

NRW Briefing for the Climate Change, Infrastructure and Environment Committee: additional written evidence on topical issues

Thank you for the opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee on topical issues for NRW. There were a number of points raised during this session, and in oral and written questions from members of the committee that we wished to follow up on to provide further information and clarify some of the points we made.

Contents

Water company performance	1
Driving a reduction in harm due to sewage spills	1
Prioritising the improvements that deliver most for the environment	2
Can we get to zero spills?	3
Ofwat's price review and 2025-2030 improvement programme	3
Water framework directive compliance in Wales	3
Bathing water quality in Wales	4
NRW Resourcing.....	5

Water company performance

Regarding sewage discharges, we are clear that water company performance is not acceptable. [Our 2023 performance report for Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water](#) highlighted the worst environmental performance from the Company against the metrics measured against, which are standardised in England and Wales.

Driving a reduction in harm due to sewage spills

We report spill data annually: [Storm overflow spill data report – 2023 \(naturalresources.wales\)](#). We recognise the public's concern about the number of spills from storm overflows and the potential

impact on our rivers and coast and have been working with the [Better River Quality Taskforce](#) to evaluate the current approach to the management and regulation of overflows in Wales, and to develop detailed plans to drive rapid change and improvement, focussed on those overflows that cause the most harm first.

The recent expansion of the use of Event Duration Monitors (EDM), installed following direction by NRW, has enabled us to build up the data and information to assess the impact of spills on our environment. This is a step forward and enables us to draw upon the evidence to drive actions, focussed on the right areas, to make the most difference to improving the environment. In some cases, that evidence may result in enforcement actions and/or prosecution.

Storm Overflows are designed to spill only in heavy rainfall. NRW has issued guidance to water companies in Wales on when that is allowable. Water companies are now assessing each individual asset to ensure it is operating to those standards. Where it isn't, improvements must be made. Where pollution is evident, and the cause is from a storm overflow we will not hesitate to use our enforcement powers.

Prioritising the improvements that deliver most for the environment

Those spilling the most frequently are not always those causing the most harm to the environment, as it depends on size and sensitivity of the receiving watercourse. In October 2023 we issued guidance to the water companies in Wales on how to classify storm overflows to ensure they operate to the required standard. We are working with Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) and Hafren Dyfrdwy (HD) on embedding the guidance and ensuring any overflows requiring improvement are factored into improvement plans focusing on those causing harm as a priority, on the path to towards ensuring that water companies have resilient infrastructure, now and for the future.

Our work at NRW is evidence based, and we prioritise action that leads to improving the environment. In some cases, that may be enforcement and/or prosecution. For other assets this means planning improvements over the coming years to ensure the sewerage infrastructure can cope with the demands society places on it.

Storm Overflows are designed to spill in heavy weather when the watercourse is in high flow and able to carry the effluent without damaging the environment. NRW has issued guidance to water companies in Wales on when that is allowable. Water companies are now assessing each individual asset to ensure it is operating to those standards. Where it isn't, and spills can be seen outside of heavy rainfall, improvement will be made.

Can we get to zero spills?

It is important to recognise that under the current system of managing sewage, assets will still spill. The current approach in Wales is about ensuring the number of spills, under the right conditions (heavy rainfall) do not impact on the environment.

Should we want to remove all overflows and have zero spills to the environment, we would need to remove all clean water (rain, drainage, streams and rivers in some cases) from the sewerage network, and divert them to rivers or the sea through a clean drainage system. The cost of this is likely to extend into billions of pounds and there would be significant disruption to Wales and its citizens.

Ofwat's price review and 2025-2030 improvement programme

As part of Ofwat's price review and environment programme for 2025 to 2030, Welsh Government require water companies to address 60% of those overflows causing environmental harm by 2030. We are pushing for significant and greater investment and action in subsequent price reviews to ensure that the sewerage network can cope with current and future pressures, including population growth and climate change. Action will be required in parallel to find a solution of how to remove the surface water from our highways, housing estates and industrial areas. Driving down spills is part of the solution, but we also need to see infrastructure improvements, planning controls, sustainable growth, and sustainable solutions in order to make the biggest difference to the environment.

Without EDM monitors installed at the direction of NRW, we would not have the data to assess the impact of spills on our environment, or to drive improvements that will make the biggest difference to our environment.

Water framework directive compliance in Wales

40% of rivers in Wales have achieved Good status or better under the Water Framework Directive. Like the rest of the UK and many European countries, we are struggling as a nation in our attempts to improve overall classification status. NRW has a key role to play in improving the status of our rivers and we are committed to continuing to enact plans and actions that drive us to good ecological status.

Focusing on ecological status of rivers, the [Office for Environmental Protection](#) summarised that 'for high and good classification, when combining the percentages, Wales (46.0%) and Scotland

(44.9%) have the highest combined percentages, followed by Northern Ireland (31.4%), and then England (15.6%).'

The percentage of Welsh rivers in good or high ecological status is similar to that reported for other EU countries such as Ireland and France.

Looking at overall status across geographic Wales, 40% of 933 water bodies are at good or better status. This represents an improvement of 3% from that reported in 2015 and an 8% improvement since 2009.

The 'one out, all out' approach to classification (if one element fails, the whole water body fails), gives a negative view of the wider status. At an element level (each biological, physicochemical, physical and chemical element considered separately) we achieve 93% at good or better status which has improved by 5% since 2015.

But we accept that our waters are not in the condition that we need them to be to support people and nature, and we will continue to take proactive action, and drive action by others, to tackle these issues.

Bathing water quality in Wales

In 2023, 107 out of the 109 designated Welsh bathing waters met the standards set by the Bathing Water Regulations. Of those 109 bathing waters assessed in Wales, 80 were of an Excellent standard.

A key goal is to make positive and pro-active steps to managing our bathing waters, and we also use systems and approaches below to support protecting public health. Samples at designated bathing waters are taken according to a monitoring calendar set out in advance of the season. This calendar can be suspended if abnormal situations occur which could affect bathing water quality.

An abnormal situation is defined by the Bathing Water Regulations as an event or combination of events impacting on bathing water quality at the location concerned and not expected to occur on average more than once every four years. They are usually declared when we become aware of an unusual pollution source that could impact on the bathing water. The relevant bodies are then required to inform the public of the situation and advise them against bathing. Any routine bathing water samples will still be taken, but the sample results do not have to be included in the sample data set used to classify the beach.

At some bathing waters short-term pollution may be predicted by models. This is called Prediction and Discounting, which can be used at 16 beaches in Wales enables us to use real time data to protect public health and allows bathers to make an informed decision about where to swim. Beach operators then update a sign at the bathing water to warn the public on days that poor water quality is predicted. It's not based on actual poor water quality sampling data.

An abnormal situation or prediction trigger doesn't result in a beach being closed, but the sign advises against swimming, due to possible poor water quality to protect public health.

Short-term pollution based on rainfall. On days when poor water quality is predicted, beach operators update signs to warn the public of possible poor water quality.

Both are systems we have that protects public health. A positive, pro-active step to managing our bathing waters.

NRW Resourcing

All public bodies are under financial pressure, and NRW is no different. We are prioritising our work and aiming to ensure our regulatory activities (for compliance assessment and enforcement) are protected in as far as possible. We are also investing in new approaches and data analysis to react faster to compliance issues. A focus on water is within our Corporate plan as well as embedded in our Regulatory service plans.

We will be looking to offset the reduction by streamlining our processes and making full use of potential new powers coming through in the Water (Special Measures) Bill.