

# Report on storm overflows in Wales

March 2022



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# Report on storm overflows in Wales

March 2022



# About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:  
[www.senedd.wales/SeneddClimate](http://www.senedd.wales/SeneddClimate)

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Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:  
Llyr Gruffydd MS**  
Plaid Cymru



**Janet Finch-Saunders MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Huw Irranca-Davies MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Delyth Jewell MS**  
Plaid Cymru



**Jenny Rathbone MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Joyce Watson MS**  
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## Chair's foreword

Wales' rivers are an essential part of its natural heritage. They provide habitats for a range of wildlife and plants, are popular for recreational activities, and help bring people closer to nature. But they are under threat. Pollution from sewage, agricultural practices and other sources means less than half of Wales' rivers are in good condition. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Over the last year or so, we have seen regular reports in the local and national media about sewage from storm overflows being pumped into Wales's rivers at an unacceptable rate. Reports of rivers too dirty for people to enjoy, and too polluted to sustain fish and other wildlife. This has, understandably, led to public outrage.

Although storm overflows are a relatively small contributor to poor river health, the public has made clear that it expects stronger action to tackle their impact.

Storm overflows should operate infrequently and in exceptional weather conditions. But that is simply not the case. The latest data shows sewage was released into Wales' rivers more than 105,000 times in a 12 month period. This suggests there's a significant problem. And, with increased rainfall as a result of climate change, population growth, and urban expansion, this is only set to get worse unless action is taken.

Our report includes recommendations for the Welsh Government, water companies and regulators, who must come together to deliver change to improve the state of Wales' rivers.



**Llyr Gruffydd MS,**

Chair, Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** The amount of sewage discharges into Welsh rivers is unacceptable. We must see action from the Welsh Government, in its leadership role, to ensure that the number and volume of discharges is reduced as a matter of urgency. The Minister should report back to the Committee 6 months after the publication of this report setting out the actions she has taken with partners to address this issue.....Page 12

**Recommendation 2.** We must see demonstrable progress from NRW on its work to bring ‘unpermitted’ storm overflows within the regulatory regime. We expect NRW to report back to the Committee on progress no later than 6 months of the publication of this Report.....Page 12

**Recommendation 3.** NRW and water companies should publish annual data and/or information on the proportion of sewage spills that are not within permit conditions, which category of pollution incidents these resulted in, and whether enforcement action was taken. ....Page 17

**Recommendation 4.** NRW, water companies and other relevant stakeholders should develop enhanced monitoring arrangements with a view to better understanding the impact of sewage spills on receiving water. In taking this work forward, consideration should be given to the potential role of citizen science within enhanced arrangements.....Page 17

**Recommendation 5.** Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy should aim to report on discharges from storm overflows “within an hour of the discharge beginning”, which is a requirement placed on water companies in England by the Environment Act 2021. If they cannot match this standard, both companies should explain why. ....Page 17

**Recommendation 6.** The Minister should ensure that the Roadmap for Storm Overflows includes targets and timescales for the reduction of sewage discharges. It should include comprehensive and transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms to enable progress to be assessed. The Minister should report back to the Committee on progress towards delivery of the action plan accompanying the Roadmap for Storm Overflows within 12 months of their publication. ....Page 22

**Recommendation 7.** Ofwat should report back to the Committee on the findings of its investigation into water companies, insofar as those findings relate to companies in Wales, as soon as reasonably practicable. This should include details of any action taken as a result of those findings.....Page 22

**Recommendation 8.** NRW should report back to the Committee on action taken as a result of the findings of Ofwat and the Environment Agency’s investigations, as soon as practicable. This should include details of any review of NRW’s compliance approach and any work undertaken with, or enforcement action taken against, water companies as a result of those findings. .... Page 22

**Recommendation 9.** The Minister should work with partners to identify and address the barriers to increasing Nature Based Solutions to water management. The Minister should report back to the Committee on this matter no later than 6 months after the publication of this report. .... Page 22

**Recommendation 10.** The Minister should report back to this Committee no later than 6 months after the publication of this Report setting out the different actions she is taking to address the problem of pollution in Welsh rivers from sources other than storm overflows. .... Page 23

## 1. Introduction

- 1.** Storm overflows have been the subject of on-going public and political debate over the past year. Concerns have been expressed about the frequency of sewage discharges from storm overflows, the adverse impact of discharges on the environment and public health, under-reporting of pollution incidents by water companies, and failure of environmental regulators to take enforcement action when pollution incidents occur.
- 2.** In October 2021, following highly publicised debate in the UK Parliament, the Environment Bill (now the Environment Act 2021) was amended to include provisions aimed at reducing the impact of sewage discharges from storm overflows in England.
- 3.** In November 2021, Ofwat and the Environment Agency (in England) announced “major investigations into potential widespread non-compliance by water and sewerage companies at sewage treatment works”.
- 4.** It is against this background that the Committee agreed to undertake a short piece of work to get a clearer picture of the situation in Wales. We set out to consider the extent of sewage discharges and how current arrangements aimed at addressing the impact of discharges are working. Our work was not intended to be an in-depth examination of the impact of sewage discharges on river quality in Wales or of specific incidents (or alleged incidents) of sewage pollution.

### Our approach

- 5.** In November 2021, we wrote to the Minister for Climate Change to ask her to explain whether the effect of the provisions in the Environment Act 2021 would mean that rivers in England are better protected than those in Wales. We also wrote to NRW to ask whether it would be undertaking an investigation into potential non-compliance by water companies in Wales. The exchanges in correspondence can be found on Senedd Cymru’s website.
- 6.** At our meeting on 3 February 2022, we took evidence from Ofwat, Natural Resources Wales, Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy. We would like to thank all those who gave evidence to inform our work.

## 2. Why is sewage being discharged into Welsh rivers?

**7.** Much of Wales is serviced by 'combined sewers' where wastewater (from homes and businesses), and surface water (e.g. run off from roads, hardstanding areas and roofs) goes into one sewer system. This is taken to a waste treatment works where it is cleaned and returned to the environment.

**8.** During heavy rainfall, the combined wastewater and surface water run-off might exceed the capacity of the wastewater treatment works, leading to the excess flow being released, untreated, into the environment. 'Storm overflows' (also known as 'Combined sewer overflows') are designed to prevent sewage overflowing onto streets and into properties. They release excess stormwater into rivers and watercourses. In theory, sewage discharges from storm overflows should be very dilute because of the large volumes of stormwater flowing through the sewers.

### Are sewage discharges allowed?

**9.** The regulatory arrangements for discharges from storm overflows are governed by **The Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016**, which set out the legal framework for NRW (and the Environment Agency in England) to permit discharges to the environment. Permit conditions include requirements for storm overflows to comply with design and water quality standards and to cause no deterioration to the existing quality of receiving water.

**10.** There are over 2,500 permitted storm overflows across Wales. The majority of these are a legacy of sewer design and construction practices until the mid-twentieth century. NRW explained to the Committee that there is now a presumption against permitting new storm overflows.

**11.** 'Unpermitted' storm overflows are those that operate without a permit. NRW has put in place a programme "to ensure that all unpermitted storm overflows that have been identified in Wales are brought within our regulatory framework. In this way we will assess whether there is an environmental impact from the discharges and require the appropriate investment to deliver improvements to the wastewater infrastructure".

### How bad is the situation?

**12.** The most recent data published by NRW shows just over 105,000 sewage discharges (or 'spills') recorded from 2,041 storm overflows. This has led to strong public criticism of water

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companies and NRW. This does not include unpermitted storm overflows or overflows that are not monitored.

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
<b>No. of spills recorded by Event Duration Monitors</b>	105,751	73,517	48,499	29,878	14,485
<b>No. of storm overflows with Event Duration Monitors installed</b>	2,041	1,665	1,359	983	545

**13.** NRW asserted “the increase in spills each year is the result of an increased number of Event Duration Monitors being installed, and subsequent available data reported”. Monitoring is explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

### What do the water companies say?

**14.** Water companies acknowledged that storm overflows are operating more frequently than is acceptable. They explained there are various reasons for this, including “hydraulic overloading from increased flows since the sewer was originally designed”. This can be caused by the connection of additional impermeable surfaces to the sewerage network; increases in overall rainfall and rainfall intensity due to climate change; increased population connected to the sewer network; and network issues (e.g. siltation and infiltration). Other reasons given were misconnection of land drainage; blockages caused by the disposal of ‘unflushable’ items, e.g. wet wipes, or cooking oils; and sewer collapses and deterioration of the sewer system which can also cause spills.

**15.** Dŵr Cymru told the Committee, “it’s not where we want to be. We clearly can see the number of discharges from storm overflows is a really large number, and that’s not coming down”. Hafren Dyfrdwy said “we are committed to continue to drive performance, improve performance, and accept that there’s far more that the water industry can do”.

**16.** Dŵr Cymru highlighted that removing all storm overflows and eliminating spills would require duplicating nearly all the existing sewer network at an estimated cost of between £9 billion and £14 billion. This would “increase customer bills significantly – adding hundreds of pounds to every customer’s bill”.

**17.** According to Hafren Dyfrdwy, “the principal measure by which water companies should be judged by is harm their operations cause rivers, as measured by Reasons for Not Achieving Good Status (RNAGS)”. Dŵr Cymru said storm overflows are a confirmed or probable RNAGS in 4.6% of water bodies. Hafren Dyfrdwy explained that, in “[its] waste area, just seven percent of

Reasons for Not Achieving Good Status (RNAGS) are attributable to water company operations, and we have action already underway to reduce this to 3.5 percent”.

## What do Ofwat and NRW say?

**18.** Ofwat acknowledged the “deep concerns” about sewage discharges. It said the “current level is unacceptable and we do need work to change that”.

**19.** NRW said:

*“clearly, we understand...the concerns that people have in terms of overflows, and people are concerned about the environmental impact of those. And it's important to note here that we all take the issue very seriously, and we all want to make progress and to ensure that there are improvements made and that there is a gradual process of improvement over ensuing years.”*

## Our view

The sewerage system in Wales is from the Victorian era. It was designed for a society with completely different needs. Storm overflows should operate infrequently and in exceptional weather conditions. But that is not the case today. Instead, we see numbers of incidents rising sharply and report after report of sewage in our rivers.

The public is rightly outraged by what it is witnessing.

It cannot be right that a parent is scared to let their child swim in a river in Wales for fear of pollution and human waste. This is simply not acceptable in Wales in 2022.

Demand on the sewerage system has changed considerably over recent years with increased rainfall as a result of climate change, population expansion, and changes to the built environment. This means storm overflows are operating more frequently.

Because of the design of sewerage system, storm overflows are necessary to reduce the risk of sewage flooding into homes and businesses. However, there is growing public concern about the frequency with which they operate and the impact of sewage spills on the environment and public health. We share those concerns.

Regardless of the reasons, it is clear from the latest data that the frequency of sewage spills is at an unacceptable level. With more frequent extreme weather events, it is likely that the number of spills will rise if urgent action is not taken.

The number of 'unpermitted' storm overflows operating in Wales is a cause for serious concern. The potential impact of sewage spills from these on the environment and public health is substantial. We would like to see demonstrable progress from NRW on its work to bring 'unpermitted' storm overflows within the regulatory regime. We expect NRW to report back to the Committee on progress within 6 months of the publication of this Report.

The Committee supports the position set out by NRW that there is now a presumption against permitting new storm overflows.

**Recommendation 1.** The amount of sewage discharges into Welsh rivers is unacceptable. We must see action from the Welsh Government, in its leadership role, to ensure that the number and volume of discharges is reduced as a matter of urgency. The Minister should report back to the Committee 6 months after the publication of this report setting out the actions she has taken with partners to address this issue.

**Recommendation 2.** We must see demonstrable progress from NRW on its work to bring 'unpermitted' storm overflows within the regulatory regime. We expect NRW to report back to the Committee on progress no later than 6 months of the publication of this Report.

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## 3. What's being done to tackle sewage discharges?

### Improving transparency

#### Event Duration Monitoring

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**20.** In recent years, there has been a move to improve monitoring of sewage discharges in both England and Wales. NRW explained this was partly in response to infraction proceedings against the UK for breaching the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. These covered breaches across several geographical areas, including at the Burry Inlet where excessive discharges were made into the sea waters off Carmarthenshire.

**21.** Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) began in Wales in 2012, when water companies were instructed by NRW to install monitors on all storm overflows. Event Duration Monitors record the frequency and duration of storm overflow discharges (known as 'spills'). NRW said the purpose of EDM is "to gain a greater understanding of [the impact of storm overflows] and the status of the sewerage network".

**22.** According to NRW, EDM "has led to greater scrutiny and public interest [in storm overflows]". NRW told the Committee EDM in England "has progressed at a slower rate [than in Wales] due to a later start date".

**23.** Currently, Dŵr Cymru has monitors on almost 99% of its storm overflows, of which it has approximately 2,500. Hafren Dyfrdwy said it has monitors on all 50 of its storm overflows.

**24.** Water companies in Wales already publish EDM data annually on their websites. They are also required to provide a summary to NRW on an annual basis, which is also published. In contrast, until recently EDM data in England has only been available on request<sup>1</sup>.

**25.** Event Duration Monitors do not monitor the volume or severity of spills. Ofwat told the Committee, "we know the duration and the number of spill incidents, or at least we have the data on that now. I think there's not enough known about the harm of those incidents".

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<sup>1</sup> This changed with the introduction of statutory reporting requirements on water companies in England and the Environment Agency through the provisions in the Environment Act 2021.

## Real time spill data

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- 26.** The Environment Act 2021 places a requirement on water companies in England to report on discharges from storm overflows “within an hour of the discharge beginning”.
- 27.** Dŵr Cymru voluntarily provides “a Real Time CSO Alert Service all year round at 30 bathing sites in Wales which provides real-time information to registered users on when a [combined sewer overflow] starts operating and when it stops”. This service is provided to beach managers, such as the local authority, and to Surfers Against Sewage for its Safer Seas Service website and app, and alerts are also sent to NRW.
- 28.** Dŵr Cymru explained it is considering how improvements in the provision of real time data can be delivered in Wales.

## Citizen science

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- 29.** NRW acknowledged the potential role of citizen science in enhancing monitoring and data collection on spills and their impact on receiving water. It said

*“one of the things that we’re looking at doing is how we can better use other people’s evidence and how we can better use, as you say, the technology and the information and the skills that are out there that don’t necessarily sit with NRW. That’s a key part of our next steps.”*

## The approach to compliance in Wales

- 30.** Water companies may be breaching their permit conditions if sewage spills occur other than during heavy rainfall, or if they are not treating enough sewage before it is discharged. They must ‘self-report’ permit breaches/pollution incidents to NRW (or the Environment Agency for water companies in England).
- 31.** NRW explained water companies will face under-performance penalties if they fail to self-report permit breaches and/or pollution incidents, therefore, “the incentive for the companies is to actually report the right number”. It said self-reporting performance in Wales had increased from approximately 30% in 2012 to the industry standard of 80%.
- 32.** NRW publishes annual Environmental Performance Assessments (EPA) for Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy. The 2020 reports show Dŵr Cymru’s self-reporting performance reached 80%, while Hafren Dyfrdwy self-reported 100% of pollution incidents.

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## Investigating pollution incidents

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**33.** According to NRW's 2020 annual Environment Performance Assessment report for Dŵr Cymru, it has the lowest number of High-Low (Category 1-3) sewerage pollution incidents to date, with 77<sup>2</sup>. Of those, 76 had a Low (Category 3) environmental impact and one had a High (Category 2) environmental impact. In 2020 Dŵr Cymru achieved green status for pollution incidents for the first time.

**34.** Hafren Dyfrdwy's report shows "varied performance in 2020 for pollution incidents". The company had an increased number of sewerage incidents – five in 2020, compared to two in 2019. In 2020, two were from sewage treatment works, one was from a permitted CSO and two were from foul sewer; all five had Low environmental impact (Category 3).

**35.** There have been calls for a review of NRW's approach to investigating water pollution incidents, including sewage pollution. Concern has been raised that thousands of small-scale spills are not being investigated and taken together, these could have a significant adverse impact on water quality. NRW's [Incident Categorisation Guidance Note](#) (April 2017) explains "we will categorise our response to any incident according to the actual or potential impacts upon the people, communities, environment of Wales and any effect to our own organisation". Following an incident call, occurrences are categorised at one of five levels, according to the degree of impact and response required: High Level Impact Risk; Low Level Impact Risk; Event; Complaint; Non-Remit.

**36.** According to the Guidance Note, "the majority of Low Level Impact Incidents will not merit attendance". It states NRW "will only attend Low Level Impact Incidents if appropriate through planned attendance at a later date or time, as part of routine work, dependent on the risks and the assessment decision".

**37.** NRW told the Committee part of the reason for the categorisation of pollution incidents is to ensure it is "able to respond to the biggest, the worst pollution incidents, and that those come as a priority". It added:

*"we don't ignore the low level [incidents], but they do tend to form more of the general picture and will be picked up more through monitoring than any incident attendance. We simply don't have the resources to respond to everything."*

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<sup>2</sup> Not all sewerage pollution incidents are as a result of storm overflows.

## Enforcement action

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**38.** NRW told the Committee that, since 2013, it had taken the following enforcement action against water companies: 13 prosecutions, 24 formal cautions, four enforcement undertakings (related only to fisheries activities), 213 warning letters and 31 instances of advice and guidance.

## Investing in improvements

**39.** Contributors set out current arrangements for determining investment to improve the wastewater management network, and levels of investment for 2020-25.

**40.** Hafren Dyfrdwy reported it is investing £7.6m on improving 46km of river, including investment in flow to full treatment [the maximum flow a wastewater treatment plant can treat] and EDM; and £3.3m on waste network and treatment works enhancements, including investigations and storm overflow improvements, and compliance and pumping station maintenance. For the same period Dŵr Cymru is investing £101m to upgrade its wastewater management network to reduce discharges as part of a wider investment package of £765 million to protect the environment. This includes £42m through the Storm Overflow Assessment Framework to determine wastewater assets for improvement.

## Our view

Public confidence in the regulatory and enforcement regime for storm overflows is low.

To start to restore public confidence, NRW must be able to respond timely and effectively to pollution incidents, and must be prepared to take enforcement action when permit breaches occur. In previous reports, we have outlined our concerns about NRW's ability to properly carry out its statutory roles and responsibilities due to a lack of capacity and resources.

We have called on the Welsh Government to ensure that funding for NRW is commensurate with its roles and responsibilities, and to increase NRW funding following the outcome of the current baseline review. We repeat those calls.

There have been significant improvements in transparency around storm overflows and sewage spills in recent years, following the introduction of Event Duration Monitoring. But, there is room for further improvement. There remains a lack of transparency around the proportion of sewage spills that are not within permit conditions, which category of pollution incident these resulted in, and whether enforcement action was taken. We believe the publication of this information

will help improve understanding of the position in Wales and result in more informed public debate.

While Event Duration Monitoring provides useful data on the frequency and duration of sewage spills, it does not tell us the impact of spills. Water companies and NRW are already required to monitor water quality. However, we believe existing monitoring arrangements should be enhanced with the aim of better understanding the impact of spills on receiving water. In doing so, consideration should be given to the potential role of citizen science.

Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy should aim to report on discharges from storm overflows “within an hour of the discharge beginning”, which is a requirement placed on water companies in England by the Environment Act 2021. If they cannot match this standard, they should explain the reasons why.

**Recommendation 3.** NRW and water companies should publish annual data and/or information on the proportion of sewage spills that are not within permit conditions, which category of pollution incidents these resulted in, and whether enforcement action was taken.

**Recommendation 4.** NRW, water companies and other relevant stakeholders should develop enhanced monitoring arrangements with a view to better understanding the impact of sewage spills on receiving water. In taking this work forward, consideration should be given to the potential role of citizen science within enhanced arrangements.

**Recommendation 5.** Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy should aim to report on discharges from storm overflows “within an hour of the discharge beginning”, which is a requirement placed on water companies in England by the Environment Act 2021. If they cannot match this standard, both companies should explain why.

## 4. What happens next?

### Current Ofwat and Environment Agency investigations

**41.** Concerns have been raised that water companies in England are regularly failing to report sewage spills or reporting them to be a 'lower category' so enforcement action is not triggered. This has prompted investigations by both Ofwat and the Environment Agency.

**42.** The Environment Agency is investigating potential non-compliance with permit conditions in more than 2,200 sewage treatment works in England.<sup>3</sup> Ofwat told the Committee:

*"New information that some water companies have shared with the Environment Agency suggests that water companies may not have been treating the amount of wastewater they should do before diverting it to storm tanks and/or discharging it to the environment. If this is the case companies will have broken the conditions of their environmental permits."*

**43.** Ofwat's investigation, which also extends to water companies in Wales, will consider "whether any potential non-compliance with permits suggests the company concerned might not be complying with other legal requirements a water company has, which Ofwat is responsible for enforcing". These include requirements water companies have about how, overall, they operate, manage, and report their performance, including of their wastewater treatment works. Ofwat can take enforcement action against water companies that fail to meet their legal requirements.

**44.** NRW told the Committee it was not planning to undertake an investigation into potential permit breaches by water companies in Wales as it already has "a compliance response in place". It explained:

*"Information has been shared by the companies since 2014 and we are working with both companies to identify causes, rectify those where possible, and set out plans to bring those sites back into compliance at the earliest opportunity. Currently 32 sites have been rectified and 37 more will be worked on in the current period of water company investment (2020-25). Where NRW feels action is not progressing as required, and as further data is*

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<sup>3</sup> Dŵr Cymru operates in both England and Wales. The Environment Agency's investigation includes Dŵr Cymru's operations in England.

*collected by the company and shared with NRW, we will take the necessary action to ensure non-compliance with permit is dealt with appropriately."*

**45.** However, NRW added it is "working with the Environment Agency and Ofwat Wales to determine what action is proposed in light of their findings", and "should this require a review to our approach as the investigations in England progress, we will take the required action".

**46.** In her letter to the Committee, the Minister said:

*"NRW is working collaboratively with the water companies and continually reviews its regulatory position in relation to each asset. They advise that where required they will use their powers to drive improvement work forward. NRW have issued enforcement notices where they feel action is not progressing as required."*

## **Wales Better River Quality Taskforce**

**47.** Contributors referred to the on-going work of the Wales Better River Water Quality Taskforce (the Taskforce), which was established in June 2021 "to examine and evaluate the current approach to the management and regulation of storm overflows in Wales". The Taskforce comprises NRW, the Welsh Government, Ofwat, Dŵr Cymru, Hafren Dyfrdwy, Consumer Council for Water, and Afonydd Cymru.

**48.** The Taskforce is developing a Roadmap for Storm Overflows in Wales (the Roadmap), which will include recommendations aimed at tackling the impacts of sewage discharges and an action plan "to drive the required work forward". Hafren Dyfrdwy explained the Taskforce's recommendations will focus on: reducing the visual impact of storm overflows, environmental regulation, network capacity, improved monitoring and stakeholder and customer engagement. Hafren Dyfrdwy said it is "developing a programme which augments our current plans and delivers against these recommendations".

## **Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans**

**49.** In her letter to the Committee, the Minister said the first non-statutory<sup>4</sup> Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans (DWMPs) up to 2050 will be published by water companies in 2022. She explained:

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<sup>4</sup> The Welsh Government has indicated its intention to put Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans on a statutory footing later in the Sixth Senedd through powers conferred on the Welsh Ministers by the Environment Act 2021.

*"[DWWMPs] will set out a long and short term plan to reduce the discharges from CSOs and any environmental harm from them. This will include improved treatment of sewage, improved storage capacity and natural, environmentally friendly ways of reducing the volume of water entering the sewage system."*

**50.** Dŵr Cymru said it is in the process of developing its DWMP, which "looks at how we can work in partnership with stakeholders to reduce the risk of flooding and our impact on the environment between now and 2050".

## **Nature based solutions and Sustainable Drainage Systems**

**51.** Contributors recognised the importance of Nature Based Solutions (NBS) and Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) as a means of relieving pressure on the sewage system to reduce the frequency of sewage spills.

**52.** Dŵr Cymru provided details of its retrofit SuDs schemes, Greener Grangetown and Rainscape. It said, "these schemes demonstrate that there is neither a 'quick fix' nor 'easy fix' to reducing our reliance on CSOs in the short term as it will take significant investment and collaboration". Dŵr Cymru told the Committee it has been working on two new schemes (in Pontyfelin and Merthyr). It added:

*"The more we look, the more we can talk about these [NBS] and try to get a few more examples in the ground, then I think the easier it will be to get them moving. That's the goal for the next couple of years – get a few real good examples in Wales, in the ground, that we can take people to and say, 'Hey, this is the answer: this is where we need to be going', rather than just putting in bigger pipes and more storage, which brings a whole heap of other problems as well."*

**53.** Hafren Dyfrdwy suggested NBS should be water companies' "first choice to address environmental challenges" and "the burden of proof should effectively be reversed to requiring an explanation of why a NBS is not appropriate".

## **Water pollution from other sources**

**54.** Although Dŵr Cymru acknowledged it has "a major role to play in improving river water quality" it said, "more significant improvements [are] required from other sectors (mostly notably from agriculture, land management and water from mines)". Hafren Dyfrdwy echoed this, and stated:

*"The diagnosis clearly shows that water companies have action to take, but unless the issue of agricultural pollution is also addressed, health of rivers in Wales are unlikely to improve materially."*

**55.** Contributors emphasised the need for intra-sector and cross-sector collaboration to improve river water quality in Wales.

**56.** In her letter to the Committee, the Minister said:

*"Discharges from combined storm overflows (CSOs) are not the main cause of poor water quality in Wales – the main causes [are] runoff from animal waste and chemicals used in agriculture, pollution from disused mines, runoff from built up areas, and sewage pipes being wrongly connected to drainage networks."*

## Our view

River pollution is a crisis that will only get worse without immediate and significant intervention. We are pleased that the Welsh Government and its partners are responding to the huge public concern, most notably with the establishment of the Wales Better River Quality Taskforce, and the development of a Roadmap for Storm Overflows and accompanying action plan.

We believe the Roadmap should be ambitious and should aim to minimise sewage discharges. It should include targets and timescales and comprehensive and transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms. We will wish to consider the action plan when it becomes available and will return to this matter to assess progress in due course.

We look forward to the publication of water companies' Drainage and Wastewater Management Plans later in 2022. We expect these plans to include ambitious measures to reduce the discharges from storm overflows and any environmental harm from them.

Our work on storm overflows was prompted in part by the investigations into alleged widespread under-reporting of permit breaches by water companies in England. We were keen to better understand the reason for the investigations, and to gain insight into NRW's on-going compliance approach in Wales and its response to these investigations.

We note that water companies in Wales form part of the current investigations by Ofwat and the Environment Agency into potential permit breaches. We expect Ofwat to report back to us on the findings of its investigation, insofar as they relate to companies in Wales, including any

action taken as a result of those findings. Following on from this, we expect NRW to report back to us on action taken as a result of the findings of Ofwat and the Environment Agency.

We recognise that managing demand on the sewerage system, and encouraging more efficient use of drains and sewers, will be essential to reduce the frequency of sewage spills in the longer-term. This will require cross-sector considerations, including interventions in planning to better address 'urban creep'.

The evidence from contributors suggests the sector is keen to adopt Nature Based Solutions to water management. Although some progress has been made in recent years, it is slower than we would like. We are keen to understand barriers to the adoption of NBS by water companies and how these can be overcome.

We acknowledge that storm overflows are not the main cause of poor river quality in Wales. Most rivers are impacted by several activities and sectors, and these are subject to their own regulatory arrangements. There is a clear willingness among contributors to work collaboratively across sectors to help improve river water quality, which we welcome.

**Recommendation 6.** The Minister should ensure that the Roadmap for Storm Overflows includes targets and timescales for the reduction of sewage discharges. It should include comprehensive and transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms to enable progress to be assessed. The Minister should report back to the Committee on progress towards delivery of the action plan accompanying the Roadmap for Storm Overflows within 12 months of their publication.

**Recommendation 7.** Ofwat should report back to the Committee on the findings of its investigation into water companies, insofar as those findings relate to companies in Wales, as soon as reasonably practicable. This should include details of any action taken as a result of those findings.

**Recommendation 8.** NRW should report back to the Committee on action taken as a result of the findings of Ofwat and the Environment Agency's investigations, as soon as practicable. This should include details of any review of NRW's compliance approach and any work undertaken with, or enforcement action taken against, water companies as a result of those findings.

**Recommendation 9.** The Minister should work with partners to identify and address the barriers to increasing Nature Based Solutions to water management. The Minister should report back to the Committee on this matter no later than 6 months after the publication of this report.

**Recommendation 10.** The Minister should report back to this Committee no later than 6 months after the publication of this Report setting out the different actions she is taking to address the problem of pollution in Welsh rivers from sources other than storm overflows.