

To act to increase the effectiveness of Natural Resources Wales in halting pollution on the Teifi

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 22 Ebrill 2024
Petitions Committee | 22 April 2024

Reference: SR24/7850-4

Petition Number: P-06-1398

Petition title: To act to increase the effectiveness of Natural Resources Wales in halting pollution on the Teifi

Text of petition: The river Teifi is dying due to levels of pollution. We call on the Senedd to increase the funding to Natural Resources Wales to enable it to fulfil its obligations in relation to the monitoring of the health of the river and the enforcement of legal requirements. We also call upon the Senedd to ensure that Natural Resources Wales is held to account for its performance. This would help to safeguard the Teifi for future generations as proposed in The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015.

Levels of pollution on the Teifi are high. Numbers of salmon, otter and other aquatic life are in serious decline.

The Teifi is a Special Area of Conservation that is under threat from pollution and climate change. Data provided by Natural Resources Wales indicate that its poor water quality means 78% of the water bodies in the catchment are classified as poor or moderate under the Water Framework Assessment.



Similarly, large sections of the river are failing phosphate target levels and a study by Natural Resources Wales indicates the Salmon and Lamprey populations are at risk of extinction in the next 15 years.

Climate change has resulted in low water levels in spring and higher water temperatures which have enhanced the growth of algal blooms and depleted oxygen levels in the water.

In 2022 the river experienced 1,889 sewage spills from combined sewage outfalls which lasted 14,079 hours, the 6th worst river in England and Wales for sewage spill duration.

1. Background

The Welsh Government is responsible for water management. The [Water Strategy for Wales \(2015\)](#) is the Welsh Government policy for managing, protecting and improving Wales' water services and quality. Its vision is to:

... to ensure that Wales continues to have a thriving water environment which is sustainably managed to support healthy communities, flourishing businesses and the environment.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is responsible for managing water resources and monitoring and improving water quality - including fresh, marine, surface and underground water in Wales. It also [implements and enforces regulations, policies and permits](#) relating to water quality.

1.1. Assessing river water quality

The [Water Framework Directive \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2017](#) (the WFD) are the primary mechanism for assessing and managing the water environment. They place a statutory duty on the Welsh Ministers to prevent deterioration and improve all water bodies to good status by 2027.

The WFD is implemented in stages based on river basins, through [River Basin Management Plans \(RBMPs\)](#), developed by NRW for each River Basin District (RBD). The RBMPs for the current cycle were consulted on in 2019, and cover the period 2021-2027. They were [published in July 2022](#).

1.2. Afon Teifi water quality

Due to its important biological features the Afon Teifi and ten of its tributaries are a SAC and SSSI. The [Western Wales RBMP](#) gives a summary of the Teifi catchment, it says priority issues for water include:

... acidification, impact from historic metal mining, diffuse rural pollution from agriculture and forestry, point source pollution from sewage discharges from wastewater treatment works, intermittent assets and areas away from mains sewerage areas, physical modification and INNS [invasive non-native species].

Additional priorities include communities at risk of flooding, abstraction demands due to increasing water use and climate change pressures. NRW's 2021 [compliance assessment against phosphorous targets](#) showed breaches in the 'lower Afon Teifi SAC' against the revised tightened targets set.

The [Western Wales RBMP](#) identifies the Teifi as one of ten 'Opportunity Catchments' which "represent the strongest mix of opportunities for delivering SMNR [Sustainable Management of Natural Resources]", and will "focus staff resource across NRW's functions to support partners to deliver integrated catchment management solutions".

1.3. Measures to improve water quality in the Teifi

A number of NRW-led projects have been set up to improve water quality in the Teifi, including the [SAC rivers project](#), which aims to address water quality management and regulation issues in Welsh SAC rivers. It is used to identify opportunities and deliver interventions through the [Teifi Nutrient Management Board](#).

The [4 Rivers for LIFE](#) project aims to improve the conservation of four SAC rivers in Wales including the Teifi by rehabilitating and restoring their natural processes, features and physical habitats.

The [Teifi demonstrator catchment](#) project explores "new and novel ways of working, ... to seek innovative environmental solutions". It aims to develop a model which can be scaled up and replicated in other Welsh river catchments in the future. Most recently the project held a ['hackathon' event](#) to "unlock some of the challenges facing water quality and biodiversity in the Teifi catchment".

2. Funding NRW

NRW receives core funding for its baseline functions, and additional grant funding for projects outside those functions. A review of NRW's baseline functions found a **'funding gap'**, which led to the Welsh Government **allocating NRW a further £18.2m** in 2023-24. In the **recent 2024-25 final budget**, NRW's resource allocation is £88.2m, an £18.2m increase from the indicative budget.

NRW's most recent accounts show its **total income for 2022-23 was £116m**, including £22m of Welsh Government grants towards a range of outcomes. Additionally, the Welsh Government provided £118m Grant in Aid. NRW's total expenditure for the year was £272m, £38m more than its income for 2022-23.

In a **paper to the Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee**, NRW highlights pressures it's facing in managing increased costs. It says it's undertaking a thorough review of all activities to make further budget reductions required.

3. NRW scrutiny

As a Welsh Government Sponsored Body, NRW is accountable to the Welsh Ministers and subject to scrutiny by Senedd Committees. The Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee undertakes **annual scrutiny of NRW**.

4. Welsh Government action

In response to the increasing pressure on Wales's aquatic environments, the Welsh Government set up the **Better River Quality Taskforce** (the taskforce). It has looked at evaluating the current approach to management and regulation of overflows in Wales and developing plans for change and improvement. It identified **five areas requiring additional action**, publishing an action plan for each area in July 2022. The action plans were updated to show progress against the actions on 24 October 2024.

There have been four river pollution summits, the **first at the 2022 Royal Welsh show**, and most recently in **March this year**, where a presentation on the progress of the Teifi Demonstrator Catchment project was given. Eight areas of intervention were agreed at the **first summit**, one of which was to establish nutrient management boards, including the **Teifi Nutrient Management Board**.

In response to this petition, the previous Minister for Climate Change, Julie James, gives further details about the '4Rivers for Life' project, she says:

Specifically on the river Teifi the project will visit over 150 farmers to provide land management advice, install approximately 25km of riparian fencing and plant around 12,500 riparian trees. There are also plans to re-meander around 3km of straightened river in the catchment, to restore natural processes and improve habitats along these sections.

The Minister also gives further details on the [Teifi Demonstrator Catchment](#) project, saying it "is about thinking differently and using innovative solutions to explore new and novel ways of working". She says the SAC Rivers projects, established in response to NRW's compliance assessment finding breaches of phosphorous levels in the Teifi:

...has identified discharges from Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water sewerage treatment works and Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) as the lead contributor to phosphorus levels in the Teifi catchment.

As part of a dedicated [Welsh Government Action Plan](#), NRW is undertaking a review of discharge permits to reduce the impact from Dŵr Cymru assets. The Minister also highlights the work of the taskforce, the role of Ofwat's 'Price Review' process, work NRW is undertaking with the Coal Authority in tackling the legacy of historic metal mines, and how NRW is working to protect fisheries on the Teifi. The Minister also draws attention to the "many other activities" NRW undertakes in the Teifi catchment as part of their general duties and responsibilities, including "reactive incident response and enforcement and proactive permitting, permit compliance/inspections".

5. Welsh Parliament action

The Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee undertook an investigation into [sewage discharges and their impact on water quality](#) in early 2022. The Committee's findings are discussed in this [Senedd Research article](#). It has since undertaken [scrutiny of Dwr Cymru's environmental performance](#) and 'illegal spillages of untreated sewage' from several of its Wastewater Treatment Works .

The Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee undertakes [annual scrutiny of NRW](#), and scrutinises NRW's budget allocations during [annual draft budget scrutiny](#) with the responsible Minister.

The Economy Trade and Rural Affairs Committee scrutinised the Agricultural Pollution Regulations in 2021/2022. It continues to scrutinise the delivery of the regulations during regular Rural Affairs Ministerial scrutiny.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.