

## FROM SIMON JUPP MP REGARDING ACTIONS TO REQUIRE IMPROVEMENTS FROM SOUTH WEST WATER

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Dear Ms Jenkins,

Thank you for your letter dated 1st September 2023 asking me to provide an update on actions I have taken to require improvements from South West Water, primarily regarding sewage discharge into the district's rivers and coastline.

I will first talk about the work this Conservative government is doing to crackdown on water companies – including South West Water.

I will then move on to what I am doing in East Devon to require improvements from South West Water.

We all agree that the failure of water companies to adequately reduce sewage discharges is totally unacceptable.

As you will know, excess rainwater and sewage are ending up in our rivers and the sea from storm overflow discharges from combined sewer overflows, or CSOs. Those mechanisms are meant to be emergency safety valves to stop sewage backing up into our homes and streets. But, to put it simply, the infrastructure cannot cope with the growing population and heavier storms.

Our sewage systems are old. Many of them date back to Victorian times. Water companies have been relying on storm overflows far too often, without adequately addressing the issues behind their continued use.

In a perfect world, we would stop sewage spills completely and immediately. Sadly, that is virtually impossible in the short term; because of the pressure on our water infrastructure, we would risk the collapse of the entire water network. Stopping sewage overflows tomorrow would lead to sewage backing up into people's homes and streets. Given the eye-watering costs involved, the government cannot in good conscience legislate for this to happen and let water bills reach astronomical levels.

In the South West, we already pay the highest sewerage bills in the country. The government already subsidises water bills in our region by £50 per household every year. I have called on South West Water to commit to funding the support itself should it ever be withdrawn by the Government. I am sad to report that South West Water has so far refused to make such a commitment.

This Conservative government has a credible plan to tackle sewage discharges, through more investment, stronger regulation, and tougher enforcement. And, as I have been clear in Parliament and in my discussions across our district, South West Water needs to invest more in infrastructure to protect the public from poor water quality, rather than protecting its company bonuses.

### What has the government done?

- The government placed a legally binding duty on water companies in the **Environment Act 2021** to progressively reduce the adverse impacts of discharges from storm overflows.

- The government has set new targets, enshrined in law, to generate the most significant capital investment (£56 billion) and delivery programme ever undertaken by water companies. Through the **Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan**:
  - By 2035, water companies will have: improved all overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and improved 75% of overflows discharging to high priority sites.
  - By 2050, no storm overflows will be permitted to operate outside of unusually heavy rainfall or to cause any adverse ecological harm.
- The government has required water companies to fit **monitors for all storm overflows** by the end of 2023. 91% currently have them fitted across the country, up from only 7% in 2010. I am told by SWW they have already achieved 100% in their network. It is as a result of this monitoring that the government is able to see the extent of what is happening and take action to address it. In February, the Secretary of State asked water companies to set action plans for all storm overflows in England, prioritising those spilling more than a certain number of times a year, and those spilling into bathing waters and high priority nature sites. As per Section 81 of the Environment Act 2021, all water companies must provide data about the frequency and duration of storm overflow discharges for all overflows in near real time and make this available to the public no later than 2025.
- The government has published a five-year strategy for water – the recent Plan for Water – which includes **bringing forward £1.1 billion investment on storm overflows**. It follows a request from Defra to English water companies to accelerate investments between now and 2025 to tackle storm overflow discharges, reduce nutrient pollution from treatment works, and address water resilience challenges. (More detail below on this project for Sidmouth & Tipton St John).
- The government has passed new laws to allow **regulators to impose unlimited civil penalties on water companies that break the rules**. This will mean that penalties can be proportionate to the degree of environmental harm and culpability; and can act as a powerful deterrent. This will also offer regulators a quicker method of enforcement than lengthy criminal prosecutions. Money from those fines and penalties will also now be channelled back into the environment. Regulator Ofwat is currently investigating South West Water's wastewater treatment works and leakage reporting. South West Water was fined £13 million last year alone because of missed targets.

### What have I done as MP?

As your MP, I want South West Water to clean up their act – and I'm holding them to account, using legislation brought in by the Conservative government.

It's worth being clear that any suggestion that MPs voted to legalise or allow more sewage to go into our waters is not true. My Conservative colleagues and I have only ever voted to strengthen requirements on water companies and the government. I voted for targets through the Environment Act 2021 to strengthen the rules on pollution from wastewater and agriculture. The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan followed, as required under the Environment Act.

We have the legislation, the investment plan, and the means to hold water companies to account. We need South West Water to continue to step up, to invest and improve our sewage infrastructure, and to stop the sewage discharges.

I have been working cross-party with East Devon parish, town, district and county councillors, and environmental groups to hold South West Water to account about their plans to invest in East Devon and urgently fix specific local problems as and when they do crop up. I have previously secured compensation for Clyst St Mary residents after foul flooding in the village. I have facilitated meetings between both Sidmouth Town and Lympstone Parish Councils and senior figures from South West Water to look at the data and plans in granular detail. I have also worked constructively with campaign groups such as ESCAPE Exmouth to raise their concerns on their behalf with South West Water's bosses and Defra Ministers.

### Sidmouth & Tipton St John

Following a debate I secured in Parliament, where I called on South West Water to invest in our area and modernise their water infrastructure, South West Water announced new investment in East Devon.

This much-needed new multi-million-pound package will upgrade sewer overflows in Sidmouth and Tipton St John, alongside work to support nutrient neutrality in Axminster.

Over £30m will be spent locally to upgrade combined sewer overflows at The Ham, Fortescue Road and Manstone Road that flow into the River Sid and Tipton St John's combined sewer overflow upgraded that flows into the River Otter.

Regulator Ofwat says this investment must ensure compliance with bathing water quality standards, shellfish water standards, and meet the Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan spill targets.

Work to reduce nutrient pollution and support nutrient neutrality at Axminster Kilminster waste water treatment works was also announced. By no later than March 2025, the site should comply with phosphorus nutrient pollution standards.

But I also want to see action in Exmouth and Budleigh Salterton. In Exmouth, South West Water say they are working to improve Maer Road and Phear Park pumping stations' storm overflows performance.

In Budleigh Salterton, South West Water say they are working to clean the 7km sewer pipe from Lime Kilns pumping station to Maer Lane sewage treatment works. I'm monitoring their progress in both towns closely.

### Meeting with Ofwat in Parliament

I'm working with Ofwat and the Environment Agency to put as much pressure as possible on South West Water to clean up their act and our water.

I recently met with the Chief Executive of Ofwat David Black alongside other MPs from our region to discuss the regulator's key role in holding South West Water to account on their poor performance.

This Conservative government is giving regulators like Ofwat and the Environment Agency more powers to clamp down on water companies than ever before. Key investigations are ongoing into South West Water's wastewater treatment works and leakage reporting - and Ofwat has enforcement powers to fine up to 10% of company turnover.

I will continue to work with regulators, armed with additional enforcement powers by this Conservative government, to protect our precious environment.

#### Meeting with South West Water in Sidmouth

In July, I met with the Chief Executive of South West Water, Susan Davy, to urge the water company to move swiftly on their £30 million investment plans for Sidmouth and Tipton St John.

Visiting their Sidmouth Wastewater Treatment Works site and storm overflow at The Ham, I urged South West Water to move quickly on the projects included in the investment plans which are set to reduce storm overflow spills and improve bathing water quality.

With my meeting with the Chief Executive of Ofwat fresh in my mind, I also expressed my deep disappointment in the fact that South West Water has found themselves under investigation by the regulator once again. Whilst its overall performance has improved, South West Water's Chief Executive acknowledged that there is more to do moving forward.

#### Statutory Consultees

I have been campaigning to make water companies statutory consultees on major housing developments.

Water companies – including South West Water – are not currently compelled by law to respond to planning applications while local councils are deciding on them.

I want to make sure new developments in East Devon come with the infrastructure residents deserve. Forcing water companies to reveal the state of their infrastructure will put pressure on them to invest to help give communities peace of mind.

In the House of Commons, I called on the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Michael Gove MP, to include the measure in planning reforms within the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

The government has now made a commitment, during the passage of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, to consult on whether or not to make water companies statutory consultees on certain planning applications, and if so, how best to do this. The Secretary of State is able to make changes to the list of statutory consultees through legislation.

#### Engaging with cross-party local councils

In Autumn 2021, the local drainage system in Clyst St Mary was unable to cope with torrential rainfall. As a result of this, the villagers worst affected had to wade through sewage and some were left without usable toilet facilities.

Immediately, I asked the chief executive of South West Water to urgently get a grip on the situation and liaise directly with the local parish council who were gathering information on the ground.

South West Water's engineering director met with the community to explain the short and long-term actions they planned to take. It will include new piping for properties and increasing capacity at nearby pumping stations.

Recognising the need to press for immediate action too, I met with South West Water and asked them to set out a clear timetable of actions and communicate with residents as often as possible to

provide updates on work being done. Following my request, South West Water later agreed to pay compensation to those affected by this flooding.

I encourage all my constituents to raise specific local issues with my office. I will always do my best to help.

I hope this comprehensive letter should prove valuable to the scrutiny committee's work.

Kind regards,

Simon

**Simon Jupp MP**

Member of Parliament for East Devon

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