

Thames Water online map confirms appalling sewage pollution in UK

Paul Mitchell
13 January 2023

Last week's publication of an online interactive map by Thames Water confirms that water companies are responsible for huge and continuing levels of raw sewage pollution across the UK.

It has taken decades of campaigning by environmental groups such as The Rivers Trust, Fish Legal and Surfers Against Sewage to force even this limited admission from the UK's largest water company.

What to do about the pollution, though, is still being kicked into the long grass. At the current rates of underinvestment, it will take hundreds of years to upgrade the sewerage system to anything like the requirements of a modern civilised society.

Thames Water's map shows information about its Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs), which are supposed to act as emergency valves during periods of "intense rainfall". They enable water companies to discharge millions of litres of untreated sewage and wastewater into rivers and onto beaches, which they claim would otherwise overwhelm the sewerage system and flood people's houses.

The map is startling. At the time of writing around one third of Thames Water's CSOs (identified by an exclamation mark) had polluted the environment within the last 48 hours and another third (double exclamation mark) were still discharging. Even among the remaining third of CSOs that have a green light, a substantial number reveal a history of pollution on further scrutiny.

For continuous pollution of a watercourse the current record goes to the storm overflow in the village of Marsh Gibbon, close to the city of Oxford. Raw sewage has been discharging from it for over 500 hours since December 19.

Local Windrush Against Sewage Pollution

campaigner Ashley Smith told reporters, "It shows the extent to which Thames Water is reliant on being able to use our rivers and streams as toilets to deal with problems caused largely by underinvestment and profiteering."

Pollution from Marsh Gibbon is not a recent anomaly. As far back as 1990 the National Rivers Authority (forerunner of today's Environment Agency-EA) identified the CSO as responsible for the poor quality of local streams and one of a swathe of sites requiring investment.

And it is not just Thames Water at fault. Last year The Rivers Trust published another map which includes the location of tens of thousands of CSOs across the country, advising people they should "Avoid entering the water immediately downstream of these discharges and avoid the overflows... especially after it has been raining."

Campaign group Surfers against Sewage has gone further, exposing how water companies resort to "dry spills" during which they "dump" untreated sewage "even when there hasn't been any rain." Forced to carry out its own research last year, the group discovered that companies failed to report a "staggering" 103 sewage overflows onto beaches for a period of more than two weeks during last summer, and that 44 sewage overflows were left completely unmonitored.

The revelations led the EA to warn people not to swim at numerous bathing sites because of high bacteria levels. At the same time Emma Howard Boyd, head of the EA's Performance department, declared that there had been "no sustained trend for improvement for several years in total incident numbers", lamenting that "only 56 percent of serious incidents were self-reported by the water companies

which is concerning given their impact on the environment”, and that most of their environmental performance ratings had been “downgraded.”

That the UK’s CSO-based sewerage system is “unfit for purpose” is made clear by Boyd and countless official reports by regulators and parliamentary committees, including a recent report of the Environmental Audit Committee headed, “Chemical cocktail of sewage, slurry and plastic polluting English rivers puts public health and nature at risk.”

Yet none address the fundamental issue. Private ownership and the profit system’s domination of the basic right to water and a clean environment has been a social, environmental and economic catastrophe for millions, while the companies and their shareholders have profited.

When the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher privatised the water industry in 1989 it wrote off all its debts and granted indemnity for CSO discharges, in order to satisfy the financial markets which were reluctant to invest, fearing potential criminal liabilities.

The Tories claimed that bureaucratism and inefficiency would be done away with through the introduction of competition, which would provide a massive injection of cash for investment.

The exact opposite happened. A Wild West-style rampage took place in which the previously state-owned water assets fell into the hands of bank consortiums, private equity firms and sovereign wealth funds committed to extracting every last penny from customers and workers, while splashing out on dividends.

Professor David Hall, an expert on England’s water industry from Greenwich University, recently explained how the companies “have borrowed large amounts of money, building up a large pile of debt and large annual bill for interest. This debt has not been taken on to finance investment, but to finance the payment of dividends.”

Since privatisation dividends worth £65 billion have been paid out, while debt has risen from zero to £54 billion.

At the same time, according to The Rivers Trust, “Since 1991 water companies have failed to treat sewage ‘effectually’ as required by the Water Industry Act 1991 and the [financial] regulator OFWAT has

singularly failed to use the powers granted to them to enforce that duty over the last 30 years. The Environment Agency has also been systematically defunded and disempowered to act.”

Since the UK left the European Union the government has attempted to scrap hundreds of environment laws. It introduced an amendment to the 2021 Environment Bill in opposition to a clause that sought *progressive reductions in the harm caused by discharges of untreated sewage*.

After decades of services run by private water companies, England and Wales have some of the worst water quality in Europe, with only 14 percent of rivers rated in good ecological health. A major part of the responsibility lies with the Labour Party and the trade unions.

The Labour government of Tony Blair (1997-2007) denounced opposition to Tory privatisation as “rigid dogma” and hailed “global finance, communication and the media” as “liberating” and “modernising” forces. “After a century of antagonism, economic efficiency and social justice are finally working in partnership together,” Blair told the 1999 Labour Party conference.

Last year, current Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer ditched plans to nationalise the water sector.

Since privatisation, the unions have pursued a “partnership” agreement with the employers, claiming it was the best way to achieve job security, better wages and conditions. Instead workers have faced constant reorganisations, job cuts, declining wages, outsourcing and downgrading.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates a fundamental restructuring of the economy to place the needs of working people and society before corporate profit and the accumulation of private wealth. A socialist policy for water supply and sanitation would involve reorganising the water companies based on rational international planning and cooperation, so that all the world’s inhabitants would receive the most basic necessity of life and health.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact