

# Widespread sewage pollution in Wales sees concerns raised over 'effective environmental governance'

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02 Mar 2026

The Welsh government has been urged to look into whether good enough regulatory measures are in place in the Ogmore catchment, as campaigners highlight that sewage spills are taking place on a large scale and high E.Coli levels have been recorded.



The environmental charity, A Peace for Nature, organised "Wales' biggest" [clean-up](#) of the river Ogmore in South Wales last summer. This resulted in over 6,000 tyres and other debris being removed from the river.

However, the charity's founder Alun Phillips has said in a letter, seen by ENDS, and addressed to Wales deputy first minister and cabinet secretary for climate change and rural affairs, Huw Irranca-Davies, that he is calling for a cabinet meeting over sewage in the catchment after being refused a meeting with the chief executive of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and the minister.

The letter states: "Volunteers can remove tyres and shopping trolleys. Communities can give their time. Organisations can mobilise hundreds of people, as they have done [...] What volunteers cannot do is regulate cumulative sewage discharge."

In the letter, sent last week, Phillips states that Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) data and discharge flow metrics show that the Ogmore catchment has received an estimated 210 billion litres of sewage from storm overflows and treatment works over the past nine years.

Phillips claims that this data is from NRW and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water datasets. He said it has been cross checked with the methodology used by a former data scientist, Peter Hammond, for detecting spills. Hammond's work was recently highlighted in the Channel 4 docu-drama, [Dirty Business](#).

The letter also outlines that in 2024, EDMs in the catchment were not recording for 9% of the time. Phillips said the hours the EDMs weren't recording discharge data translates to an estimated 558 cumulative days.

Additionally, Phillips reports that the charity has recorded E. coli concentrations in excess of 100,000 colony forming units (cfu) per 100ml at multiple inland locations within the catchment. He raised particular concern with bathing water quality at Ogmore-by-Sea, which was [closed to the public](#) due to a sewage works leak in 2024.

In the NRW bathing water [report](#) for 2025, Ogmore-by-Sea and Watch House Bay - which are both in the Ogmore catchment - were the only two non-compliant bathing waters in Wales. The regulator has said it will put up signs advising against bathing at Ogmore-by-Sea in 2026, however it said it will not prohibit swimming there.

Phillips also said in the letter that laboratory-confirmed cases of E. coli O157 have been identified within the Vale of Glamorgan. This is a dangerous strain of the bacteria which resulted in the death of eight-year-old [Heather Preen](#) in 1999, who came into contact with sewage in the South West of England. Her story has been put into the spotlight through Channel 4's docu-drama.

"When a pathogenic strain capable of causing fatal illness is present within the wider region, and when bacterial concentrations exceed recognised safety thresholds by such magnitude, the issue ceases to be a technical regulatory discussion. It becomes a matter of public health risk management", Phillips said.

"The question is no longer whether the river is beautiful. It is whether pollution of this magnitude is compatible with effective environmental governance", he added.

Phillips told ENDS today that NRW has contacted him and said that a "catchment-wide framework is being developed" for Ogmore.

An NRW spokesperson told ENDS: "We take concerns about water quality in the Ogmore catchment very seriously, and we recognise the public interest and have been in contact with Mr Phillips and remain open to further engagement with him and all community representatives. Our local teams are actively involved in ongoing discussions with partners and stakeholders across the catchment.

"Storm overflows and wastewater treatment works operate under strict environmental permits which only allow discharges in specific circumstances, such as heavy rainfall. Any spill outside permit conditions is unlawful, and we investigate potential breaches and take enforcement action where required. We have strengthened our regulation of the water sector, increased scrutiny of water company discharges, and continue to monitor delivery of improvements secured through the most recent Ofwat price review.

"Improving water quality in the Ogmore catchment is a long-term challenge, which is why we are working with [the] Welsh government and partners on a new catchment-wide bathing water improvement project for Ogmore-by-Sea and Watch House Bay in Barry following 'poor' bathing water classifications. This includes targeted sampling and investigations to identify pollution sources, including misconnections.

"We remain committed to robust regulation and collaborative action to protect public health and improve the water environment for communities and future generations."

A Welsh government spokesperson said: "Protecting public health and the environment is a clear priority for us and we expect regulators and water companies to take robust action where standards are not being met."



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