



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

Rebecca Pow MP
Minister for Environmental Quality and Resilience

2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T: +44 (0) 3459 335577

E: correspondence.section@defra.gov.uk

W: gov.uk/defra

Dr Phil James
Chief Executive
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
Chadwick Court, 15 Hatfields
London, SE1 8DJ
c.donaghy@cieh.org

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Dear Phil,

Thank you for your letters of 3 July to me and the Secretary of State about your recently published Environmental Health Manifesto. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and apologise for the delay in doing so. Please also accept this as a response to your letter of 30 June to the Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP.

We greatly appreciate your commitment to this important cause and your interest in our support. Environmental Health is something we take very seriously. Earlier this year, we published our own comprehensive Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23) which sets out ten goals, from achieving clean and plentiful water to maximising our resources and minimising our waste. EIP23 details a delivery plan for each of these goals and includes commitments on managing food waste, maintaining our environmental protections, and outlines the action water companies must undertake to safeguard our waters.

We know that spending time in nature has significant health and wellbeing benefits. For example, people who visit nature regularly feel their lives to be more worthwhile, with 82% of adults questioned in the most recent People and Nature Survey saying that nature made them happy. Evidence also shows links between a greener living environment and higher life satisfaction, including improved mental health and reduced stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression.

This is why we committed in the EIP23 to work across the Government to help ensure that everyone lives within 15 minutes' walk of a green or blue space, and to work in parallel to reduce barriers to access. We are also taking forward several other policies to improve access to nature, including:

- Working to complete the King Charles III England Coast Path which, at around 2,700 miles, will be the longest waymarked and maintained coast walking route in the world. Over 2,000 miles have now been approved as King Charles III England Coast Path, with over 914 miles already open. It will also create 250,000 hectares of new open access land within the coastal margin.
- Delivering the £9 million Levelling Up Parks Fund to improve green space in over 100 disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
- Designating Wainwright's coast to coast route across the north of England as a National Trail.
- Delivering the £14.5 million 'Access for All' programme, which consists of a package of targeted measures in our protected landscapes, national trails, forests and the wider countryside to make access to green and blue spaces more inclusive.

We have also set new statutory targets across a number of areas, including two new legally binding targets for fine particulate matter; the most harmful pollutant to human health. Our dual target approach will ensure reductions where concentrations are highest as well as reducing average exposure across the country by over a third by 2040 compared to 2018. Achieving these targets will make an important contribution to improving public health. Over the course of 18 years achievement, they will result in up to:

- 214,000 fewer cases of cardiovascular disease,
- 56,000 fewer strokes,
- 70,000 fewer cases of asthma, and;
- 23,000 fewer cases of lung cancer.

With regard to the polluting of rivers and coastal areas, the volume of sewage discharged by water companies is unacceptable and I will ensure improving water quality remains a Government priority. No Government has done more to tackle the issue of storm overflow discharges.

In August 2022, the Government launched the most ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows in water company history. Our new strict targets will drive water companies to deliver their largest infrastructure programme - £56 billion capital investment over 25 years. On 25 April, we announced that we would set a legally binding target to crackdown on sewage spills from storm overflows.

On 24 July, the Government consultation on expanding the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction plan to include coastal and estuarine storm overflows closed. We are currently reviewing the responses.

Our Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction plan will protect biodiversity, the ecology of our rivers and seas, and the public health of our water users for generations to come. By 2035, water companies will have to improve all storm overflows discharging into or near every designated bathing water; and improve 75% of overflows discharging to high priority nature sites. By 2050, all remaining storm overflows covered by our targets will also have to meet the new requirements on rainfall and environmental impact, regardless of location.

In terms of your ask for the Government to introduce the mandatory display of food hygiene ratings in England, working towards this in England is an objective in the Food Standards Agency's (FSA) new Three Year Corporate Plan 2023-26 and the FSA has developed detailed draft proposals. However, a mandatory scheme in England would require new primary legislation and cross-Government support, so the decision on whether to consult and legislate would be dependent on Government priorities and timetabling. Policy development has been paused temporarily because the FSA has had to identify a series of essential changes to its workplan to create capacity to deliver additional demands without compromising on its statutory duties.

The FSA is continuing to work with its local authority partners to maintain and improve the impact and benefits of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme, which remains a highly successful public health initiative.

Finally, I appreciate your concerns around regulation, especially regarding Retained EU Law (REUL). Defra's default approach is to retain REUL unless there is a good reason to either repeal or reform it. This allows us to keep protections in place, provide certainty to businesses and stakeholders, and to make reforms tailored to our needs as an independent nation outside the EU.

Regretfully, due to diary pressures, I am unable to accept your kind invitation to meet at this time.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact us about this important issue.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Pow', with a stylized flourish at the end.

REBECCA POW MP