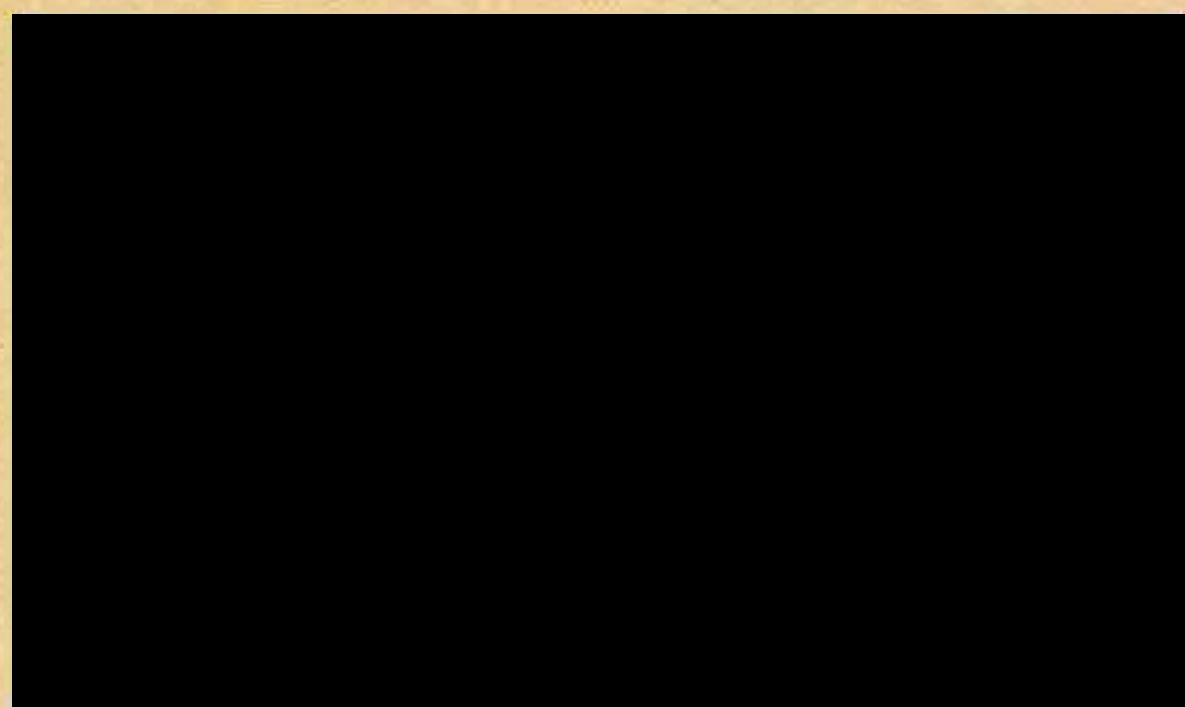


HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA



25 October 2021

Dear Rosemary Shepherd

Thank you for contacting me about the Environment bill. I appreciate you taking the time to contact me with your concerns, and I understand that there are many ranging views on this bill, however some may be influenced by misleading accounts. Please always do come to me for a proper and fulsome explanation of what the reasons are as to why votes go the way they do. Social media is awash with bias and politically motivated information to discredit.

Overall, I hope my response makes crystal clear my desire to protect and enhance our coastline, waterways, and rivers.

As you may be aware, I voted against an uncosted amendment which would have seen households pay thousands of extra pounds in water bills - money which I know most families don't have. This has seen many of the usual left-wing agitators suggest that Tory MPs voted for raw sewage to be pumped into rivers - this is simply not true. It also ignores the safeguards and work which is ongoing to protect our rivers and which I voted for as part of the Bill.

I would like to split my response into two parts, firstly I would like to explain why I didn't vote in favour of the Lords section of amendment 45; and secondly, the key steps this Bill is taking to address the harm caused by storm overflows which I agree is a serious issue and a concern I share.

I did not support the Lords' section of amendment 45 for two main reasons. Before the vote, I reached out to Ministers to discuss this further - I was assured the provisions in this Bill will deliver substantial progressive reductions in the harm caused by storm overflows which is indeed the case as I will explain below.

Secondly, I know the age of our sewerage system means the complete elimination of storm overflows would be extremely challenging. Notably, initial assessments suggest elimination would cost between £150 - £660 billion. To put that in perspective, that is nearly £10,000 for every person in this country. This would undoubtedly lead to customer bill increases and trade-offs against other water industry priorities. It could also be a huge liability for the taxpayer as government would ultimately be responsible for ensuring that this work would be carried out and would have to underwrite the cost. The threat that households could have faced huge increases in their bills if this amendment was approved was very real. I suspect

that 99.99% of people wouldn't support a huge increase in their water bills and I make no apology for voting this amendment down to protect working families. I hope this adequately explains and sheds some light on why I didn't vote for this section.

Please allow me to now explain what the Bill does contain to address the harm caused by storm overflows:

- A new duty on government to produce a statutory plan to reduce discharges from overflows and the harm this causes by September 2022 (they will report directly to Parliament).
- A new duty on water companies and the EA to publish data on storm overflow operations on an annual basis.
- A new duty on government to produce a report setting out the actions that would be needed to eliminate storm overflow in England and the costs and benefits of such action (once this report is published with a breakdown of costs & benefits, I would be more than happy to revisit this subject and potentially support further action).
- A new duty on water companies to publish information (within 1 hour) of the commencement of an overflow, its location and when it ceases.
- A new duty on water companies to continuously monitor the water quality upstream and downstream of a storm overflow and of sewage disposal works.
- A new duty on water companies to produce comprehensive statutory Drainage and Sewerage Management Plans setting out how the company will manage and develop its drainage and sewerage system over a minimum 25-year planning horizon and how storm overflows will be addressed through these plans.

I hope this information is useful and hopefully reassures you somewhat that clear and effective action is being taken to address storm overflows. I admit I have been disappointed to see some reports in the press mischaracterise what happened this week in relation to amendment 45.

The fact that this has been jumped upon by the usual left-wing suspects on Facebook to portray Tory MPs as 'scum' - just a week after one of our colleagues was murdered - is not surprising but is disappointing. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the words we speak carry a level of respect and decency and that words written online also have consequences.

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. However, I do believe more needs to be done.

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, 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.

I have received many written communications from constituents angry at how Southern Water have treated the waterways. I recognise this strength of feeling and do want to see more done to hold these companies to account with regards to environmental protections.

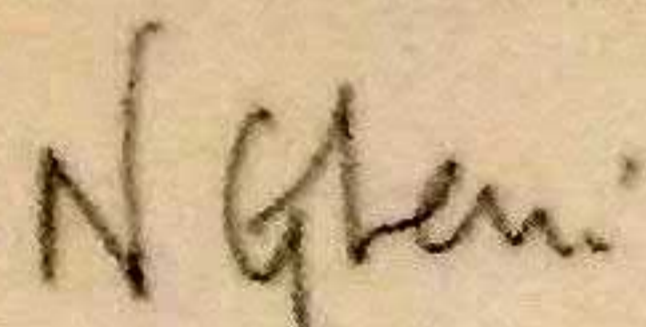
More widely, I am encouraged that between 2020 and 2025, water companies will invest £3.1 billion in storm overflow improvements to reduce sewage discharges to our waters. This includes £1.9bn investment on the Thames Tideway Tunnel super sewer, as well as £1.2bn of other investment throughout England.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

If you'd like to be kept informed on this matter and other areas of my work both in Parliament, and locally, here in Wealden, please do sign up to my email newsletter <https://nusghani.us12.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=4bd121d74e18183e65ee0a965&id=350b20cd59>.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me and I hope the above response eases some of your concern.

Best wishes,
Nusrat

Yours sincerely,



Nusrat Ghani MP