Water BRIEFING

CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

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Water briefing

- **Water faces multiple types of pollution and water security is increasingly under threat.** In England, just 15% of rivers, 16% of waterways (rivers, lakes, and streams), and 45% of coastal waters are in good ecological condition. On top of this, our demand for water is projected to grow by five billion extra litres per day by 2050 despite the domestic supply of water predicted to decline over time.
- **The government has prioritised tackling sewage pollution, but there is more work to be done elsewhere.** Alongside unlocking £56 billion of capital investment to reduce the use of storm overflows and a new legal duty to reduce their use of storm overflows, the government has removed the cap on civil water company fines. However, even with this action, there is more work to do to improve water quality.
- **Local authorities also have a role to play in improving water quality.** This briefing will explore some of the ways you can help, including reducing the use of pesticides on council land, awareness campaigns, and working with your water company.

Water quality and security in the UK

- **Just 15% of English rivers are in good ecological health.** The Environmental Audit Committee has described English rivers as a 'chemical cocktail' of sewage, agricultural waste, and plastic. Activities attributed to agriculture, the water industry, and transport are the leading known causes of river pollution.
- **Rainfall is the primary driver of storm overflow spills.** Most of England's network is 'combined', meaning rainwater and raw sewage go into the same pipe. The average number of spills per overflow was 33 in 2023. This figure was 23 for 2022 because we experienced less rainfall that year. Heavy rainfall does not affect a water company's responsibility to manage storm overflows in line with legal requirements and it is already illegal to exceed their permits for doing so. Water companies can face civil and criminal prosecution for exceeding their permits.
- **Pressure on the sewage system is growing, but historical data is unavailable to provide a clear idea of change over time.** As of December 2023, 100% of England's storm overflows are now fitted with monitors. With a roll out instigated in 2013, monitoring has increased from just 7% in 2010. In 2023, Scotland's rate was still less than 4%. This data has driven public outrage about sewage discharges and also provided the government with the necessary information to take appropriate action.
- **Increasing urbanisation reduces the ability of our land to naturally absorb water.** Impermeable surfaces, like car parks, roads, and buildings, reduce the ability of the land to absorb water during periods of heavy rainfall. This increases the pressure on the sewage system by forcing this rainwater into the drain, which, in turn, increases the risk posed by flash flooding.
- **Our demand for water is increasing, yet the supply is becoming more scarce.** Hotter and drier summers are leading to higher drought risk as a result of climate change. In England water availability could be reduced by 10 to 15% by 2050. Chalk streams, a vital ecosystem and globally rare habitat, are under particular threat, because their

aquifers are abstracted to provide drinking water for South East England. In addition, the UK has not built a single new reservoir since 1991 to cope with this risk to supply.

- **Our waterways are not in their natural state and have seen severe biodiversity loss as a result.** The UK has lost 90% of its wetland habitats in the last 100 years and over 10% of our freshwater and wetland species are now threatened with extinction. Major contributing factors to this include the loss of riparian habitats, pollution, and the construction of physical barriers such as weirs which can obstruct migratory species.

The importance of healthy waterways

- **Waterways provide critical habitats for many species.** Freshwater habitats are vital ecosystems for many species of flora and fauna. In the UK they are home to some iconic species such as Atlantic salmon, otters, kingfishers, and dragonflies.
- **Waterways provide people with essential services.** Much of the UK's drinking water comes from natural surface water such as rivers and lakes. Rivers also provide important routes for transport and irrigation.
- **Waterways are important recreational resources too**. Angling has the highest numbers of participants in the UK of any sport. Wild swimming has also become a popular leisure activity. By being reliant upon water, these activities and the access to nature they provide have mental and physical wellbeing benefits for your residents. However, poor water quality can discourage people from this activity.

Sources of water pollution

- **Excessive use of chemicals and slurry on agricultural land is a leading cause of water pollution.** When applied in excess, nitrates and phosphates found in farming inputs, can run off into nearby water courses and cause harmful algal blooms. Currently, 62% of river stretches failed chemical health tests because of activities attributed to agriculture and rural land management.
- **Water industry activity is another leading cause of water pollution.** Sewage discharges are attributed to the failure of 54% of river stretches chemical health tests. Poor drainage, growing populations, the predominantly combined system, and high levels of rainfall, all increase pressure on our sewage system and the need to use storm overflows, resulting in more sewage entering watercourses.
- **Urbanisation and the transport sector play major roles in the decline of our rivers.** Pollutants built up on road surfaces like oils, fuel spills, and particles from tyres wear – get washed into road side drains and watercourses. These factors contributed to the ecological health test failure of 26% of English river stretches.
- **Incorrect disposal of products is another threat to our sewage system and wildlife.** When incorrectly disposed of, fats, oil, and greases (FOGs) can congeal with sanitary products and lead to sewer blockages. Water companies spend £100 million per year resolving blockages. Items that don't get stuck in the pipe end up in our natural environment with 72% of beaches having 'sewage-related litter' on them in 2023.

Government action on water quality

- **Privatisation of water companies in the 1990s has delivered higher levels of investment, lower bills, and a better service.** Water companies in England have invested £190 billion since 1989 and have put forward business plans to spend a further £100 billion between 2025 and 2030. This figure is almost 250% larger than the dividends that have been paid out in the same time period and, according to Ofwat, bills are £120 lower than they would have been otherwise.
- **The Environment Act 2021 placed new duties on water companies and legally-binding targets to reduce water pollutants.** Water companies now have a legal duty to progressively reduce harm from storm overflows and to provide near real time information on their operation. There are also now legally-binding targets to reduce different sources of pollution, like nitrogen and phosphorus, by 40% by 2038.
- **The Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan will unlock £56 billion of capital investment.** By 2050 water companies will need to ensure there is no local adverse ecological impact from the use of storm overflows and discharges will not be permitted above an average of 10 rainfall events per year. Progress will be reported on in 2025 and every five years afterwards, with a review of the targets in 2027.
- **The Plan for Water published in March 2023 committed to a suite of actions, including the creation of a Water Restoration Fund.** The £250,000 cap on civil penalties has been removed, meaning civil *and* criminal fines imposed on water companies for environmental harm are now unlimited. The first round of the fund made £11 million available to communities.
- **The Bathing Water Regulations were passed in 2013.** In the early 1990s, just 28% of bathing waters met the highest standards in force at that time. Last year, 96% of bathing waters in England met minimum standards and 90% of bathing waters in England were rated as 'good' or 'excellent', up from 76% in 2010. In May 2024, the government designated 27 new in-land bathing waters in England.
- **The rollout of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) will ensure new developments across England will benefit nature.** Developers must now deliver BNG of at least 10%. This will ensure that nature is left in a measurably better state than it was before the development and increase access to nature in the places where people live. This will increase the quality of green space on developments, helping to absorb rainwater.
- **The new Environmental Land Management schemes pay farmers to improve soil and water quality.** Land managers can now receive public money to restore wetlands, manage nutrients more effectively and establish riparian buffer strips. The regenerative farming practices rewarded through this post-Brexit payment system will also strengthen farmland soil, helping farmers to cope with periods of flooding and drought. A £15 million Catchment Sensitive Farming programme can also provide advice for farmers on how to reduce water pollution.

Labour's plans to improve water quality

- **Water companies will remain privatised.** Despite pressure from its members, Labour has committed to not nationalising the water sector because of the billions of pounds it would cost taxpayers to do so.
- **Labour's plans to clean up rivers are purely deterrent based.** Its policies include blocking bonuses (something the Conservative government already provided Ofwat with the powers to do) and criminal charges for water company bosses.
- **The policies to improve water quality focus solely on water companies.** Despite the multiple sources of pollution water is subjected to, reducing sewage discharges is the only stated area of action. In its manifesto, there is no mention of reducing the pollution caused by agriculture, transport, or the adopting of a more catchment based approach to water quality to solve the problem efficiently and holistically.

Resources and ideas

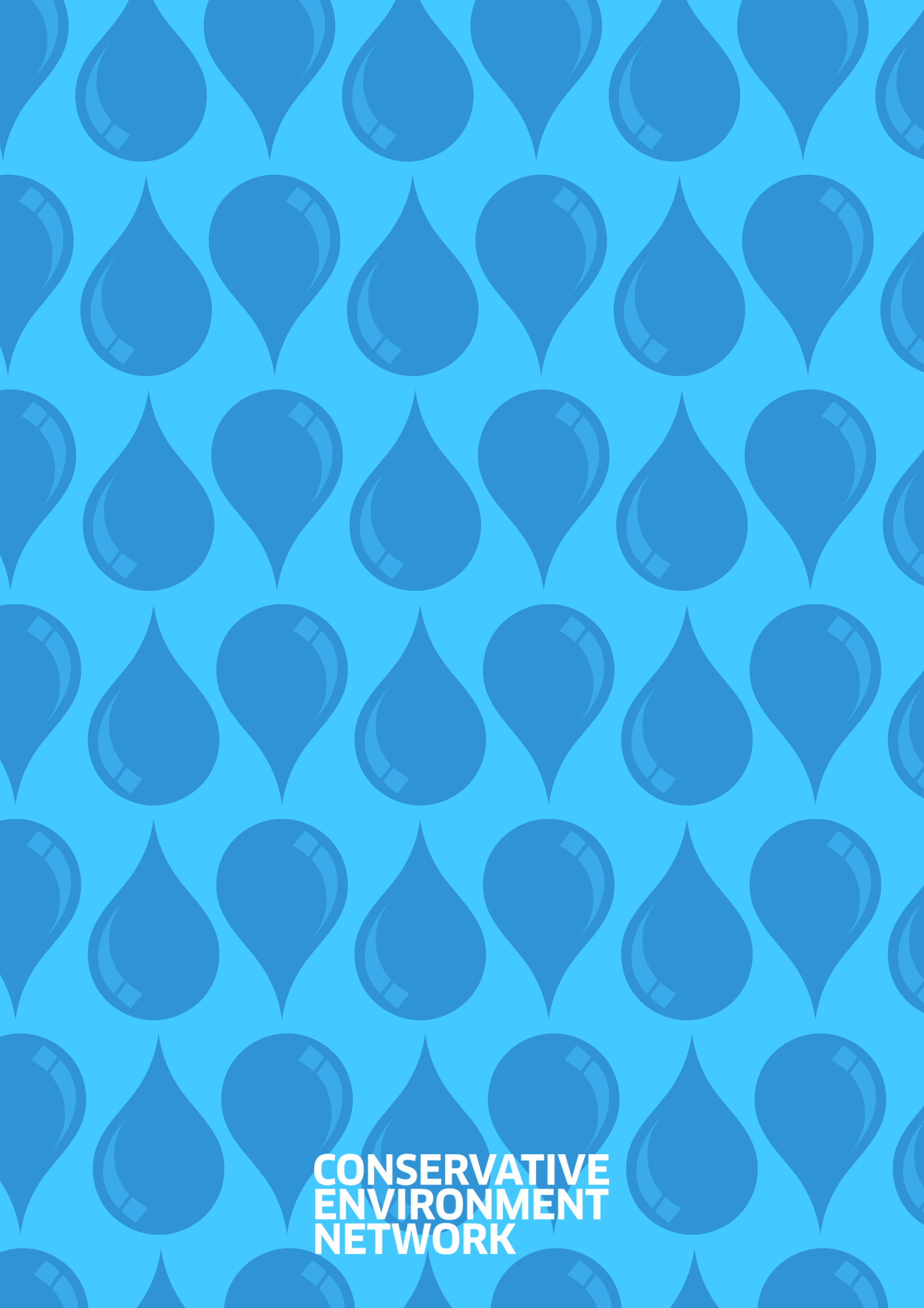
- **Reduce the use of pesticides on council land.** Using pesticides more sparingly can reduce the amount of chemicals in the ecosystem and often save councils money. Through its Pesticide-Free Towns scheme, the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) is supporting 100 councils wanting to cut their pesticide with advice and resources.
- **Increase the amount of greenery in the built environment.** Sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS) retain and filter rainwater in urban environments. Susdrain and The Flood Hub have case studies and more information about SuDS. Water companies and the government have previously made funding available for SuDS.
- **Work with water companies to help improve local water systems.** Local authorities have been key partners in many previous water company initiatives to help address water issues and improve efficiency. There are plenty of opportunities to collaborate with your local water company. For example to improve the capacity of the sewerage system by avoiding common sources of blockages and keeping rainwater out.
- **Apply a catchment-based approach to your Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).** The 48 strategies spanning England will require local authorities to identify target areas for nature recovery. The scale of the strategies lend themselves to thinking at the river catchment level, from source to sea. SSWAN and Catchment-Based Approach (CaBA) provide resources and information for organisations interested in applying this catchment-based thinking to their projects.
- **Lead a community water butt roll out.** Water butts are a simple way to keep rainwater out of the sewage system. Read CEN's water butt briefing to find out more.
- **Convene conversations about local action on water management.** Councils can be a powerful convening force for discussions with local stakeholders, like NGOs, water companies, farmers, and developers, about water. As a local councillor, you can be a driving force behind the success of regular and constructive meetings with these stakeholders to ensure everyone is working together towards the same goal.
- **Apply for Water Restoration Fund funding.** The fund is used to restore and enhance the water environment in specified geographical areas, using environmental fines and

penalties collected from water companies. The proposed project must focus on improving and preventing further deterioration of the water environment.

- **Run a digital awareness campaign about blockages.** Informing residents about the correct methods of disposal (i.e. not flushing items down the toilet, sink, or drain) can help to reduce blockages. Add an information page to your council's website for residents wanting to learn more. This could be joined by a social media campaign. Water UK has published digital assets that are free to use.
- **Liaise with local eateries to promote responsible management of FOGs.** Some ways to engage with them include: adding a page to your council's website; hosting an information session with a water company and/or the Food Standards Agency; or making grant funding available to businesses wanting to upgrade their grease traps.
- **Support or lead a campaign to achieve bathing water status for a local stretch of water.** Bathing waters are sites that are officially recognised by the government as being popular for recreation. Once designated, the Environment Agency will regularly monitor and work to improve water quality. Successful applications require local council support. Read CEN's bathing water toolkit to find out more.
- **Increase your council's local BNG requirement.** By increasing the net gain minimum of 10%, your council can deliver greater measurable improvements for nature. Studies have found that the cost of doubling BNG from 10% to 20% is often very manageable.
- **Ensure drains are in good condition.** Councils are responsible for 97% (just under 600,000) of road drains across the country with the National Highways in charge of the remaining 3% (18,000). By ensuring that their drains are unblocked, and working efficiently, councils can help to reduce this runoff into watercourses. Increasing the greenery around road drains can also reduce the amount of rainwater entering them.

Case studies

- **Isle of Wight Council has partnered with Southern Water to establish SuDS across the island's town centres.** This Pathfinder project identifies suitable areas within town centres, namely those with large impermeable areas such as car parks, to establish SuDS. SuDS have included tree pits, rain gardens, and permeable paving.
- **Wiltshire County Council is alleviating flooding whilst improving biodiversity along the River Avon.** The Salisbury River Park project is in response to flood risks in Salisbury's city centre. This project has created wildlife areas along the banks of the River Avon and removed man made river barriers. This project has been funded through the Local Enterprise Partnership, Salisbury City Council, the UK government's Flood Defence Grant in Aid and the Department for Education, the Local Levy from the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, and National Highways funding.
- **The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has focused on SuDS in its new Local Flood Risk Management Strategy.** At risk from multiple types of flooding, including flash flooding, a core mission of this council's new strategy is to increase the amount of greenery, such as SuDS, in the community to absorb and retain rainwater. The strategy details the role that each council department and local stakeholders need to play, and identifies the actions they each can take to deliver the strategy.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