



SEWAGE, WATER AND COUNCILS

This briefing outlines what we know about the state of our water, the causes, the dangers posed, and the role of councils. It then includes a model motion based on work done by Emily O'Brien in Lewes

HOW BAD IS IT?

Rivers in England are in a terrible state. (See Wales section on next page.) Chemical health is classified as bad for all of them, and only 14% have good ecological health. Beyond rivers, only 16% of waterways (rivers, lakes and streams) were classed as in ecological good health in 2020.

Why?

Raw sewage discharged into English rivers 375,000 times by water firms

Data from 2021 released at same time as government plan to stop 40% of untreated sewage releases by 2040

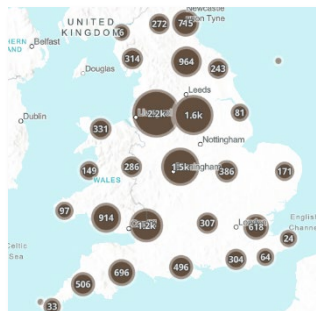
Headline attention has rightly been on raw sewage discharges. "Untreated sewage and rainwater should only be released into rivers and coastal waters via storm overflow pipes in extreme weather to relieve pressure in the sewerage system. However, evidence over the last three years has shown water companies are routinely using the overflows to discharge untreated sewage rather than treating it." Guardian 31/3/22

Farming and wastewater are the biggest offenders.

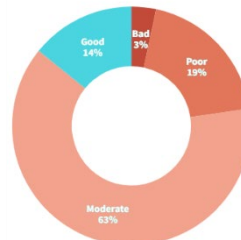
Agriculture practices impacts nearly two thirds of rivers in England. Over half are also impacted by the water sector, mainly by sewage effluent. **The built environment** and roads impact a quarter. You can read more in the [State of Our Rivers report from the Rivers Trust](#).

How bad is it where I am?

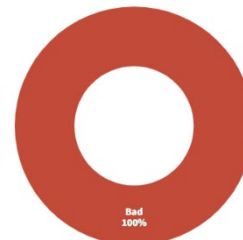
Click on the map to go to a zoomable version on the Rivers Trust site where you can see the detail of 2021 discharges in your area.



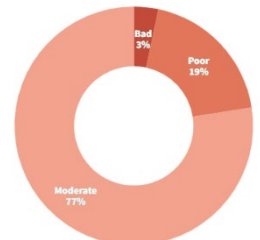
Ecological health



Chemical health



Overall health



WHAT IS GOVT. DOING?

A consultation on a Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan has just completed. It's commitment to 'eliminate 40% of raw sewage overflows into rivers by 2040' is [widely considered completely inadequate](#). Half of storm overflows would still be spilling untreated sewage in 2040.

IT'S A CLIMATE EMERGENCY ISSUE

The Rivers Trust says, "Rivers are on the frontline of our climate and nature crises. We are already seeing climate impacts through more extreme floods and droughts. Globally, wildlife populations in freshwater ecosystems are suffering losses greater than those observed in any other habitat. To adapt to and recover from climate shocks, we need healthy rivers. Our race to resilience will be won or lost on rivers, and right now, we're losing."

[Natural Resources Wales](#) states "There is evidence that climate change is increasing river water temperatures, and that rainfall intensity and peak river flows are increasing."



WALES

46% of rivers in Wales reach Good Ecological health. Unlike England, all new developments have been required to include Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) since January 2019.

[Afonydd Cymru](#) – the campaigning organisation, are now technical advisors to the Welsh Government. They have stated that “We expect Welsh Government and Welsh Water to provide a commitment, like Defra, to eliminating CSOs [Combined Sewer Overflows] which cause environmental harm.” They have requested a review of regulation of CSOs. Action plans to deliver changes to the CSOs in Wales will be published in May 2022.

[Report that cites Dŵr Cymru / Welsh Water as one of the worst offenders.](#)

River pollution in Wales: Swimmers warned over sewage

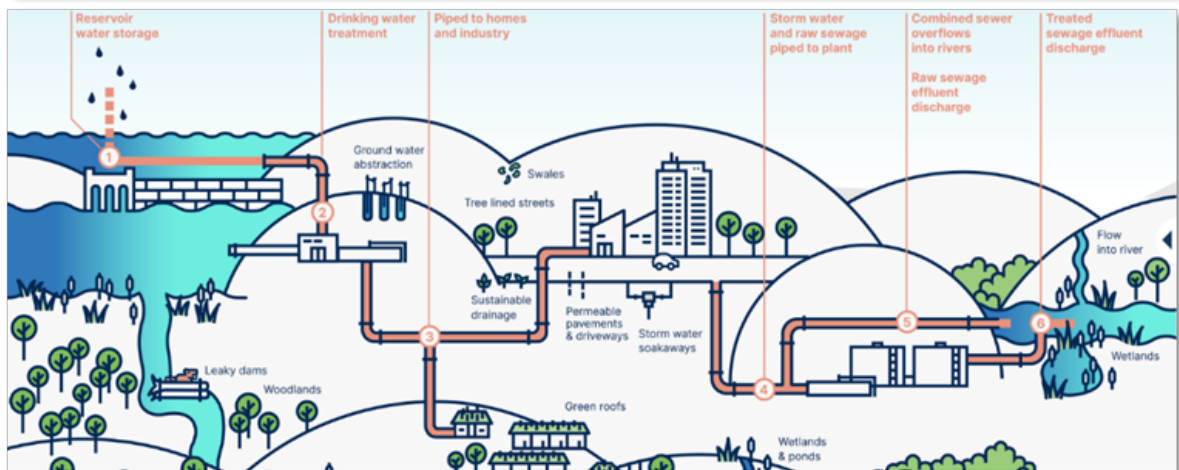
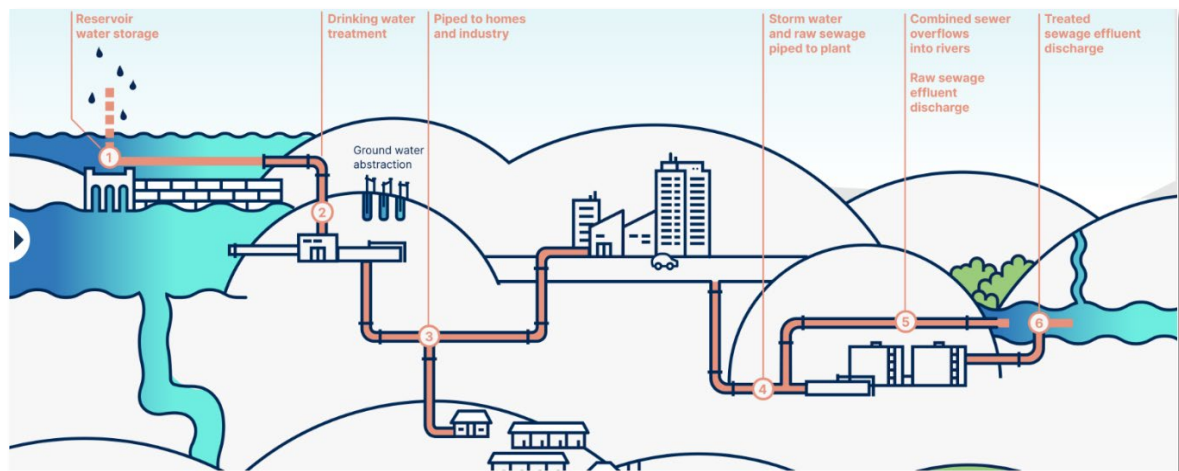
By James McCarthy
BBC News
© 8 August 2021



Report from Afonydd Cymru

WHAT CAN COUNCILS DO?

To rescue our rivers and watercourses changes need to be made to how water, land and development is managed. Compare the two images from the Rivers Trust and **spot the differences** (will need to enlarge). **The 2nd image shows the measures that can help.** Many of these can be influenced by councils even if powers are limited. **In particular, the cumulative impact of development has so far not been adequately addressed in planning.** Lewes Greens commissioned a legal opinion about this to help inform their motion. A version is on the next page.





“Government must act, but business and local partnerships are critical...

By embedding local partnerships at the heart of these solutions, it's possible to build a broad base of Nature Based Solutions which will rebuild resilience at a national scale. Government and regulators must up their game, but they cannot solve this alone: we need to see businesses, local authorities, communities and individuals included.” **Rivers Trust**

QUESTIONS TO ASK

If you are concerned but not sure where to start, you could submit these Members Questions to raise the issue...

The health and resilience of our water courses is under threat from development, from roads, from some farming practices and from poor management and infrastructure of our water and sewage systems...

“What work is the executive currently pursuing - & with which partners - to ensure nature-based solutions are being put in place to ensure our water courses are healthy & resilient & that damaging practices are being brought to a halt?”

“What work is the executive currently pursuing to reduce the cumulative pressure from development on our water and sewage systems”

MODEL MOTION *

This Council notes:

Residents are deeply concerned about water quality and the impact of regular wastewater discharge, which includes untreated sewage, into our local rivers and seas and the impact on wildlife and on human health.

The UK has the dirtiest rivers in Europe. Here in... [Add some detail about local discharges, local concerns, affected local habitats etc.]

Releasing sewage into rivers is no longer an emergency-only situation occurring as a result of severe storms, but an everyday occurrence even in ‘normal’ rainfall, and that we are in a situation of cumulative overload on the sewage and wastewater system.

Whilst there are long term commitments, there are no plans in place which will address the immediate unacceptable situation either locally by [the relevant Water company] or by national government

Both the local*** and national planning policy requires a robust approach to both water quality and pollution and a recent legal opinion from the Environmental Law Firm** **confirms the need to consider cumulative impact**. Yet planning consultation documents show that it has not been the practice of council planners to ask Water Companies to report on cumulative impact i.e. whether or not

development may lead to any potential increase in ‘emergency’ discharge into rivers and seas.

This Council resolves to:

1. Recognise this Council’s obligation to protect its rivers and seas, including from the cumulative impacts of pollution, in line with its local planning policy*** and the National Planning Policy Framework.
2. **Recognise that there is clear evidence of deterioration of water quality due to cumulative impact of multiple sewage discharge events or ‘sewage overload’.**
3. ****Ensure that an evidence base is compiled that assesses the cumulative impact of sewage discharge so that this is factored into decisions made in new iterations of the local plan, including the overall level of future development.
4. Seek to better understand the cumulative impact of wastewater discharge including untreated sewage on our local rivers, wildlife and the health of our residents
5. Continue to take a lead on addressing this issue, working constructively with other agencies.
6. Ask the chair of the relevant scrutiny committee to invite the Chief Executive of [the relevant water company] plus senior representatives from the Environment Agency and Natural England/Natural Resources Wales to attend a meeting to answer questions on the current levels of sewage discharge.
7. Ask [the relevant Water company], from this date onwards, in its planning consultation responses for major development, to clarify which treatment works will be managing the sewage; whether it has the information available to assess the impact on the number or duration of sewage discharges into local rivers or seas, and if it does have this information to share it (noting that this can only be requested not required).
8. Request that planning officers, from now onwards, include in all reports relating to major development a specific section on the impact on watercourses [in line with local policy?***], including the potential for the development to affect sewage outflow into watercourses (i.e. cumulative impact), or to flag if this information is not fully available, so that this information (or the lack of it) is clearly and transparently set out.



* Useful if you are having specific issues around planning and water quality, based on the Lewes motion.

** [Here is the full opinion, and the original motion from Lewes which this is based on](#), or click on the image below.

***Check your own Core Strategy policy on this; a search for 'water courses', 'ground water' or 'water quality' should find the relevant paragraphs – it might be that you will conclude these need improving.

**** If your council is in the process of writing or reviewing a Local Plan there is a strong case to call for this.

Lewes District  **Green Party**

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[Water Quality Initiatives](#)

Green Party Councillors say that it's time for Southern Water to 'come clean' on the link between sewage discharge and development



Cherished local species, the sea trout, taken on the Ouse above Barcombe. Image by permission of photographer Paul Sharman.

Green Party Councillors are planning to make Lewes District the first council in the UK to link the increasing discharge of raw sewage into local rivers and seas with housing development.

A motion to the council on 23rd May would mean that for the first time, local water company Southern Water will be asked to make clear the impact of new development