I congratulate my hon. Friend Mr Sanders on securing the debate and on raising this really important issue.

I shall start by reading from an e-mail that I have received from a hard-working 52-year-old constituent of mine, Mr Bamber. This is the first time that he has written to his MP:

"I'm having a pay rise of 0.0% this year, but being a good bloke it's for the good of the country. Then my water bill arrives—it's risen by 9.75635%. I'm mad, and I'd like something done about it."

He is not alone; I have received several e-mails. Another disturbing fact was raised in an e-mail from a constituent who pointed out that his elderly mother, who is 80, has a water bill of £1,040, despite existing on a post office pension and being in substantial difficulties.

Although we all appreciate schemes such as WaterSure, many constituents have great difficulty in accessing them. I was particularly disturbed by a visit to my surgery this week by the husband of a constituent who suffers from severe multiple sclerosis. He brought with him evidence that he had sent to South West Water of her very much increased water usage as a result of her condition, and of the fact that she is on the higher rate of disability living allowance. They have, however, been declined access to WaterSure, which I am sure hon. Members agree is a complete disgrace. I hope that South West Water address that matter immediately.

The issue is one of unfairness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay has pointed out, our constituents do not have any choice in the matter, other than to live somewhere else in the country, which is clearly ludicrous. The rises have been described as 8.1%, but for many constituents, they are nearer 10%.

I agree completely. If Ofwat were doing its job properly, it would see that that is inherently fair. It is completely unreasonable to expect anyone to deal with a rise of more than 5%. Near 10% is totally outrageous, particularly given that our constituents have no choice whatever in the matter.

As other hon. Members have said, we are not, as is often assumed, a wealthy area. Some 22% of people in the south-west are pensioners, which is well above the national average. No one would suggest that pensioners are a wealthy group, but they are none the less being subjected to outrageous rises in their water bills. Will my hon. Friend the Minister take
all those points into consideration? It cannot be fair for 3% of the population to shoulder the burden of cleaning up 30% of the coast. Of course, none of us feels that we could have continued using 200 sea outfalls to dispose of sewage, and we all welcome the economic boost from the infrastructure programme instituted by South West Water, but it is clearly unfair that the burden of that necessary programme should fall on our constituents. 

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Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) May I raise the point that the accepted figure is 8.1% because the figure that the Minister quotes assumes that people will be switching to water meters?

Richard Benyon (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Natural Environment and Fisheries), Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

My understanding is that that is the figure over the piece. However, I am happy to look into that and give my hon. Friend an absolutely clear and unequivocal answer, because it is important that we know that figure. In my hon. Friend's earlier remarks, I think she raised the point about why we use the retail prices index rather than the consumer prices index. [Interruption.] Sorry it was not her; it was my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay. Bills have been tied to inflation since privatisation because, when inflation is higher, water companies' costs increase. As is the case with other regulators, Ofwat uses RPI. Although RPI was higher than CPI this year, it was actually lower than CPI when last year's bills were calculated, so average bills that year were lower. We can argue about percentage points, but that is an important factor. Let us take that matter forward in our consultation, which I will come to in a moment.

I am acutely aware that nobody wants to see higher bills, particularly in these tough economic times. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that the money raised will pay for Â£159 million of investment in the region during the next financial year, which will benefit customers. I know that that sounds trite, and I am not diminishing the effect of the increase, but we must recognise that there are also benefits, including Â£14 million to improve tap water quality, Â£10 million to repair crumbling sewers and Â£28 million to further reduce pollution incidents. 

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