



Department
for Environment,
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Nick Measham
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Dear Nick,

Thank you for your letter of 8 July to the former Secretary of State about Chalk Stream Designation. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and apologise for the delay in doing so.

I would like to begin by thanking you once again for your continued work and engagement in our pursuit of cleaner and healthier waterways. Chalk streams are a source of national pride, and I am committed to protecting these iconic British waterways for future generations. Restoring chalk streams is fundamental to this government's ambitious programme to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

As you outlined in your letter, all chalk streams are protected under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), and where they are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), they receive even more protection. At present, there are eight chalk streams with SSSI or SAC protection: four SACs (all of which are underpinned by SSSIs) and an additional four SSSIs that are not designated as SACs.

Where chalk streams are designated sites, they are subject to bespoke environmental targets. Future reviews may conclude a standard set of environmental targets which may then be further tailored for specific sites. Natural England (NE) assess and set targets for chalk streams in designated sites based on the [Common Standards Monitoring Guidance](#) (CSMG). Where the standards for a designated site vary from the Water Environment (WFD) Regulations baseline standards, NE will use the more stringent target/standard.

There are also occasions where NE will set more stringent bespoke targets based on observed data, for example on the River Coquet. For the River Coquet, the more stringent targets were set because the average recorded concentrations of nutrients were far below the generic targets set as part of CSMG. The Coquet is the only River SSSI in Favourable Condition, and it was clear the natural baseline of the river was exceedingly low. In 'capping' the current baseline values, we prevent deterioration. Using these methods, we can already apply bespoke targets where this is required by local circumstances.

NE regularly reviews these targets and agrees them with the Environment Agency (EA). NE are assessing the status of all SSSI/SAC rivers and securing additional monitoring where we are uncertain of condition status or site pressures. At the point of EU Exit, the UK network of SACs was considered sufficient for habitats related to chalk streams and there are currently no plans to review sufficiency for these or other habitats.

Currently, chalk streams are recognised by decision makers in planning as valued landscapes and sites of biodiversity value. As chalk streams are wildlife-rich habitats, providing key ecosystem services and benefits for natural capital, they should be identified and safeguarded through local plans. Local Nature Recovery Strategies, which are being rolled out across England, will help decision makers to identify and protect them as areas of importance for nature. As sensitive waterbodies, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government guidance is clear that developers should be assessing and mitigating impacts to water quality in these areas.

We also have a framework in place to protect water quantity in chalk streams. The EA's Environmental Destination for Water Resources (EDWR) sets out the future water resources needs for chalk streams. This includes supporting good ecological status and wider environmental ambition to provide additional protection for chalk headwaters, as outlined in the Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy. This means that the full range of chalk water resources requirements can be understood to inform the water company planning cycle. The EDWR does not determine how quickly these are delivered; this is determined through water planning processes.

The next steps are for Regional Water Resources Groups to consider the EDWR in the development of their best value Regional Water Resource Plans, which informs the next round of water company plans. These will follow on from the current round of Water Resources Management Plans, which include significant abstraction reductions that will benefit chalk streams.

Protecting and restoring chalk streams is embedded in our plan to reform the water industry. Through our Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, we are prioritising chalk streams as part of the record £11 billion of investment to improve nearly 3,000 storm overflows in England and Wales during Price Review 2024. In July, Sir Jon Cunliffe delivered his report recommending fundamental reforms to the water system. The government has already responded to a number of Sir Jon's recommendations, as set out in the [statement](#) made by the former Secretary of State on 21 July. Delivering these recommendations will be essential to delivering our ambition for clean rivers, lakes and seas, including chalk streams.

Thank you once again for your continued engagement with us on this topic, we hope our actions demonstrate our commitment to addressing this matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emma Hardy', is positioned above a thin vertical line.

EMMA HARDY MP