

Julie James AS/MS  
Y Gweinidog Newid Hinsawdd  
Minister for Climate Change



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref  
Ein cyf/Our ref JJ/02488/22

Jack Sargeant MS  
Chair - Petitions committee  
Senedd Cymru  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

15 November 2022

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your letter of 27 October concerning the petition to improve water quality in the River Usk by upgrading sewage systems in the Usk valley.

Addressing the intractable and multi-faceted issue of pollution entering our rivers is a Welsh Government priority. This is reflected in the First Minister's River Pollution Summit on 18 July at the Royal Welsh Show and our support of Natural Resources Wales' (NRW) Four Rivers for LIFE project, which I launched on 28 October.

The River Pollution Summit brought together senior representatives from regulators, water companies, developers, local government, farming unions, academia and environmental bodies to discuss the development of a strategic and joined-up approach to dealing with river pollution. You can read the First Minister's Written Statement about the River Pollution Summit along with the 'Tackling Phosphorus Pollution in Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Rivers: information and evidence pack' that accompanied summit at the link below. Written statement link - <https://gov.wales/written-statement-river-pollution-summit-royal-welsh-show#:~:text=Written%20Statement%3A%20River%20Pollution%20Summit%20at%20the%20Royal,we%20can%20work%20together%20to%20improve%20the%20situation.>

The Four Rivers for LIFE project, which includes the Usk in its remit, is backed with £9 million of EU funding over 4 years with part-funding by the Welsh Government (£3.4 million) and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water. The project is being delivered as a partnership between NRW, Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, River Restoration Centre, Coleg Sir Gâr, and the Woodland Trust. You can read more about the Four Rivers for LIFE project on NRW's website.

Four Rivers for LIFE link - <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/our-projects/nature-projects/4-rivers-for-life/?lang=en>

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Welsh Government also provides funding via the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority for the Usk Catchment Management Partnership. The partnership is a responsible body for ensuring the delivery of the Conservation Objectives for the River Usk Special Area of Conservation (SAC). It will provide oversight and direction to all involved in delivering their nutrient management plan, which is principally concerned with tackling the intractable issue of phosphorous pollution.

NRW is committed to the improvement of water quality throughout Wales and has numerous proactive projects and programmes ongoing designed to achieve this aim. These are a key component of the River basin Management Plans (RBMP). The RBMPs form the basis of our compliance with the EU Water Framework Directive and provide the overarching picture for water quality across Wales. You can read more about RBMPs on NRW's website. For reference, Usk is featured in the Severn river basin management plan, which the Environment Agency currently leads on due to the cross-border geography of this river basin. River basin management plans - <https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/research-and-reports/water-reports/river-basin-management-plans/?lang=en>

NRW run a network of water quality monitoring points across the River Usk catchment to assess if sample sites are meeting the threshold for the presence of particular chemical compounds and biological contaminants and assessing this data for compliance with environmental standards. The monitoring data for Wales may be viewed at NRW's Water Watch Wales website - <https://waterwatchwales.naturalresourceswales.gov.uk/en/>

Sources of pollutants in the Usk are numerous, including private sewage treatment systems, urban run-off, agriculture, and water company discharges.

The infrastructure in Wales to deal with our sewage is under pressure from climate change, changes in population density and distribution, and new development. Without action, these pressures will contribute to an increase in the flows at treatment works, risking an increase in the number of spills from storm overflows the potential to adversely impact on our water environment. Coordinated action across organisations is essential if we are to achieve a change and improvement to the management and environmental regulation of overflows in Wales.

Together, Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales, Ofwat, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) and Hafren Dyfrdwy (the partner organisations) recognise this need for action and have established a Better River Quality Taskforce (the taskforce) to evaluate the current approach to the management and regulation of overflows in Wales and to set out detailed plans to drive rapid change and improvement. Afonydd Cymru and Consumer Council for Water are providing independent advice to the taskforce, offering insight and challenge from a stakeholder and customer perspective.

Tackling overflows is only one of many elements that need to be addressed if we are to improve river quality in Wales. In Wales the water companies have been working over a number of years to improve poorly performing assets, this includes improving monitoring to identify where further action is required. The Welsh Government has also made provision for a multi-year multi-million-pound programme of works to improve water quality totalling over £40 million over the next 3 years.

Over the next three years, DCWW are investing over £10 million in Usk to improve the way their treatment works operates and reduce the number of spills that come from CSOs at the Mill Street sewage pumping station. Between now and 2025, the work will be undertaken in three phases as detailed below:

**Phase 1 – Work at Usk Sewer Pumping Station**

Upgrading the assets at the local sewage pumping station to install a screening chamber and a 6mm screen that will remove large solids such as rags, wet wipes etc. from any CSO discharge. This work is underway and will be completed by the middle of December.

**Phase 2 –Work to transfer more waste to the wastewater treatment works (WwTW)**

Making improvements to the network that runs between the sewage pumping station and the wastewater treatment works, increasing its capacity so more diluted wastewater and stormwater can be treated instead of using the CSO. .

**Phase 3 – Building new assets at Usk Wastewater Treatment Works**

Transferring more waste to the wastewater treatment works, to ensure that it has the capacity to treat the waste. Installing brand new assets and storage tanks.

DCWW are also committed to working collaboratively with all organisations involved to help further enhance river water quality. DCWW are working with the Wye & Usk Foundation and Hereford Council to support additional phosphorus removal – phosphorus causes an increase in problematic algae growth in ponds, lakes, and rivers. This phosphorus removal uses natural treatment such as low carbon wetland systems, which will also enhance local biodiversity. The proposals will remove more phosphorus than developments in the catchment will introduce. The benefits of adopting this approach are twofold as it will reduce the phosphorus entering the river and do so in a sustainable and low carbon way.

I have been clear that we need to take an integrated catchment approach focussing on multi-sector co-operation and nature-based solutions to drive water quality improvements. By taking this approach and improving community engagement we will be better able to take account of local circumstances and priorities. Citizens and local groups can play a key role in helping tackle water quality pollution through providing monitoring intelligence and public awareness.

Yours sincerely,



**Julie James AS/MS**

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