

3.5 HOWDON RESILIENCE - ENVIRONMENT AGENCY GUIDANCE AND POLICY NOTES

Howdon Resilience – Environment Agency guidance and policy notes

The strengthening of our resilience of key assets at Howdon STW is also in line with the current EA guidance and policy, which seeks to minimise the frequency of pollution incidents in terms of environmental impact, ensuring more robust permit compliance and lower the risk of prosecution.

The risk and impact of a failure of one of these too critical to fail assets at Howdon STW is emphasised in the following summary of recent or proposed changes to EA policy and guidance.

Pollution Risk

- The EA (and public) acceptance of pollution is reducing, assets failing and discharging to the environment will attribute a pollution incident, at a level associated to the sensitivity of the receiving water and longevity of discharge.
- The newly introduced change to sentencing guidelines has enhanced the financial consequence of a pollution from our assets. The ceiling has increased maximum fines for a company of our size to £3million.
- Increased environmental and leisure activity designations have increased the risk and magnitude of an impact. For example EU Bathing Water Standards have tightened with the revision of the Directive. One-off issues affecting compliance of bathing water quality now remain in a classification datasets for four years extended the period of negative publicity for financial impact for a business reliant on a bathing water classification.
- Nature and water immersion sport activities have increased. Public participation in the environment for recreational purposes has increased through the decade since assets were constructed.

Permit impact

- Permits for the discharge of emergency sewage stipulate a variety of mitigation measures to minimise the risk of a pollution to the environment. These standard conditions are tighter now than when any of these assets were constructed. For our larger assets, and for the assets we have identified as too critical to fail at Howdon STW, the practicality of finding replacements quickly is difficult and can have significant delays. Emergency permits typically include a clause that standby pumps are provided and automatically activate. For an emergency situation of this scale, over-pumping is not a viable option due to the time it would take to put in place. The fact a pump is unavailable for any length of time is a permit breach.
- Over recent years the EA have sought to revoke emergency permits on sewage treatment works in-system pumping stations (for example Howdon PEPs). To do so, heightens the risk of legal action when the asset is inoperable and a discharge is made. Northumbrian Water oppose this EA initiative.

Permits have been refused and surrenders sought across the country. The best that can be agreed is for the removal of the 'hands-off' period on the permit, if a permit change is needed. The EA can then revoke the document at any time or stipulate investment. Neither actions are acceptable as a business, particularly if shorter discharges did not have a major environmental impact.

Permit relaxation when we undertake improvements is also now becoming more restrictive. Historically when work is needed on an assets temporary discharges to the environment of partially treated sewage have been possible. The EA views are differing. Dualling of assets enables flows to be retained in-system without a release to the environment when rising mains are duplicated.