

Press release: Environment Secretary Theresa Villiers visits Whaley Bridge

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New Environment Secretary Theresa Villiers today visited Whaley Bridge where she met with emergency response teams working around the clock to fix a breach at Toddbrook Reservoir.

The Environment Secretary was joined by Environment Agency Chair Emma Howard Boyd and spoke to senior officials, including Chief Executive of the [Canal and Riverside Trust](#) Richard Parry, [Derbyshire Police](#) incident commander Inspector Adam Wilkins and RAF Squadron Leader John Plenty – who briefed them on the current measures being undertaken to fix the dam.

Measures include the use of RAF Chinook to drop over 400 sandbags, and the use of pumps to remove excess water from the reservoir – levels continue to fall as the operation to pump away water continues, with a current reduction of 1.3 metres.

The Secretary of State then visited the Rest Centre at Chapel-en-le-Frith school, which is being used as a community hub, where she met with residents who have been evacuated from their homes. About 1500 people were evacuated, but were allowed to return home today for a short period of time in order to collect essential belongings and pets.

Environment Secretary Theresa Villiers said:

My thoughts are with the people who have had to leave their homes. Having spoken today to some of those evacuated I know how difficult this situation is for them and I pay tribute to their patience and fortitude. It's been wonderful to see the community support and spirit in Whaley Bridge.

I want to thank all emergency services, military personnel, Environment Agency and volunteers for their continued hard work. I am confident that everything that can be done is being done and I've seen a reassuring amount of progress today.

Chair of the Environment Agency, Emma Howard Boyd said:

Visiting Whaley Bridge today it was amazing to see the pure dedication of the teams at work here. Not just those in the Environment Agency – of whom I am immensely proud – but the numerous other organisations that are working tirelessly to keep the community safe.

Real progress has been made, and after seeing our pumps and the RAF Chinooks at work today I am confident we are doing all we can to lower the water levels and secure the dam.

All teams on site continue to work to ensure the structural integrity of the dam and a progress update will be made in due course. The Environment Agency continue to monitor the flood risk closely.

[Equality takes centre stage at this year's Mey Highland Games](#)

The NDA, the organisation responsible for decommissioning and cleaning up the nearby Dounreay site in Caithness, was main sponsor for the games – heralded as an exemplar for fairness and inclusion in sport and competition.

Celebrating sport and culture in the far north Highlands, the 2019 games championed equality in gender and ability.

Winners were given the same level of prize regardless of whether they were female, male or adaptive athletes.

David Peattie, Chief Executive of the NDA, attended the Mey Games, and said:

Embracing equality, diversity and inclusion across sport will serve to further inspire athletes to perform at their best – just as it inspires others in society. It is these principles that the NDA group holds at its heart.

We are committed to investing in the communities around our sites and the Mey Games is an event of real significance to the Caithness community.

David presented three new trophies to the top female, male and adaptive athletes. These will be presented in future games.

STEM ambassadors from Dounreay were on hand during the day to promote the work being done to inspire young people into science, technology, engineering and maths.

The NDA also donated a 'build-your-own-robot' which was raffled and the proceeds of which will go to the Lifeboats Association.

Martin Moore, Managing Director of Dounreay, said:

I am delighted that some of our apprentices were part of the event, making STEM subjects interesting and fun, with the activities they regularly deliver in Caithness and North Sutherland schools.

We are incredibly proud to have a strong network of more than 80 STEM ambassadors who make a real difference, promoting science and engineering subjects in the community. This is just one of the positive things that we can do to ensure the area continues to have the right skills to attract and maintain high quality, sustainable employment in the future.

In 2018, Mey Highland Games became the first in Scotland to introduce an adaptive element, inviting para athletes to take part.

The event, held at the Show Ground fields in John O'Groats, includes all the favourites of a traditional Highland Games.

[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

[Letter to The Times from Emma Howard](#)

Boyd, Chair of Environment Agency

Response from the Chair to The Times' article "Filthy Business", 3 August 2019.