

Letter to The Times from Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of Environment Agency

Your editorial (“Filthy Business”, 3 August) and coverage of the state of England’s rivers is wrong on most counts except one. Let me give you the facts.

Water quality in our rivers is now better than at any time since the start of the Industrial Revolution. All over the country, salmon and otter have returned to waters that until recently were biologically dead. That has happened because of the work of the Environment Agency, alongside that of the water companies, environmental non-governmental organisations and local communities.

Rivers in England are not currently certified as safe for swimmers because there is no current system of certification. But the bathing waters off our beaches are, and last year 388 of them (97.9%) passed the minimum standards. In 1995 over half would have failed those standards. The Environment Agency has led these improvements.

Water companies are not “free to pollute”. They have to meet tough standards set by the law and the Environment Agency, which they do meet in almost all cases. If they fail to do so we take action against them, up to and including criminal prosecution. In 2017, Thames Water rightly received the highest ever fine, over £20 million, for discharging raw sewage into the Thames.

We will always press for the toughest penalties, but sentencing is a matter for the courts who fine on a case-by-case basis. We have also been calling for tougher financial penalties to drive better environmental performance given fines are currently only a fraction of turnover.

Water companies are not allowed to “mark their own homework”. While they do carry out some tests for the Environment Agency (which is standard practice for most regulated industries here and elsewhere), we do our own testing, and we monitor and regularly inspect their facilities.

Nor are the companies allowed to “set their own fines”. If they commit a serious offence we will always prosecute them, and will seek the highest possible penalties. But where there is less harm, and the damage they have done can best be remedied quickly by local partners, we do in some cases accept Enforcement Undertakings (EU), by which the company commits to respect the law and provides money to make good the damage.

Whether or not to accept an EU rather than prosecute is our decision, not the companies’. Last year we accepted 15 EUs, totalling £3,432,150 – which allows environmental groups, such as the many Rivers Trusts, to deliver major environmental improvements.

Where you are right is that the Environment Agency needs more resources if we

are to tackle pollution as effectively as we all want.

The funding the Environment Agency gets from the government to protect the environment has been cut from £120m in 2010 to £52m now, a cut of 57%, and that has affected our ability to protect and enhance our waters.

We have increased our charges to the water companies to help support our regulatory work. But the government also needs to step up to the plate. The forthcoming Spending Review is an opportunity for the government to show its commitment to the environment, and to protecting our rivers, streams and lakes.

Emma Howard Boyd Chair, Environment Agency

Government readies whole nation for Brexit with every council to have a designated Brexit lead

Councils should be fully prepared to leave the European Union by the end of October, the Communities and Local Government Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said today (3 August 2019), as he ramped up preparations.

Mr Jenrick thanked councils for all the work they have already done, but said they must step up vital preparations and committed £20 million for councils across England to prepare for delivering Brexit on 31 October, whatever the circumstances.

He has asked each council to designate a Brexit lead to work with central government and oversee teams in every community who will work with stakeholders in their area to plan intensively for Brexit.

The new funding comes in recognition of the central role councils will play to make sure their residents are ready for Brexit, and is expected to support a range of activity including communications, training and the recruitment of staff.

Mr Jenrick will continue to talk to local council leaders to give them the opportunity to discuss preparations and the opportunities of Brexit ahead.

Communities and Local Government Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

From Whitehall to town halls – everyone needs to be ready to fulfil our democratic mandate to leave the European Union by the end of October.

Local government has a vital role in helping to make Brexit a success and it is absolutely right that together we intensify preparations in every community.

And to do this successfully I have asked every council to appoint a Brexit lead to work with government. We'll be providing £20 million for councils to support the major step up in preparations.

I want all of us – central and local government – to be fully prepared for leaving the EU on 31 October whatever the circumstances. I know that we can achieve this, by continuing to work side by side with renewed national focus and intensity.

The government recognises that certain areas face more acute pressures. It is currently considering how best to allocate funding to ensure that those areas where greater impacts are expected, such as high impact ports of entry, get the funding they need in order to take appropriate steps.

At his first meeting with senior leaders from local authorities since becoming the Communities and Local Government Secretary earlier this week, Mr Jenrick told representatives that the government will support them to ensure they are ready to leave the EU in just under 90 days' time.

Departments will continue to assess and, if appropriate, fund any potential new requirements of local authorities as part of Brexit work they are undertaking.

In January the government committed £58 million of funding to support local authorities in their preparations for Brexit.

[Foreign Secretary meets China State Councillor in Beijing](#)

Following the meeting Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

I was very pleased to meet State Councillor Wang Yi in Bangkok today in the margins of the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting.

The UK and China have an important and constructive partnership, which we want to build on. We have a strong economic relationship. We work together as permanent members of the UN Security Council, and today discussed shared areas of concern such as the Iran nuclear deal and North Korea's recent missile launches.

Equally, we are clear and candid when we disagree. On Hong Kong, I underlined that the UK and China have a joint and legal commitment to the freedoms enshrined in the Joint Declaration, and that while we deplore any violence, peaceful protest is a basic right and should be respected.

Further information

[Investing in our global future by protecting children affected by conflict](#)

Thank you very much, Madam President. And I'd like to pass on our thanks also to his excellency the Foreign Minister for being here today to conduct this debate. And I join others in thanking all our briefers, particularly Ms Kamara and Mr Awan, for their very compelling testimonies and for sharing those with the Security Council this morning.

I want to add my voice to those congratulating Peru on a very successful presidency and welcoming Poland to their presidency and pledging UK support. I welcome our Chinese colleague, who we had the pleasure of seeing earlier. And I want to thank the Kuwaiti representative for joining our attention to that very important anniversary.

I think what we've heard today, Madam President shows that everybody has been very much moved by the bleak picture of the impact of armed conflict on children that's conveyed in the Secretary-General's report for 2018. And I won't repeat many of the very pertinent points that have been made round the table. It's very clear that this issue of children in armed conflict is something that unites the Council and I suspect it unites the whole membership. So we ought to hold on to that as we try and find a way to enhance all the measures we've taken.

If I may, I'll use this session to focus on six ideas for further action to reverse some of the incredibly worrying trends of 2018.

First, and at the heart of all the violations against children set out in the report, is the widespread disregard we're seeing for international law; not just by non-state armed groups, but by governments. We all know the situation in Syria, in Idlib. We need to have an urgent conversation about the international legal framework, how to strengthen adherence to International Humanitarian Law, but also about accountability for those who disregard it. And in that connection, Madam President, it's very welcome that the Polish presidency will also be doing a debate on IHL and another very important

anniversary.

Secondly, levels of rape and other forms of sexual violence against children in conflict remain prevalent and too high. In Somalia, for example, sexual violence was committed against hundreds of girls and boys by both state and non-state actors. In South Sudan, sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war in concert with abductions, although we welcome the willingness of the government in engaging with the UN to develop a comprehensive action plan on all six violations there. In November this year, the UK will have the pleasure of hosting the Global Conference on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. The conference will focus on addressing the root causes of sexual violence, tackling stigma and strengthening justice for survivors and holding perpetrators to account. We also hope that it will be able to launch a code ensuring that signatories uphold international standards and best practice when dealing with sexual violence. And I hope many of the countries represented in this room and our colleagues from the UN will be able to join us for that event.

Thirdly, and as was very clear from the testimony of Ms Kamara and Mr Awan, we need to improve approaches to reintegrating children who've been recruited and used by the parties to conflict. In situations like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where over 2000 children were separated from the parties to conflict in 2018, this means we need to increase funding for reintegration programs. But it also means we need to improve the availability of psychosocial and mental health support, education, vocational training, jobs and support to the community. And I think that came over really clearly from both by civil society briefers today. For our part, we are looking forward to the outcomes of the studies commissioned by the Global Coalition for Reintegration, of which we are a member and a financial supporter.

Fourthly, we should strengthen our response to denial of humanitarian access. The report states that incidents of denial of access decreased in 2018. It tells us little, however, about the extent of the impact on children. In Yemen, for example, the impact was clearly devastating. And in Myanmar, the UK remains deeply concerned about the lack of humanitarian access – and I take this opportunity to call on the authorities in Myanmar to honour fully the MOU signed with the UN in June 2019. As a first stage, we would hope that children and armed conflict reporting might be able to provide more information on impact here. And looking forward, we should look further at how we make denial of humanitarian access a trigger for listing in the annual report.

Fifthly, Madam President, member states should do more to embed child protection mechanisms into their domestic systems. I was very interested in what Mr Awan had to say about this in particular and the Executive Director. We urge member states to join us in signing and ratifying the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and in endorsing initiatives such as the Safe Schools Declaration, the Paris Principles and Commitments, and Vancouver Principles.

We ourselves, Madam President, have provided an extra 2.3 billion pounds, so over \$3 billion dollars, for mental health care support, and this includes

extra funding for children. In June of this year, we were able to launch Child Mental Health Prevention Plan. And I know our royal family Princes Harry and William have launched a mental health line called Shout. So we take very seriously this aspect of the problem.

Sixthly, we should remain vigilant in our monitoring of ongoing conflict situations where there have been unlawful attacks on education, including in the Anglophone region of Cameroon and in eastern Ukraine.

And finally, I want to express our admiration and respect for the UN's own work to the SRSG, for the monitoring and reporting personnel, the child protection staff, and their partners on the ground for the tireless work they do at great personal risk to themselves, and as we've heard today, in very harrowing circumstances. You deserve our full support. And I'd like to end by recording what the Executive Director said about looking after the children being an investment in our global future; I don't think there can be a truer word for that.

Thank you, Madam President.

FCO statement on North Korea missile test launches

We are concerned by the launch of ballistic missiles by North Korea on 2 August, following similar tests on 24 and 30 July. Such launches are prohibited by relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and pose a threat to regional and global security.

We urge North Korea to take concrete steps towards its complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the US as agreed between President Trump and Kim Jong Un on 30 June. This is the best way for Kim Jong Un to secure a brighter economic future for the people of North Korea.