



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
Prime Minister

1 September 2026

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing about water-quality concerns in the River Stour and Christchurch Harbour. On 19 August 2026, Christchurch Harbour and Marine Society (CHAMS) recorded an alarming 370,000 E. coli cfu/100ml in the Stour, compared with 4,217 cfu/100ml in the same week in 2025. Recent readings have continued to exceed 10,000 cfu/100ml.

Further testing recorded 14,400 cfu/100ml at Ferry Jetty, compared with 1,500 cfu/100ml approximately six kilometres upstream at the A338. Records show that the Wessex Water-owned Cooper Dean Detention Tank discharged untreated effluent into the Stour between 09:49 and 11:04 that day, approximately 3.5km upstream of Ferry Jetty. While this does not establish that the discharge caused or primarily contributed to the contamination, the timing and location clearly warrant urgent investigation.

The immediate issue is public safety. The Stour and Christchurch Harbour are used by sailing clubs, rowing clubs, paddleboarders, swimmers, and children. Christchurch Sailing Club has already had to cancel its junior water activities, affecting 53 young people.

Most importantly, we urgently need a system that warns people before, or immediately when, a sewage discharge occurs, not 12 hours afterwards. These may be the hours when people are entering contaminated water.

I therefore ask the Government to act in three areas:

1. MONITOR: Introduce independent, systematic E. coli monitoring

- Ensure independent, systematic E. coli monitoring of heavily used non-designated recreational waters such as Christchurch Harbour and the lower River Stour, with results made publicly available promptly.
- Volunteers are currently providing data that has revealed potentially very serious contamination. Citizen scientists should not have to discover dangerous levels of faecal bacteria before the authorities do.

2. NOTIFY: Provide automatic, timely public alerts

- Extend the existing near-real-time sewage discharge notification system so that recreational water users are given automatic, targeted alerts when sewage discharges occur or when water quality presents a potential health risk.

- Since 1 January 2025, water companies in England have been required to publish storm-overflow information in real or near-real time within one hour of a discharge starting and ending. Every storm overflow now also has an event-duration monitor.
- However, this information does not currently provide a direct warning to recreational users of non-designated waters such as Christchurch Harbour and the lower Stour.
- Information that a discharge has occurred is not enough. People need a clear warning at the time of the discharge so they can avoid entering the water.

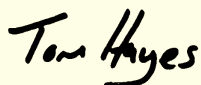
3. ACT: Investigate and protect

- Require the Environment Agency to urgently investigate the source of the current contamination, including potential contributions from sewage infrastructure, private sewage systems, agricultural run-off and other sources, and publish its findings.
- Christchurch Harbour is not a designated bathing water and is therefore not routinely monitored by the Environment Agency for bathing-water quality. Yet it is heavily used for recreational activities, including by children.

If sewage is discharged into a river used by the public, people need to know before they enter the water, not after the event.

I would be grateful for your urgent attention to this matter and for action to ensure that people using Christchurch Harbour and the River Stour have timely, reliable information to keep themselves and their children safe.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Hayes". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Hayes MP
Labour Member of Parliament for Bournemouth East