



Partnership for South Hampshire

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Theresa Villiers MP
Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
2 Marsham Street
LONDON SW1P 4DF

By email and post
25 October 2019

Dear Secretary of State,

Formal request to DEFRA to commission an Environment Agency review of Waste Water Treatment Works (WwTW) permit levels assigned within the Partnership for South Hampshire catchment area.

I write on behalf of all members of the Partnership for South Hampshire (PfSH) and further to my letter of 28 June to your predecessor The Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP. That letter highlighted the issues faced by our twelve local authorities following the introduction of the requirement that all new housing development must demonstrate nutrient neutrality. A copy of my letter is attached for ease of reference.

Implementation of that requirement is currently preventing, and in some cases completely halting, local planning authorities around the Solent from granting permission for new housing development where sites cannot demonstrate nutrient neutrality. This is because of a risk of challenge (on the back of advice and guidance issued by Natural England) to the granting of planning permissions that are not considered compliant with Habitats Regulations.

Finding solutions to reduce nutrient discharge is a shared task. Collectively, and as individual local authorities, PfSH members are working hard with Natural England, the Environment Agency, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) officials, water companies and others, to develop both short-term and medium/long-term solutions.

We are strongly of the view that, in relation to development, the most effective long-term solution is a reduction in the permitted levels of nitrate discharge in both treated and untreated sewage effluent. While the sewerage treatment works along the coast operate within relatively tight permit levels, and in actual fact evidence shows that they routinely outperform their permit - some of the inland sewerage treatment works have no permit level for nitrate. This means that the amount of nitrogen that finds its way into the Solent is greater than necessary and un-monitored. A review of permits to levels appropriate to avoid impact on the European Protected Sites would positively affect both the environmental condition of protected sites *and* the ability to facilitate much needed housing growth (and other developments including overnight accommodation, such as hotels). To achieve this reduction we believe that a review of Environment Agency permit levels issued to sewerage treatment works that fall within the catchment area of the European Protected Sites needs to be undertaken in the near term.

Implementation of more stringent permitted nutrient discharge levels will require Southern Water to implement measures that either, cause its works to operate to a higher standard of nutrient removal, or upgrade some or all of its works to enable its ability to do so. We believe that the two arms of your department, Natural England and the Environment Agency, need to work together to address the disparity

of both its advice, and required standards, to meet this challenge. PfSH believes a review is wholly necessary, and should form part of a wider strategy of mitigation measures.

Following an initial meeting with MHCLG officials in August, we have been working with them to provide a collective overview of the scale of the issue, and where it has been possible, outlined the measures individual local authorities have implemented to address the challenges in the short-term. I understand that MHCLG has initiated cross-government discussions with DEFRA, Natural England and the Environment Agency with a view to developing a wider long-term strategy. We await the outcome of those discussions.

You will appreciate that there is an immediate need for PfSH local authorities to grant planning permissions, not least to comply with government requirements around housing need, five year housing land supply and housing delivery test. However, it is clear that the short-term mitigation options available, and that are already being implemented where they meet the legal tests of the Habitats Regulations, will not sufficiently help us reduce the backlog of development applications - which is in turn having a negative impact on the business of local developers and wider growth.

We look forward to the outcome of the ongoing cross-government discussions. On behalf of PfSH I request that you fully consider commissioning the Environment Agency to undertake a review of permit levels issued to sewerage treatment works within the catchment area of the European Protected Sites in the Solent - which we believe will form an important part of the wider long-term strategic solution. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Seán Woodward". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Councillor Seán Woodward
Chairman, Partnership for South Hampshire

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About the Partnership for South Hampshire

The Partnership for *Urban* South Hampshire (PUSH) was formed in 2003 following recognition by the leaders of Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth and Southampton councils (the urban core of South Hampshire) and Hampshire County Council, that South Hampshire was underperforming in economic terms in comparison to the remainder of the south east England.

Subsequently, PUSH invited the leaders of East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley and Winchester councils to join in recognition that the natural economic area of South Hampshire included parts of these areas too. PUSH then evolved from an informal meeting of council leaders to a formally constituted Joint Committee with overview and scrutiny arrangements.

As a group of councils, it works together effectively and is committed to encouraging sustainable development and growth across South Hampshire.

In August 2019 the decision was made by the New Forest National Park Authority to join PUSH - following which the word 'urban' was withdrawn from the partnership's title to reflect the wider diversity of membership. The subsequent 'PfSH' sub-region covers the area outlined in the map below.

