



October 2021

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about sewage overflows.

These overflows were designed to be used during extreme weather to prevent sewers becoming overloaded with a combination of sewage and rainwater, releasing diluted wastewater into rivers rather than letting it back up into people's homes. However, climate change has led to increased rainfall and water infrastructure has not kept pace with development growth over decades. Please be assured that Ministers have amended the Environment Bill to help crack down on the pollution in our rivers, waterways and coastlines, to better tackle the harm that overflows cause.

These new measures will tackle storm overflows including through a new requirement for water companies to monitor the water quality impacts of their sewage discharges and publish this information, with the Secretary of State being able to make regulations regarding the publication of this information. This monitoring will drive action by water companies to reduce sewage discharges that do the most harm, to better protect the environment and public health. I understand that water companies will also be required to publish near real-time information on when their storm overflows operate.

Also, the amendments will introduce a duty requiring the Government to produce a plan for the reduction of both storm overflows and their harm as well as a duty to publish a report considering the costs and benefits of eliminating overflows entirely which will inform decision-making in this area. Both of these actions are required before the 1st September next year. Separately, ministers will undertake a review of legislation which would require Sustainable Drainage Systems to be constructed to ministerial standards on new developments, reducing the pressure on the sewage system. I know that this type of "blue-green" infrastructure can deliver a number of benefits - it can prevent water entering foul sewers, reduce surface flooding, improve biodiversity and improve associated carbon emissions.

More widely, between 2020 and 2025, water companies will invest £3.1 billion in storm overflow improvements to reduce sewage discharges to our waters. This includes £1.9bn investment on the Thames Tideway Tunnel super sewer, as well as £1.2bn of other investment throughout England. £144m of this is new, additional investment as a result of a call to action from the Storm Overflows Taskforce.

I can tell you that all discharges by a water company require a permit issued by the Environment Agency. I know that these permits include necessary conditions which ensure discharges only occur under strict permitted conditions. Where discharges occur outside of these conditions, the Environment Agency investigates and takes appropriate action, which includes enforcement action if necessary. This action has resulted in more than 48 prosecutions against water companies in the last six years.



Chris Heaton-Harris

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Most recently, I understand Southern Water was fined a record £90m, the largest ever imposed on a water company, after pleading guilty to thousands of illegal discharges of sewage into rivers and coastal waters. This fine is absolutely appropriate and welcomed and will rightly be paid solely from the company's operating profits, rather than customer bills. I would like to assure you that the Environment Agency will continue to take enforcement action against water companies which cause serious harm to our environment.

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**