

Thames Water fined £2.3 million for 'foreseeable' pollution

Thames Water has been fined £2.3 million after a stream was polluted by sewage.

A court heard failure to address equipment faults at a sewage-treatment plant in Oxfordshire made the incident "entirely foreseeable".

Sewage with high levels of ammonia was released into Fawley Court Ditch at Henley-on-Thames in 2016, killing 1,144 fish and other water life.

Poor management at the plant was laid bare at Aylesbury Crown Court. Thames Water's treatment works at Henley had no adequate monitoring in place to manage the risk of pollution, made worse by staff not responding to alarms highlighting faults in the process.

Judge Francis Sheridan said Thames Water should have reacted to the warnings "long before" they did. He added the pollution and the events leading up to it showed "high negligence" by the company.

The first Environment Agency officer on site on 23 April 2016 could smell the sewage in the brown water. Another witness reported a number of dead fish and sanitary products in the stream, near to where the pollution occurred.

The Environment Agency's investigation showed ammonia levels in Fawley Court Ditch were, at worst, double the permitted limits.

Fish from 13 species died, including chub, gudgeon, dace, roach, perch, tench and pike. The stream took almost a year to recover, having lost almost all its fish to the pollution.

Some of the 1,144 fish killed by the pollution

The court was told a number of faults at the plant had a significant effect on sewage treatment.

Machines to aerate effluent and reduce ammonia totals weren't working. Probes measuring the standard of the treatment process were also out of order.

Officers found oxygen at the plant that helps control the treatment dangerously low 24 hours before the incident.

Alarms warning of problems were given a delayed response or none at all. Part of the sewage treatment process wasn't even monitored in the week prior to the pollution.

Jackie Outhwaite, a land and water officer for the Environment Agency, led

the investigation:

Thames Water could and should have prevented this pollution through better management of sewage-treatment.

Our investigation found the risk of pollution was increased by a lack of measures in place to prevent it. Thames Water's failure to respond to warning alarms ultimately led to significant harm on water quality.

The Environment Agency's enforcement action over several years and the pressure it has put on water companies has led to £30 billion of investment by the industry in water quality. The damage caused to the environment at Henley, however, shows water companies have a lot more to do to protect the environment.

Sitting at Aylesbury Crown Court on 26 February 2021, Judge Francis Sheridan fined Thames Water £2.3 million, ordering them to pay the Environment Agency's costs of £87,944.

Thames Water pleaded guilty to one count of causing a discharge of partially-treated effluent into Fawley Court Ditch and Fawley Court Stream without an environmental permit between 21 and 24 April 2016. It was charged under regulation 12 (1) (b) of the Environmental Permitting (England & Wales) Regulations 2010.

This latest conviction brings the total amount of fines levied against Thames Water since 2017 to £24.4 million for 9 cases of water pollution across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

[UK supports Malawi's energy diversification drive](#)

On Monday, British High Commissioner to Malawi, David Beer, joined Malawi's Minister for Energy Newton Kambala and officials from InfraCo Africa and JCM Power (JCM) in launching the Golomoti Solar, which will deliver 20 megawatts of clean power to the grid, at a ground breaking ceremony in Dedza District.

The project is being undertaken by InfraCo Africa, part of the Private Infrastructure Development Group (PIDG), and its project partner, JCM Power (JCM).

UK Government is pleased to be a partner to this innovative joint financing project by providing, through Innovate UK, a £2.1 million grant to provide state of the art batteries. These will enable the plant to provide reliable

power and improve network stability, reducing reliance on hydro and diesel generation, whilst ensuring that grid stability is maintained. In addition, the UK through InfraCo Africa, one of UK's Infrastructure Financing Agencies, is a 25% shareholder to the project through equity financing.

British High Commissioner to Malawi, David Beer, said:

Malawi urgently needs to develop a more diverse energy supply. This project is a clear marker that renewable technologies are the best route for the country, and shows what commercial and political creativity can achieve. The UK commits to continue being an investment partner of choice for Malawi in such sustainable projects aimed at helping the country build a better and greener future.

InfraCo Africa's Chief Executive Officer, Gilles Vaes, said:

As part of our commitment to Malawi's renewable energy sector, we are pleased to be working with our partners at JCM to deliver a further 20MWAC of clean power to the grid. This key milestone has been made possible by the strong support the project has received from the Government of Malawi, regulators and the state utility, ESCOM. By generating additional power and pioneering energy storage, Golomoti Solar will ensure that homes and businesses in Malawi will have access to more reliable electricity to drive economic growth.

JCM Power's Co-Founder and Head of Africa, Justin Woodward, said:

During what has been an unprecedented year, this project marks a renewed commitment from all stakeholders that Malawi is an attractive destination for foreign investment. With the addition of batteries, the project will provide the foundation for Malawi to continue to be a regional leader in the renewable energy industry.

20MWac solar photovoltaic (PV) coupled with a 5MW/10MWh lithium-ion Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) Golomoti Solar Project has benefited from knowledge-sharing with its sister project, Salima Solar, with both projects (among the first commercial-scale solar photovoltaic plants in the country) key to transforming regulatory frameworks around Malawi's renewable energy sector. Salima Solar is expected to begin delivering power to Malawi's national grid in early 2021, with Golomoti becoming operational in the latter half of 2021.

Malawi has an electrification rate of just 18%, with only 11% connected to the grid, and frequent power outages affecting economic productivity.

Malawi's energy sector is currently reliant upon hydro power; however, rainfall fluctuations have severely impacted electricity generation in recent years.

The Government of Malawi has recognised energy as a key driver of economic growth in its Growth and Development Strategy (2017-2022) and is working to establish regulatory frameworks needed to attract private sector investment to Malawi's energy sector.

Innovate UK: Energy Catalyst is designed to accelerate the innovation needed to end energy poverty. Through financial and business advisory support, and by building strategic partnerships and uncovering new insights, Energy Catalyst supports the development of technologies and business models that can improve lives in Africa and Asia. To find out more visit:

<https://energycatalyst.ukri.org/>.

[Innovate UK](#) is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a non-departmental public body funded by a grant-in-aid from the UK government. We drive productivity and economic growth by supporting businesses to develop and realise the potential of new ideas, including those from the UK's world-class research base.

[Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus \(COVID-19\): 1 March 2021](#)

Good evening and welcome back to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and Dr Susan Hopkins, from Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace.

Since we spoke on Friday, I'm absolutely delighted that we've reached the milestone of more than 20 million people in the UK getting a vaccine against COVID-19.

It's a magnificent achievement for the country.

First slide please.

As of yesterday, 20,275,451 people have received a jab.

I want to pay tribute to all the teams involved – across the whole of the UK – who are delivering the largest and fastest vaccination programme in British history.

That we've been able to do this – and move so much faster than any other similar-sized nation – has depended on a huge number of people; it is not an accident.

It's down to insight and hard work.

For the last year, we have shared a common mission: to deliver a vaccine, as fast as safely possible.

We've got used to saying thank you to the people who have made this happen.

But I just want to call out a few in particular.

First, the regulator the MHRA – who have remained tough and rigorous throughout but flexible, so it's safety, not bureaucracy they focused on, proving themselves to be, without doubt, the best medical regulator in the world. And we are all very grateful

Next, the Vaccines Taskforce. Their combination of academic excellence, with private sector entrepreneurialism, and civil service grip has forged a team of remarkable capability, which is a model for how governments can get stuff done in the future.

The scientists, the pharmaceutical companies and the armed forces, everyone involved in the delivery effort – from the leadership of the NHS to every local volunteer.

And you, the British people.

For sticking by the rules and for your remarkable enthusiasm to get a jab – it makes me really proud.

Recent figures show 94% of those eligible have said they have either had a jab – or will get the jab when the call comes. 94%.

And this is so important because each and every jab makes us all safer.

Every time a friend sends me a message with a picture of them getting their jab – and they do a lot – I know that we're all one step safer and we're all one step closer to returning to normality.

It is fantastic the enthusiasm that people are showing and we still have a long way to go, so let's stick at it.

Today we have some new data to present on the effectiveness of the vaccine, both its real-world effect we can now see in the data and some new analytical research that we're publishing, which shows how it's saving lives, and this is being published in a paper by Public Health England and others right now.

First, let's look at the real-world data.

Next slide please.

If you look at the number of new cases as we described on Friday the number

of new cases is falling but the rate of decline has slowed.

This shows how we all need to keep sticking to the rules.

Let's not blow it now.

However.

Next slide please.

The number of hospitalisations is falling faster.

Even better: among the age groups vaccinated first, the fall in hospitalisations is faster than in the younger age groups who are still yet to get a jab.

This is a sign of the vaccine working.

Next slide please.

But where you can really see it is in the data on deaths – we can see that the number of deaths each day is thankfully falling much much faster than after the first peak, and again, as you can see from this slide, is falling faster in the over-80s – who got the jab first – than in the under-80s.

Final slide please.

Taken together, this difference in the data – between older and younger groups – shows a 'vaccine gap', you can just see it starting to emerge here over February.

This is a gap between the rate of decline in older and younger groups, the rate of decline in terms of people dying each day, is going faster amongst the over-80s and this shows in the real world, across the UK, right now, that the vaccine is helping to protect the NHS and save lives.

These real-world effects are backed up by some exciting new data that shows that a single shot of either the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine or Pfizer vaccine works against severe infection amongst over-70s, with a more than 80% reduction in hospitalisations. This is extremely good news.

In fact, the detailed data show that the protection that you get from catching COVID, 35 days after a first jab, is even slightly better for the Oxford jab than for Pfizer, albeit both results are clearly very strong. Professor Van-Tam is going to set more details in a moment.

These results may also help explain why the number of COVID admissions to intensive care units among people over 80 in the UK have dropped to single figures in the last couple of weeks.

Which is something that I know, we all welcome. This is seriously encouraging, it shows the power of science and what it means for you is that when the call comes – get the jab. The evidence shows it will protect you.

And I can formally announce that we're now inviting the over-60s to be vaccinated.

All part of our national effort to offer everyone the jab by the end of July.

To do that, and to make sure our vaccine programme has the funds it needs to keep up this incredible work, at the Budget on Wednesday, the Chancellor will set out £1.65 billion of new government funding to reinforce our vaccine rollout across all parts of the UK.

As more of us are protected against the virus, we can gradually replace the safety that comes from the restrictions that we have to impose with the safety from the jab.

Part of that funding will go towards further vaccine testing and development to make sure that we are as fast and effective in developing the next generation of COVID vaccines, including vaccines against variants, as we were with the existing ones.

There's a huge amount of work underway to ensure that we can develop vaccines against variants as fast and as safely possible.

Finally, I want to turn to the 6 cases of the variant of concern first identified in Manaus, in Brazil that we have identified here in the UK, 3 in Scotland and 3 in England.

We know that 5 of these people quarantined at home – as they were legally required to do.

We have been in contact with them and their families, and are grateful to them for understanding the seriousness of the situation.

We are putting in place surge testing in South Gloucestershire, as a precaution and I urge everyone to remain vigilant.

One of the 6 completed a test but did not successfully complete contact details.

We are therefore asking anyone who took a test on the 12 or 13 February but hasn't received the result back, to please get in touch by calling 119.

And Susan Hopkins will give more information on this effort in a moment.

We identified these cases thanks to the UK's advanced sequencing capabilities. We know about them because of NHS Test and Trace, and scientists around the world are now working to get ahead of some of the new coronavirus variants, looking at how a third vaccine dose could tackle these evolving mutations – much as we do with flu each year.

But for now, tackling this disease rests with every single one of us.

It's important to remember that, no matter what variant it is, COVID spreads in the same way, through social contact between people.

The steps we can all take to stop its spread are the same.

To stay at home, to take vital steps like hands, face, space, and make sure we observe the basics – letting fresh air in – and keeping to the rules on social distancing.

And that's how we can keep ourselves safe – and protect the people around us.

And if we can do that, as surely as spring follows winter there will be brighter days ahead.

[New data show vaccines reduce severe COVID-19 in older adults](#)

Today Public Health England (PHE) has submitted a [pre-print of a real-world study](#) that shows that both the Pfizer and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines are highly effective in reducing COVID-19 infections among older people aged 70 years and over. Since January, protection against symptomatic COVID, 4 weeks after the first dose, ranged between 57 and 61% for one dose of Pfizer and between 60 and 73% for the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

The pre-print article:

- compares the rate of vaccination in symptomatic people aged over 70 years of age who test positive for COVID-19, compared to those who test negative
- compares the rate of hospitalisation in confirmed COVID-19 cases aged over 80 who were vaccinated more than 14 days before testing positive, compared to unvaccinated cases
- compares the rate of deaths in confirmed COVID-19 cases aged over 80 who were vaccinated with Pfizer vaccine more than 14 days before testing positive, compared to unvaccinated cases

In the over 80s, data suggest that a single dose of either vaccine is more than 80% effective at preventing hospitalisation, around 3 to 4 weeks after the jab. There is also evidence for the Pfizer vaccine, which suggests it leads to an 83% reduction in deaths from COVID-19.

The data also shows symptomatic infections in over 70s decreasing from around 3 weeks after one dose of both vaccines.

The new analysis adds to growing evidence that the vaccines are working and are highly effective in protecting people against severe illness, hospitalisation and death.

Dr Mary Ramsay, PHE Head of Immunisation, said:

“This adds to growing evidence showing that the vaccines are working to reduce infections and save lives.

“While there remains much more data to follow, this is encouraging and we are increasingly confident that vaccines are making a real difference.

“It is important to remember that protection is not complete and we don’t yet know how much these vaccines will reduce the risk of you passing COVID-19 onto others.

“Even if you have been vaccinated, it is it is really important that you continue to act like you have the virus, practise good hand hygiene and stay at home.

From this week, the NHS has started to deliver second doses to those people vaccinated first, which will provide higher and longer lasting protection.

[Separate studies](#) in healthcare workers show that one dose of the vaccine is preventing people from catching asymptomatic COVID-19 by at least 70%. This will help to reduce the spread of infection in hospitals and care homes, ultimately offering more protection to these vulnerable populations.

[Have your say on guidance for driving on motorways and high-speed roads in The Highway Code](#)

Highways England is working with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) on updated guidance for the code to help drivers making journeys on the roads, as well as what they should do in an emergency.

Highways England has today launched a four-week consultation for members of the public to give their thoughts on the proposed changes.

Developing The Highway Code to include extra information about smart motorways is part of the Department for Transport’s 18-point action plan to improve safety on England’s roads.

Jeremy Phillips, Highways England’s Head of Road Safety, said:

The Highway Code is the go-to guide for road users to help make journeys as safe, efficient and sustainable as possible.

We know more needs to be done to help motorists understand exactly how modern motorways and high-speed roads operate.

The updated edition of The Highway Code will help inform the next generation of road users as well as giving important updates to those with many miles under their belt, to help us all stay safer.

Among the proposed updates are explanations of the availability, appearance and safe use of emergency areas, clearer information on the use of the red X sign to close lanes and provide safer areas for those involved in incidents or where people are working on the motorway, and how road users can help keep themselves safe in the event of a breakdown or emergency.

The update includes new guidance on the use of variable speed limits to manage congestion, how safety cameras are used to ensure compliance with speed limits and lanes closed with a red X, including the hard shoulder.

The guidance is also being updated on key factors that contribute to safety-related incidents, including driving while tired, unroadworthy vehicles, safe towing, tailgating and driving in roadworks.

It is vital that all road users are aware of The Highway Code, are considerate to other road users and understand their responsibility for their own safety and that of others.

The consultation runs until 23.59 on Monday 29 March 2021. To have your say, [visit the consultation webpage.](#)

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.