Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

arc adrian rees consulting

AECOM

THE UK WATER PARTNERSHIP

UK Water Partnership white paper

River health and restoring public trust

Authors:
Adrian Rees, Adrian Rees Consulting
Jim Marshall, AECOM
Lauren McMillan, Northumbria University

Delivering a better world

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the contributions of many stakeholders into this work including the UKWP Seminar hosted by Arup on 23rd April 2025 and by bilateral discussions or written contributions.

Figures

Table of contents

Call to action

Trust in the management of our water environment is at a historic low. Our rivers are under pressure, under scrutiny, and in many cases, are not meeting expectations.

The public sees pollution — from sewage, agriculture industry, and road runoff — and is openly demanding greater accountability and radical change[1].

So, who is accountable? The answer, too often, is no one. The system is fragmented, and no single body commands public trust. This must change.

In July 2025, the Independent Water Commission delivered a landmark report[2], a blueprint for reform. Many of its recommendations require legislative change, a process that is slow and risks losing public confidence.

The public wants action now. We cannot afford to wait.

This white paper is a call to action to all stakeholders — regulators, water companies, environmental groups, and government departments — to act decisively and collaboratively. We must:

- Re-define what good river health looks like.
- Take immediate steps to address the root causes of pollution.
- Demonstrate visible progress through investment and action.
- Ensure no organisation uses transition periods as an excuse for inaction.

Improving river health and rebuilding trust are not separate goals, they are intertwined. But trust will not return simply because rivers improve.

We must understand and address the deeper drivers of public mistrust.

As Sir Jon Cunliffe rightly said, *"Change will not happen overnight, and trust will take time to come back."* That time starts now.[2]

Let this be the moment we move from concern to commitment.

The health of our rivers and the trust of the public are not luxuries, they are necessities. We have the data, the insight, and now, a clear mandate.

The time for hesitation is over. The time for action is now.

Together, we can restore our rivers and rebuild public trust. Not through promises, but, through progress.

Executive summary

The UK's rivers are under increasing pressure from pollution, climate change, and fragmented governance. Public trust in those responsible for managing the water environment is at a historic low. This white paper sets out a clear call to action for all stakeholders — regulators, water companies, environmental groups, and government — to act decisively and collaboratively.

This white paper explores the key challenges facing our river health and the impact these have on public trust in those responsible:

- River Health: Pollution from agriculture, sewage, urban runoff, and industry continues to degrade water quality.
- Public Trust: Confidence in water sector governance has eroded due to perceived inaction, poor transparency, and lack of accountability.

Recommendations

This white paper issues a clear and urgent call to action for all stakeholders to take swift and decisive measures to address the dual challenges of deteriorating river health and declining public trust in those responsible for managing the water environment. To support this call, we propose the following three strategic recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Establish a unified strategic framework for river health

Stakeholders with responsibility and accountability for river health should adopt a coordinated, three-pronged approach:

- Define a shared ambition for the future state of the water environment.
- Develop and implement a strategic roadmap to achieve this ambition.
- Foster collaboration and cooperation across all relevant sectors and stakeholder groups to ensure alignment and sustained progress.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Rebuild public trust through transparency and engagement

Responsible bodies must take deliberate action to restore public confidence by:

- Identifying and addressing the root causes of mistrust, including historical and systemic issues.
- Implementing a strategic, long-term approach to rebuild trust through transparency, accountability, and meaningful, objective public engagement.
- Continuously monitoring the trust cycle to identify weak points and proactively working to improve these by developing and strengthening relationships between key stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Create a UK-wide, independent data reporting system

A comprehensive, real-time data reporting system should be established to:

- Provide reliable, transparent, and accessible information on water health across the UK.
- Support evidence-based planning and decision-making, and enhance credibility among stakeholders including the media, environmental non-governmental organisations (NGO), advocacy groups, and the public.
- Ensure data independence, with open-source access and governance free from influence by any single sector.
- Strengthen citizen science contributions by supporting the robustness and integration of data collected by community-led initiatives.

Next steps

This white paper serves as a starting point for discussions with stakeholders and policy makers as part of the wider national approach to addressing the impacts of pollution on our water environment. The UK Water Partnership (UKWP) provides an ideal forum to foster these discussions, drawing from the breadth and expertise of its membership.

UKWP will lead engagement and work with stakeholders to develop a national strategy for improving river health and restoring trust. This includes convening roundtables, supporting regional planning authorities, and promoting inclusive governance.

UKWP will also play a vital role in working with other sector bodies to promote education, knowledge and awareness of the importance of the health of our rivers to stakeholders and the public in general.

1. Introduction

1.1 A look to the future

2050: Our rivers are seen as the lifeblood of our natural environment, key to the wellbeing of people and wildlife and as a key resource that is managed with care and consideration. Monitoring of the quality of water bodies is carried out and information from all sources made available in real time to those who want it. Pollution incidents still occur but these are rapidly identified, and steps taken to fix the problem. Through taking effective, timely action and taking account of the concerns and needs of all stakeholders at a local and catchment level, trust in those organisations with responsibility for our water environment is increasing.

1.2 Back to reality

2025: The rivers, seas and water bodies across our country are vital ecosystems that support a diverse range of flora and fauna, provide water for drinking, agriculture, and industry, and offer recreational opportunities for communities. However, across the UK the health of these water bodies is under threat due to pollution, climate change, and unsustainable practices. Public calls for steps to be taken to improve river health have been growing.

Across the country there is a societal push to engage more with our blue-green spaces for physical and mental wellbeing as well as an increasing desire to see thriving wildlife and open spaces.

Healthy rivers are an essential part of this. They provide habitats for numerous species of fish, birds, and other wildlife. Rivers also play a critical role in nutrient cycling, sediment transport, and maintaining the ecological balance of surrounding landscapes. Moreover, they are a source of fresh water for human consumption, agriculture, and industrial processes. Increasingly our rivers are a source of recreation and wellbeing.

It's fair to say that while society appreciates water more now than we used to, we still don't necessarily value it enough to take the actions needed to improve and maintain its quality.

How highly we value something makes a big difference to how much we are prepared to spend on protecting and improving it. Even so, the value of the services that our environment provides to us has been shown to be huge — in 2022 it was just over £87 billion per year at 2024 prices (ONS 2024[3]) — in comparison to what it costs to look after it.

Pollution from agricultural runoff, highways drainage, industrial discharges, and untreated sewage overflows can severely degrade river health. Contaminants such as pesticides, heavy metals, and pathogens can both harm aquatic life and pose risks to human health. Climate change exacerbates these issues by altering precipitation patterns, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, and raising water temperatures, which can disrupt the delicate balance of river ecosystems.

The quality of our river environments is front and centre in the minds of people right across the UK whether they are regular free-swimmers, kayakers, anglers or those who enjoy a stroll along the banks of their local water course. In recent years there has been an increasingly visible public campaign for cleaner rivers and seas. This is partly due to the increased environmental awareness of local environments during the 2020-21 Covid-19 lockdowns and to an increase in available and transparent information driven by the roll out of event duration monitors on combined sewer overflows.

There are multiple sources and pathways for pollutants to impact rivers. Water companies, agriculture, urban drainage systems, transport, mining, industry and households are all contributors to the impacts in river water quality. Solutions to the various problems are both complex and costly and require significant lead times to make a demonstrable impact.

In July 2025 the Independent Water Commission published its recommendations for reform to improve the water sector regulatory system in England and Wales. The report[2] is wide ranging and focussed on the governance and operation of the water sector. The reforms it suggests will form the cornerstone of how the sector is viewed in the future. It highlights how, following a period of improvement immediately post-privatisation, performance has largely plateaued or declined in recent years, the expectations on the public good have increased. However, simply focussing on a single sector, without recognising and addressing other pressures on river health, will not necessarily result in an increase in trust in those responsible for our water environment.

1.3 River health and trust

At the same time there has been an undercurrent of a loss of trust in those responsible for the management of our water environment.

Trust is a complex concept that is hard to win and easy to lose. Once trust is eroded addressing the root causes will not automatically lead to a reset.

Whilst the health of our rivers has raised questions that has led to the loss of trust it does not necessarily follow that restoring river health will restore that level of trust. Action does need to be taken to address river health and whilst doing so taking the steps that demonstrate the action being taken in a transparent and open manner.

It's important therefore that firstly we fully understand where there is poor river quality, the cause(s) of it, agree priorities for improvements, before putting the right interventions in at the right time to address these, and fund them in the most applicable way to maximise benefit and minimise the cost. This is the start point for regaining trust, as we explore in Section 5's 'trust loop'.

2. River health

2.1 River water quality is impacted by human activity

Rivers are vital ecosystems that support a diverse range of flora and fauna, provide water for drinking, for agriculture and industry, and offer recreational opportunities for people and communities. The health of rivers worldwide is under threat due to pollution, climate change, and unsustainable practices. Improving river health and building public trust in water management are crucial for ensuring the sustainability of these vital resources.

River water quality is influenced by several contributory factors from a range of sources (Figure 1, Figure 2). These include impacts from wastewater discharges, from agriculture and industry and rainwater run off channelled from urban areas and highways.

Pollution from all sources including agriculture, industry, transport, mining, urban drainage, domestic animals, as well business and households, must be minimised to maintain and improve the quality of water. Pollution pathways, however, vary from point source discharges, such as sewer overflows or highway outfalls, to diffuse routes such as run off from agricultural land. Some will be easier to mitigate or remove than others.

Whilst there are metrics (such as the Water Framework Directive) in statute that help measure the chemical and ecological quality of river water, the overall health of our rivers is less defined and is open to the expectations of the individuals or groups who interact with them. For example, a general view would be a healthy river can be characterised by clear and unpolluted water that supports a diverse and thriving ecosystem, whilst those who partake in immersive water sports or swimming may expect a higher level of microbial quality to reduce the risk of illness.

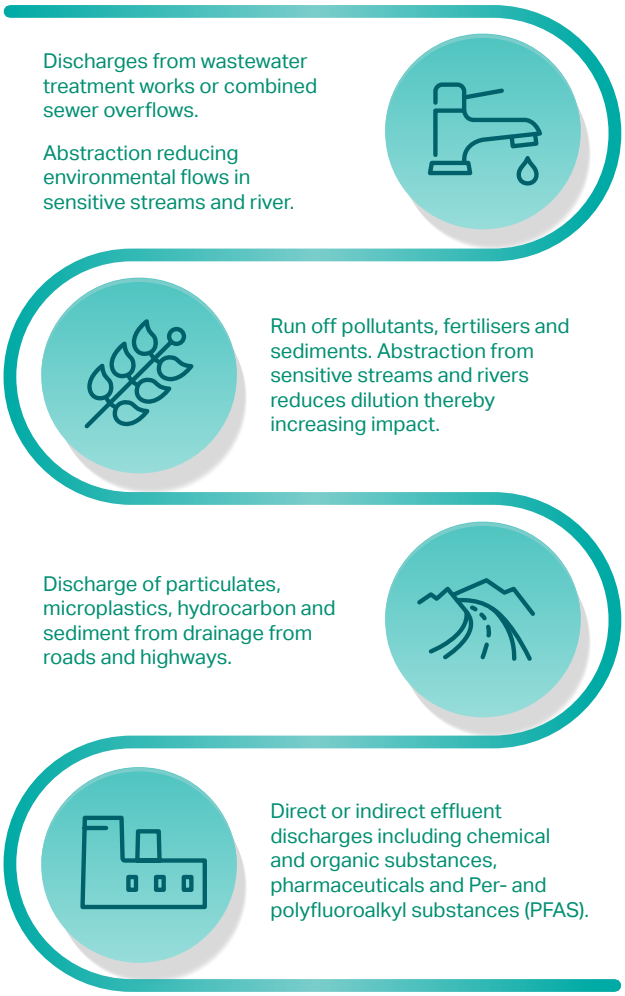

Figure 1: Sources of pollutants impacting river health

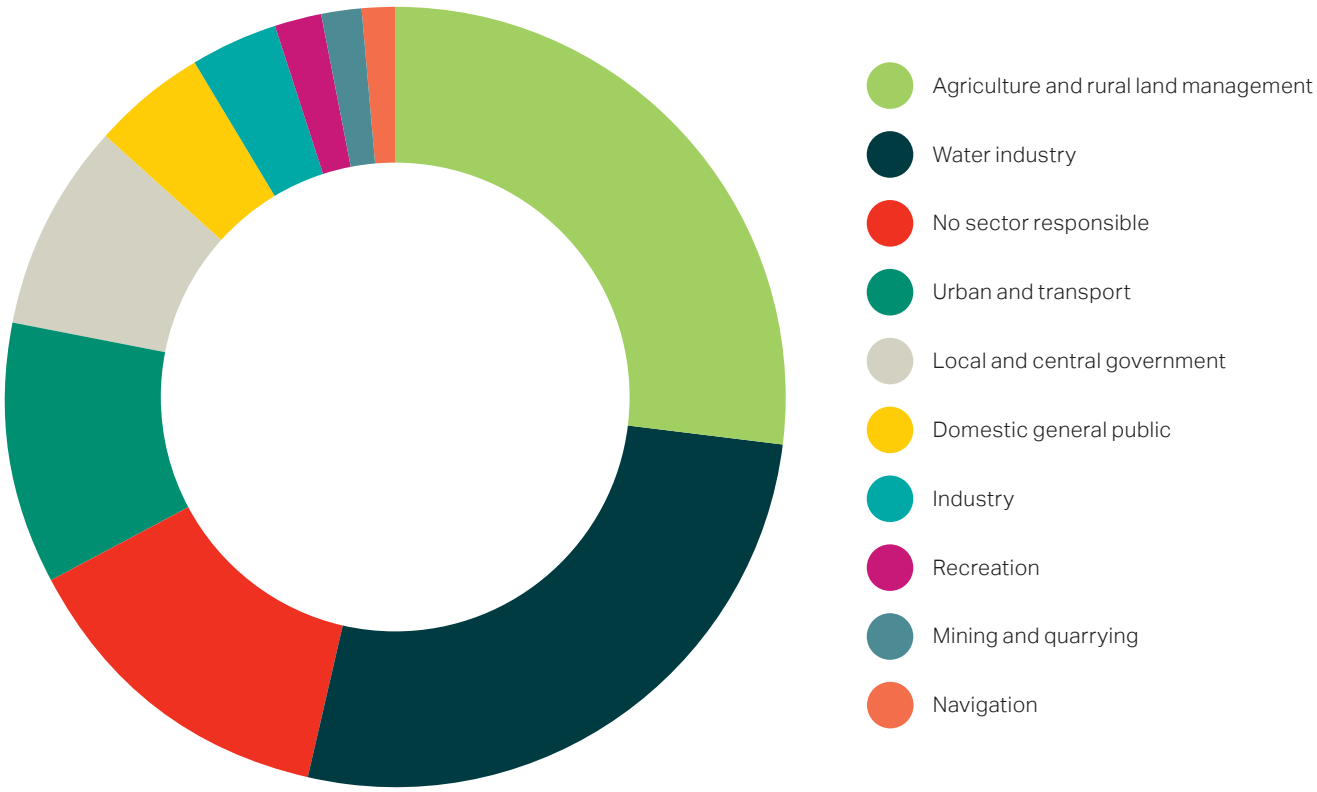

Figure 2: Contributors to river health by sector in England (Source: Independent Water Commission Final Report)

2.2 What state are our rivers in?

The state of our rivers has been the subject of many high-profile narratives. In 2024 in a speech celebrating World Rivers Day[4] the Environment Agency (EA) Director of Water highlighted the public perception of declining quality of water in our rivers and seas, set against an actual improvement in river ecology.

In order to change a situation, it's imperative to understand it. In the case of river health information on the actual state it is in (water quality, ecological indicators) and on what's causing it to deteriorate — it's hard to fix something without understanding why it's broken — needs to be available.

So, let's pick apart the extent to which river quality is poor, and the follow-on question of what makes 'good enough', and for whom.

Many other commentators including the Rivers' Trust[5, 6] and Surfers Against Sewage[7] have called for action to be taken by all stakeholders with urgency to address this perceived decline in the quality of our natural river environments. There are many other pressure groups, campaigners and action groups all seeking redress to the status.

It's clear that these recommendations need to be addressed with measures taken to mitigate deterioration and driving further improvements through change of practice or upgrading of assets.

Public statements expressing the view that generally rivers are in a better state than since pre-Industrial Revolutions have been objectively researched and challenged by independent academics in the environmental science field. Unsurprisingly the answers provided by the available evidence are of an 'it depends' nature. From a regulatory reporting perspective of the Water Framework Directive (WFD)[8] assessment recent reports show that both ecological and chemical status measures have declined in recent years[9].

For some parameters, there is unmistakable evidence that there have been improvements over the last 30 years, such as biological indicators (Pharaoh et al 2023[10]) and chemical measures (Whelan et al, 2022[11]). For others though, it depends on whether the start point should really be the Industrial Revolution (around 1840), or whether we should reference what has been monitored.

Regardless of these nuances, the belief of the public is that our water environment is degraded, isn't clean and, with respect to immersive sports, simply isn't safe.

The water sector's sewer overflow performance has, with considerable justification, been the focus of public anger and mistrust, specifically in the context of poor governance at best and active misreporting at worst. But when assessing the effects of Sewer Overflows (SOs) on river water quality, it's clear that — even with the existing overflow performance — these effects do not support SOs being the sole or even majority pathway for all types of pollution.

For instance, Afonydd Cymru's summary[12] of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's (DCWW) joint 2022 modelling work into the contributions of SOs to nutrient pollution of rivers in Wales is illuminating as to where effort to improve river quality should be targeted for best effect noting that "*it is likely that agriculture's role in phosphorus pollution is highly likely to be underestimated in this modelling.*" This is largely due to the monitoring focussing on readily measurable ortho-phosphorus at the expense of the harder to measure additional phosphorus associated with particulates such as farm runoff, which would be measured if total phosphorus were analysed.

2.3 Data, data and more data

Improving our knowledge of the likely sources of pollutants, and what's driving ecological and chemical status, are key to effectively targeting bill and tax payers' money so that real change for the better is achieved and reported.

Over the past decade, improvements to monitoring technology have supported an increase in the amount of information gathered by water companies, regulators, and researchers. This has enabled a much clearer understanding of the status quo in terms of environmental performance and shows where there may be improvement or deterioration.

More and more data is being collected and made available to everyone:

- Monitors that measure the activation and duration of sewer overflows put information into the public domain that in turn forms the basis of applications that provide users with information.
- Probes that measure and monitor river water quality are becoming more common as technology, both analytical and communication, improves and becomes more affordable. Water companies will monitor water quality upstream and downstream of overflows to help understand the impact of spills and discharges. Other sectors, such as highways, chemical and food manufacturing facilities, are looking at installing similar river monitoring devices.
- Citizen scientists and action groups are collecting data at the point of contact with the environment, offering valuable insights into the lived experience of the public. (NB sampling techniques and analyses are often less robust than regulatory samples with fewer checks and audits, meaning this data source needs to be appropriately referenced.)

At the same time, data analytics and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are helping to manage and interpret all this data, converting it into information that can be used to make informed choices, influence policy decisions and support investigations and potential enforcement action.

As we saw earlier, how much we value something (such as river quality) affects how much we are prepared to spend on protecting and improving it. It's often the case that the better we understand things, the more we appreciate and value them (as shown time and again when people engage with the water cycle, for instance in deliberative research or citizen science). So, this increase in available and accessible information represents a huge opportunity to increase how much we value our aquatic environments.

With all the positives of this new wealth of information, it is worthy of caution that the increase in data availability can, at first glance, indicate a worsening situation which may just be a case of a reflection of the baseline. However, without properly measuring something, it is hard to manage it or at least determine the changes generated because of action taken.

The frequency at which overflows are operating is now information that is readily available thanks to the roll out of Event Duration Monitors (EDM).

This information is now being recorded and published. Figure 3 shows EDM rollout against spill numbers in England. Collection of data in Wales and Scotland commenced later and is not shown in the chart. NB drop in spills in 2022 is largely attributable to below-average rainfall. Spill frequency per se isn't necessarily the issue if it is not understood alongside information on impact.

With the addition of upstream and downstream river water quality monitoring, which is being introduced, even more information on the impacts of sewer spills will be generated and made available via open data sources to all who need it — regulators, users, researchers. This will benefit decision making for those who wish to access the environment now, provide information to determine the effectiveness of interventions, and provide early warnings when things go wrong.

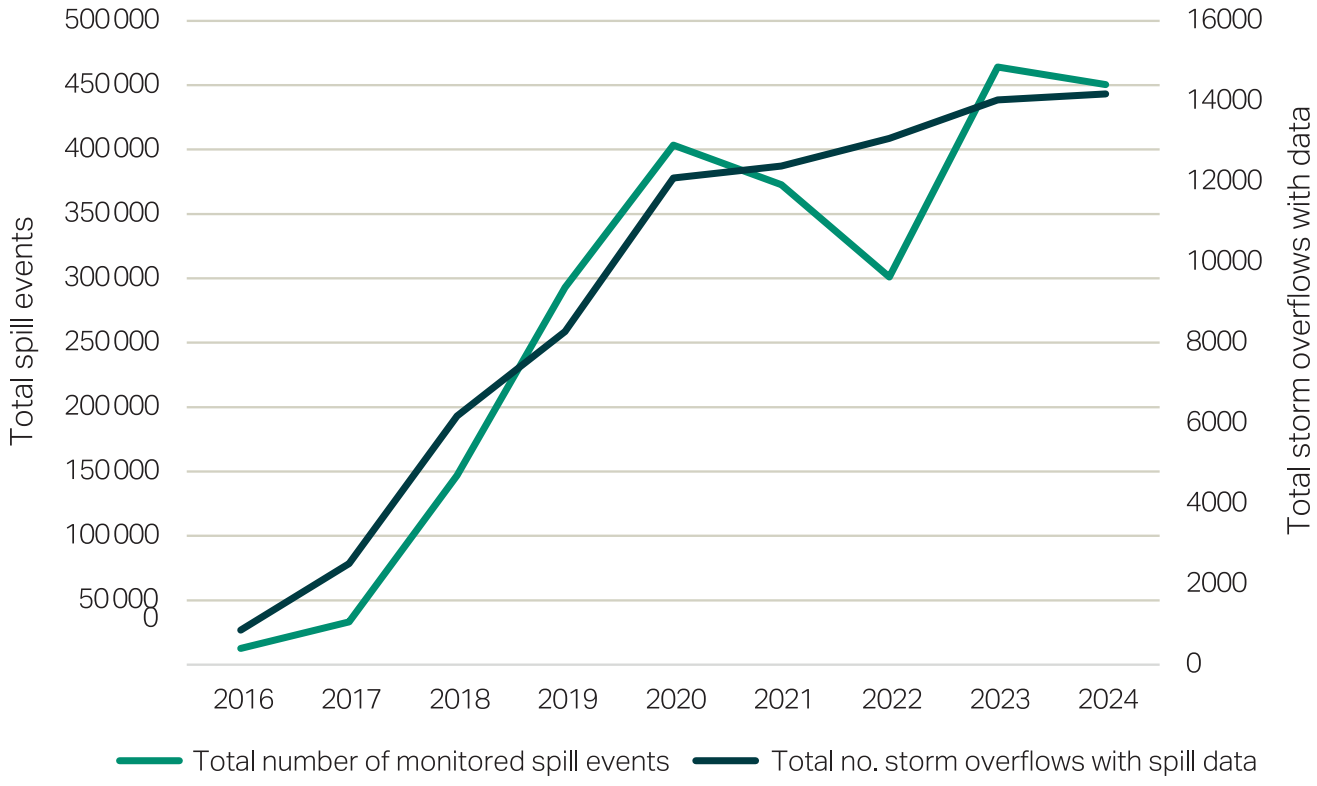

Figure 3: Correlation between spills and EDM roll out (EA EDM Annual Returns Long-Term Trends[13])

3. Steps to improve river health

3.1 Agree on the destination

We need to recognise that modern river environments have multiple uses and as such multiple needs. Whilst there is general agreement that the quality of our rivers needs to improve, there are complex and detailed decisions that must be made as to the extent of improvement needed. Society needs to agree *"how clean is clean enough"*, as the investment and interventions needed will largely be driven by this goal.

Sir Jon Cunliffe, lead of the Independent Water Commission, noted that there is a vision that: *"water is safe for recreation, and a water environment that everyone can enjoy in which nature thrives. And it means a water system that is resilient to future pressures and challenges and supports economic growth and prosperity. Importantly, this must be a vision that is ambitious but achievable, in which communities have a stake, and in which people believe."*[2]

Society is increasingly expecting more from its rivers as sources of leisure and relaxation through pursuits such as wild swimming, paddleboarding or other water sports. This poses a challenge and raises the question of what quality is needed above and beyond that needed to meet the ecosystem needs?

A drive towards a river environment that meets the needs of its aquatic ecosystem should be the starting point, with consideration given to other uses (such as swimming or immersive sports) where this can be achieved. The ambition could then be to reach a state that can be reasonably achieved using the resource and funding available.

However, wild swimming, for example, should be seen as having intrinsic risk that is not the same level of risk as swimming in swimming pools. Users need to ensure that they accept the balanced risk; whilst rivers should not contain sewage or chemical contaminants, they are also not sterile environments as this itself would be incompatible with having an ecosystem.

3.2 Address the causes of poor river health

By addressing pollution, restoring habitats, engaging communities, and ensuring transparency and accountability, rivers can be protected, and the sustainable use of water resources can be managed for future generations.

Below are some examples of steps that could be included in a strategy to improve river health. These are not exhaustive, mutually exclusive or sequential.

- **Manage interventions at the right location:** Not all intervention locations have the same benefit. For example, in many cases focussing action on a catchment's headwaters, ponds, and wetlands, can kick-start recovery and provide an aggregate benefit across the whole catchment.
- **Pollution Control:** Implementing stringent regulations to control pollution from agricultural, industrial, and urban sources is essential. This includes promoting the use of environmentally friendly farming practices, ensuring proper treatment of industrial effluents, and upgrading sewage treatment facilities.
- **Riparian Buffer Zones:** Establishing vegetated buffer zones along riverbanks can help filter out pollutants before they enter the water. These buffers also provide habitat for wildlife and help stabilise riverbanks, reducing erosion.
- **Restoration Projects:** Restoring degraded river habitats through initiatives such as reforestation, wetland restoration, and removal of invasive species can enhance biodiversity and improve water quality.
- **Sustainable Water Management:** Adopting integrated water resource management approaches that consider the needs of all stakeholders, including the environment, can help ensure the sustainable use of river resources. This includes measures such as water conservation, efficient irrigation practices, and the use of alternative water sources, so that less water is taken from rivers that have ecosystems that are vulnerable to low flows.
- **Community Engagement:** Involving local communities in river conservation efforts can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. Educational programmes, citizen science initiatives, and volunteer opportunities can empower individuals to take action to protect their local rivers.

3.3 Take a multiple stakeholder approach to improving river health

River health is driven by multiple contributing sources and, at times, complex interactions between these sources. Therefore, effective solutions need multiple stakeholders working together, with a mix of capital interventions, policy change, behaviour modification, produce reformulation, and producer responsibility. No single solution is expected to make a step change acting in isolation — a cumulative, compounding and cyclical approach is needed.

A multi-stakeholder problem requires the buy-in of multiple stakeholders to develop and deliver solutions. However, it is not enough for stakeholders to play a role in the implementation of solutions, they must also be seen to be playing their part. The continued engagement of multiple stakeholders relies upon a sense that others are also contributing. Even if it is misplaced, a belief that one or more stakeholders are failing to deliver has a knock-on effect on trust between project partners that can compromise the entire endeavour.

The public and community organisations are significant stakeholders with a critical role to play in tracking changes to river health and providing vital feedback on the effectiveness of interventions. By engaging with the public from the outset and providing clear communication channels throughout the duration of a project, the needs of members of the public most concerned with river health can be captured and these parties can have direct insight into project challenges, decisions, and outcomes.

The final report of the Independent Water Commission makes a recommendation to establish greater public representation into the planning process, primarily through the creation of nine new and independent regional systems planning authorities to ensure that local and regional priorities and concerns are addressed in water investment plans. The creation of these bodies will enable full catchment-based rather than sector-based decisions to be made, involving all parties including representation from all stakeholders including local and regional councils, agencies, NGOs, industry and agriculture and the wider public.

4. Trust

4.1 What is trust?

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary trust can be defined as “having a firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”.

To that end, whilst trust is an outcome of activity or action, it is also an enabler for action to begin. It underpins the social licence that organisations have been given to look after a common or natural resource on behalf of the wider society. It is a key element of social capital and amplifies both the value of things when they improve or the disbenefit of things getting worse. Maintaining a high level of public trust is essential for the successful implementation of policies and practices aimed at improving river health.

Trust is a complex combination of perception, experience, and baseline beliefs. In any sector, there will be those who object to the basic principles of private ownership of public goods or to how the sector is structured, financed, or governed. This fundamental belief won’t change unless there is seismic reform, that is unlikely to occur. This will be the baseline of mistrust and will vary in its quantum from sector to sector and over time.

In addition to this fundamental baseline, there are several other drivers of mistrust that can be addressed. Typically, these focus on those members of the public who have either a lived experience of poor performance or service, and on those who haven’t had first-hand experience but are picking up on sentiment put out by media and pressure groups and making their decision based on that.

Finally, there is often a lack of accessible, accurate, and verifiable information (either from or independent to the sector under scrutiny) and communication that at best leads to scepticism and limits the ability to share facts and context. While we have seen a recent increase in publicly accessible data, thanks to initiatives such as Stream[14], there are limited resources to support interpretation of this data, and so it remains typical to rely on other sources that communicate the significance of any new information.

4.2 Trust has declined

The topic of trust has become a core issue in recent years with a gradual eroding of the belief that individuals have in government, regulators, and operators. In the water sector, it has become particularly clear that trust in those considered responsible for deteriorating river health conditions has been lost. The Consumer Council for Water's (CCW)[15] report from 2024 notes that customer trust has dropped since 2020 and only half of those asked believe that water companies care. Figure 4 indicates the change in attitude to the questioning directly on whether their water company can be trusted.

This erosion of trust led to river quality being a political priority for the government and the topic was vocalised loudly in the 2024 general election. Ofwat, in their submission to the Independent Water Commission noted that: "*Public trust has been significantly undermined by the sector's failure to reduce the amount of sewage spills into our rivers and seas along with concerns about excessive dividends and executive pay.*"[16]

The interim report of the Independent Water Commission[17] noted that "*Public trust in the water sector has been shaken — by pollution, financial difficulties, mismanagement, infrastructure failures, and by a sense that decisions affecting people's daily lives are made too far from their communities, that local voices are lost. Restoring that public trust is paramount.*"

Furthermore, the CCW's reaction[18] to the Interim Report drew further on the concept of trust: "*Public trust in water companies has never been lower and the Commission is right to say there is no silver bullet to restoring people's confidence.*"

Similarly, the value of water to our society and our daily lives comes through in how national and local water sports events have been reportedly affected by drops in water quality, and how business and tourism have been adversely affected by actual or perceived drops in water quality.[19] Public trust in water management is essential for the successful implementation of policies and practices aimed at improving river health.

To ensure that the public have trust that their best interests are being addressed, they need to have confidence that the full extent of the problem is being communicated, that steps are being taken to remedy the situation, who is taking these steps, and that implementation will be properly scrutinised and regulated.

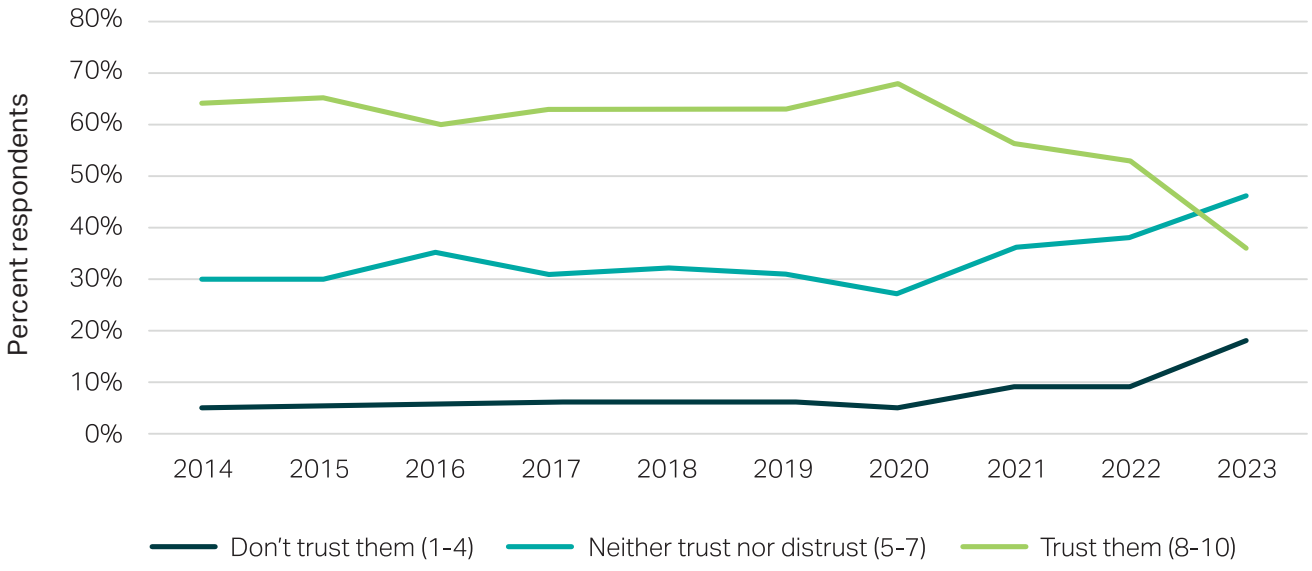

Figure 4: Decline in trust in England and Wales water companies (CCW 2024 report Figure 2)

5. Steps to improve trust

5.1 Break the cycle of mistrust

Figure 5 shows a conceptual model of the stages at which public trust must be earned and managed. The model conceptualises the "Trust loop" reflecting stages at which trust can be earned — or lost — the scale at which these stages typically occur and the entities that are involved in delivering and informing these stages. The trust cycle is essential not just to ensure trust between the water sector and the public, but to ensure trust within regional, catchment-level, or local project teams. Those directly responsible for, or indirectly influencing, each stage may look different at these levels, but the key characteristics of shared understanding, assigned responsibilities for action, and establishing governance and accountability, remain.

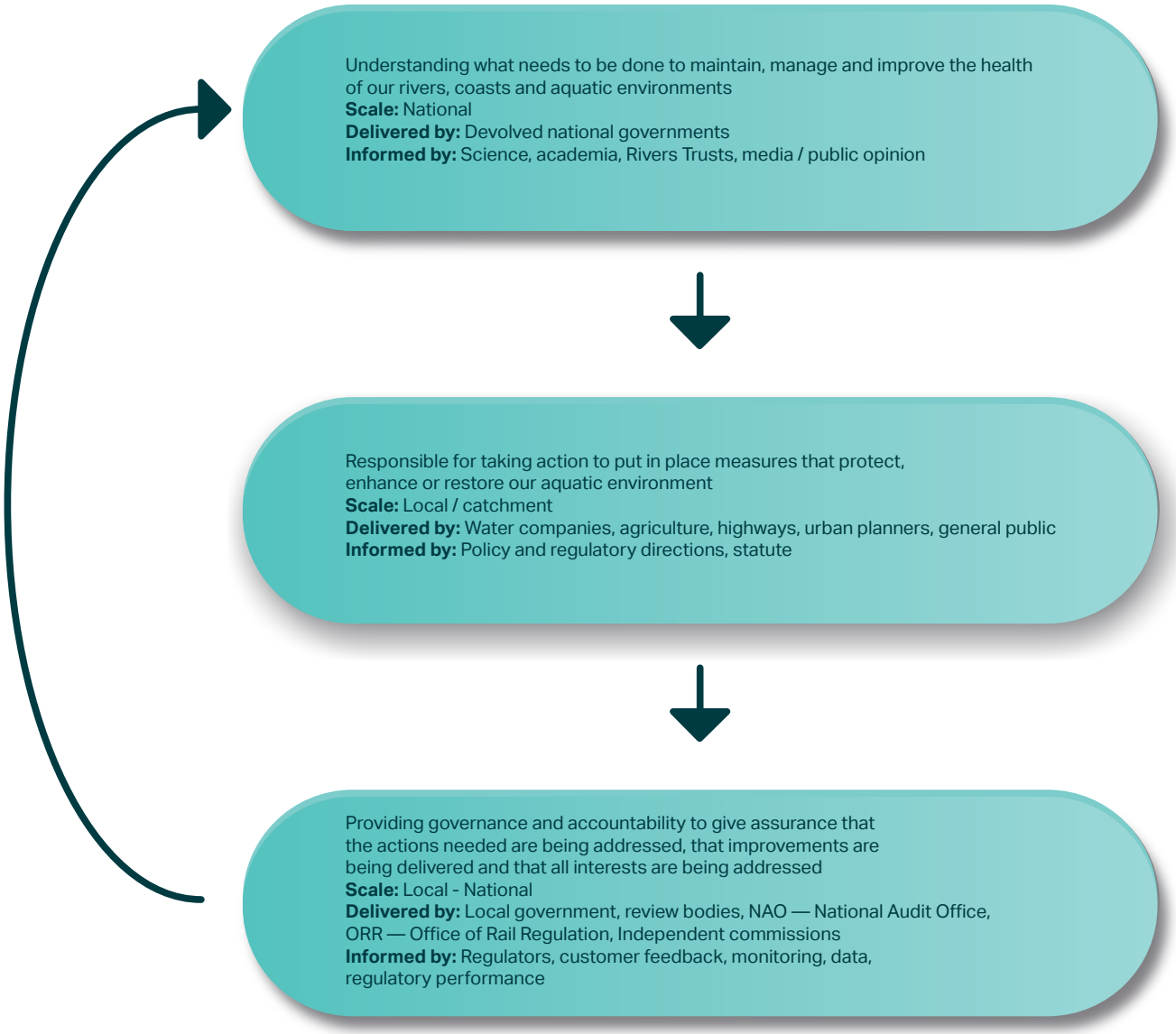

Figure 5: The Trust Loop — How Public Confidence in Water Management Is Built and Lost

5.2 Develop an overarching strategy to build and maintain trust

To rebuild the trust in the water sector a purposeful strategic approach and action plan are needed. Whilst improving river water quality will of course be essential there are deeper and often less quantifiable drivers to loss of trust. In developing a strategic approach, the following should be considered:

- **Be transparent:** Providing clear and accessible information about river water quality, management practices, and decision-making processes can help build trust. Regularly publishing water quality reports and holding public meetings to discuss water management issues can enhance transparency. Data should be made available in real-time and should contain data from all sources including regulatory data, citizen science data and data from monitors. AI tools can be utilised to ensure data are accurate and shared with confidence allocating bandings as required. Establishing clear communication channels that not only share key data but also provide insight into the broader context helps present a clear and comprehensive picture to stakeholders, building confidence in the sector as a reliable source of information.
- **Consider all views:** Engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and environmental groups, in the decision-making process and setting the expectations for what the outcomes will ensure that multiple perspectives are considered. This collaborative approach can lead to more effective and widely accepted solutions. There is a need for a clearer input from people and communities into the decision-making process for all aspects of the river environment. Public presence on water company boards is being considered by the regulator which will be a start. However, a true recognition of the wants and needs of those who use or are affected by rivers needs to be democratically included at all stages and in all sectors.
- **Raise awareness:** Raising public awareness about the importance of river health and the challenges facing water management can help build support for actions needed. Educational campaigns, workshops, and school programs can inform the public about the steps they can take themselves to protect the water environment.
- **Be accountable:** Ensuring regulators are empowered and resourced to hold all polluters accountable for their actions is crucial for maintaining public trust. This includes setting leaders and managers clear performance targets, monitoring progress, and taking corrective actions when necessary.
- **Innovate and adapt:** Embracing new technologies and adaptive management practices can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of water management. Demonstrating a commitment to innovation and continuous improvement can build confidence in the ability of authorities to address emerging challenges.

6. Conclusion

We set the narrative for this white paper on the basis that trust in the management of our water environment is at an all-time low. The health of our water bodies is under pressure and under scrutiny. High-profile media and political attention have highlighted the impacts that sewage, farming industry and road-run off are having. Simultaneously there is a demonstrable lack of trust in those given stewardship of our rivers as well as in those setting and enforcing the rules.

From a public perspective rivers are getting increasingly polluted, and no-one is holding those responsible to account. It's a complex issue of measured facts and lived perception with no single body carrying the trust of the public. Something needs to be done.

We have set out a Call for Action to all stakeholders outlining the need to take swift, decisive action to address both the impacts we are having on river health and the trust in those responsible for our water environment.

7. Next steps and making a difference

This white paper serves as a starting point for discussions with stakeholders and policy makers as part of the wider national approach to addressing the impacts on our water environment. UKWP provide an ideal partnership to foster these discussions, drawing from the breadth of its membership.

UKWP will lead stakeholder engagement and work with stakeholders to develop a national strategy for improving river health and restoring trust. This includes convening roundtables, supporting regional planning authorities, and promoting inclusive governance.

8. The UK Water Partnership

8.1 About Us

The UK Water Partnership was established in 2015 to provide a strategic vision for the development and growth of the UK water industry. It brings together a wide cross section of UK water sector stakeholders in a single coherent alliance to support research excellence, promote collaborative innovation and secure the UK a greater share of the $500 billion global water market.

The UK Water Partnership is a public-private not-for-profit company limited by guarantee with its operations funded by financial contributions from its members. Private sector contributions are used to carry out core operational activities such as administration, marketing and promotion, as well as planning and hosting events that help promote the UK water economy both at home and overseas. The Partnership is indebted to its members, not just for their continued financial support, but also for their substantial gifts of time and for their willingness to co-design our emerging products and services.

8.2 Contact

https://www.theukwaterpartnership.org/

secretariat@theukwaterpartnership.org

References

1. *Protesters call on government to tackle water pollution — BBC News*
2. *Independent Water Commission: review of the water sector — GOV.UK*
3. *UK natural capital accounts — Office for National Statistics*
4. *World Rivers Day — EA Blog 22/9/2024*
5. *Pollution — The Rivers Trust*
6. *State of our Rivers Report 2024 — The Rivers Trust*
7. *The State of Sewage • Surfers Against Sewage • Water Quality Investigations*
8. *Water Framework Directive — European Commission*
9. *State of the water environment indicator B3: supporting evidence — GOV.UK*
10. *Evidence of biological recovery from gross pollution in English and Welsh rivers over three decades*
11. *Whelan et al (2022) — Water Quality in British Rivers*
12. *Afonydd Cymru (2022) — Phosphorous modelling*
13. *Event Duration Monitoring — Storm Overflows — Annual Returns*
14. *Stream — Portal*
15. *Water Matters 2024 — CCW*
16. *Independent Water Commission call for evidence — Ofwat response — Ofwat*
17. *Independent Water Commission: review of the water sector — GOV.UK*
18. *CCW statement on Independent Water Commission's interim report — CCW*
19. *Surfing competition cancelled after raw sewage dumped into sea — Independent*

About AECOM

AECOM is the global infrastructure leader, committed to delivering a better world. As a trusted professional services firm powered by deep technical abilities, we solve our clients' complex challenges in water, environment, energy, transportation and buildings. Our teams partner with public- and private-sector clients to create innovative, sustainable and resilient solutions throughout the project lifecycle — from advisory, planning, design and engineering to program and construction management. AECOM is a *Fortune 500* firm that had revenue of $16.1 billion in fiscal year 2024. Learn more at aecom.com.

aecom.com/markets/water