



Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to urgently bring to your attention the [critical environmental crisis unfolding in Hoad's Wood, Ashford, Kent](#). This cherished site of natural beauty, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), is facing a dire situation due to rampant illegal waste-dumping on an industrial scale. What was once a vibrant habitat for diverse species is now a desolate wasteland, with processed landfill waste strewn across a four-acre area, in some places reaching depths of more than 25 feet.

[Despite previous warnings from the community](#) dating back as far as 2020, the situation began escalating in July 2023 when community members reported observing 20-30 trucks a day, many unregistered, illegally disposing of waste in Hoad's Wood. Despite these early alerts, a lack of prompt and effective intervention allowed the situation to deteriorate drastically into an [environmental disaster](#).

The consequences of this inaction are profound. The accumulation of waste not only poses a significant threat to the area's biodiversity, undermining the habitat of scarce flora and fauna, but it also adversely affects the mental health and well-being of the nearby community.

The environmental degradation and potential health hazards this situation presents are intolerable. The site is already giving off hydrogen sulphide gas and toxic leachate is seeping into the River Beult, a tributary of the River Medway. This is harmful to the wildlife in the woods, the nearby community and wider public health. Indeed, the damage has been likened to a deliberate oil spill on land that, instead of being contained and cleared as it would be at sea, is being left to pollute the air, soil and watercourses. All the while the Environment Authority (EA) is now spending more taxpayers' money on running tests and analysis that should be diverted to an immediate clean-up.

Rescue Hoad's Wood, a campaign set up by the local community and endorsed by the undersigned NGOs, demanded a meeting with the EA, Natural England, Kent Police, Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council to push for an immediate clean-up. This was held on 15 March 2024 at Bethersden Village Hall and chaired by Damian Green MP.

Attached is a statement by Rescue Hoad's Wood that was given at the meeting and the associated questions to the authorities. Responses to these questions made it clear that all the public bodies concerned did not understand their duties under Section 28G of the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 in relation to the preservation and enhancement of SSSIs.

Moreover, it was painfully clear that the EA prioritised "gathering evidence" over and above the protection of a designated SSSI, using Hoads Wood, the wildlife therein and the local community as acceptable collateral damage. The illegal felling of the trees in preparation for

the site in 2020 and the presence of a single digger preparing the site in July 2023, all of which were reported, should have been ample evidence a criminal act had been perpetrated against an SSSI. This should have resulted in an enforcement order that came almost four years too late.

It was agreed that the EA should immediately reach out to you for the funding to clear the site immediately and that all authorities, going forward, should be more responsive, coordinated and accountable in their reaction to proactive community reporting. To that end, to rectify this crisis, we urge you to take immediate and decisive action:

- Allowing the EA to follow due process in prosecuting those responsible and, failing that, holding landlords accountable for clean-up is not a solution that addresses the urgent environmental and local communities' needs. We must prioritise immediate clean-up efforts to restore Hoad's Wood to its natural state immediately. This operation should also include measures to secure the area against future illegal dumping. Furthermore, it is imperative to provide the necessary funding for these immediate actions while allowing the EA to concurrently run its process to try to recover monies from those responsible.
- Moreover, it is crucial to investigate the delayed response from local and national authorities and to implement stronger preventive measures to avert similar environmental disasters in the future. Our call-to-action stems from a collective responsibility to protect and preserve our natural habitats. SSSIs, like Hoad's Wood, are vital to our national heritage and biodiversity. Allowing such sites to deteriorate not only contravenes our environmental commitments but also deprives future generations of the opportunity to enjoy and learn from these invaluable natural resources.

Your intervention in this matter can serve as a benchmark for managing environmental crises in the UK, showcasing a commitment to safeguarding our natural landscapes and holding accountable those who threaten them. We implore you to take swift action to address the situation in Hoad's Wood, ensuring the protection of our precious environmental assets for present and future generations.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Sally Smith, *Kent Wildlife Trust*

David Mairs, *CPRE Kent*

Joseph Beale, *RSPB*

Jack Taylor, *Woodland Trust*

Mike Sims, *CLA*

Jonathan Stevens, *South East River Trust*

Campaigners, *Rescue Hoads Wood*