



October 2021

Dear Constituents,

Thank you for taking the time to contact my office.

Several constituents have written to me about my vote last week on Amendment 45 of the Environment Bill. There has been a lot of deliberate and divisive misinformation on this so I wish to set the record straight. Social media also appears to have gone into meltdown but the context and background to this are rather more straightforward.

From the outset, I have supported the new Environment Bill and it is an excellent bit of work. Contrary to what I have read in the past few days, it tightens up environmental regulation, not least the Water Industry Act of 1991, so it is a total fabrication that I 'voted to allow raw sewage to pollute our wildlife, our sports fields and our food', which is what someone actually posted on social media over the weekend. Having grown up on the border of Surrey and Berkshire, spent much of my childhood fishing on our beautiful streams and been at the forefront of the fight against water pollution as an environmentalist and lover of the countryside, this deliberate political scaremongering is bewildering.

The Environmental Bill has many strengths and continues to make rapid progress through Parliament. It will instigate real change and leave a lasting legacy. Amongst other things, it places a new duty on the UK Government to produce a statutory plan to reduce discharges from overflows by September 2022, a new duty on water companies and the Environmental Agency to publish data on storm overflow operations on an annual basis and a further duty on Government to produce a report on what is needed to eliminate storm overflow in England, and the costs and benefits of such action. It places an obligation on water companies to publish information (within one hour) of the commencement of an overflow, its location and when it ceases, a further duty on water companies to continuously monitor water quality upstream and downstream. It also mandates 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. The statutory intent here could not be clearer and none of these measures are indicative of any plan to pump raw sewage into rivers!

In respect of Amendment 45 from the House of Lords, this is slightly more complex but I am happy to explain my logic. Contrary to perception, the House of Commons actually adopted most of its recommendations, albeit with the exception of lines 7 to 14 on storm overflows. The reason is that this would have effectively set a specific timeline for infrastructure works which would have been well beyond the ability of the Government, Environment Agency and water companies to implement. Current cost estimates on the elimination of storm sewerage overflows range from between £150 billion to £660 billion so it would have been utterly irresponsible to mandate a fixed timeline of work and against unknown cost estimates, without understanding the full impact of doing so. Had this amendment not been voted down, then much of the cost of delivering this work would have fallen immediately upon the taxpayer and placed an unacceptable legal burden on already stretched families, at a time when the UK needs to tackle its public finances in the wake of the pandemic.

Like most of my colleagues, I was not willing to write a blank cheque for this against an impossible timeline and it would have been irresponsible to do so, hence I supported a vote that was rightly whipped. I was also not prepared to ignore the serious fiscal consequences

for the consumer. The simple fact here is that the Government is already tabling the most progressive, ambitious and environmentally friendly legislation of a generation and the bill is taking serious steps to address the harm caused by storm overflows. As it stands, water companies are already investing £7.1 billion on environmental improvements across England between 2020 – 25, of which £3.1 billion will be invested directly into storm overflow improvements. And once the Government's Water Quality Enquiry is published in 2022, the water regulator OFWAT will be further incentivised to significantly reduce the frequency and volume of sewage discharges from storm overflows, to the point where it will be mandated in law.

I hope this information is useful and reassures you that effective action is being taken to address storm overflows. As a politician, I have become accustomed to misrepresentation in the press and on social media but it was important for me to address the clear lack of context in this case and to underscore the wider merits of the Environment Bill. And as someone who loves the countryside, I hope that this statement makes clear my desire to protect and enhance our coastline, waterways and rivers

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Sunderland', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

James Sunderland MP
Member of Parliament for the Bracknell Constituency
Bracknell, Crowthorne, Finchampstead, Sandhurst and Wokingham Without