

# Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing: Westminster Hall debate on the Independent Water Commission Final Report

February 2026

## Introduction

In July 2025, the Independent Water Commission published its final report to the Government, setting out steps for reforming the water system in England and Wales. This clearly identified that the water system is broken, and that radical reform is required.

The report made 88 recommendations, including on national cross-sector plans and strategies, on the legislative framework, and on regulation. Together, these recommendations set out some important elements of what an improved future water system could look like, including the introduction of new regional system planners, a new water regulator, and reform of legislation including the Water Framework Directive Regulations and the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive Regulations.

Responsibility now rests with Government to respond to these recommendations, and to deliver transformative change for our waters, and the people and wildlife who rely on them. The Water White Paper, published in January 2026, sets out some positive first steps but does not yet commit to the scale of change and ambition needed.

To meaningfully address the findings of the Independent Water Commission, Government must:

1. Fix the system – with a public environmental interest duty on water companies, and enforceable clean water targets.
2. Stop the pollution – by setting strict limits for catchments across all pollution sectors, banning harmful chemicals like PFAS, and tightening agricultural permitting and pollution rules.
3. Restore nature – through creating accessible wildlife corridors alongside restored water environments from source to sea, including effective nature-based solutions.

This briefing paper summarises some of the key actions for how this can be delivered through the forthcoming Water Transition Plan, and the Water Reform Bill.

## Why change is needed

A healthy, thriving water environment is essential for the health and wellbeing of society, the economy, and wildlife.

Securing this will bring multiple wider benefits; for example, a healthy water environment will bring recreational and public health benefits due to improved water quality, and increased resilience to climate change and flooding. A healthy water environment is also a prerequisite for industry resilience, and therefore the provision of affordable and reliable services for customers, and for economic growth.

Yet just 14% of English Rivers are in Good Ecological Condition, and most of England's water-dependent protected sites are in unfavourable condition. The Office for Environmental Protection estimates that by 2027, just 21% of our surface waters will achieve Good Status, falling far short of legal targets. We face a 5 billion litre shortfall in public water supply per day by 2055, with water scarcity already proving a challenge for new development. Public trust and satisfaction in water industry performance have reached a record low, and compliance with environmental regulations across polluting industries is not currently sufficient to meet legal targets.

As the Independent Water Commission concluded, there is no single, simple change that will fix this broken system; instead, we need 'fundamental reform on all sides'. The Water White Paper, published in January 2026, includes some positive elements, including the intention to move towards a longer-term, more coherent approach to water system planning, to take a more proactive 'pre-pipe' focus to tackling pollution, and to further develop stronger regional planning functions. But both the ambition and detail are not yet sufficient to deliver on this 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity for reform.

Furthermore, crucial components such as action on chemical pollution and nature recovery are entirely lacking from the paper, whilst the proposed action on agriculture is piecemeal and does not go far enough to drive whole-system change.

## Action needed: Water Transition Plan

In its White Paper, Government committed to publishing a 'Water Transition Plan' in 2026 that will provide a 'roadmap for transformation of the water industry regulatory framework'. This will set out further detail in a number of areas, including the new strategic direction framework, the new regulator, regional and national planning, and plans for legislative reform.

Crucially, the Transition Plan presents an opportunity for Government to start taking action now, to give the forthcoming Bill its strongest possible foundation, and to ensure that much-needed reforms do not have to wait for a potentially lengthy legislative process.

## **Setting the strategic direction framework**

The Transition Plan must set out a new, clear strategic direction for the whole water system. This must not simply focus on water industry and the new regulator, but should cover all sectors impacting both water quality and water quantity.

This strategic direction should be aligned with the Environment Act 2021 targets, setting out delivery pathways with clear, time-bound measures for how these targets will be achieved, including how necessary funding and resource will be provided. This should better clarify Government's expectations of sectors including the water industry, agriculture, and the chemicals industry, and how targets will therefore be achieved across the whole water system through making use of the most efficient and effective solutions.

To support this, a strong nature and climate duty should be introduced for water regulators, and a public environmental interest duty for water companies, via the Water Reform Bill. This should be signalled in the Transition Plan, and issued as new direction to the regulators and regulated sectors in the interim before the Bill via an updated Strategic Policy Statement (SPS). The timings for the development and publication of the new SPS should be set out within the Transition Plan.

Wider reforms and the legislative process will take time, meaning that there is a risk that water industry planning and investment processes become locked within the current ineffective system. AMP8 delivery and PR29 planning are already in motion; these processes should be aligned with outcomes-based catchment planning as much as possible, including steer to maximise the use of 'nature-first' approaches wherever appropriate. The new SPS should provide this steer.

## **Piloting the regional systems planner**

An Integrated Water Management approach will be essential to deliver this holistic whole-system approach. The Transition Plan must therefore set out a clear plan for piloting a new regional systems planning function as soon as possible. These pilots must include developing regional level targets and associated delivery plans with the power to direct funding and action across sectors. For example, regional and catchment targets for reducing nutrient pollution, and for planning and securing a network of nature-rich, connected aquatic and riparian habitats to achieve biodiversity targets.

Pilots must involve democratic representation from key stakeholders across the water environment and system, including water companies, agriculture, local government, protected landscape bodies, the third sector, and water users and customers.

This must then be used to inform the development of a nation-wide system of Regional Water Authorities via the Bill, with the power to develop statutory regional plans. These bodies must be independent of the regulator, but empowered to access and make use of the information the regulator holds, and must be properly staffed and funded to work

effectively. To complement this work, funding for existing Catchment Partnerships should be significantly increased; though welcome, the increase in funding for Catchment Partnerships set out in the White Paper will not be sufficient to realise their full delivery potential.

### **Start implementing non-legislative reform now**

The final report of the Independent Water Commission was clear that not all reforms to our water system require primary legislation to proceed. Government should use the Transition Plan to kick-start implementation of these actions, particularly where implementation will unlock further reform, or will help provide a solid foundation for the forthcoming Bill.

For example, it has been positive to see Government already proceeding with consultations on several of the report's recommendations which do not require primary legislation, most recently concerning the regulation of sludge application to agricultural land.

Further areas the Government should prioritise and set out next steps for via the Transition Plan include reviewing monitoring programmes to ensure that these are adequately resourced and accurately reflect the state of the water environment, bringing industry abstraction activity under the Environmental Permitting Regime, and further developing the process and framework around Special Administration Regime for water companies.

### **Action needed: the Water Reform Bill**

The Water White Paper sets out a number of actions that Government intends to progress via a Water Reform Bill 'within this Parliament'. The Bill presents a critical opportunity to radically reset the water system, including through reshaping the regulatory framework, and setting new targets for water health. While many of the Independent Water Commission's 88 recommendations will require primary legislation to proceed, the opportunity for radical reform will be missed if the Bill remains narrowly focused on the water industry alone, neglecting other polluting sectors and the recovery and resilience of the water environment more broadly.

#### **Legislative reform**

The White Paper signals that the Government intends to pursue an 'ambitious and coherent reset of the legislative framework' through the Bill, including elements of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations, and the Water Framework Directive Regulations (WFD).

Any reform of these regulations must be to strengthen ambition and to address implementation challenges that have undermined their impact, not to dismantle or downgrade the vital protections they offer. The crucial principles of no deterioration and 'one out, all out' must be maintained; tools such as River Health Report Cards or 'elements improved' indicators can be used to improve the nuance of reporting without removing these critical safeguards.

The White Paper also signals that Government is exploring opportunities to set ‘new ambitious targets’ for the water environment. This is a critical opportunity to increase ambition in line with public demand and environmental need, through setting a new apex target for national water health through the Bill, and broadening the scope of the regulations such that the whole water environment – including small water bodies - and the full range of pollutants and pressures acting upon it are monitored, aligning with EU updates on chemical monitoring and regulation. Furthermore, a new target for 50 additional waterbodies to reach ‘high status’ by 2050 would help boost nature’s recovery through celebrating and safeguarding our most valuable sites.

### **Regulatory reform**

Government has stated that it plans to deliver a new water regulator in response to the Independent Water Commission’s report. This has potential to fix deep-rooted issues and reset culture, but also brings significant risk, particularly if the new regulator adopts a narrow focus on water industry finance alone.

The Bill must be used to establish a strong, independent water regulator, with environmental protection as a clear priority. To achieve this, the new regulator must have a strong nature and climate duty to deliver targets under the Environment Act 2021 and the Climate Change Act 2008. This duty should function as a guiding principle for water planning – for example, determining priorities for industry business plans – and should empower stronger enforcement action when companies do not deliver their environmental regulations.

Furthermore, Government should impose a public environmental interest duty on water companies, to drive a new approach to water company governance. This should include ensuring that company profits are conditional on delivery of obligations and legal compliance, and that debt and borrowing is used sustainably for long-term infrastructure investment and does not compromise operational performance. To empower the regulator to hold industry to account, the triggers and conditions for Special Administration should urgently be clarified; this should include (lack of) compliance with environmental duties.

### **Take action on pollution at source**

The Water White Paper includes a positive commitment to increase focus on ‘pre-pipe’ solutions, such as tackling sewer misuse and making greater use of sustainable drainage systems. However, this pre-pipe focus is required beyond the water sector alone.

Government should ban the use and manufacture of harmful chemicals including PFAS, and should align with the EU to expand monitoring of emerging threats. The Bill should also deliver on the Independent Water Commission’s recommendation to introduce Extender Producer Responsibility to recover costs from producers and sectors responsible for pollutants, including producers of pharmaceutical and cosmetic products.

Government should also tighten permitting thresholds for pigs and poultry, and introduce new permitting requires for intensive dairy and beef operations. No new permits should be granted in catchments with excessive nutrient pollution, or where nutrient pollution is already impacting sensitive wildlife sites. This should be supported through regulations to require every farm to have a sustainable nutrient management plan, accounting for all nutrients coming on and off the farm, and a new Water-Friendly Farming Programme under ELM to support farmers to commit to low-input models.

## We need Clean Water Now

Wildlife and Countryside Link will be launching our Clean Water Now campaign and policy report on 2<sup>nd</sup> March at The Churchill Room, Parliament, where we will be calling on Government to make sure that the forthcoming Water Reform Bill delivers the transformative change that our waters so desperately need. If you would like to attend the launch, please RSVP to [eleanor@wcl.org.uk](mailto:eleanor@wcl.org.uk)

## Further materials

Further detail can be found in the following documents from Wildlife and Countryside Link:

- Summary of evidence submission to the Independent Water Commission:  
[WCL Blueprint Cunliffe Summary April 2025.pdf](#)
- Full evidence submission to the Independent Water Commission:  
[WCL Blueprint Cunliffe Call for Evidence April 2025.pdf](#)
- Briefing on priorities for the Water Reform Bill:  
[WCL Briefing Priorities Water Reform Bill Nov 2025.pdf](#)

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 90 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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