

Link briefing: immediate actions to restore the water environment

October 2024

This briefing is on behalf of the environmental coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)).

This briefing is supported by Angling Trust, Beaver Trust, Campaign for National Parks, Fidra, Friends of the Earth, Freshwater Habitats Trust, Froglife, Institute of Fisheries Management, Keep Britain Tidy, Marine Conservation Society, National Trust, Paddle UK, Planet Patrol, Rewilding Britain, River Action, RSPB, Surfers Against Sewage, Sustainability First, The Mammal Society, The Rivers Trust, The Wildlife Trusts, and WWF-UK.

Wildlife and Countryside Link welcomes the launch of the Independent Commission into the water sector and its regulation. Transformational change is required to restore the water environment to good health.

However, there are immediate opportunities to address the drivers of poor water health which do not require review. We urge the Government to act now to cut agricultural pollution, enforce the law, and invest in nature at catchment scale to deliver multiple benefits for the economy, communities, and wildlife.

This can be achieved through a water-friendly farming commitment, fully funded catchment plans, and a requirement for regulators and companies to take a nature-first approach.

A water-friendly farming commitment

Agricultural pollution contributes to at least 40% of waters in England failing to achieve Good Ecological Status, with regulators struggling to advise, monitor and enforce the Farming Rules for Water.

The Government should take rapid action to strengthen and enforce regulatory requirements for water-friendly farming, particularly where nutrient pollution threatens important wildlife

sites. Ongoing agricultural pollution is the primary cause of poor water quality, it is slowing housing development, and it threatens the UK's most important legally-protected wildlife sites.

Farmers also need more support to take positive action, and should be better rewarded for working with nature to restore the health of our soils, floodplains and wetlands. Many farmers are already working to reduce their impacts on nature, but much more could be achieved by targeting packages of water-friendly farming options in areas where agricultural changes could make the biggest difference

This requires a range of water-friendly activities within an uplifted [nature friendly farming budget](#), including widening buffer strips to deliver a healthy riparian zone, restoring floodplains and creating ponds and wetlands. This must come with greater provision of free expert advice to help farmers to target these actions where they will be most beneficial for nature, and adequate funding for regulators to ensure they can robustly monitor and enforce compliance.

Fully funded and effective catchment plans

Plans to clean up river catchments are failing. The Office for Environmental Protection [has concluded](#) that “there are not enough specific, timebound and certain measures in the River Basin Management Plans to achieve the Environmental Objectives” and there has been “insufficient investment in measures to address all major pressures”.

Catchment-wide action is needed to improve the health of UK rivers, lakes, ponds and seas, ensuring not only that every polluter pays, but that every sector is actively contributing to nature's recovery. The success of water regulation is being undone by critical implementation failures; siloed work within individual sectors, tackling individual pollutants, is not driving the improvements nature needs. Plans should take a source to sea, whole-catchment approach to tackling pollution and driving species restoration, fully accounting for all water bodies, from headwater streams and small standing waters to large rivers, lakes and seas. Cross-border collaboration for catchments that respectively span the England/Scotland and England/Wales borders is also required.

The Government should deliver an integrated approach to water management, working at the scale of the catchment. To do this, the funding and reach of the Catchment-Based Approach partnerships should be extended, to support and improve implementation. An uplift in funding to just [£3.68 million annually](#) would significantly enhance the capacity of this national delivery network. This should be driven by an ambitious, outcome-based target for overall water health in law. Further legislation to restore rivers, lakes, ponds and seas to good health should be aligned and built around such a target.

A nature-first approach to regulation and investment

For too long, customers' water payments have been misspent, too often funding corporate profits rather than effective action. Future payments must follow a strict regulatory focus on maximising the environmental outcomes of spending. Opportunities to do so are currently being missed, [for example](#) in the current round of water industry business planning.

The Government should issue formal directions to Ofwat and the Environment Agency to drastically increase the use of nature-based solutions by the water industry. These [multi-benefit green solutions](#) are not only often cheaper than traditional hard infrastructure, but create opportunities to bring in private investment, increasing value for money.

Furthermore, money from enforcement penalties should be ring fenced for environmental improvement projects to ensure that the polluter really does pay. This must include [those imposed](#) by the regulator Ofwat, as well as those imposed by the Environment Agency. The Water (Special Measures) Bill [presents an opportunity](#) to ensure that water company fines are always invested in environmental projects, through giving legislative weight to the Water Restoration Fund.

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

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