

22 August 2022

Huw Merriman MP  
[Huw.merriman.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:Huw.merriman.mp@parliament.uk)

Dear Mr Merriman,

Thank you for your letter of 18 August.

I agree with you that the rivers and the coastline across Sussex should not be blighted by the discharge of sewage. As you say, storm overflows are designed to protect homes and communities from flooding and pollution by stopping the sewers backing up during periods of large rainfall. But they should not be operating outside such events, and even then only spilling the minimum necessary.

That is why the Environment Agency has been clear with all the water companies, including Southern Water, that we want to see them take action to reduce the frequency and impact of their storm overflows; why we have required all the companies to put monitors on all their overflows and publicise the data; and why we are insisting that they must comply fully with their EA permits which stipulate the conditions under which those overflows can and cannot operate. We have been clear that we will not hesitate to take enforcement action against those companies which fail to comply. We are currently conducting a major investigation into whether the companies have been complying fully with the terms of their EA permits in relation to the operation of their sewage treatment works and overflows.

Largely down to the work of the Environment Agency with water companies, local authorities and our other partners, most of the bathing waters around our coasts are now in a better condition than they have been for decades. In 2021, 99% of the designated bathing waters in England (413 out of 417) met at least the minimum standard for bathing. The Environment Agency issues daily warnings for individual bathing waters via our Swimfo website based on our prediction of bathing water quality, taking account of any local pollution incidents.

You asked for details of all individual discharges in the area over the last week. That information is held by the water companies, not the EA, so that is a question which Southern Water will need to answer.

With regards to our specific contact with Sussex Resilience Forum partners, we have met them throughout the summer to reinforce the increased risk of both localised flooding and pollution that may occur following heavy summer rainfall. The most recent of these meetings was held on 12 August. In addition, on the morning of 16 August, when particularly heavy rain was forecast, we emailed all our partners about possible flood and pollution risk, together with a list of the locations we believed to be most vulnerable to heavy rainfall impacts. Regardless of the cause of pollution,

whenever we are made aware of significant incidents affecting our beaches we will speak directly with the respective local authority so they can consider closing the beach for public safety. Bexhill Beach, for example, was closed to the public on 17 August by Rother District Council after we made them aware of pollution from a Southern Water Pumping Station following a power failure.

Finally, I would be very happy for the Environment Agency to join your proposed Parliamentary meeting in September with Southern Water on how to tackle the sewage discharge issues on the Sussex coastline. Please liaise with my office on the details.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J.D. Bevan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "D".

**Sir James Bevan KCMG**  
Chief Executive

### **Copies**

Laurence Gosden  
Chief Executive Officer, Southern Water

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Member of Parliament for Hastings and Rye

Maria Caulfield MP  
Member of Parliament for Lewes

Caroline Ansell MP  
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