

Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill

Overview

Our water systems are the backbone of our environment, vital to the health and well-being of people and nature, providing key ecosystem services and supporting priority wildlife species. This government has pledged to provide 'clean and plentiful water' through its 25 Year Environment Plan, and for at least 75% of waters to be as close to their natural state as soon as is practicable.¹

Yet our freshwater environment is suffering. Latest Environment Agency figures show that 0% of rivers, lakes and streams in England are in good health, with just 16% meeting good ecological standards. 13% of our freshwater and wetland species are threatened with extinction. In 2019 alone, raw sewage was discharged into rivers across England and Wales 200,000 times, for over 1.5 million hours. These discharges also contribute to poor water quality at our coasts, with the UK [ranked 25th](#) out of 30 European countries for coastal water quality.

Ambitious action is needed to protect and enhance our water environment. The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill is designed to tackle river pollution from untreated sewage and to improve water quality. To do so, it seeks to place a duty on water companies to ensure untreated sewage is no longer discharged into England's inland waters. The Bill will progress to its Second Reading in the spring (date to be confirmed).

We recommend MPs support the Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill and attend the Second Reading debate.

Why we need action

Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) are emergency infrastructure assets within our sewage system. They are permitted to discharge untreated wastewater during periods of 'unusually heavy rainfall', as defined in the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, in order to stop sewage from backing up into homes during extreme rainfall events. There are 17,684 CSOs in the UK.

However, CSOs are used far too often. Raw sewage pollution is discharged from 8-14% of overflows at least once a week, and between a third and a half at least once a month. This is a significant threat to the health of people, putting water users (inland and at sea) at risk of contracting illnesses such as E. coli and gastroenteritis, and to the freshwater environment itself, with poor water quality threatening habitats and wildlife. Already 13% of our freshwater and wetland species are threatened with extinction.

The health of our water environment is vitally important for both people and nature. Our freshwater systems are home to thousands of species, and act as vital blue corridors in connecting habitats and wildlife across our landscapes. They also deliver key ecosystem services, beneficial to human health

¹ *Wildlife and Countryside Link is a coalition of 57 organisations working for the protection of nature. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.*

and well-being, and our economy. Restoring just 3/4s of rivers, lakes and wetlands in England to good ecological status by 2027 would [boost the economy by a total of £8.4 billion](#) through increased tourism, improved flood resilience, and enhanced quality of life.

Current measures do not go far enough to protect and enhance our freshwater environment, and to manage the threats posed by CSOs. Monitoring and investment are vital, yet are significantly lacking. The Environment Agency rely on water companies to self-monitor CSOs, yet current requirements mean that around a fifth of CSOs remain unmonitored, and that whilst the frequency and duration of overflow events is recorded, the environmental impact of this is not. From 2013-2019, the number of water quality samples taken by the Environment Agency fell by 45%, with the number of sampling points falling nearly 40%. Between 2009-2019, Environment Agency funding fell 63%. This lack of resource and high-quality environmental data significantly reduces our ability not only to understand the state of our freshwater systems, but also to effectively manage them and to enforce regulation, further exacerbating the threats posed by CSOs to our blue spaces.

About the Bill

The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill is a Private Members' Bill sponsored by the senior conservative MP for Ludlow and Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Philip Dunne. The Bill already has support from a [cross party group of MPs](#) keen to **#EndSewagePollution**.

What the Bill calls for

The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill would place a duty on water companies to ensure untreated sewage is no longer discharged into England's inland waters.

- The Bill would require water companies to set out plans to **reduce their reliance on combined sewer overflows (CSOs)**. The Bill would also ensure increased transparency, as firms will be mandated to report publicly not just on the frequency and extent of sewage discharges from CSOs and any other sewer catchment assets, but also on the impact on water quality.
- The draft law also proposes measures to **upgrade drainage infrastructure** to separate household sewage from surface water drainage, helping reduce the risk of overflows. It includes measures to reduce harmful products such as non-biodegradable wet wipes, and commercial fats and oils from being disposed of down the drains.
- It also calls for progressive **nature-based solutions to manage water flow**, which help mitigate flood risk, climate change, and biodiversity loss.
- The Bill would require the Government to **investigate further steps** that stakeholders, such as the Environment Agency, could take to improve water quality. This could include designating a minimum of two inland bathing waters every year, and setting legal targets to increase the number of bathing waters classified as 'good' or 'excellent'.

Why MPs should support it

This Private Members' Bill provides the opportunity for the government to take ambitious action to protect and enhance our water environment. The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill represents the

ambition, legal commitment, and high standards needed to prevent pollution and restore our blue spaces for people and nature.

Strong, ambitious, and legally binding targets can drive transformative change and offer the protection our water environment urgently needs. The Bill would require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the contribution a number of policy measures could make to improving water quality and what steps he intends to take. This includes, for example, measures to set statutory targets to increase the number of inland waters designated as bathing waters, and therefore subject to enhanced statutory water quality standards. Other measures include setting statutory targets to increase the number of bathing waters rated as 'good' or 'excellent'. These high standards, supported by strong legislation, are crucial.

High quality environmental data is essential to protect and enhance our water environment, required to understand the current state of these systems and therefore to inform effective management. In May 2017, [we asked for water companies to aim for 100% monitoring of CSOs and 100% self-reporting of pollution incidents](#). Progress has been made, but this has not gone far enough. Around a fifth of CSOs are currently unmonitored. Though there are plans to bring a further 10% into monitoring by 2025, the majority have 'Event Duration Monitoring', recording *when* CSOs spill and for *how long*, but with little monitoring of actual environmental impacts. The Bill would require water companies to progressively install continuous monitoring of all discharges of treated or untreated sewage into inland waters from those assets, and crucially, to publish that data. Companies will also be required to monitor and publish reports on the quality and duration of discharges made from CSOs.

Nature-based solutions are actions to enhance ecosystems that also bring economic or social benefits. This government has acknowledged that nature-based solutions are a win-win for people and nature, making good economic and environmental sense. [The water environment provides the ideal opportunity for their delivery](#), reducing flood risk and pollution whilst also safeguarding water supplies from drought, securing valuable habitats for wildlife, and providing for community health and well-being. The Bill calls for progressive nature-based solutions for wastewater works, final tertiary sewage treatment, and drainage systems. These include ecosystem enhancements such as integrated constructed wetlands and Sustainable Drainage Solutions (SuDS), which help to slow the flow of water or filter out pollutants. These innovative green solutions will not only benefit our water systems, but will bring additional benefits for the wider environment, communities, and the economy.

Our rivers, lakes and waterways are vital blue corridors, yet they are under threat. Protecting, restoring, and enhancing the water environment is beneficial for all. The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill would help deliver commitments to the water environment made by this government, driving transformative change and becoming world leading water quality legislation with greater ambition to protect and enhance our environment.

There is significant public interest in the water environment, and support for action taken to protect it. Over 40,000 people have signed the #EndSewagePollution petition to demand water quality legislation. Wildlife and Countryside Link fully supports the Bill.

We urge MPs to take action for our water environment and support the Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill.

For further information, please contact Wildlife and Countryside Link:

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This briefing is supported by the following Link members:

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