

Protecting our environment and improving standards of animal welfare are issues that, along with so many local residents, I have a long-term interest in and care passionately about. This is why I welcome the raft of recent announcements made by the Government to improve standards across the board, and I thought this week's column would be a good opportunity for me to outline just some of them!

Over the past several months the Government has announced plans to ban harmful pesticides to protect our bees, introduce mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses, ban micro-beads to protect our marine life, expand Marine Conservations Zones (including in the River Medway) while consulting on plans to ban the ivory trade in the UK. This comes on top of the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs publishing the draft Animal Welfare Bill which recognises that animals are sentient and also proposes increasing the maximum penalty for the most serious offences relating to animal cruelty from six months to five years. These are issues I have campaigned on previously and its really good news that they are now being brought forward.

The Government is also determined to use Brexit as an opportunity to go further in raising environmental standards and improving animal welfare. Many of you will have seen in the news the Prime Minister's welcome comments about long-term plans to reduce avoidable plastic waste and the Government plans to establish an independent body to monitor environmental legislation in the future, making sure standards are maintained and improved.

I know that these issues matter hugely to local residents from my postbag and I am keen to start a conversation about the environment locally. This is why I am in the process of setting up an Environmental Network which will include the occasional Saturday coffee morning, newsletters and other opportunities to get involved. So if you care about your environment and would like to get involved, get in touch!