

Background paper to Policy Statement on River Quality

Paragraph 1

- Over the last six years, in the UK there have been over 1 million sewage discharge spill events, which on average means a spill taking place every 2.5 minutes.
- the amount of raw sewage dumped into UK seas and rivers has increased by over 2,500 per cent in the last five years
- 2021 in England alone, sewage was discharged for over 2.7 million hours
- 24% of sewage overflow pipes at popular resorts have monitors that are faulty, or do not have monitors at all

[Commons questions on sewage discharge by Caroline Lucas:

[:https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-09-06/debates/064CCB9A-D89D-4A8E-B301-404150CC0C18/SewagePollution#contribution-87D4CE7B-29FF-4BC1-8027-1BC09540D26C](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-09-06/debates/064CCB9A-D89D-4A8E-B301-404150CC0C18/SewagePollution#contribution-87D4CE7B-29FF-4BC1-8027-1BC09540D26C)]

Paragraph 2 Privatisation was supposed to mean lower bills and a better service but the opposite has happened.

<https://weownit.org.uk/public-ownership/water>

Paragraph 3 The Government claims that water quality is ‘better now than at any time since the Industrial Revolution.’ A team of scientists led by Professor Mick Whelan of Leicester University described the state of the UK’s rivers as “unacceptably poor” and that ‘there are signs that recent progress to tackle pollution has stalled.’

[\[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722041110\]](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722041110)

Figures from the Environment Agency in 2020 revealed that ‘0% of rivers, lakes and streams are classed as in good health in England’ This is a decline from 2016 when just 16% of rivers were described as in ‘good condition’.

<https://www.wcl.org.uk/not-one-river-in-england-in-good-health.asp>

Paragraph 4 Most of the water companies are owned by private equity operators, with little experience of managing a natural resource and supplying an essential public service, but rather whose priority is the maximisation of dividend payments.

- Since privatisation, £72 billion has been paid out in dividends, [HoC debate]
- In 2021 water companies paid out £1 billion in dividends [HoC debate]
- Bonuses for chief executives rose by 20%, despite most targets being missed
- In total the 22 water bosses paid themselves £24.8m, including £14.7m in bonuses, benefits and incentives, in 2021-2022.

[\[https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/aug/19/bonuses-for-water-bosses-in-england-up-20-last-year-despite-sewage-failures\]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/aug/19/bonuses-for-water-bosses-in-england-up-20-last-year-despite-sewage-failures)

<https://weownit.org.uk/public-ownership/water>

<https://www.bmj.com/content/378/bmj.o2076#:~:text=Having%20initially%20starved%20England%20and,a%20prerequisite%20for%20public%20health.>

Paragraph 5 The Government's response to the declining state of Britain's rivers and coastal waters has been to cut funding to the Environment Agency, the body tasked with monitoring and enforcing standards on the Water Companies. The Agency budget has been cut by two thirds since 2010 and over 1700 staff members have been made redundant.

[\[https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/23/environment-agency-needs-120m-grant-restored-to-protect-rivers-says-ceo \]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jun/23/environment-agency-needs-120m-grant-restored-to-protect-rivers-says-ceo)

Agency members of staff claim that they can no longer do their job to monitor pollution and enforce regulation and targets. The government claims that the Agency is setting strict targets for the Water companies and other polluters and that prosecutions will increase. The staff responsible for enforcement claim that the Agency is no longer a deterrent to polluters.

[\[https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/20/environment-agency-cuts-staff-blow-whistle \]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/20/environment-agency-cuts-staff-blow-whistle)

Paragraph 6.1 renationalisation: High Court judgements relating to the Northern Rock renationalisation set a precedent relating to the payment of compensation to shareholders.

See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/dec/02/water-renationalised-without-compensation-activists-shareholders-england>

More information at:

<https://weownit.org.uk/public-ownership/water>

Costs

The government claims that to separate the sewage and storm water systems would cost up to £660 billion. This figure is widely challenged.

[:https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-09-06/debates/064CCB9A-D89D-4A8E-B301-404150CC0C18/SewagePollution#contribution-87D4CE7B-29FF-4BC1-8027-1BC09540D26C \]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-09-06/debates/064CCB9A-D89D-4A8E-B301-404150CC0C18/SewagePollution#contribution-87D4CE7B-29FF-4BC1-8027-1BC09540D26C)

An independent report commissioned by the government's Stormwater Task Force found that: The complete separation of wastewater and stormwater systems—eliminating storm overflows—would cost between £350bn and £600bn. This could increase household bills between £569 and £999 per year. It would be “highly disruptive and complex” to deliver nationwide.

Targeted improvements to protect most sensitive ecological sites or bathing sites would range from £8 - £26 billion.

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sewage-pollution-in-englands-waters/#:~:text=In%20November%202021%2C%20an%20independent,and%20C2%A3999%20per%20year.>

UK water in a submission to the Environment Audit Committee said that to fully separate stormwater and sewage would cost around £100billion.

<https://utilityweek.co.uk/eliminating-combined-sewage-overflows-could-cost-100bn/>

The Angling Trust says that a programme to progressively prevent the worst spills would be between £3.9 - £62.7 billion.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/27/cutting-sewage-spills-may-be-far-cheaper-than-uk-ministers-predict-say-experts>

The Rivers Trust say that complete separation is not necessary, specific problems need specific solutions which can include nature based systems that are difficult to cost, and temporary storage facilities. Also changes in public behaviour [eg: separation of non-biodegradable material from sewage] and changes to planning regulations to discourage runoff [eg: porous surfaces] will help to spread the cost load.

<https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/news/the-full-cost-of-sewage-free-rivers>