obligation on government to deliver them. The EA is playing a central role, both in developing those targets and in delivering them.

There are several other important elements of the Act. To cite just two, it requires the Secretary of State to produce a policy statement on environmental principles (polluter pays, etc) to which Ministers must have due regard when making policy; and it establishes the Office for Environmental Protection which will hold the government and other public authorities (including the EA) to account in complying with environmental law.

We welcome these moves, and will continue to work closely with the government, parliament, businesses and NGOs to create the better place for people and wildlife we all want.

Swansea's new Arena opens with City Deal funding

Swansea's new £135 million Copr Bay destination has been officially opened.

UK Government Minister David TC Davies was among those present to officially open Swansea's 3,500-capacity venue, called the Digital Arena, which has been part-funded by the £1.3bn Swansea Bay City Deal.

The new facility hosts its first show on 15 March 2022 when stand-up comedian, John Bishop performs there.

The Digital Arena is at the heart of the £135 million Copr Bay development, and is surrounded by a new 1.1 acre coastal park, accessed by a new bridge over Oystermouth Road.

UK Government Minister David TC Davies said:

Copr Bay is a wonderful addition to Swansea and I'm absolutely delighted that the UK Government has contributed £13.7m to the project. It will attract visitors and provide a great leisure destination to Swansea's residents. And it will support jobs and opportunities, as we build back better after the Covid pandemic.

Projects like this one demonstrate what the UK Government means when we talk about Levelling Up and means that Swansea has a great future.

I'd like to thank all our partners for the hard work that has gone into this fantastic project.

Cllr Rob Stewart, Swansea Council Leader, said:

The official opening of Copr Bay phase one is delivering on our promise to the people of Swansea. This shows Swansea is not a city of artist's impressions – we are transforming the city with a £1bn programme of investment.

Copr Bay will create a fantastic new leisure destination and hundreds of jobs and opportunities for local people, while also helping support local businesses and generate more footfall and spending for our city centre.

We've delivered this scheme during a pandemic, so everyone involved deserves enormous credit – from council staff and funding partners to our contractors and Ambassador Theatre Group, who will operate the arena on our behalf and bring world class entertainment to Swansea.

Worth £17.1m a year to Swansea's economy, Copr Bay is already acting as a catalyst for even more jobs and investment, meaning Swansea is very well-placed to quickly bounce back from the economic impact of Covid.

It's a key part of a £1bn regeneration story that's unfolding in Swansea, transforming our city into the UK's best to live, work, study and visit.

Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales, said:

This is a very exciting time for the regeneration of Swansea and I'm delighted that we've been able to invest in these projects which will increase the connectivity between the city centre and the waterfront and provide Swansea with a state-of-the-art facility that will increase its ability to host major cultural and business events. I'd like to congratulate all partners on delivering this project in such difficult circumstances.

Statement on the phasing out of Russian oil imports

Introduction

Thank you very much Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to start by saying what a privilege it was for all of us to hear the historic address in the House yesterday by President Zelenskyy. I am sure all Members will join me in thanking him once again for his inspiring words, his great leadership. And it is with those words in mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I come here today.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the UK phase out of imports of Russian oil in response to Vladimir Putin's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine.

The UK joins key allies, including the United States, in halting the import of Russian oil, which makes up 44% of Russian exports and 17% of the government revenue through taxation.

This action follows the most punishing set of sanctions the British state has ever imposed on a G20 nation.

Our trade, financial, and personal sanctions are having an effect on the Russian economy, the Ruble as I speak has now fallen by nearly 42% – and the Moscow Exchange's stock trading has been shut since 25 February.

The British government has sent a clear message to Putin's regime and those who support him in his war against Ukraine.

Russian Oil Supply

It is important to remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, Russia produces only a fraction of the fuel products currently imported to the UK. In a competitive global market for oil and petroleum products, demand can be met by alternative sources of supply.

As a result of international revulsion at Putin's action, Russian oil is already being excluded from much of the market and currently it is trading at quite a sharp discount from other crude oil sources.

Measure detail

But we want to go further, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Yesterday I set out that the UK is phasing out imports of Russian oil during the course of the year.

This transition will give the market, it will give businesses and supply chains more than enough time to substitute Russian imports.

UK resilience

Businesses should use this year to ensure as smooth a transition as possible so that consumers will not be affected.

The government will work with companies through a new Taskforce on Oil to support them to make use of this period in finding alternative supplies.

Yesterday, I spoke with businesses, unions and representatives from the sector, and of course I and officials in BEIS will continue to engage and support British business.

Whilst Russian imports account for 8% of total UK oil demand, the UK is also, one should remember, a significant producer of both crude oil and petroleum products. We participate in a global market for these products and we have resources in place in the unlikely event of supply disruption.

Over the course of the year the taskforce we set up will work closely with international partners including the USA, the Netherlands, and the Gulf to ensure alternative supplies of fuel products.

Last week I addressed the International Energy Agency and tomorrow we will have an extraordinary meeting of the G7 Energy Ministers to discuss further steps.

While businesses should do everything they can to source oil from alternative sources, they will still be able, it is important to emphasise this, to import Russian oil during the transition period.

These measures target oil related products imports only. The UK is not dependent on Russian natural gas, making up less than 4% of our supply. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be exploring options to end this altogether.

I want to be clear to the House that we fully intend, and we must, end our dependency on all Russian hydrocarbons.

In the meantime, we need more investment in North Sea oil and gas production as we make the move to cheaper and cleaner power.

Turning off domestic production – as some are calling for – at this moment would be completely the wrong thing to do. We're not going to do it.

The Prime Minister has also confirmed that the government will set out an energy strategy to explain the UK's long-term plans for greater energy security, including both renewable and nuclear power – building on our [Ten Point Plan](#).

Wider sanctions

This measure – and those being taken by our allies in terms of the oil phase out – will move the West away from a dependency on Russian oil.

It will take us on a road to building a stronger more resilient British energy system.

It will increase the growing pressure on Russia's economy.

And it will ultimately hamper Russia's ability to impose further misery on the Ukrainian people.

£11.6m boost for local authorities to tackle air pollution

Blaby District Council Purchase of particulate matter monitors and development of a public facing app supported by communication and engagement activities for most vulnerable. Recruitment of an Air Quality Officer. £155,121 Bradford Metropolitan District Council Purchase of particulate matter monitors and development of the existing public facing website for information on particulate matter relating to domestic combustion and Non-Road Mobile Machinery. Supported by communication and engagement activities for vulnerable groups. £253,432 Brighton and Hove City Council Retrofit of 40 buses to Euro-VI standard. (Working in partnership with Lewes and Eastbourne District Councils, Worthing-Adur District Council, Horsham District Council, Crawley District Council and Rother District Council) £499,500 Brighton and Hove City Council Sensors upgrade to monitor particulate matter; supported by community engagement with a focus in schools. (Working in partnership with Lewes and Eastbourne District Council, Worthing-Adur District Council, Horsham District Council Crawley District Council) £376,800 Buckinghamshire Council Renovation of a 10 year old Dennis Eagle 26 tonne Refuse Collection Vehicle to include an electric power train; installation of telematics system and 5 years' worth of replacement parts. £578,000 Buckinghamshire Council Purchase and trial of electronic diffusion tubes implemented by the public, and community engagement focussed on schools. £91,273 Canterbury City Council Purchase of sensors to publicise real time data on particulate matter and NO2 on existing website – supported by an education and communication campaign. £129,681 Cheshire East Borough Council Communication campaign to raise awareness in Cheshire East on the health impacts around idling and domestic burning to encourage behavioural change. £54,607 Colchester Borough Council Development of an e-cargo bike delivery service made through a bespoke booking app so shoppers and visitors to Colchester Town Centre can book deliveries to their homes within a 5 mile radius or a nearby smart locker. £188,587 Doncaster Council Schools' street closure, and communication and engagement project to raise awareness of

transport emissions to change attitudes and influence behaviour and encourage mode shift from car to active travel £104,000 Dorset Council Additional monitoring and public awareness campaign to improve knowledge of particulate matter £53,339 Eastleigh Borough Council Communication campaign and schools' engagement focussed on active travel. £132,932 Essex County Council Schools' education and awareness theatre production and air Quality monitoring in schools. Plus, updates to existing local Air Quality website £279,489 Gloucestershire County Council Development of an E-bike company that will operate a small fleet of bikes and electric vehicles out of a warehouse near the centre of Cheltenham to act as delivery depot. £40,000 Hammersmith and Fulham Council Monitoring, engagement, and awareness raising in schools £145,590 Hertfordshire County Council Air Quality data collection for particulate matter and NO2 communications campaign to raise community awareness. £132,000 Ipswich Borough Council Domestic burning behaviour change campaign £115,632 Islington London Borough Council Audit of care homes to introduce air quality improvement measures £267,060 Lancaster City Council Domestic burning behaviour change campaign £198,794 London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Development of Barking & Dagenham Airspace platform to encourage engagement between vulnerable groups £218,800 London Borough of Camden Large communication campaign across 13 London Boroughs on particulate matter and domestic burning. (Working in partnership with London Borough of Islington, London Borough of Brent, London Borough of Croydon, London Borough of Ealing, London Borough of Haringey, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames, London Borough of Lewisham, London Borough of Merton, Royal Borough of Richmond Upon Thames, London Borough of Sutton, London Borough of Waltham Forest, London Borough of Wandsworth, City of Westminster) £300,000 London Borough of Ealing Air Quality Educational resource supported by live data. £237,502 London Borough of Hackney Creation and promotion of local web site to improve knowledge and encourage behaviour change in vulnerable groups. (Working in partnership with City of London, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, London Borough of Newham) £313,720 London Borough of Southwark Project aims reduce emissions from gas boilers at schools through installation of replacement heat pumps. Supported by a Project officer to co-ordinate. £375,000 Medway Council Taxi and private hire Ultra Low Emission Vehicle Feasibility Study £113,400 Medway Council Anti-idling campaign on busy high street £14,110 North West Leicestershire District Council Monitoring of particulate matter to develop knowledge of domestic burning and reduce emissions through behavioural change. (In partnership with Harborough District Council) £27,240 Oxfordshire County Council Expansion of a Zero Emissions Zone in area in Oxford city following on from a previous pilot scheme. (Working in partnership with Oxford City Council) £970,700 Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Driver training scheme for Council employees £64,018 Southampton City Council Clean Air schools' engagement and behaviour change programme £350,533 London Borough of Southwark Air quality mapping tool to gather data and share info via air TEXT, schools messaging and hospital outpatient clinics. (In partnership with London Borough of Lambeth) £617,000 St Helens Borough Council Set up a programme to provide a grant programme to retrofit or replace polluting vehicles to low or zero emission. £650,000 Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council Air Quality monitoring and anti-idling campaign with schools £36,664 Transport for Greater Manchester Particulate matter monitoring and

communication campaign to improve community knowledge and influence behaviour. (Working with Bolton Council, Bury Council, Manchester City Council, Oldham Council, Rochdale Council, Salford City Council, Stockport Council, Tameside Council, Trafford Council, Wigan Council) £573,956 Uttlesford District Council Particulate matter awareness and behaviour change. Clean air pilot scheme through try before you buy e-bikes, e-cargo bikes and e-vehicle car club, and a traffic management scheme £517,124 West Midlands Combined Authority Retrofit of 10 buses to Euro-VI standard and conversion of 6 buses to electric. (Working with Dudley MBC, Sandwell MBC, Walsall MBC, and City of Wolverhampton) £999,072 West Northamptonshire Council Data gathering on congested routes and public information campaign £148,297 Westminster City Council Project to move freight to London by river rather than road and continue ongoing deliveries through fleet of zero emission electric vehicles, cargo bikes and walking. (Delivered through Westminster Cross River Partnership in partnership with London Boroughs of Hammersmith & Fulham, Islington, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Wandsworth. Plus, Port of London Authority (PLA), Cadogan Estates, and The Fitzrovia Partnership) £1,000,000 Wigan Council Schools and community education programme. Followed by information campaign for vulnerable groups £99,094 Wokingham Borough Council Information and behaviour changes campaign to promote active travel in favour of cars and school buses £185,280

Changes to Environment Agency's abstraction charges to safeguard water supplies for people and wildlife

- **New charging framework to protect the environment and England's long-term water supply**
- **It will provide a fairer system where people pay for the services they receive and those abstracting a lot of water will pay more**
- **The funding is needed to secure sustainable water resources for the environment, business, and society, now and into the future**

The new rules have been approved by government and published in the Environment Agency's response to the review of water resources abstraction charges and the outcome of its consultation.

The Environment Agency regulates the abstraction and impoundment of water,

working with water companies, farmers, industry, businesses and others to protect access to water and make sure that the water in England is abstracted sustainably.

England is facing increased pressure on its water resources due to population growth and climate change. Without action, by 2050 significant water shortages in parts of the country have been predicted and some rivers could have between 50 and 80 percent less water during the summer. Based on recent projections, more than 3.4 billion additional litres per day will be needed in England by then, an increase of 23% on today's supplies.

The Water Resources Review of Charges aims to create a fairer system where people pay for the services they receive and those abstracting a lot of water, such as water companies, will pay more, supporting behavioural change to use water more economically.

The new charges – which have not changed for the past 10 years – will be based on:

- the volume of water taken from the environment
- where the water is taken from
- how much of that water is returned to the environment

The new charging framework will secure £25 million in additional income each year to protect access to water and meet environmental challenges, including to help protect England's sensitive habitats, such as chalk streams.

The increase in funding from charges will enable further investment by the Environment Agency in:

- protecting future supplies through maintaining and operating infrastructure, including water transfer schemes, gauging stations, weirs and sluices
- modernising the water abstraction licensing system through digital transformation
- protecting and enhancing the environment through a more sustainable approach to water abstraction with increased emphasis on rare and sensitive habitats, such as England's unique chalk streams

Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, said:

The biggest long-term threat to the environment, our economy and our lifestyle is water quantity – simply having enough for people and wildlife.

In the face of the climate emergency, population growth and rising demand for water, we need to ensure that all those who use water, and rely on it for their business, can continue to do so now and into the future, as well as better protecting our rivers and aquifers.

As part of this we need a system that allows us to charge fully and fairly for the services we provide to preserve water supplies and help businesses meet their needs in a sustainable way that protects the environment.