



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your letter of 20 September to the Rt Hon Ranil Jayawardena MP about the Green Spaces Campaign. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the considerable delay in doing so.

I have strongly expressed that the volume of sewage discharged by water companies is unacceptable and I will ensure improving water quality remains a Government priority. I am committed to continue meeting the worst offenders over the coming months.

Reducing sewage discharges

In August the Government launched the most ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows in water company history. Our new strict targets will see the toughest ever crack down on sewage spills and will require water companies to undertake the largest infrastructure programme in water company history - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years.

Our plan will protect biodiversity, the ecology of our rivers and seas, and the public health of our water users for generations to come. 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, all remaining storm overflows covered by our targets will also have to meet the new requirements on rainfall and environmental impact, regardless of location.

Overflows that are causing the most harm will be addressed first to make the biggest difference as quickly as possible, and water companies will be expected to consider nature-based solutions in their planning. We will review this plan in 2027 to consider both where we can go further, taking account of innovation and efficiencies, and how this programme is impacting bills.

We have increased the number of storm overflows monitored across the network from 5% in 2016 to almost 90% now monitored, and we will reach 100% cover by end of next year. Through powers in the landmark Environment Act, we will also place duties directly on water companies to monitor the water quality impact up and downstream of all their assets. In the Storm Overflows Reduction Plan, we committed to commencing these duties in 2023. We take robust enforcement action against illegal breaches of storm overflow permits. Since 2015, the Environment Agency has brought 56 prosecutions against water companies, securing fines of over £141 million.

Through our Strategic Policy Statement to Ofwat, we have set, for the first time, a direction to water companies that they must prioritise the environment, including by reducing sewage discharges and their adverse impact. We expect Ofwat to challenge water companies to demonstrate how they will achieve zero serious pollution incidents by 2030.

Since privatisation, water companies have invested £25 billion to reduce pollution from sewage, and water company investment in environmental improvements has been scaled up to £7.1 billion over the period 2020-25. This includes £3.1 billion invested in storm overflow improvements specifically (approximately 800 improvements to storm overflows), of which £1.9 billion has been invested in the Thames Tideway Tunnel super sewer.

There should be no doubt about the Government's ambition and determination to prioritise storm overflows and sewage discharges.

Protecting Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs)

Thank you also for bringing to my attention the interest shown by your constituents to see the Surrey Hills AONB expanded and re-designated as a National Park.

The Government fully recognises and values the crucial role our most valued landscapes, AONBs, and National Parks, play for conserving and enhancing the country's most beautiful and iconic landscapes, and also meeting its commitments as set out in the 25-year Environment Plan, the Environment Act 2021 and also meeting the commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030 for nature.

As you may be aware, Natural England, the statutory advisor to the Government on landscape is progressing the multi-year landmark designation programme announced in the summer 2021 and this includes the consideration of extending the Surrey Hills AONB.

I can assure you that there are clear legislative and policy requirements in place for both AONBs and National Parks to protect these landscapes against inappropriate developments, including on valued greenfield sites and as you have recognised, all AONBs already enjoy the highest level of protections.

Thank you for the invitation to meet and visit South West Surrey. The Secretary of State's office is in touch with your office to finalise arrangements

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact us about this important issue.



REBECCA POW MP