

4th February 2026

Dear Minister Hardy,

Action on Chalk Streams

I write as the new Chair of the CaBA Chalk Stream Restoration Group (CSRG – previously chaired by Charles Rangeley-Wilson, now CaBA chalk stream ambassador) and on behalf of the environmental NGOs that have contributed to the development, and the ongoing delivery, of the CaBA Chalk Stream strategy and implementation plan.

The eNGO sector welcome the inclusion in the Environmental Improvement Plan 2025 (EIP), published in December, of Commitment 28 to “Restore chalk streams to better ecological health, ensuring protections and investment towards these habitats”.

Despite positive progress with restoration projects on the ground, it remains the long-held view of the eNGO community that chalk streams must be recognised in a way that secures their protection, and prompts additional investment in their restoration. These globally-rare ecosystems are especially vulnerable by virtue of their physical characteristics (gentle nature) and their geographic location in the heavily-urbanised and intensively-farmed south and east of England. Without focussed support, they will increasingly become unable to provide essential services such as water supply and wastewater removal, without suffering catastrophic harm.

During the passage of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill there was consistent and strong cross-party support for measures which would provide chalk streams with bespoke protection in the planning system, ensuring that these treasured and biodiverse ecosystems would be subject only to sustainable use, rather than exploitation. This strong parliamentary support led to Government concessions and Ministerial assurances from the despatch box that effective chalk stream measures would be included in upcoming policies. We looked to the National Planning Policy Framework consultation and Water White Paper to provide such protections.

Yet neither move us on significantly in policy terms. Planning policy proposals maintain a focus on development-level mitigation rather than strategic action to protect chalk streams from abstraction and discharges, whilst the Water White Paper recognises the importance of chalk streams but does not set out the detail of how reforms “will further embed action to improve chalk streams” and strengthen the collaborative partnerships between organisations to tackle the pressures that they face.

It is the hope of eNGOs and the chalk stream communities with which they work that forthcoming reforms reflect a recognition from Government that chalk streams cannot simply be ‘lumped in’ with other rivers. These stakeholders expect to see bespoke action

for chalk streams via commitments that up the ambition of both of these documents - for example, by providing:

- A commitment to develop long-term targets for chalk streams that are more ambitious than those in existing River Basin Management Plans and are supported by explicit interim goals.
- A steer that in planning to meet the 'Full' scenario in the Water Resources National Framework 2025, abstraction reduction to benefit chalk streams should be prioritised and underpinned by time-bound commitments.
- Ring-fenced funding for habitat enhancement, including through Environment Agency grant schemes and any future mechanisms for investing water industry fines.

These are amongst a number of priority actions for chalk streams building from the recommendations and commitments contained within the CaBA Strategy. Government's ongoing commitment to the strategy is welcome and we were pleased to see recent correspondence with the water sector recognising the value of their chalk stream Flagship projects as long-term, funded, catchment-scale schemes. I understand that you hope to visit the River Chess with Charles to see this work in action. We agree that such schemes offer an excellent opportunity to tackle the range of pressures facing chalk streams in a holistic way, and hope that changes to support catchment planning and delivery through a forthcoming Water Reform Bill will similarly deliver such opportunities.

With these significant changes on the horizon, the Chalk Stream Restoration Group, the expert panels that support it, and the eNGO sub-group collectively house a wealth of experience to support the development of any policy proposals relating to chalk streams.

Actions set out in the EIP are welcome but will alone be insufficient to secure the outcomes that commitment 28 seeks to deliver, or the concessions promised by the Government during the Planning and Infrastructure Bill debates - as such I offer the support of eNGOs, the CSRG and its constituent components, in identifying and taking forward the 'protections and investment' referred to that will help to secure the future of these rare and precious ecosystems.

Very best,



Ali Morse, Chair of the CaBA Chalk Stream Restoration Group
Cc CaBA Chalk Stream Restoration Group members.

The Catchment-Based Approach Chalk Stream Restoration Group brings together Defra, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the water sector, eNGOs, farmers and other stakeholders to drive forward the actions set out in the CaBA [Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy](#) and [Implementation Plan](#).