



# All Party Parliamentary Water Group

**Co-Chairs:** Angela Smith MP and Baroness McIntosh of Pickering  
**Vice-Chairs:** Neil Parish MP, Lord Bird and the Earl of Selborne GBE FRS  
**Treasurer:** Luke Pollard MP

## Better Water Usage and the 25 Year Environment Plan (Non-Verbatim Minutes)

Tuesday 20 March, Committee Room 11, Palace of Westminster  
5.00pm – 6.00pm

The All Party Parliamentary Group's March meeting was on the topic of Better Water Usage and the 25 Year Environment Plan

Guest Speakers:

- Holly Lynch MP, Shadow Water Minister
- Dr Pete Fox, Director of Water, Land and Biodiversity, The Environment Agency
- Catherine Moncrieff, Freshwater Policy and Programme Manager, WWF

**Angela Smith MP** chaired the meeting, welcomed attendees and introduced the guest speakers.

**Holly Lynch MP** opened the discussion by explaining that in addition to flooding her role concerns coastal communities and fisheries.

Addressing the 25-year Environment Plan, she said that reference to flooding was limited and that there is a lack of potential for long term "*joined-up*" thinking with existing plans and funding streams.

She also spoke about the lack of resilience in infrastructure. Additionally, she highlighted the unfairness of high executive pay in companies that haven't invested in infrastructure and who have struggled to cope with the impact of cold snaps.

Turning to Labour's policy to nationalise the water industry, she admitted that it was not a quick fix for the problems that face the water supply network.

**Dr Pete Fox** welcomed the 25-year Environment Plan as a milestone document and praised its focus on long term planning. He described the plan as a "*framework for action*", not a completed plan, and explained that the specifics of measurements and metrics would be clarified through a 6-9-month process. He also spoke about the "*difficult choices*" of balancing the needs of the environment with the needs of the population.

**Catherine Moncrieff** noted the prominent focus of water in the plan but argued that it "*lacks a bit of bite*", with unambitious targets. She said WWF is keen to work with the Environment Agency to flesh out the frameworks in the plan.

Speaking on the issue of water efficiency, she suggested that an increase in the resilience of the network is needed. She also called on water companies to do more to use their



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water more efficiently. Regarding the targets set out in the plan, she explained that many were restatements of policy that had already been announced and called for more ambition in relation to per-capita consumption and extraction from the environment. She also argued that behaviour change must be at the heart of what is done to ensure a reduction in demand levels.

Turning to reforming the approach to abstraction, she criticised the Plan for containing “*weak words*” on this issue. She supported a catchment based approach to abstraction but argued that there must be regulatory underpinnings about usage and sharing between abstractors.

**Angela Smith MP** summarised the panel contributions by stating that the Environment Plan provides a framework for action but outlined that there remained concerns about whether it is ambitious enough. She then opened up the debate to the audience.

**Lord Tebbit** asked Holly Lynch MP what her estimate was of the capital costs of nationalising the water industry. Responding, Holly Lynch explained that the Labour shadow BEIS team has access to those figures as they lead on that policy.

A member of the audience spoke positively about the work being done to manage flooding and slow the flow of water at Pickering. **Dr Pete Fox** later spoke about the importance of landscape scale interventions in tackling flooding and reducing the impact of extraction from the environment.

Addressing the question of behavioural change, **Catherine Moncrieff** spoke about the importance of involving people outside of the water industry, such as social scientists in order to understand what motivates people’s behaviour. On Smart meters she explained that they work if they are used effectively, so behaviour change is crucial to ensuring that they operate correctly.

Speaking on the need to ensure involvement from people outside of the water industry, **Dr Emma Westling from the University of Sheffield’s Twenty65 project** explained that the project involved engineering and social science to encourage consumers to change actions and behaviours. She suggested that here is too much focus on education and awareness and called for greater focus on bigger structural change.

**Lord Mackenzie** pushed Holly Lynch MP on her thoughts regarding nationalisation. Responding, Holly Lynch explained that she is mindful as a shadow DEFRA minister that it is not a quick fix.

**Director of Environment and Assets at Wessex Water, David Elliot** explained that Wessex Water places responsibilities on itself that go beyond its strict statutory duties. He outlined that Wessex is developing new structures to encourage system-wide thinking about more efficient water usage. Addressing previous points raised about poor resilience in the system during the recent cold snap, he said that Wessex didn’t suffer from leakage due to infrastructure investment and forward thinking. He felt that the plan was a huge



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opportunity but that water efficiency and leakage should have been addressed together, adding that Wessex takes it as a responsibility to manage the system better, through initiatives such as the catchment approach.

**Emily Shirly, Kent Environment and Community Network** asked how the government can be held to account without legislative framework. She also asked about the role of sustainable development goals (SDGs).

**Holly Lynch MP** championed the work of Yorkshire Water and explained that she understood that there are variations in the effectiveness and performance of water companies. However, she felt it was necessary to develop a framework that addresses the problems in the system whilst rewarding good practice.

**Dr Pete Fox** explained that the Environment Agency would continue to work with progressive water companies. He also agreed that leakage was a key issue.

Addressing **Emily Shirly's** earlier questions, **Catherine Moncrieff** called for an environmental act, which she felt is the only way to effectively hold the government to account. She also agreed that there was work to be done to ensure that the Plan meets with SDGs.

**Managing Director and Founder of Radio Data Networks, Brian Back** argued that there should be a greater focus on effecting change in industry and the public through tariff systems and tax breaks to produce financial incentives. Specifically, he called for the encouragement of rainwater harvesting.

**Fergal Sharkey** spoke about the importance of sustainable water supply, raising concern about the impact on chalk streams. He asked whether cheap water is a cause of drought in the south east?

**Dr Pete Fox** agreed that the low cost of water could have a negative impact and explained that if there a greater focus on the cost of water this would help to foster a stronger mindset on managing it as a resource.

**Catherine Moncrieff** agreed that there was a need to incentivise rainwater harvesting and other approaches to reducing consumption. Additionally, she felt that water and its benefits were not valued enough, but putting a higher price on water raises concerns about affordability.

**Holly Lynch MP** stated that there are very important reasons why water should cost more because of the additional work that companies do on behalf of their customers. However, she stressed that this needs to be balanced with affordability for customers. She also called for a greater focus on how to move water around the country to alleviate regional drought.



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Summarising the meeting, **Angela Smith MP** explained that in the context of climate change and growing population the challenges face by water companies are significant, and for this reason investment in innovation is crucial. She added that while understanding the true cost of extraction of water and maintaining the system was crucial, it was important that affordability was considered alongside.