

CLEAN
THE
BILL

IT'S TIME FOR A
NEW VISION FOR
WATER



**SURFERS
AGAINST
SEWAGE**





WE NEED A BILL
THAT DELIVERS FOR THE
FUTURE WE ALL DESERVE

INTRODUCTION

Surfers Against Sewage was founded in 1990 by surfers who were tired of getting sick when surfing. More than three decades later, water users across the UK are still getting ill from swimming, surfing and playing in sewage-polluted waters.

The sewage scandal is the direct result of a profit-driven water system that has paid out billions in dividends to shareholders in England and Wales, since privatisation in 1989. Over the last 30 years, regulators have turned a blind eye whilst infrastructure crumbles and water companies treat our waters like an open sewer.

Communities across the UK have been paying the price. Sewage pollution is making people sick, destroying livelihoods, and wrecking our environment. The UK's most popular beaches are being deluged in sewage, even in summer. Rivers, once bursting at the banks with life, now trickle in despair; suffocating with sewage.

This is more than just an environmental disaster; it's a public health threat, which has destroyed the lives of countless families, cost the NHS time and resources and continues to put our lives and our health at risk when we enter the water.

Right now, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to end sewage pollution through the Clean Water Bill. Get it right and we transform our future; we get clean water to swim, surf and play in and the conditions to allow our precious coasts and rivers to recover. Get it wrong and we're locked into the same broken model for another 30 years, where pollution still pays, and people still get sick.

Radical change cannot be achieved through the current privatised water system. We need transformational, systemic change and a new vision for water. A new water system that protects public health and the environment. Where communities get a say and regulators do their job.

The solutions are known. Every major political party has expressed outrage at the sewage crisis and promised change. Public pressure has never been higher. All we need now is for the Government to act in the interest of its people – and not water company shareholders. This Government was elected on a pledge to clean up our beaches and rivers. They must now deliver. For every victim of the sewage crisis. And for every bill-payer forced to foot the cost of this scandal.

THE STATE OF SEWAGE

Decades of neglect and underinvestment have left the UK with some of the most polluted seas, rivers and lakes in Europe. Without a fundamental change in the way our money is spent, we will continue to put our health, and our lives at risk when we swim, surf or paddle in our waters.



SEWAGE STATS IN ENGLAND

Raw sewage was discharged
into England's waters

288,649

times in 2025 – one of the
driest years on record.

An estimated

80-90%

of all sewage discharges
are illegal.¹

In 2025, there were an average of

20 sewage alerts at
designated bathing
waters per day.

Water Bills are set to rise over
the next 5 years by at least.

36%

187,241

hours of dry discharges were
recorded in England in 2025.

80%

of sickness reports were
from bathing waters rated
'good' or 'excellent'.

Total pollution incidents in
England increased

45%

since 2020 – the opposite of the
40% reduction water companies are
supposed to deliver by 2040.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn0nxd1jgw5o>

A GROWING PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Even the places that are supposed to be safe – our bathing waters – are being flooded with raw sewage. In the UK, amidst a growing mental health crisis, more people are finding solace in our waters. Recent research has shown that access to blue spaces has multiple measurable benefits for mental health, physical health and social wellbeing – and likely reduced healthcare costs as a result. Yet this is under threat, and sewage discharges are stopping people from entering the water, or worse making them sick when they do.

Cases of serious sickness due to sewage pollution are already widespread across the UK. Since 2020, SAS has received 7,641 sickness reports from UK water users, leading to 14,009 sick days off work. These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg and actual figures are likely to be far higher. When it comes to sewage sickness, we're not just talking about a few surfers with stomach bugs. People are contracting devastating, life-changing diseases and infections. And at the most extreme is the heartbreaking story of Heather Preen, an 8-year-old girl who lost her life after playing on a sewage-polluted beach.

7,641

sickness reports from UK water users, leading to 14,009 sick days.

53%

of people are worried swimming in the UK water will make them sick.



THE PUBLIC ARE READY FOR CHANGE

The Government published its 'Vision for Water' without running a public consultation. So, we did it for them. **37,470** people took part, sharing their views on the future of the water industry.

1%

of the public believe the current proposals from Government will fix the problem.

82%

say the Government is not doing enough to tackle the sewage scandal.

77%

say bringing water companies under public ownership would be the single most effective way to improve the sector.

54%

say a party's stronger stance on sewage and water companies would influence how they vote.

WHAT ARE WE CALLING FOR?

A NEW VISION FOR WATER

The Clean Water Bill provides the best opportunity in a generation to create the legal and regulatory framework needed to transform the system. **To end sewage pollution and protect people and the environment, we are calling for a Bill which will:**

1 RECLAIM THE SYSTEM
— end this failed privatised model and set out a clear roadmap for a water system that works for people and the environment, not shareholders.

2 PROTECT OUR HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT
— protect the health of water users and make water companies legally accountable for the harm they cause to public health and the environment.

3 STOP THE POLLUTERS, STOP THE SEWAGE
— introduce a tough independent regulator, loophole-proof accountability, and enforcement that makes polluters pay.



OUR GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

Everything we are calling for flows from these five principles – the framework against which the water industry, its regulation and any Government policy should deliver.

- **LEGAL DUTY TO PROTECT PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH.** Water companies must operate under a clear legal duty to provide clean and safe drinking water and protect public health and the environment. This means prioritising action to protect the health of the millions of people who use the water and restoring natural environments.
- **OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST.** Water companies must be not-for-profit. Investment must be funded by long-term low-risk investors, ending the current exploitative profit-driven model. Only the transition of all water companies to not-for-profit models will deliver long-term stable investment and end the cycles of asset sweating, under-investment and pollution that characterise this for-profit system.
- **TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATORS.** Regulators must have a clear and unambiguous legal duty to protect and restore public and environmental health, and be resourced, equipped and financed to enforce the law and hold polluters to account. The regulatory and enforcement system must be clearly beyond the influence of water companies and drive continuous performance improvement. Operator self-monitoring must end immediately.
- **DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING.** Decisions about how water is planned, funded and managed should be taken on a regional and local level with the input of local stakeholders. Crucially, these stakeholders must have decision-making power legislated for in regulation.
- **TRANSPARENCY.** Water companies and regulators must reveal the truth about their operations across the business and provide the public with consistent, easily understandable information to protect water users' health.

1

RECLAIM THE SYSTEM

**The privatised water model has failed.
The Clean Water Bill must replace it.**

At the time of privatisation water companies were debt free - and given £5 billion for environmental improvements. Water companies in England are now £69.2 billion in debt, after relying largely on borrowing to pay out more than £75 billion to shareholders. The public are paying the price, with an average of 35p in every pound of bill payers money servicing debt and dividend payments. And bills in England are set to rise by at least 36% by 2030, to cover the much-needed investment in the infrastructure that water companies have neglected. This is not a series of individual corporate failures. It is the predictable outcome of a governance and financial system that prioritises shareholder returns.



1.1

A ROADMAP TO A NEW VISION FOR WATER

The current privatised model cannot deliver the transformation needed to end sewage pollution. The Clean Water Bill must set out a clear roadmap to end it and enable the transition to water companies operating for the benefit of people and the environment, not for private profit.

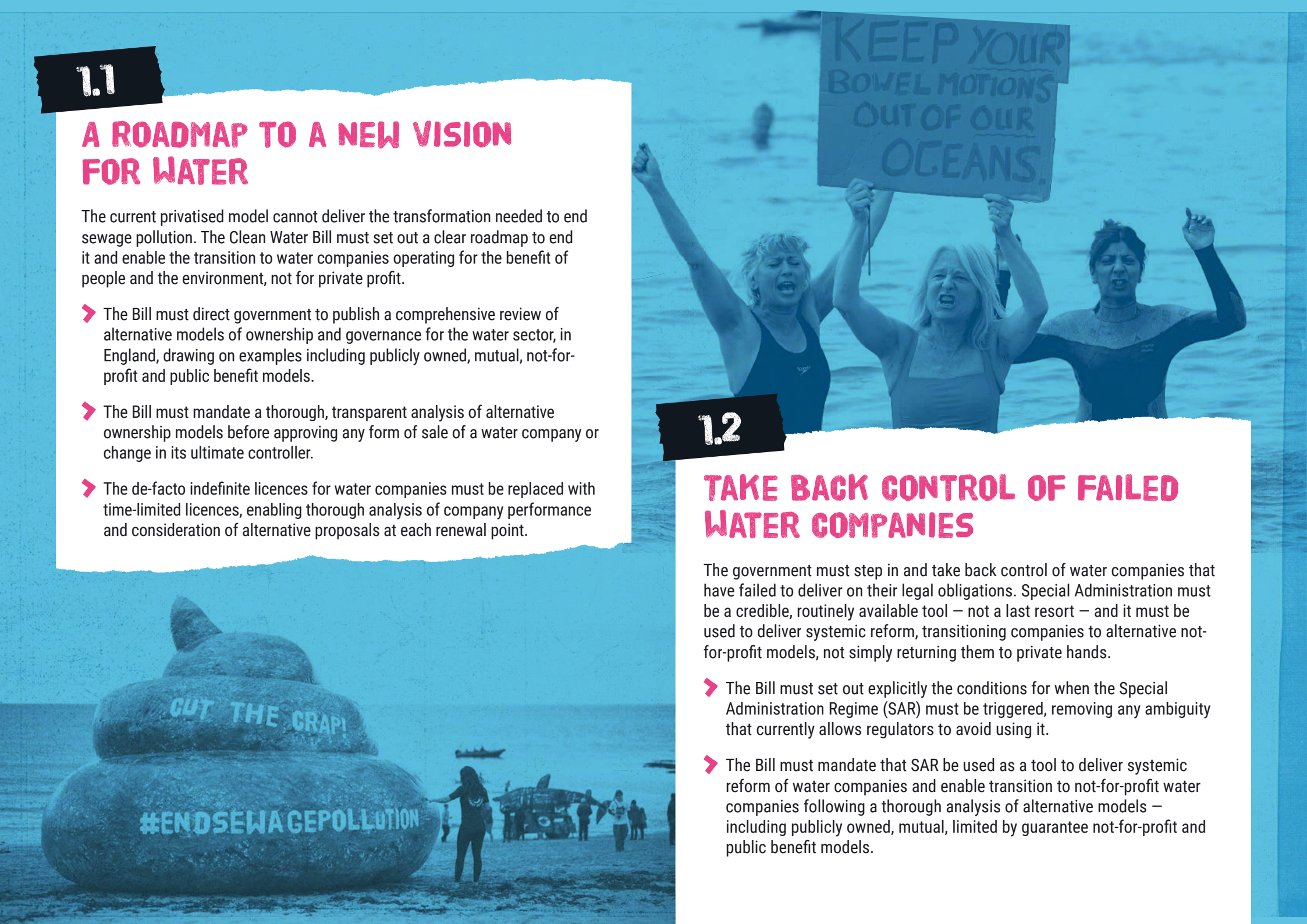
- The Bill must direct government to publish a comprehensive review of alternative models of ownership and governance for the water sector, in England, drawing on examples including publicly owned, mutual, not-for-profit and public benefit models.
- The Bill must mandate a thorough, transparent analysis of alternative ownership models before approving any form of sale of a water company or change in its ultimate controller.
- The de-facto indefinite licences for water companies must be replaced with time-limited licences, enabling thorough analysis of company performance and consideration of alternative proposals at each renewal point.

1.2

TAKE BACK CONTROL OF FAILED WATER COMPANIES

The government must step in and take back control of water companies that have failed to deliver on their legal obligations. Special Administration must be a credible, routinely available tool – not a last resort – and it must be used to deliver systemic reform, transitioning companies to alternative not-for-profit models, not simply returning them to private hands.

- The Bill must set out explicitly the conditions for when the Special Administration Regime (SAR) must be triggered, removing any ambiguity that currently allows regulators to avoid using it.
- The Bill must mandate that SAR be used as a tool to deliver systemic reform of water companies and enable transition to not-for-profit water companies following a thorough analysis of alternative models – including publicly owned, mutual, limited by guarantee not-for-profit and public benefit models.



A STATUTORY LEGAL DUTY TO PROTECT PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

The Water Industry Act 1973 required the government to restore the 'wholesomeness of rivers' and protect recreational water use. That duty was quietly removed in 1991 and replaced with a requirement to ensure water companies made a 'reasonable return'. This single change set the direction for three decades of sewage pollution. The Clean Water Bill must reverse it.

- The Bill must establish a primary statutory duty at the heart of the water sector: to protect public health and the environment from sewage pollution.
- The Bill must introduce a statutory duty in water companies' licences to protect public and environmental health. This duty must replace water companies' profit motive and embed protecting public and environmental health as core operational and governance principles.
- The Bill must mandate a long-term, low-risk investment structure for the water sector focused on delivering public health and environmental outcomes, ending the current exploitative financial model.

DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

Decisions about how water system is planned, funded and managed must be taken on a regional and local level with the input of local stakeholders – and crucially, those stakeholders must have genuine decision-making power, legislated for in regulation. The Clean Water Bill must establish Democratic Regional Water Authorities with real power, not advisory functions.

- Democratic Regional Water Authorities must sit above water companies with oversight of local and regional water company planning, spending and performance.
- They must be independent of the new Integrated Water Regulator, with the ability to hold it to account.
- Regional Water Authorities must be established on a statutory footing, with democratic accountability and powers to direct and approve water company plans and investment, influence local planning and permitting decisions, and trigger place-based interventions where companies are failing to prevent sewage pollution.



2

PROTECT OUR HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Bill must protect the health of all water users in England — wherever, whenever and however they use the water.

Sewage pollution is creating a public health crisis. People are being made ill by swimming, surfing and paddling in waters contaminated with raw sewage. Public health requirements in water legislation in England are framed almost entirely around drinking water quality. The millions of surfers, swimmers, paddlers and coastal communities who use our waters for recreation, sport and wellbeing are largely left unprotected. **The Clean Water Bill must change this.**



2.1

HOLD POLLUTERS ACCOUNTABLE FOR HARM TO HUMAN HEALTH

To protect public health water companies must become legally responsible for harm caused to human health by sewage pollution. When nearly 80% of people reporting sickness are from bathing waters rated 'good' or 'excellent', it is clear the current system is not protecting people. When sewage pollution has made people sick, or impacted businesses, individuals cannot and should not be left to fight water companies and prove they are responsible. The water industry must become **strictly liable for harm caused to human health**, including the health of recreational water users, as a result of sewage pollution.

- The Bill must introduce a new 'failure to prevent harm to public health' strict liability offence for water companies.
- Harm to public health must be legally presumed to be the result of water company action where: water quality standards are exceeded at a monitored site; untreated sewage discharge occurs in or near a designated bathing water; an unpermitted or illegal overflow occurs; or a sewage-related pollution incident occurs.
- Through the strict liability model, water companies cannot evade responsibility by claiming ignorance or operational complexity. Instead, they must demonstrate that they had robust, preventative systems in place to protect the health of water users from sewage pollution.
- To hold water companies to account for harm caused to individuals and communities by sewage pollution, the Bill must mandate a reversal of the burden of proof, so no individual has to prove a water company is responsible for harm caused to them. Where sewage contamination or discharge is evidenced, water companies must prove that their activities did not cause harm – rather than individuals being required to prove causation against a well-resourced industry.
- **Penalties must include:** unlimited fines; bans on dividend payouts; custodial sentences for executives; and in the case of repeated breaches, the Secretary of State must consider the use of Special Administration.

2.2

PROTECT ALL WATER USERS

The millions of people who swim, surf, paddle and play in England's waters have been failed by a legal framework that treats drinking water consumers as the only people whose health matters. The Clean Water Bill must name recreational water users, protect them, and give them enforceable rights.

- Any definition of 'public health' within the Bill must explicitly include recreational use of water, not just drinking water.
- The duty on the regulator to protect public health must explicitly include the health of recreational water users.
- The Bathing Water Regulations must be amended to monitor year-round and in real time for current and emerging pollution threats, and to count all forms of recreational water users, not just 'bathers', when designating bathing waters.
- The Bill must prioritise action to end untreated sewage discharges at the places we swim, play and surf by 2030.



3

STOP THE POLLUTERS, STOP THE SEWAGE

Tough independent regulators, loophole-proof accountability, and enforcement that makes pollution pay.

Years of discretionary enforcement and weak penalties have proved one thing conclusively: water companies in England will not stop polluting unless they are compelled to. Fines have been too small and too slow. Executive bonuses have continued despite record spills. The bonus ban introduced by the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 is already being circumvented through corporate structures.

In 2025 there were 187,241 hours of illegal dry spills in England: sewage discharged despite no rainfall. These dry spills affected 105 bathing waters in England, 79% of which were officially rated 'good' or 'excellent'.

The Clean Water Bill must change this fundamentally: with tough, independent regulators empowered and resourced to enforce the law; and accountability that reaches the individuals who make the decisions that allow sewage to flow.



3.1

TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATORS

The Government's proposed creation of a new Integrated Water Regulator is an opportunity to end fragmented oversight of England's water industry. But structure alone will not change outcomes. The new regulator must have the right primary duty, genuine independence, sufficient resources, and a clear mandate to enforce the law without fear or favour.

- Legislation must place a legal duty on the Integrated Water Regulator to protect public health and deliver environmental restoration. This duty must replace Ofwat's previous duty to make 'reasonable returns' for water companies.
- The new Integrated Water Regulator must be empowered to ensure water companies deliver on their public and environmental duty, and be sufficiently resourced to hold them to account when they don't.
- The Integrated Water Regulator's first action must be to enforce all existing laws which require water companies in England to treat sewage 'effectively' and only permit sewage discharges from storm overflows in 'exceptional circumstances'.
- The regulator must review all permits currently issued to water companies to ensure they are brought into compliance with existing legislation.
- Operator self-monitoring must end immediately. Independent monitoring of sewage discharges and pollution incidents must replace it, with real-time data published publicly.

3.2

A DIVIDEND BAN FOR LAW-BREAKING COMPANIES

All water companies in England and Wales are either under investigation or have been fined by the regulator for breaking the law and failing to treat sewage effectively. Yet they have continued to reward shareholders. No company that has broken the law should be able to profit.

- Where a water company has been shown to break the law it must be barred from paying dividends.
- Dividends may only be paid where water companies meet stretching performance and delivery targets.



A ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION OPPORTUNITY

The privatised water model has had more than three decades to prove it can deliver. It has categorically failed. The Clean Water Bill is the most important piece of water legislation since privatisation. It must not be a managed reset of a broken system. It must be the beginning of its replacement – with a system that places public health and the environment at its core; that makes sewage pollution a matter of criminal accountability for those who allow it; that gives every water user the legal protection they deserve; and that sets out a clear, time-bound path to a water sector that works for people and nature, not shareholders.

Every major political party has expressed outrage at the state of the sewage crisis and promised change. Hundreds of thousands of people have signed petitions, marched, paddled out and refused to accept sewage pollution as normal.

**The public demand an end to sewage pollution.
The Bill must deliver for them.**

