



January 2023

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about storm overflows.

My ministerial colleagues and I are clear that the current use of sewage discharges is unacceptable. I would like to assure you that tackling storm overflows is a priority and the Government is committed to protecting public health and the environment from storm overflow discharges.

Sewage overflows are a Victorian infrastructure issue, and this is the first Government to take steps to tackle them. The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan will require water companies to deliver their largest ever environmental infrastructure investment - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years.

Water companies will be required to take measures such as increasing the capacity of their networks and treating sewage before it is discharged, while massively reducing all discharges. In September 2022, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs asked water company bosses to write to him with their plans to accelerate investment in infrastructure. Water companies are investing £3.1 billion to deliver the 800 storm overflow improvements across England by 2025. I am assured that Ministers are working with water companies to explore accelerating infrastructure projects.

Ministers will take forward plans to lift the Environment Agency's maximum civil fine for individual breaches of the rules. Fines for water companies who seriously breach rules will be increased 1,000 fold, from £250,000 to up to £250 million. The Environment Agency has also instructed water companies to install new flow monitors on more than 2,000 wastewater treatment works.

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. Ministers will review the plan in 2027 to consider where we can go further, taking account of innovation and efficiencies.

To crack down on water pollution, the Government has boosted funding for the Environment Agency (EA), with £2.2 million per year specifically for water company enforcement activity. In 2022, 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. Investigations 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



Chris Heaton-Harris

Member of Parliament for Daventry
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel: 020 7219 7048

follows 56 prosecutions against water companies since 2015, securing fines of nearly £141 million.

At present, money from these fines is returned to the Treasury. However, I am aware of new plans to channel money from water company fines into environmental improvements. This could include initiatives to restore our water environments by creating wetlands, re-vegetating riverbanks and reconnecting meanders to the main channel of rivers. In November 2022, Ofwat announced that almost £135 million would be returned to customers as a result of companies underperforming against their performance commitments.

Finally, 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 improving 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.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

**CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY**