



September 2022

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about storm overflows.

My ministerial colleagues and I have made it clear to water companies that the current number of sewage discharges is unacceptable. I would like to assure you that tackling storm overflows is a priority and the Government is committed to taking action to protect public health and the environment from storm overflow discharges.

The Government has published the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, which will require water companies to deliver their largest ever environmental infrastructure investment - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years - into a long-term programme to tackle storm sewage discharges by 2050.

Water companies will have to achieve a number of targets so that discharges only happen when there is unusually heavy rain and when there is no immediate adverse impact to the local environment. The targets will mean that water companies need to take measures such as increasing the capacity of their networks and treating sewage before it is discharged to protect public health and prevent pollution, while massively reducing all discharges. Failure to meet these targets could see them face substantial fines or having to return money to customers.

I understand that by 2035, water companies will have to improve all storm overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water and improve 75% of overflows discharging to high priority nature sites. By 2050, this will apply to all remaining storm overflows covered by our targets, regardless of location.

Further, the plan sets out that water companies will be required to publish discharge information in near real time as well as committing to tackling the root causes of the issue by taking steps to improve surface water drainage. The plan also sets out Ministers' wider expectations for the water industry, to ensure their infrastructure keeps pace with increasing external pressures, such as urban growth and climate change and to ensure our water supplies remain clean and secure for the future.

Under this plan there will be no changes to bills until 2025. I am assured that Ministers will continue to monitor water affordability and take further action if needed and will consult on a new water affordability scheme to help less well-off households.

The Government has been clear that companies cannot profit from environmental damage. Ofwat have outlined that water companies must be transparent about how executive pay and dividends align to delivery of services to customers, including environmental performance. The Government supports Ofwat's recent proposals, which would provide extra powers for enforcement action against companies that do not link dividend payments to their environmental performance, or who failed to be transparent about their dividend pay-outs.



Chris Heaton-Harris

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The Government, the Environment Agency (EA) and the regulator Ofwat have been working to drive up water companies' performance and monitoring and increase accountability. This includes a massive expansion in monitoring frequency and duration of discharges, from approximately 5% in 2016 to nearly 90% in 2021, which has been used to hold companies to account.

Last year, the EA and Ofwat launched the largest criminal and civil investigations into water company sewage discharges ever, at over 2200 treatment works, following new data coming to light as a result of increased monitoring. The investigations will look at where sites may be breaching their permits and ensure that companies found to be acting illegally are held to account, up to and including prosecution, which can lead to unlimited fines and companies having to reimburse customers. This follows 54 prosecutions against water companies since 2015, securing fines of nearly £140 million.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Chris'.

CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY

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