

Improving Management of our Water Environment

Non-Verbatim Minutes



All Party Parliamentary
Water Group

Date	Wednesday 9 November 2022
Time	10:00 – 11:30
Venue	Room G, House of Lords, Palace of Westminster and on Zoom The meeting was hybrid, with some virtual attendees.
Chair	Baroness Anne McIntosh Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Water Group.
Speakers	Helen Wakeham Deputy Director of Water Industry Regulation, Environment Agency. Matt Wheeldon Director of Assets and Compliance, Wessex Water. Lydia Dareheath Public Policy Advisor, Anglian Water.

MINUTES

Baroness McIntosh, the co-chair of the group, welcomed everyone to the session, thanking especially the speakers for their attendance. She introduced the session on improving the management of our water environment.

She gave some background on her experience as a backbench MP during 2007 for an area that was prone to surface water flooding. Baroness McIntosh introduced the panel for the session on why surface flooding is so dangerous, particularly when combined with sewage overflows. She is very passionate about the problem because if the sewage does not stop coming out of the new build homes then community will continue to be damaged. She gave an example of sewage costing millions of pounds worth of damage to a school and a number of bungalows, regularly occupied by older people.

The Levelling Up Bill provides a method to include building regulations. Baroness McIntosh said she has a number of amendments ready to go and motioned to her co-chair Liz Twist MP indicating that she could take these up in the House of Commons.

She said she looks forward to discussing the role of local government and other actors, referencing the Pitt Review on flooding. Challenges to parliamentarians and other decision makers is recognising that the problem is front ended. She wants to put a timeframe on replacing the infrastructure for the right to connect for water companies.

Baroness McIntosh introduced the first speaker Helen Wakeham from the Environment Agency.

Helen Wakeham opened with her involvement in the first bathing water samples in Blackpool. She stated that the bathing water then was overrun with raw sewage and was much worse than it is now. It is nice to hear about integrated water management, rather than separating the issues.

Clean and plentiful water is the biggest challenge for the water sector. The UK is a dense country and our river health is not ecologically stable enough. There are new problems facing water that we didn't know about 30 years ago. Climate change and other factors are exacerbating the problems. Helen acknowledged that although there are still problems, the sector has made changes which have improved water health across the UK. She mentioned a study done by Cardiff University which found that river biodiversity has improved due to measures taken, particularly in urban areas. The impact of agriculture and road runoff are still significant factors to water issues.

Drainage and waste water plans are essential to water management plans and one of the last areas without a plan. A holistic and sustainable approach is necessary because it is not effectively to individualise each aspect of the water system. She provided the example of London's sewage system and how costly and ineffective it would be to dig up every street for an entire system upgrade. Helen agreed with Baroness McIntosh about the right to connect. Source control is needed, but whether that is further up the system is open to discussion.

The twin track approach of a regulation which drives planning which drives investment works, but there needs to be a more strategic approach and application.

Baroness McIntosh introduced Matt Western from Wessex Water.

Matt Western has been in the industry for 27 years and has mostly dealt with sewage and sewage treatment. He was part of the DEFRA taskforce on sewage treatment. He said drought issues and overflow issues are rooted in poor rain water management. Rain water should be treated as a resource and it is underused in the UK. There are not mandatory requirements for rainwater to be used.

Rainwater should not be mixed with foul water and should return to land as close to where it falls as possible. The centralisation of rainwater management means ownership and management is taken away from individuals. Half of housing stock only has one pipe which drains all water off the property. If we do not change the way we do things the issues will compound.

Overflow treatment needs a regulatory change not a legislative change. There are many benefits to changes to the overflow processes when using a separation method. Customer benefits are lower water bill, lower waste water bill and lower service charge, meaning water customers save three times on their water bills. The benefits for the environment are abstracting less during high demand, lowest carbon footprint, less storm drainage sites. Matt suggested that the change needs to come from a legislative position to do that, but not all areas are easily transferred.

If we do disconnect service water, there is no power to charge that service. Developers did not have that power, but highway authorities do have such authority. Matt recognised there is a need for fiscal incentives. Doing the right thing for the customer and the planet is regularly more risky and therefore regulatory support is needed for a change in process to benefit all. Holistic thinking is necessary to solve these issues.

Baroness McIntosh thanked Matt and introduced Lydia Dareheath from Anglian Water.

Lydia Dareheath said she agrees with the previous speakers but that we need to look at how to get these conversations into more diverse spaces both in viewpoints and backgrounds. There is a fair bit of work to do as a water company but there are some positives coming out of those spaces.

She explained that Anglian had set up a new environment department as well as increased transparency on water data, as part of their Get River Positive campaign. The programmes were in partnership with Severn Trent. She referenced WaterUK's report on rivers and how she found that helpful.

She echoed that notion that all these issues are integrated. Anglian water has created a strategic pipeline Alliance which is a major pipe to bring water down into the South East where there are some water shortages from Grimsby, which experiences more rainfall. Anglian Water has also been preparing for a drought like the one that occurred in the Summer of 2022 for some time which meant they did not need to enact a hosepipe ban. Anglian Water is also working on a two new reservoirs to support regeneration and will support new green jobs.

She acknowledged WaterWise who attended the meeting and the important role they play in water efficiency.

Baroness McIntosh thanked all the speakers. She asked why the press are saying it is now worse than in the 1980s when it clearly isn't and why the water companies are not being given credit for the positive work that the companies are doing. She remembered that she was frustrated when the environment bill was going through parliament as the bill did not address the origin of the issues

Lydia replied that the positive side is that people are talking about water and that there is a space and conversation for further discussions to be had. She recognised that graduates who are passionate about the environment are not joining the water sector due to them being viewed as the bad guys, when in actuality there is a large amount of work being done in that space. For example, the water sector is on track to reach net-zero by 2030. Getting water management as part of building regulations would be very impactful in water management further down the line and would raise awareness of the process issues.

Matt said that a number of colleagues have taken harsh criticism. Some NGOs feed on bad news which allows them to grow their base. The fact that storm overflow data is available can create issues as the numbers do not tell the whole story. Need to move to a position of stronger information to cut off the link between water quality and storm overflows. The perception of the water sector is so low that it will be a long road to change the narrative.

Helen agrees that water industries and waste water management have faced a large amount of negative press, but said the increased press has taught us some things and raised greater awareness of the larger issues at play. Some of these issues have been around for years, so why have the water companies not raised them before.

Baroness McIntosh asked Helen how we can tackle the issue of road runoff contributing to sewage overflows.

Helen would like to see academics having a louder voice in the debate and then discussing with NGOs about what the solutions are for the future. Nobody is asking about the future or current status.

Co-chair Liz Twist MP said that NGOs are campaign organisations and that they focus on a particular issue. Those campaigns get through to her inbox. She does not criticise the NGOs for carrying out their campaigns. She also emphasised that we need to bring more people particularly policy makers into the conversation. We are using too much water too freely and there needs to be cross sector cooperation to tackle these issues.

Baroness Hooper, who attended virtually, thanked all the contributors. She asked if it was possible to produce some guide of good practice, including practices of other countries?

Baroness McIntosh thanked Baroness Hooper for her question and said the panel will circle back to it. She then asked the representatives from WaterWise which review was the most useful and why water efficiency has fallen off the radar?

Dr Fatima Ajia said for a long time water companies have based their services on uninterrupted supply of water rather than thinking about how is best to provide and use water. Integrated water resource management can be a vessel to bring back water efficiency to the top of the agenda. We need to link

water efficiency to wider narratives of environmental protection, climate action, health, and other top priorities of society. High profile incidents tend to overpower discussions of water efficiency.

Lydia said she agreed with Liz Twist MP that conversations need to go beyond just the water sector. She echoed what was said by Dr Fatima Aja that water labelling and further understanding where our water comes from and how the water is used is important to further understanding water processes and how to better them. Water efficiency needs to be coupled with energy efficiency conversations.

Helen said that Baroness Hooper's question was a very interesting one, but she did not know of a comprehensive document or guide. In relation to the water efficiency discussion, there are opportunities to bring better awareness to consumers about how their water usage impact the environment and broader water systems.

Matt noted the water bottles around the tables, stating that the cost for the same amount of water coming out of a tap would be less than 1p for all six bottles. We do not value resources and services when they are cheap or free. Only when those resources are taken away is more value placed upon them. He noted that there are some reports comparing waste water across European countries and the reports showed many other countries do not know as much about their water systems as the UK does. European water systems are much more fragmented. Data should be contextualised, so that those viewing the data understand where the overflows and sewage is coming from to highlight the personal impact on water systems. Is there a societal or a government problem. One of the issues is that there is no single regulatory framework. He noted the suds hierarchy and the back and forth between authorities on where surface water can flow.

Baroness McIntosh handed over the chair to Liz Twist MP as the House of Lords is now sitting. She thanked everyone for their contributions again. She said she hopes everyone in the room will brief parliamentarians on upcoming bills discussed earlier. There should be a holistic approach.

Baroness McIntosh said she hopes legislation like the Lev would fill the gaps in the current system.

Lydia noted that DEFRA is consulting on Water labour at the moment.

Helen said there is an opportunity in the Levelling Up to talk about the dependency of the floods and water act.

Baroness McIntosh said the NGOs are helpful in lots of ways, noting that the Rivers Trust is particularly good.

Baroness McIntosh closed the meeting.