

Afon Cynffig / Kenfig River Pollution Incident



Community Meeting Public Record of Proceedings

19 June 2026

Cornelly Community Centre

Prepared by A Peace for Nature

Publication and accuracy note

This document has been prepared from the full meeting audio recording for the community meeting held on 19 June 2026. The audio recording remains the primary record of proceedings.

The purpose of this document is to set out the questions, answers, commitments, future dates and key statements arising from the meeting in a format suitable for public circulation.

Names of community members who spoke in a private capacity have been redacted as [Community Member, name redacted] or [Name Redacted]. Names of elected representatives, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water representatives, Natural Resources Wales representatives and professional contributors from Kenfig Nature Reserve have been retained where they spoke in that capacity.

Sir John Cunliffe has not been redacted where he is referred to as a public figure in discussion about the Independent Water Commission.

Words have been retained as closely as possible to the recording. Any uncertain passages are marked as [inaudible] or [unclear] or [...].

This document has been checked against the audio recording in full.

Attendance

Estimated public attendance: approximately 100 people.

Panel members present

- Alun Phillips, Chair, Chief Executive Officer, A Peace for Nature
- Gareth Davies, Operations Manager, Natural Resources Wales
- Steve Bayliss MS, Member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda
- Alun Cox MS, Member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda
- Stephen Kinnock MP, Member of Parliament for Aberafan Maesteg
- Sera Evans MS, Member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda
- Steve Wilson, Chief Operations Officer, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
- Cllr John Spanswick, Leader of Bridgend County Borough Council
- Huwel Manly, Head of Operations South West Wales, Natural Resources Wales
- Huw Irranca-Davies MS, Member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda
- Benjamin Hodge-McKenna MS, Member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda

Apologies

Elyn Stephens MS.

Meeting format

Panel members were welcomed and briefed on proceedings before the meeting began.

The meeting was held as a public question and answer session. Panel members were initially asked to keep answers to three minutes. As the evening progressed, and because of the volume of questions, answer times were reduced to approximately two minutes and later to approximately one minute.

Questions were managed through the Chair. The Chair explained at the start that questions should not be rude, should not be heated and should be purposeful. The Chair also explained that he would intervene if necessary to keep the meeting orderly and focused.

The meeting continued beyond 9:00pm by agreement of those present. The meeting closed at approximately 9:45pm.

Agreed points, commitments and follow-up actions

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Steve Wilson apologised on behalf of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water and accepted that Welsh Water understood the harm caused to the river and the problems caused by the incident.

Steve Wilson stated: "We got this one wrong, and I am very sorry for that."

Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water is committed to getting the river back to full health and would work with consultants, contractors and experts until the river is in the right place.

Steve Wilson stated that he wants to replace the whole rising main and is seeking funding to do so. He stated that if he has to take more money from the maintenance budget to replace it, Welsh Water will do that.

Steve Wilson stated that he is not prepared to leave the risk of the remaining 3 kilometres of pipe unfixed.

Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water will involve the community in river recovery plans once details have been received from experts and shared with NRW.

Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water wants to work with the community, NRW and all landowners on river recovery.

Steve Wilson apologised for Welsh Water not speaking to landowners early enough and stated that Welsh Water is working to make sure that does not happen again.

Steve Wilson stated that river recovery tenders are due back at the end of June 2026.

Steve Wilson agreed that Welsh Water would be happy to attend a further public meeting once tender responses have been received and recovery proposals developed, subject to NRW and landowner engagement.

Steve Wilson stated that he would look into the reported EDM sensor issue at Marlas and said there is no plan or approach to hide data.

Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water is happy to work with local schools and bring them into this.

Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water will work with the local authority environmental health department regarding possible signage or warnings at known river access points.

Natural Resources Wales

Huwel Manly confirmed that NRW has an active investigation into the latest burst and ongoing investigations from previous instances.

Huwel Manly stated that any final enforcement decision has yet to be taken and must follow a full investigation because the burden of proof is the same as any criminal case.

Huwel Manly stated that enforcement undertakings are a possibility, while explaining the usual circumstances in which they are used.

Huwel Manly stated that NRW has undertaken water samples and a full ecological analysis.

Huwel Manly stated that NRW has looked at impacts on SSSI features at Margam Moor and what needs to be done to recover SSSI condition.

Huwel Manly stated that there has to be recovery to the river and recovery to affected land.

Huwel Manly stated that NRW will support work to rectify the problems and that the programme of work will need to be aligned with the landowners.

Huwel Manly stated that if the case is there and is strong enough, NRW will take enforcement where appropriate.

Elected representatives and council leader

Alun Cox MS warned Welsh Water that the recovery plan needs to be done with the community, not behind closed doors.

Alun Cox MS stated that elected representatives were agreed that they wanted to see a plan very quickly for investment in the remaining 3 kilometres of the main.

Cllr John Spanswick stated that representatives would make sure pressure is put on Welsh Water and that regular meetings and continued public information would be expected.

Sera Evans MS asked Welsh Water to commit to a further meeting with residents once tender responses are in and a decision has been made on who will undertake river recovery work.

Stephen Kinnock MP stated that he supports the regulatory side of the water industry being devolved and said he would speak to colleagues in Westminster to ensure that happens.

Huw Irranca-Davies MS stated that the river does not have to remain dead, that it can be recovered and that the aim should be to get it back to really good condition.

Sera Evans MS stated that Dŵr Cymru and NRW should commit to a further meeting with residents when there is clarity on the recovery plan and that questions had also been asked about recovery further downstream, including the foreshore and estuary.

Future dates and timescales identified

End of June 2026: Steve Wilson stated that tenders for river recovery work are due back at the end of the month.

Matter of weeks after receipt of expert quotations: Steve Wilson stated that once time scales are received from experts, Welsh Water should be able to say how long river recovery will take and what will be done.

2027: Stephen Kinnock MP referred to a completion date of 2027 for the six kilometres of replacement rising main already funded.

Wednesday following the meeting, to be confirmed: Benjamin Hodge-McKenna MS referred to an anticipated Senedd debate on a Welsh Rivers Act motion.

Further public meeting, date not yet set: Steve Wilson agreed that Welsh Water would be happy to attend a further meeting once tender responses and river recovery proposals are available, subject to engagement with NRW and landowners.

Possible future school engagement: Steve Wilson stated that it would be good to engage local schools and that he was happy to take that further forward.

Possible future signage discussion: Steve Wilson stated that Welsh Water would work with the local authority environmental health department regarding possible signage or warnings at known river access points.

Full transcript

The following record follows the audio recordings made during the meeting. Community names have been redacted except where a speaker is retained because they spoke in a professional or public capacity. Panel member names are shown before their responses.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Good evening, all.

So, thank you very much for coming, first of all.

My name is Alun Phillips, CEO of A Peace for Nature.

Some of you may have seen the work that we've done on the catchment recently, and that's not why I'm here.

So, I'm going to be chairing this evening's proceedings.

First of all, what I'd like to do is pass the mic on to the panel and then ask everybody to introduce themselves so that everyone knows who is who.

And just for added safety, we've printed their names as well.

Gareth Davies, Natural Resources Wales

My name is Gareth Davies, the Operations Manager for Southwest Natural Resources Wales.

Steve Bayliss MS

Hello, I'm Steve Bayliss. I'm the MS for Afan Ogwr Rhondda. I've just been elected.

Alun Cox MS

Hello, my name is Alun Cox. I'm also a member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda.

Stephen Kinnock MP

Hello, I'm Stephen Kinnock. I'm the Member of Parliament for Aberafan Maesteg.

Sera Evans MS

Good evening. My name is Sera Evans and I'm a member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda at Plaid Cymru alongside Alun and my colleague Elyn who can't be here this evening as well.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

I'm Steve Wilson. I'm the Chief Operations Officer for Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water.

Cllr John Spanswick

Good evening. I'm John Spanswick, the leader of Bridgend County Borough Council.

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

Good evening. I'm Huwel Manly, the head of operations for South West Wales with Natural Resources Wales.

Huw Irranca-Davies MS

Good evening. Huw Irranca-Davies, also recently elected member for Afan Ogwr Rhondda.

Ben McKenna MS

I'm Ben McKenna, alongside Steve Bayliss, Reform member of the Senedd for Afan Ogwr Rhondda.

Alun Phillips, Chair

So, the purpose of tonight is to ask questions of the elected members and obviously representatives from Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Water. I would ask if you would please make sure that your questions are not rude, not heated and with purpose. If I feel that I need to intervene at any stage, I will, but I'm not here to talk tonight. These are the people that have got answers to your questions.

So who would like to go first?

Alun Phillips, Chair

[Redacted], well volunteered.

Question 1

Well, first of all, thank you everybody for joining up this evening.

Wonderful turn out for the community.

I'd just like to ask Welsh Water, when the first pipe started to fall apart three years ago?

How much significance did Welsh Water put into that and how much concern did they have?

Because it seemed at that time that there was a major breakdown of the pipeline which went from the rising main in Marlas across to Port Talbot Steelworks was breaking down and an ecological disaster was imminent.

So what sort of thought process did Welsh Water have behind that and why did you react until March of this year?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Thank you for the question.

And first of all, I'd like to say a really big apology from Dŵr Cymru.

We absolutely understand the harm that this has been, has caused to the river and the problems that this has caused.

Back in 2023, we had a burst on this pipe.

That's the first burst that we had on a pipe that was not actually that old.

It was installed in around the 90s.

It's ductile iron.

A pipe of that age should have lasted 60 years plus.

So it was an out of the ordinary kind of burst.

But given the significance of the environment, at that point in 2023, 2024,

We were producing our five-year investment plan for the period 2025 to 2030, and we were negotiating with Ofwat that we have a number of rising mains such as this in sensitive areas in Wales, you know, affecting beaches, nature reserves, lots of sensitive areas.

And we were asking Ofwat for extra funding.

We put a package together for £58m to replace a number of these pipes.

And we included this one into that submission.

That money wasn't forthcoming from Ofwat in terms of an extra funding package.

We were told that we had to take this out of our existing base maintenance funding.

And that's what we started to do from April 2025.

Planning to replace a pipeline through land that we don't own does take a bit of time. And unfortunately, the rate of deterioration of this pipe was far greater than we expected.

And we've seen a burst rate really accelerate away from us, hence why we've had to take these much more drastic actions of trying to build a temporary treatment plant, doing all the tankering and laying an overland pipe.

So we're really sorry that this has happened, but things accelerated away from us.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Does that answer your question?

Question 1 asker: Probably.

Alun Phillips, Chair

OK.

Question 1 asker:

I think the pipe is slightly older than that, 1983-85.

In fact, this gentleman was one of the contractors that laid it.

It burst more than once in 1983, across the top of the sidings.

In fact, it burst several times.

It rolled into the river many, many times, but the concern was that once that went inoperational, you just pumped sewage into Kenfig River with no sort of, no regret is the word, I suppose.

I mean, I think it's estimated it was 150 tonnes an hour, which was going into that river.

If you would spend more money in the earliest stages back in 1983, one, it would be a lot cheaper, and two, this ecological disaster wouldn't have happened.

But I think the pipeline was a lot older than what you actually think.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So,

Apologies if the records we've got aren't correct.

There was a treatment works there in the past, and we put a pipeline to pump this to the Afan Wastewater Treatment Works through in the 90s, according to our kind of records.

Yes, I mean, we've got 33,000, actually no, sorry, 35,000 kilometres of sewers and pipes across our operating area.

It's a huge number.

That stretches from here to New Zealand and back again.

And trying to stay on top of all of those pipes and making sure that we understand the quality of the grade of them when they're underground is a tricky matter.

And one of the big lessons we are taking away from this incident is how can we do better non-destructive testing to understand the mains before we get into this situation because this has really deteriorated much quicker than we would have expected.

Once this incident is over and we've replaced the pipe completely, we have a new pipe, we are going to do a lot more investigation to see why the ductile iron pipe has deteriorated so quickly in this situation.

That isn't normal.

We've got many hundreds of kilometres of ductile iron pipe across our operating area and we've not seen failures like this before.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

Alun Cox MS

I guess the question goes to the nub of the frustration that the community here exhibits.

This is a known problem, and it's been known for many years.

I accept that the deterioration happened at a pace that you did not expect, but by your own admission, you talk of making a bid for funding, that funding wasn't available.

And the question is, if that funding had been available at that time, would it have happened quicker than you were, you then subsequently didn't do and used your own base funding to do it?

Did you do it over a different time scale than you would have originally if you'd had that money from Ofwat originally?

And if that is true, then I think not only does this community deserve the apology, which you've already given, but a consideration about how that happened and why that was allowed to happen at that time.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So the rate at which we would lay a pipe, particularly through land that we don't own, does require quite a bit of planning to do.

And the time scales for laying a sort of 13 kilometre pipeline would normally take us, you know, two to three years of planning, design and delivery.

In this situation, that had to be accelerated because, as I said, the rate of deterioration for a normal operation just wasn't, we had to speed the process up, which is what we're doing currently.

Hindsight's a wonderful thing.

I wish we knew more about the pipe, and I'm really sorry that, you know, our approach at trying to understand the quality of our pipes and the asset base that we've got was missed in this situation.

And as I said, we've really got to relook at how we do asset grade assessments of our asset base.

But I'm afraid I do come back to the problem that we've got, which is 33,000 kilometres of sewers and an investment rate in the UK at the moment, which means most sewers have to last 800 years.

That's the kind of problem that we've got at the current level of funding for base maintenance.

The water industry is pushing hard at the moment to try and get regulators and government to change the funding mechanism so that there's more money for maintenance.

But in the meantime, we have to make tough choices.

And we got this one wrong, and I am very sorry for that.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

Question from audience 2

I laid many pipelines with different contracts across South Wales and when that pipeline was put in down there, there was about another third of houses were built and they were out of date from the time they were put in.

[Some unclear discussion around historic infrastructure]

And if you beat about the bush, till the cows come. That's all it is, underfunded, where has all our money gone? (applause) Direct uncertainty, without an inquiry, without an inquiry. It's all passing the back, and it's a constant passing the back.

At the end of the day, something needs to be done, because our money has been totally, totally wasted, big salaries, and not any work done to justify it. Thank you. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So on the point about growth, we do work very closely with local authorities to try to manage growth and development.

And all new houses in Wales come with separate systems so the rainwater doesn't go down that pipe. So actually from a capacity point of view, new housing is easier to deal with than existing housing where quite often it's combined sewers and the rainwater also goes down that pipe.

And this pipe was actually oversized at the beginning with plans for a lot of growth in that kind of area.

But actually operationally, operating a pipe which is oversized is equally as difficult as an undersized pipe.

Because what happens with an oversized pipe is the sewage sits there longer, producing, you know, hydrogen sulphide gases eating away at the pipe as well.

So actually undersizing and oversizing are both problems.

Getting it right is a tricky business.

And so in this situation, we do need to further understand why this pipe has deteriorated so quickly.

Is it because of something that was in the pipe?

Was it that actually the pipe itself wasn't of the right grade at the time when it was laid?

Or actually is the ground conditions, particularly going through the old sidings, is the ground so contaminated there that it's eating away at the pipe? We've still got to try and work that problem out.

In terms of the point about bills, look, I really understand how bills at the moment have gone up considerably.

And the reason for that is a huge increase in investment that we have to put in.

What are we talking about here?

But an infrastructure that's been getting older and that we've got a lot more growth going on.

And we've also got climate change, which is accelerating away here, making things more difficult for us.

So we've got a big step up in increase in bills to fund that extra investment.

But I have to say for the last 10 to 15 years before that, we've had bills which have only gone up less than inflation.

And that's part of the problem that we now see as a water industry in the UK.

This isn't just a Welsh issue, it is a UK wide issue around funding infrastructure at this moment in time.

Now when there's a deficit of investment and we're having to try and play catch up, is also at a time when interest rates are a lot higher.

So the cost of borrowing money to do that investment means we're paying higher interest charges on that money to do those improvements.

So it's a difficult situation at the moment to try and get out of without, you know, seeing bills rise.

But we absolutely recognise that we've got to try and strike the right balance of affordability for customers. You're spot on, sir.

You know, the price of bills is very, very high at the moment.

Alun Phillips, Chair

So I'd like to just come back in on one of the questions that was asked.

So I understand obviously Steve's answer there about infrastructure, increasing bills, but if I may have a slight follow on there.

So the question was, where's all our money going?

I don't think the question was answered there.

And also from an investment point of view, maybe you could explain what bondholders are and how much income is raised from bondholders as well, please, because that's directly relevant to that question.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So where has the money gone?

Well, Welsh Water is a not-for-profit company.

All the money that we raise from customer bills goes to fund infrastructure, goes to fund the running costs of the business and also to pay the debt on the money that we're borrowing to put into the ground lots more assets, new, tighter standard treatment works, new water treatment works, improvements to the water network, improvements to our dams and our reservoirs.

That's where the kind of funding goes. The annual report on the counts is available for the public to see and actually you can see that we've been making a loss over the last few years.

We've been spending more money than we've actually been receiving in from customers and that isn't a sustainable position for us to be in either.

So it's quite clear and transparent that the money is being spent on the operation of the business.

The challenge we have in Wales is that we've got a third of the UK's Blue Flag beaches.

That's a fantastic thing to have.

We've got nine of the 16 SAC rivers in the UK in our operating area.

But we've got less than 5% of the UK's population to pay for all that infrastructure.

Customers in Severn Trent, you know, have no beaches, have no SAC rivers.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, if you don't mind, the question is about the Kenfig, not about Severn Trent.

Maybe you could focus around a bit on what/where customer money is on in the Kenfig area?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

I'll just say that all the customer money that we receive is spent on the infrastructure that we put in the ground and the running costs of running water treatment works, running pipe networks and running wastewater treatment works.

One of the reasons why we have more Blue Flag beaches in Wales than in England is that we operate to a much, tighter standard, more treatment plants with UV disinfection trying to meet that standard.

Question 3 Community

Thank you.

I'll ask my questions on why and what, and initially to pick up on this very cogent argument.

I did expect to come here today, to hear some answers, not excuses.

I'm also an agricultural journalist, and I have seen many, many dairy farmers have to go out of business because they couldn't afford to replace [inaudible] 10 years ago or even the less, let alone something said [inaudible] 30 years old.

If a farmer or any other businessman put forward the sort of reasoning that you guys, with the greatest respect, are putting forward, I'm not sure the judge would laugh, but it would certainly be thrown out of court, it would not stand, oh, I couldn't get agreement with my business partners. I couldn't get this or whatever plan done.

But that is not good enough.

People in [the] estate: the smell and the stench and the high mortgage and community tax and everything else is appalling. So I personally would like to hear a proper, comprehensive answer [inaudible]. There [are better minds] in this room who understand the detail.

The other point I have to make is perhaps more political. It seems to me to be represented in the systemic rot that we have in these countries from the United Kingdom. Why on earth can Welsh Water and Natural Resources Wales not get together very, very quickly and sort that part of the problem out between themselves?

It really does defy belief, and that is a political question.

I hold you all, in high regard, but on this point, it really, really does need to be addressed.

We want answers, not, if I may say so, excuses.

Thank you.

Sera Evans MS

Thank you for the question.

Firstly, thank you very much for the invitation, Alun, to be here this evening.

It's good to be here and it's great to see so many of you really engaged in this matter.

I will just give a, before I come to your question, if that's okay, I wanted to just pick up on a point that the gentleman in the front raised.

I was alerted to this issue before I was even elected to the Senedd.

And I then started asking questions of Dŵr Cymru.

And then within a very short space of time of being elected, we were contacted by Alun.

And I'm sure that he will testify that we arranged to meet on site at the river to understand exactly the gravity of the situation.

And we've been responsive to Alun and others.

The Kenfig Nature Reserve has been in touch with us as well.

And we've called several meetings with Dŵr Cymru, one of which Alun was present at.

And we've also asked some questions around other technologies that could have been used or could have been perhaps used earlier in the process.

We also queried the aeration techniques that were used on site, which Alun's testing showed weren't effective in terms raising those oxygen levels, you may get to differ Steve in a moment.

And we engaged the press and the media as well to ensure that we would bring in as much attention to this as possible.

We've also, Elyn Stephens, my colleague, raised it in the Senedd, and we've also raised it directly with the Minister, Llŷr Gruffydd. And we've also called for landowner meetings as well to ensure that people whose land has been affected, and I know there are a few of you at least here this evening, to ensure that we understand the mitigations that have been put in place, if any, and then also to understand any ameliorative works that can take place to support the recovery of that land.

So I want to reassure you that we haven't been sitting on our hands with this, and I'm sure that Dŵr Cymru colleagues will agree that we've really held their feet to the fire on this, and we've been in close contact, regular contact, and have scrutinised many of their statements and many of their moves in meetings and outside of meetings as well.

And we'll continue to do that.

This issue isn't over.

We know that overland pipe is now in place, but we know that longer-term solution is not going to be ready, am I right, Ed? [...] till January. So we know that there is that longer term solution in the pipeline, pardon the pun, but that we know that the situation remains precarious.

And let's face it, the river is dead. That river is dead.

And it's going to take a long, long, time before that river gets anywhere near back to its former self.

The odour has been absolutely disgusting. I had tears in my eyes. Again, Alun can testify to the tears.

(Timekeeper calls time)

Sorry, I haven't answered the question.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Sera.

So, Steve, if you could just address the smell and the issues that the local residents have had to face from the temporary treatment works, including the sewage foam that has been blown off those tanks, please.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So look, again, really sorry for the disruption that the temporary treatment plant caused, because again, we were trying to find ways of solving the problem here.

Tankering away the waste, we couldn't keep up with the volumes of flow.

And the number of tankers on the road was becoming unmanageable.

We clearly can't ask the people of Cornelly to leave for a few weeks while we're doing, so their sewage has to go somewhere.

So we decided to build a temporary treatment plant to try and treat that to reduce the impact on the river.

That is not an easy thing to do in a very short period of time.

And clearly, a treatment works so close to housing, you wouldn't normally do that kind of thing.

And so I do apologise to people who had to suffer the smells of a treatment works, particularly when it got to that bank holiday weekend when it was very, very warm.

I can really understand that.

The foam is a byproduct of treatment.

When you get biological treatment and a treatment works, naturally bacteria kind of create a foam in that process.

And so, again, because it was a temporary plant, it wasn't designed necessarily for dealing with that.

And there was a couple of days where foam was generated and then in the wind it blew about.

And again, we're really sorry for that.

We tackled that as quick as we possibly could when that problem and phenomenon is generated.

But clearly building a treatment works at the back of a number of houses as a temporary setup was a real inconvenience for the customers.

We understand that.

And I'm very sorry, but thank them for bearing with us while we put that in place because that was designed to try and reduce the impact on the river.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you Steve.

So I'm just conscious of the time.

I know some members of the panel will need to leave soon-ish.

So what I'm going to do is reduce the time to two minutes for an answer if that's okay.

Is that okay with the panel?

Stephen, would you like to say something?

Stephen Kinnock MP

Thank you very much, Alun, and thank you for the opportunity to go and see the appalling sight of this environmental catastrophe.

And there's no other word for it.

The smell down there is appalling.

You see the discolouration in the water.

The oxygen levels have dropped through the floor.

There's no way that any wildlife can survive in there.

It is an absolute disgrace.

I followed up by writing to the minister and to NRW and to Dŵr Cymru and have had answers to my questions in those letters, not all of them satisfactory.

But in the interest of time, I thought it might be helpful to, I think, answer, to ask you, Steve, 2 questions, one general and one specific.

My general question is, when will we get this river back to where it needs to be, habitats recovered, wildlife returned?

When will that river once again be a thriving river?

Can you please set out the budget and the time frame for doing that with the specific dates for achieving it?

And my second more specific question is, my understanding is that the rising main is a total length of 9 kilometres.

You've secured funding of 13 million pounds to replace just six kilometres.

The new infrastructure has a design life of 40 years, completion date 2027.

However, I understand that the remaining 3 kilometres also require replacement.

What is the timeline and the budget for ensuring that the full 9 kilometres is fixed?

So could you please answer the general question and the specific question?

Thank you.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Thanks.

So in terms of river improvement, we are absolutely committed to getting this river back to full health.

I don't know how long that will take.

We are working with environmental consultants, experts, we're working with the Rivers Trust and we will do what it takes to get this river back into full health again.

I can't put a budget around it because I'm asking those companies at the moment for quotes in terms of what it will cost, because this is not a matter of me saying it's going, here's X amount of money and we're walking away.

Our commitment is to get this river back to the right standard and we'll be here working with consultants, contractors, experts until it is in the right place.

Back to the point about the full rising main.

Yes, I want to replace the whole main now and I am seeking funding to do that.

Now, we're having conversations with Ofwat, we're having conversations with other parties as well.

But if it takes me having to take more money from our maintenance budget to replace this, we will do that.

The difficulty then is that I will be taking money from other planned maintenance schemes to be able to fund that.

Because we have a finite pot, we can't go back and ask for more money.

We've got the ceiling that we've got for this five-year period.

And all that funding is committed at the moment to other environmental improvements.

But I'm not prepared to leave the risk of 3 kilometres of this pipe unfixed, given what we have seen.

So the commitment is we're going to replace it.

But it's my job now to try and find the funding and find a way of doing that.

And that's what I'm committed to do.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

You mentioned about consultants and experts.

One thing you haven't mentioned is about traditional local knowledge that needs to go into that as well.

What are your commitments to the community to involve them in the recovery of this river, please?

And then, sorry, then I'm going to bring in Huw.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yeah, no, thanks, Alun.

And thanks for reminding me about that point, because actually I should have mentioned that we are sharing our plans around river recovery once we've got all the details through from the various experts with NRW.

And then we want to involve the community as well.

Absolutely we do, because it's, everybody's river.

It means a lot to locals and certainly the nature reserve as well is a jewel in all of our crowns in this kind of area.

So we will be seeking, consultation from everybody around are they satisfied with the actions that we're taking.

Clearly, there are a number of landowners who we will have to get their permission as well, because there are riparian owners of this river as well, and some of that activity to improve the quality will have to take part on their land as well.

So, there are a lot of stakeholders I need to engage with.

Huw Irranca-Davies MS

I hadn't expected to be up here to be honest. I thought I was going to be down there asking questions up this way, but as I'm here, I'm going to use the privilege.

In the discussions we've had with Dŵr Cymru and with NRW, the questions we've raised, the opportunity that we've had to actually sit in meetings and go, what are you doing on X, Y, and Z? Are you committed to this long term?

There are still some questions that are still out there.

One of them is the issue of not only the pollution within the river and the contamination within that, but also the wider contamination that may not have come only from this leakage, but the leakage that's been referred to over many years.

What has it done to the land, the surrounding, etc.

So I would want to understand, not just from Dŵr Cymru, but also from NRW, what analysis, what assessment is being done of the wider implications.

The unknown is always the fearful thing.

If we know that there is proper monitoring and science-led evaluation going on, in the Marlas areas, not just in Kenfig Nature Reserve, etc., to see what the impact of this most recent, but also longer term is.

I'm probably just I'm going to run out of time.

The other thing I'd just like to ask my colleague to the right here is NRW's role in this, not only in terms of monitoring now and this immediate one, but also longer term going forward, so that we have not only good recovery from this pollution incident now, but actually restoration of the biodiversity and the nature and the wildlife that we want to see, and the landowners, when their land is back to good health as well.

So those questions for both of you, please.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Just before we answer the question, sorry, I'm just going to pass you over to [Name Redacted] one of the landowners, because I'm sure he's got something to say about that.

Question from the audience [name redacted]

Thank you for the introduction.

I'm [Name Redacted], one of the local farmers.

I'm probably the single most affected person in the room with 4km of frontage to Kenfig and 200 acres of grasslands covered in raw sewage between 2023 and 2026.

We are where we are.

It's been a total environmental disaster.

I think Welsh Water realised that.

But communication with us was absolutely appalling.

Nobody told us you pumped raw sewage into the Kenfig, cows, sheep, horses, all drinking out of the Kenfig traditionally - always have: drinking raw sewage.

I've got dead cows, I've got dead sheep, I've got sick horses.

No one told us.

The communication has been absolutely appalling.

The only way we have managed to get anything done with Welsh Water is by having some very clever people put up some paperwork and it was issued for us and it was issued incorrectly so we could physically stop by the water, laying some of the pipes until we got some answers and some promises which we've got now moving forward very, very slowly.

To be fair to Welsh Water, they have now come up with some plans to help improve some of the land [that] has been damaged, but it's going to cost an awful lot of money over a very long period.

Now, I understand Welsh Water will probably be prosecuted by NRW for this.

Most of the people in this room don't want Welsh Water to be prosecuted, and the money taken off Welsh Water by NRW and sent to the Treasury in London.

We don't want Welsh money going to London.

We want Welsh Water's money spent on the Kenfig, the Kenfig catchment, my land, other farmers' land to put it back the way it was 10 years ago.

So we've got both Welsh Water, you've got a people from Welsh Water, we've got some very important people from NRW, people far cleverer than me up on there.

Can we now have some assurances, instead of being fined, Welsh Water money would go to repair environmental damage done on the Kenfig of the Kenfig catchment.

No one wants Welsh money to work in London.

Let's spend Welsh money where it belongs in ways of the damage that's been done.

(strong applause)

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

Thank you for that.

Just to be clear from NRW perspective, and I'm going to sound a little lucid for some of my answers because at the moment we do have an active investigation into the latest burst and some ongoing investigations from previous instances that occurred.

And therefore, forgive me that I won't cover everything in detail because we need a burden of proof to make sure we have sufficient evidence to go forward for potential prosecution.

I'm outside of potential prosecution in terms to, in terms of the question around how you deal with different levels and the options around enforcement. Yes, enforcement undertakings are a possibility, okay?

And normally enforcement undertakings are normally given as an opportunity to where an incident has not had a major impact, where it's had a minor impact, or where it was unforeseeable.

Okay, so just be clear there, but any decision on our final enforcement is yet to be undertaken and has to follow a full investigation because the burden of proof we require is the same as any criminal case.

In terms of the question that you asked around monitoring, we have undertaken a number of water samples.

We have done a full analysis of the ecology, and we've got some really great specialists and teams around that.

In terms of some of the land that's impacted the SSSI over at Margam Moor, we've looked at the impacts of what the sewage has had on the features of that SSSI, and realistically then what needs to be done to recover the SSSI back to condition.

So there are some options that will need to be put forward as part of the recovery plan.

So ultimately there has to be recovery to the river.

There has to be recovery to that land that is affected in particular those very precious Kenfig nature reserves, Margam Moor, SSSIs, which I'm aware that you graze only.

Thank you.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Huwel.

Huwel, if you wouldn't mind keeping the microphone just for two seconds.

Just to follow up on that, so in terms of recovery of the river, there are a lot of people in this room tonight who would be prepared to take the time, time to come and help to do this.

There are some issues further downstream with blockages and overgrown areas.

Is that something that NRW would be happy to meet with the local community, walk the river and have a look to see what can be done collectively?

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

I think there are opportunities. But what I would say is I understand that Welsh Water have commissioned a recovery plan and I think let's look at what that recovery plan covers and what proposals are coming in that plan.

Because overall there's no point being a little bit here, a little bit there.

It needs to cover the whole river system that's impacted.

And I think it's better to have a full costed plan and that's looking forwards.

And at that time we can look to see potentially what can be done or not.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, diolch.

Question from Audience name redacted.

Yeah, just going on from that, you just said recovery will have a recovery plan.

But when is that going to come forward?

You're quick enough to stick the sewage in the river.

But where's the answers?

What you're doing?

Because Mr. Wilson, you earlier said that when we got your rising [main] being done, you're going to have an investigation as to why the pipe has failed.

If you're not interested in that, we want to know when you're going to clean them up.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

You know, thanks.

We're now receiving quotations back from various experts, as I said before, on river recovery.

We're talking to the Rivers Trust and Afonydd Cymru around their kind of proposals.

As soon as I've got the kind of time scales from them, which I think will be, you know, in a matter of weeks, we'll be able to say how long this is going to take and what we're doing.

But as I said before, because I don't know that at this moment in time, my commitment is we will do and we will be here as long as it takes to get this river back to the right standard.

This isn't a case of me just sort of, you know, paying somebody to go and solve this problem for us.

We want to work with the community, we want to work with NRW, we want to work with all the landowners.

And particularly for the point before, you know, [Name Redacted], I want to apologise that we didn't speak to you and the landowners early enough in this process.

We communicated with NRW as soon as the incidents were happening, but actually that was a gap on our side of not trying to seek out as quickly as we should have done who all the landowners were and make direct contact.

So I'm sorry for that and that is something that we, didn't get right, and we are working now on making sure we avoid that.

But, thank you for your dialogue currently, because actually the solutions to this improving the river will involve lots of work with landowners as well.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

Alun.

Alun Cox MS

The recovery plan

I think most people will accept that in order to do a plan properly, then you have to take time in order to do that.

The warning that I would give to Welsh Water is that plan needs to be done with the community, not behind closed doors.

The tendency always is to keep stuff to yourselves, rather than sharing with the community.

So my plea to you, my warning to you is to make sure that recovery plan is well communicated to the community, is done with the community.

The other thing that I'd like to come back to is that extra 3 kilometres of the main.

I understand that you are seeking investment to that so that can be done.

What I would again like to say is sometimes politicians, everybody says politicians don't agree.

I think we're all agreed here that what we want to see very, very quickly is a plan for that investment to do that extra 3 kilometres.

We will be expecting Welsh Water to do that.

It is the least that can be done.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you.

Just to follow up on that, Steve, have you got a time frame in the next week or so where any meetings are taking place where elected representatives, charities, local members of the public can come to those meetings to talk about what the plan is essentially.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So we haven't got dates set up at the moment, but as soon as I've got all these tenders back from the various experts, the Rivers Trust, etc. around what they can do, we will absolutely commit to sharing that.

As I said before, we want to make sure that NRW are comfortable.

As the statutory body in charge of these things, they must be comfortable with what we are proposing and we will also involve the community as quickly as we can.

I can't give you dates at the moment, unfortunately, because I haven't had the tenders back from the various bodies and experts who are currently pricing the kind of work that we need to do to improve this river.

Question from the community – [name redacted]

I just want to sort of dig down on something you mentioned earlier.

So you talked about the kind of the extent of the pipeline that you have and the amount of investment applied across the whole area.

And you sort of touched on this when you mentioned about the Blue Flag beaches.

But can I just double check that you are prioritising when it's got a very clear impact on SSSI.

Because it seems like, I appreciate that you have so much pipeline, but this isn't just, you know, a beauty spot.

This is a site of special scientific interest.

Like, it's surely, is this, are these your priorities?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

No, it's a really good point and thank you.

We are prioritising the sensitive SSSIs and the sensitive watercourses.

As I mentioned before, we, as part of our price submission to Ofwat for the investment period that we're in now, so it's called the PR, the Price Review Process 2024.

So you actually submit this through to your regulator in 2023 and then they tell you in 2024 how much you can spend.

We built a business case for £58m, targeting 14 rising mains, pumped mains, which were close to either Blue Flag beaches or SSSI's that we wanted to replace proactively because of the sensitivity of failures.

And that business case was not accepted by Ofwat.

They didn't say that was 'exceptional'.

They said this is 'normal base maintenance' and you need to fund it from your normal base maintenance.

But actually they also then gave me a bit of a sting in the tail because they also said, and here's a penalty if you don't then invest your base maintenance in tackling those rising mains.

So we are doing them.

We are fixing them.

We've got 14 in the plan.

Some are around Tenby, some are around the Menai Strait. There's a lot of them around.

But I have to make the choice of taking that money from other maintenance needs.

And that, whether it's a rattling manhole cover in the road or a collapsed sewer somewhere in a street in Cardiff, whether it's a treatment works that's getting older in the River Wye catchment, I now have to take that maintenance funding to do these.

And we are prioritising these mains because clearly it is, these are our jewels in the crown in Wales, our beaches and our SSSI's are important to protect.

Alun Phillips, Chair

So a question from someone who's not in the room tonight.

The regulators have downgraded Welsh Water's environmental performance, Ofwat has taken enforcement action and you've previously spoken about the need to improve environmental outcomes.

Steve, what do you think Welsh Water is getting wrong and did any of these issues contribute to what happened on Afon Cynffig?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So look, the issues I've mentioned around the state of the water industry in the UK, increasingly not meeting what customers are expecting.

We've got a deficit around maintenance that we need to fix, and we are in that situation.

The recent sort of issue with Ofwat that you kind of raised there, Alun, seven other water companies, we were the 8th, and the other two companies will be in the same situation.

The problem is one of investment, and until we can increase the amount of investment required in this infrastructure. We're going to see these kind of problems.

But we've got to do this in a way that's affordable, because we've got a lot of customers here already struggling to pay their bills.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Sorry Steve I'm going to cut across you there.

The question is, what do you think Welsh Water is getting wrong?

And do you think any of those issues contribute to what happened on the Afon Cynffig?

That's the question.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So clearly our performance is not where we want it to be and I am very sorry about this.

We get out of bed every day to try and do a good job here, to protect the environment, to look after our rivers and our beaches. And when we get it wrong, it really hurts. These things matter to us.

So we're not happy with our performance.

And I don't think that particularly, you know, the issue in the Kenfig is to do with with anything like that. As I said before, this was a pipeline which should have lasted a lot longer than it did, and it failed extraordinarily quickly. And that's what we're trying to sort out here.

Question from the audience – [name redacted]

Steve, I'm glad you mentioned that because I've been thinking since the beginning of the evening, you said the pipeline was supposed to last 60 years and unfortunately, it lasts about 30 for whatever reasons, environment, et cetera.

So you're now going to be putting pipes in that are going to last 40 years.

Are they going to last 20?

And what have you got in place to check that that's not going to happen again?

Because we don't know, the environment could change and in 20 years, 10 years, five years, you could have another catastrophe on your hands.

So have you got a strategy in place?

And can you tell us what it is, please?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Well, thank you.

And clearly, we're putting in pipes in the ground now, the replacement pipes, which we think should have at least 40 years life.

But you don't know what you don't know.

You know, when the pipe was installed here, everybody thought it would last, you know, 60 years.

So it is a tricky one to get right.

What we've got to improve on, though, is our asset management, our understanding of the state of our assets.

Your point about change, climate change is affecting our pipelines.

We're seeing wetter winters and drier summers, which means more ground heave.

We all look at our own gardens and see what it's like in summer and then in winter.

That does affect pipe longevity.

So actually we're going to have to increase the amount of spend on our pipes and look after them in a much better way than perhaps we have done in the past.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Just to go back.

What we do to check that this doesn't happen again, to check - the check part?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yes, sorry. So we do need to do more frequent condition-based monitoring, but that comes at a price as well. So non-destructive testing to our pipelines is going to cost about £15m.

Now that's a big old chunk of money, which I'll then spend on checking the quality of our pipeline.

But that's less money then to spend fixing them.

It's a balancing act I've got to try and get right.

Question from the community

Thank you.

I'm Cllr Elaine Winstanley the local member for this area.

I was alerted to the issues by members of the community and I thank all those who've been involved in letting me know what was going on the ground.

I'm really pleased that there has been a little bit more action from Welsh Water in telling us about what's going on, but that came far too late.

And I want to pick up on your statement about the tenders have gone out, etc.

There should surely be a deadline for that so that we have an idea of the timescales going forward, because obviously we are very, very keen to see the river improve.

The impact on the local residents for both for the mitigation, whether it's the tankering, whether it's the pump installation, whether it's the smells which are appalling, has been horrendous.

We've even got roads that are falling apart because of the amount of the work that's been on them.

So it's, when is the tendering going to happen?

And that would be a really good answer, please.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

No, thank you.

The tenders are due back at the end of this month.

Question from the community

Hi, it's Martin Thomas from Kenfig Nature Reserve.

We've heard a lot of platitudes and apologies and this is what we're going to be doing in the future. And certainly what we as a nature reserve, and many residents would like to know, is what are you actually doing now?

What are you doing to help recover that river?

We've got ammonia levels rising in Kenfig Pool.

A lot of the slacks, et cetera, that rely on water that comes down from the river.

Ammonia levels are rising.

It's just what are you doing?

I've seen the aerators in, but they're never switched on when I've gone down there.

They're just sat in the river doing nothing.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So we've now taken the aerators out because the oxygen level in the river is back up over 90%.

So the river, in terms of the oxygenation, is now back to where it needs to be.

We are continuing to look at what we can do to improve the river, but I really want these experts to come on board.

What are we doing today?

Well, we are still laying a new pipeline.

We've laid another 200 metres of that pipe this week alone.

But to try and get a brand new pipeline in that's going to be the full 13 or so kilometres is going to take a bit of time and that's what we're concentrating our efforts on because while we have a temporary pipeline there still remains a bit of a risk.

You know we talked about about the operating pressures, et cetera.

I don't want another burst from this pipe at all.

So we're going hell for leather to replace the pipeline with a properly engineered, you know, permanent solution.

And that's what the team are concentrating on today and tomorrow as well.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Councillor Spanswick.

Cllr John Spanswick

Yeah, thank you.

It's not so much a question but it's a concern.

The role of Natural Resources Wales, holding Welsh Water to account.

On Monday this week, there was a scrutiny committee in Bridgend Council where NRW, Wash Water and Shared Regulatory Services were in attendance, and there were some good questions asked.

And one that was picked up was the rate of enforcement or investigations.

I heard the gentleman say earlier, we don't want any money if there's any crime, if there's an ongoing investigation, going out of this country, any fine or whatever prosecution, if there is anything, money can be spent in this area.

But examples given, and perhaps Alun you might have the figures, there [were] several 100 investigations into Welsh Water spillages and a tiny percentage of prosecution.

With a comparison to developers, putting mud in waters, 5% of prosecution.

And I found that difficult to understand, and I still need to [...] Welsh Government to make sure NRW are fit for purpose.

In a tiny percentage of prosecutors to Welsh Water, a large percentage of prosecutors from mud in water from developers.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Yes, so just to follow up on that, Councillor Spanawick, the numbers were between 2020 and 2023, there were 254 investigations from NRW into Welsh Water, 4 successful prosecutions, so that's a 1% return on prosecutions, versus Persimmon Homes who were the second one on the list with 20 investigations and there were around, I think, 8 or 9 successful prosecutions, so that's a ~40% turnaround.

One of the things that we've been doing as a charity is looking into why that might be the case.

Obviously, I'm not going to put the pressure on NRW here because this is not their decision, this is an executive level decision.

But the minutes of the board meetings from 2021, where they discuss the approach to regulation of water industry companies in Wales specifically, is that they adopt a guidance style approach rather than a prosecutorial approach.

Now, the current CEO of NRW has refused to meet with us.

The issue there is high level discussions from a community point of view around enforcement, policy, et cetera, in Wales.

So from our point of view, what would be helpful is if mainly the political representatives here can hear the voice of the community today, and agree to help us with a meeting with the either soon to be ex-CEO of NRW, or her replacement.

And the important thing there is that the CEO was the director of that particular department at that time that recommendation was made.

So it would be good to hold her to account for that decision as well.

Sorry to waffle on.

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

Sorry Alun can I just look a bit back in on cases, and in terms of Welsh Water, we've had 75 prosecutions over the last 10 years, two of which were unsuccessful.

We've had 109 kind of formal cautions, okay, received 539 warnings, 53 advice and guidance, and 82 cases that weren't taken any further, okay?

We've also had a total, I think, just check the figures now on enforcement undertakings, that's 7 enforcement undertakings over the last 10 years, but only one in the last five years.

Okay, so we took three successful prosecutions in the last eight months, one of which was fined at £1.35m, but upon appeal, I think it dropped down to £120,000, that was to do with a technical aspect around managing that.

So I'd just like to reassure that if the case is there and is strong enough, then we will take enforcement where appropriate, as we have with Persimmon Homes and other companies.

Alun Phillips, Chair

And yourselves as well.

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

And ourselves as well, yes, and ourselves, because sometimes we manage forestry, land, we manage other land, and if we get it wrong ourselves, then potentially there are risks of internal enforcement as well.

Thank you.

Question from the community

Thank you, Stuart from the Kenfig Nature Reserve

First question to Steve, please.

Why are you discharging toxic waste into the environment to start with?

I understand that you've got permits which allow you to do so.

And then secondly, I think I'll ask all of our politicians here, and thank you all for turning up tonight.

When are we going to see some legislation changes to stop our sewage being discharged into our pristine environment?

It's a national treasure.

It's going on countrywide, not just on the Kenfig, although this is the worst ever, and it's affecting our rivers, our seas, and it has to stop. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So look, we do not want to be discharging any kind of toxic waste and wastewater is something we try to manage on a daily basis.

But the reality of the situation is that in the UK and most of Europe, the drainage network was designed to take rainwater as well as wastewater.

And it was designed when the rains fell and the pipes got full to avoid flooding houses that that would discharge in a permitted way with a permit into the environment.

Now if we want to stop that, if we want to re-engineer our drainage network in the UK, that is billions and billions of pounds.

The bill in Wales to remove all of the storm overflow discharges like the one at the pumping station is £14b.

That would be a bill to every customer of £10,000. No Welsh Water customer can afford a £10,000 bill.

Our challenge is that we've got a small customer base, a small population, and a huge environmental problem to solve here. And that is the reality.

We are trying to fix these, but the rate of doing this is slow because we've got to try and keep bills as affordable as possible.

And so we're prioritising tackling storm overflows based on environmental harm.

Those causing the most harm we will tackle first, rather than necessarily the ones that spill the most.

We do want to have the same, we want the best rivers, we want the best beaches, but we've got to do it in a way that's affordable for our customers.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you Steve. Huw

Just to follow up on that, sorry, Huw, obviously you are no longer the Cabinet Secretary, but you were.

Could you maybe give us your thoughts, please, on where we are right now in terms of your previous role, not only in Welsh Government, but as the MP and sitting in London with environmental duties?

Huw Irranca-Davies MS

Yeah, really happy to do that.

And thanks for the question as well on when you're going to pass legislation that deals with this.

Really critical.

So during the last 6 to 12 months, there was extensive engagement with UK government about changing the legislation within Wales.

And we've got agreement, and I'm sure the new government will want to take it forward, that we actually bring forward legislation in Wales, which is based, which people call it different things, but essentially let's call it what it should be, a clean water act.

Now as part of that, if we can, and I think we can, certainly the discussions with the UK government were good if we can devolve the regulation of water, not the job NRW are doing, but the overall regulation, the sort of regulation that would enable any investment to happen, but not on the same 1980s economic model, which is basically squeeze until the pits, you never get the investment going, but one that has a mind to the environmental standards, developing pristine rivers, pristine water courses, not just in Kenfig River, but in every part of Wales.

So I think we have the golden opportunity here to get on with that piece of work, deliver a clean water act within Wales.

It'll require some back and forth with UK government to put all the things down.

And then we have a different type of overall regulator of water systems in Wales that is not to do with how we can squeeze money out of it.

It's more to do with what are we looking for in our rivers.

So we have an opportunity.

The other thing is, sorry, I know we're not, we passed last year in the Senate the legislation around environmental governance in Wales.

Ignore the fancy title for a moment.

Basically, it gives power to the citizen with a new powerful body to say, if there's a systems failure, if there's not enough going in, if the regulator isn't doing their job, if the water company isn't doing their job, then the citizen can say, get a judicial review.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you Huw. Ben.

Ben McKenna MS

So thank you again for raising the question about legislation.

We've already, I know Sera's mentioned, Elyn's raised this issue specifically in the Senedd chamber as well.

On the Reform side of things, we've also raised this, Sera has raised this specifically, and David Mills has asked the First Minister about water quality in Wales.

On legislation specifically, Reform currently have a motion tabled to call on the Welsh Government to bring forward the Welsh Rivers Act to stop things like this from happening again, to increase the accountability and make the requirements stricter there in terms of sewage discharge into rivers.

We anticipate that debate is going to be on Wednesday of this week.

That should be confirmed as soon as possible, but we are going to be next week in the Senedd chamber calling on the Welsh Government to bring forward that Welsh Rivers Act to make sure that things like this don't happen again.

Thank you.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Sera or Alun, I would like to make sure that Elyn's voice is heard as well.

So I know you've got a statement there.

Sera Evans MS

Yeah, I won't comment on the motion because I haven't seen the wording yet and I need to be well appraised on that before making comment.

But what I will say is, and as Ben has mentioned and Huw, this is high on the minister's agenda.

Also, it's been brought up by several other colleagues about other parts of Wales as well.

So it's not just Afon Cynffig.

In this instance, there was a colleague, a Plaid Cymru colleague from Swansea who also commented on people getting ill following bathing in rivers and in the sea near the Swansea area.

So again, this is really, it's been coming up time and time again already in the Senedd.

And so it is high on the Minister's agenda and I think he will want to press forward relatively quickly with that act that Huw mentioned.

I'll pass to Alun now, because I know that Elyn has written a statement because she wasn't going to be here this evening and wanted to make sure that her views were also represented.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Sera, just before you do, in terms of the wider picture that's going on in the UK at the moment, where there's a lot of voice around renationalisation of the water industry, where does the current government sit on that?

Alun Cox MS

Our manifesto was very clear that is our position.

Huw is right in terms of the Clean Water Act as well.

There is some negotiation to be had with the UK government and I hope that they negotiate in good faith.

I'm not actually going to read out the full statement because I don't think I can do that in 2 minutes.

But I will read out part of that.

Elyn apologises for not being able to be here tonight, but she says, in regular meetings with Dŵr Cymru, I've raised the concerns that were fed back to us about poor communication with local residents.

I welcome their attempts to approve this, improve this, but it is important that communication is clear, consistent and meaningful from this point onwards.

I was able to raise the sewerage leak at Marlas directly in the Senedd.

In response, the Minister responsible, Llŷr Gruffydd, said that he had asked Natural Resources Wales, Ofwat and Dŵr Cymru for updates on stopping the discharge, repairing the environmental damage, ensuring swift action is taken to improve the river and preventing any further incidents.

He also confirmed that he had asked to meet with the Chief Executive of Dŵr Cymru and would underline the need for firm action, not only in relation to this case, but to the wider performance of the company.

She's gone on to say some other things as well, but I think she's sorry that she couldn't be here and that's some of the work that she's done.

Can I use my 2 minutes?

Thank you.

I'm taking advantage.

Everything that we've talked about tonight is looking backwards, isn't it?

Is how did this happen?

Why did it happen?

I'm not entirely sure that we're entirely clear about that so far, but this should not have happened.

But the focus now needs to be on that improvement.

The focus needs to be on ensuring that those people who have been directly affected are, that is made good.

And that is what we will be doing as representatives to make sure that pressure is put on them.

I think that in the time that we have left and the time that we will go on, I think that the issue of how we hold Welsh Water to account and how you hold Welsh Water to account is the , is the thing that we should concentrate on.

What do you need to do next to make sure that Welsh Water lives up to some of the commitments that they've made tonight?

Are you expecting regular meetings?

Yes.

Are you expecting us to keep you as informed as we possibly can along the way, which we're no doubt more than happy to do so?

Sera Evans MS

To reiterate Alun's point more than happy to keep you informed and we will have that regular dialogue as we've had with Alun, we'll continue that conversation.

But I was going to also suggest that as a next step from this evening, and again I will come to you to ask the question, when you have, at the end of the month, the tender response is in and when you've made a decision on who will be taking that action on your behalf to recover the river, would you be content to hold another meeting of this kind to explain that plan to residents and to us here as well so we can fully understand what that river amelioration plan looks like and what then the timescale, going back to Stephen's question, on the timescale for that recovery as predicted by the person or the company that's been appointed to undertake those works.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yes, absolutely.

We're happy to do that.

Clearly, we would need to consult, I said, with NRW and with the landowners, because it's very important that, you know, what is proposed is acceptable to the people who are the riparian landowners as well as the river.

So we have to be mindful for that, but assuming that we can work with Natural Resources Wales and with the landowners, happy to share that with the public, yes.

Sera Evans MS

One other point.

Huw mentioned devolution in terms of, you know, needing to progress with that Clean Water Act.

And I've got your MP sat next to me, so we would hope that, Stephen, you would support calls.

Clean Water Act being able to be enacted here in Wales, which will require, as you mentioned, those negotiations and discussions with the UK government.

And of course, nationalisation, going back to your point, Alun, will require devolution, further devolution and again further negotiations.

So possibly with a change of Prime Minister, who knows, on the horizon, who is, or has been up until now, at least quite sympathetic to devolution, at least in Manchester anyway, I would hope that we may be able to see some further devolution coming to Wales on not just water, but also several other elements, policing, justice to name but a few, many, several, many others as well.

Stephen Kinnock MP

I love the way you got devolution of policing into a discussion about a river, but there were...I've got to give you credit for that.

Look, you know, I fully support what Huw has said.

It makes a ton of sense for the regulatory side of the water industry to be devolved.

I think it's a loophole in the law which needs to be closed and full support for that.

And I'll certainly be speaking with my colleagues in Westminster to ensure that happens.

I think the broader point about the water industry, I'm genuinely not trying to make a party political point here is a fact that a decision taken by Margaret Thatcher to privatise our water industry ended up turning what is a public good into a source of massive private profit (applause) and we have had water industries, water companies for decades, owned by private equity firms and American investment vehicles, and it's been a license to print money.

They filled their pockets with bonuses and the money that should have been invested into pipelines, into infrastructure, into keeping our rivers and seas clean, has instead been going into the pockets of American billionaires.

There is no doubt at all that needs radical change.

There is a fundamental challenge, though, that in order to nationalise the water industry, you have to buy the shareholders out. And that will cost 10s, if not hundreds of billions of pounds.

We currently live in a country where we are paying £100b a year just to service our debt interest.

So we've got a big challenge, which is how can we, I think, assert better public control on the water industry.

That means much stronger regulation.

We're putting a clean water bill through the UK Parliament at the moment.

That's, of course, primarily relating to England, but what we want to do is to ensure that Wales is given the ability to deliver the stronger regulation that we need.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you.

Question from the audience

I'm [Name Redacted], and our family comes from the same area as Feargal Sharkey, you will recognise his name.

Now, I'm looking at the NRW people here because clean rivers become clean and then they need to be monitored. They're monitored by taking samples at various stages. It's done on other rivers in the area.

What monitoring was done on the Kenfig before this happened.

There's been other spills. There's been dead fish here before. I took some dead fish to NRW. Nothing really happened about it. There wasn't enough fish to be taken too seriously, even though I got Fish Legal involved in it, who will prosecute.

Now, now you've got this village, what you're doing to up your monitoring, and can you tell us how this is expected to go and what you'll do if you do come across?

Because it's not just dirty water, is it? Anything else can happen in the river. It goes into the sea, you've got mullets, flounders, sea trout, possibly even salmon. I was telling 15 years ago, disappeared. Salmon then disappeared.

So clean rivers, NRW, need to pull their socks up. I'm disappointed with what's happened in the past when I read what's happened out of the area. Now this has come home and hit the local small river like the Kenfig.

But it's very important.

Look at all these people here tonight.

It's a terrific turnout and I appreciate you all coming along, but monitoring is the way to find out what's going wrong for the invertebrates and fish.

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

OK, so the position is that all rivers in Wales are tested against the Water Framework Directive standards.

So there is a monitoring programme that picks up sort of the, the assessment of the river condition.

And in terms of the Kenfig, the last delivery status, we go back to 2024, the overall water body was classified as good, rather than excellent, okay?

Ecology is good, chemistry is high.

So what that means is that actually the health of the Kenfig itself is in a good river, okay?

And I think that's where, after this incident, we want to get back to.

That programme is replicated across all of Wales, OK, on a monitoring cycle, four year monitoring cycle.

Then, around the coast of Wales and around bathing waters, then we have a seasonal sampling regime that also picks up then on E. coli levels, OK, and then we advise on the public working through the local authority of the beaches to safely work on.

So, we have a programme like that.

On coastal areas as well, we also monitor for fish species.

We do the same fisheries assessment for our main rivers as well.

So the sampling programme over the summer months, the check then for fish species.

That's normally then produced in geographic regions.

And we have a document online that captures where we have fisheries trend.

Unfortunately, for certain rivers, salmonid species in particular, the trend is looking very, very poor, and a number of the key salmon rivers in Wales are at risk.

That's the fact of that is partly pollution, partly fishing at the sea, partly climate change.

And one of the big issues we heard on salmonid species are that salmon eggs have to have temperatures below 12 degrees centigrade.

Alun Phillips, Chair

We're at 9 o'clock.

I know some need to leave.

So if people want to carry on, you're more than welcome to.

If those that need to leave, and if you're happy to stay for the extra half hour, we aren't billed till 9:30 and the show is absolutely riveting.

So I'm wondering if the panel are happy to stay till 9:30, those that need to leave - thank you very much for coming along.

If anybody in the audience needs to do so. Can I just get a show of hands, stay or go home?

Stay. Panel. Well, thank you, Huw and Sera.

And do you want to say something there, Huw?

Huw Irranca-Davies MS

I just want to say something before I head off.

I turned up stupidly at 6:00. Yeah, indeed.

But I just wanted to say two things here.

One is, if you look at other parts of Wales, there are rivers that are genuinely dead and will be dead chemically because of things such as metal mining.

So if you go to the top of the Cwmystwyth area, if you've ever been up there, the zinc load within that river means it's absolutely dead in terms of invertebrates, whatever.

That is not the case with this river, we can recover it.

If we have long-term commitment and if we have the right plan in place, we can get this back.

And my ambition would be, and I think everybody on this panel would support that and all of you would, is not to get it back to okay, but to get it back to really good.

And that comes to the other point that was made by a colleague there with the angling.

We've also got weirs and stuff on this river and Alun, when we wandered down there, overgrown not working functionally for migratory fish species.

Wouldn't it be good to extend the work that we're doing to make sure that was a river that the species could properly migrate along?

What we should be aiming for here is not just good, but really excellent, and we can do that.

And if you can bottle the energy in this room and the commitment of Dŵr Cymru and NRW, doing monitoring and some citizen science, then we can have a better afternoon walking down than a smelly, ammonia, rich, putrid river.

We can absolutely be down there as the months go by and as the years go by, with a pristine environment that families will love to walk by.

Fishermen will be angling in and we know the water is good and clean and it's full of life.

Now that's where we need to be.

So I'd simply say to you, this does not have to be a dead river, we can bring this back to life and improve on where it was even a few years ago. (applause)

Sera Evans MS

Apologies from me as well.

I also have to go due to my children.

Well, one of them's in the car, so he's probably gone mad by now.

But so, for me, thank you again for being here.

I agree with Huw.

I do believe that the river can recover and we don't know how long that'll take and hopefully the consultant... the tender results will tell us that.

And that's my final call is on Dŵr Cymru to commit, and NRW, to commit to a further meeting with residents when we have clarity on that plan.

And I think the people in this room would really appreciate, again, an understanding of that and an assurance from you that work is underway to ensure that river recovers as fully as possible.

And in terms of that weir here also fully on board, ensuring that we try and get that weir back to what it should be.

And Huw and I we've also, here when I have asked questions around going down to the foreshore and the estuary as well.

And again, we've asked Dŵr Cymru to engage with Tata on that because we know that Tata have an interest in it as well, of course, that the sewage works go down there.

So again, there's some work I think that can be done to extend the recovery of this river further down towards the nature reserve and beyond as well.

So again, we need to keep the pressure on here.

We need you all involved to keep up the momentum and hopefully you will get that meeting in shortly for an update on that river recovery plan.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Sera.

If the panel members need to leave quickly and.

Then we get the next question.

Question from the audience

Thank you, [I'm] Cllr Owain Clatworthy.

We've heard lots of waffle up on the top table this evening, I think what you can gather from residents is they want to see action rather than words.

So a question I'm going to ask is to Mr. Steve Wilson. I did ask this in council earlier this week, but you weren't there to answer.

So, Mr. Wilson, your personal X, formerly Twitter handle, is TurdHerder69.

I repeat that, TurdHerder69.

Given the seriousness of your public role, do you believe that username reflects the standards and professionalism these residents and the public would expect, because it's the taxpayers who pay your role?

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, before you go anywhere near answering that question.

Steve's already made a very public comment on that.

And that's not the type of question that we're going to be entertaining tonight, I'm afraid.

Steve's already made a public statement on that.

No, I'm sorry.

So the next question.

Question from the audience

Obviously, we understand this being a catastrophic event and it's affected so many people.

And a lot of something I've taken after this meeting tonight is talk about funding or lack of it. Now, I think, whether there's prosecutions which are imminent or, whether it's going to be the cost of putting a new pipeline in, I think the residents have suffered long enough.

And my concerns are that, or can you answer this question, Steve, that the cost of that, and increments of the cost, are not going to be pushed out the residents or this community because I think they've suffered quite enough. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So look, I absolutely understand how the community has been affected by this.

And as I said, we are committing to not only replace the pipeline, the money that we're spending also to improve the river.

Now, in terms of whether any of the enforcement bodies, whether that's Natural Resources Wales or whether that's Ofwat decide to take action against Welsh Water, that is for them.

The regulatory mechanism is there for them to do that.

But I just come back to the point that there is no other source of funding in Welsh Water than customer bills.

We have no shareholders.

There is no other money.

And so any money which goes out to pay fines or in some cases where Ofwat reduce the income as a penalty, then we have less money to fix the problem in front of us, the state of our kind of assets.

I don't want any particular money to go elsewhere other than spending on infrastructure in Wales to improve our rivers and our beaches.

That's my goal.

But clearly, when we get things wrong and when pollution incidents happen, such as this one, we will face whatever punishment is meted out to us.

But the reality is the funding for all this work only comes from customer bills.

There is no other source of money and therefore fines would have to be paid from our income and if we get other kind of penalties from Ofwat where they reduce our income as they've had a pseudo penalty, well then we have less money to fix the things that we need to fix.

And that's the sad reality of the situation here.

Clearly what would be better for Wales would be that money is committed to improving the rivers, the environment and the state of the infrastructure.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, just a brief follow-up on that.

You said that the money only comes from bill payers.

I'd stand corrected if I'm wrong here, but I understand somewhere in the order of £700m was raised last year through bondholders.

So could you explain roughly what that's going on, please?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yes, certainly.

So when we have big investments in new infrastructure. So we're building a new treatment works or we're building new phosphorus removal processes on our treatment works. Then we go to the bond market just like we would go to banks to borrow money.

You borrow the money to invest in new infrastructure.

Maintenance money, operating costs are paid for a pound for a pound in the bills.

So when I say it all comes from customers, that money we have borrowed from bondholders or from banks has to be paid back and the interest that we pay on that money is also coming from customer money.

So ultimately, it all does come back to customers in this model.

There are no shareholders here who we can go and ask for extra money from.

And there is no money from government provided for any of this investment either.

Question from the community [name redacted].

How do you do?

I think listening to listening to the top table say about this is going to cost this, is it going to cost that, where are we going to get the money from, what are we going to do?

I think most of the people here tonight, what upset them the most was that when this happened in 2023, nobody was told.

I went down there and actually saw the leak that it was, and it was pouring into the river, neat sewage.

Nobody was told, the farmer there was just saying, he wasn't even told.

But that was, it wasn't far from the river mouth.

And that went into the sea.

With the incoming tide, it takes you to Porthcawl.

With the outgoing tide, it takes you to Aberavon.

Nobody was told.

There's surfing clubs down there that employ people and there's people surfing in the water, taking in the water, they weren't told.

There's people that fish in the river, they weren't told.

And that's been going on all along.

And the only reason you're here tonight is because a group of local people were upset about what they see, going into the river made a fuss.

And that's the only reason that you were actually here tonight.

And this is why most of you here are upset with what's going on. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

I understand everybody's concern and the sentiment here.

Nobody wants to see sewage going into our rivers or onto our beaches.

I absolutely understand that.

And when we end up with a burst, we want to try and fix it as quickly as possible.

Thankfully, overall in Wales, the number of burst pipes is not rising, it's coming down.

But with climate change, that is really hard to do.

We're working harder and harder to try and stay on top of that.

But when these things happen,

I absolutely understand the kind of sentiment.

We do have...

Alun Phillips, Chair

Sorry, Steve, just bear with me two seconds.

Follow up from the questioner above:

You're not answering my question.

Why didn't you tell everybody what was happening when it happened?

Why are you sneaking the sewage into the water without telling anybody?

You even locked the fences so people couldn't go down and monitor it.

Why?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So we have a map on our website where we publish every single day, every hour when there's a sewage discharge that's publicly available.

We share that data with Surfers Against Sewage.

I'm sorry we didn't come out and tell everybody when that first happened.

When these things happen, when we do get burst pipes, our approach is to try and fix it as quick as possible.

But what I can assure you is that in terms of the bathing waters that you talked about, they were okay.

Whenever we have a pollution incident, we monitor quite closely.

We want to make sure we're protecting the bathing waters.

And NRW, if they thought that the impact would have impacted on any of those bathing beaches, then warnings would have been posted there.

So we can rest assured that the beaches were okay, but I do understand the sentiment in terms of the river and what that means to locals.

I'm sorry about that.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Just to play on one point on your data that is being shared with Surfers Against Sewage.

Just to let everyone know, there is an app and it's called Safer Seas app that Surfers Against Sewage have got.

You can download that and you can have a look to see what the issues are at the local beaches.

So all the bathing water designated areas, they're on there and I would highly advise having a look at that.

In terms of the discharge monitoring on the Kenfig, just a brief on that point, the EDM data, and this is more of a technical thing, EDM data doesn't seem to be actually working

I was there the other day watching the discharge coming out of that discharge point, if you will, from the Marlas and actively looking at the live data online and there was no discharge for eight days: and I was watching the discharge.

I understand that Welsh Water are questioning whether that EDM sensor is actually working.

Maybe you could give an answer to whether that is working and what will be done if it is not, please?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So I'll absolutely look into that because clearly the point of putting all these sensors in, 2,500, I think it is, sorry, 2,304 sensors we've put in on these discharges, we want them to work.

But any sensor that's located in a sewer or in a sewage chamber, you know, it's not the best of environments for equipment to work.

So if there is a fault, we'll look into it.

Clearly, we are, we want to report this as transparently as possible.

There is no plan or any kind of approach around hiding any of this kind of data.

So absolutely, I'll look into that, Alun.

Question from the community [name redacted].

I just had a question for Mr Wilson, please.

I stand here and listened very, very hard tonight and a lot about learning [inaudible for 1-2 seconds].

What strikes me is if the Welsh Water Authority were more proactive, and others, and could see that there were problems, would it not be less expensive to address it and fix it?

Now we can find ourselves in a situation that we're now in the situation where environmental damage has been caused, but we're also talking about reparation, possible compensation, temporary solutions until the matter can be resolved.

Surely, that is more expensive than addressing the issue in the first place.

And we all think about it again, if you want to know that that money is being well spent.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

You're absolutely right in terms of this is going to have cost us a heck of a lot more money and the damage.

So why has it happened?

Well, it's a failure on our part around risk management.

That is the reality here.

And back to if I fix, if I replace every pipe that had, you know, a single burst and I replace the whole length, which is what we've done here, that would cost me over £80m a year.

I have £30m of budget to spend on the sewer network.

So I have to make choices.

And in this case, we got it wrong.

And I am sorry about that.

But it's a business of risk management, which we got spectacularly wrong here.

And yes, it has cost us a lot of money to put this right.

We are working really hard to learn the lessons from this.

And as I said earlier on, doing more condition-based monitoring of our pipe network so that we don't get into a situation where they start failing and it's a surprise to us is the key to doing this.

But I've got to persuade the regulators to give us more funding to allow us to spend money in that kind of way.

We need to spend more money on maintenance.

That is the reality of the situation that we're in.

We've got a very big network.

We're focusing a lot in the UK about tightening standards, putting new infrastructure in the ground to meet new obligations.

But actually what's missing is more and more funding of the base maintenance.

And I'm sorry we got that one wrong.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, if I may follow up on that exact question.

So last year there were 13 bursts alone.

This is what you've told me in our meeting recently and previous to that.

So at what point, at what number, if you will, does Welsh Water select how many bursts you need before you repair the pipe or replace the pipe?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So actually, after the first burst in 2023, because of the sensitivity of Kenfig, we put that into our plan to be replaced.

The issue is that the replacement time for driving a pipeline of that length through land that we don't own, through contaminated land in the old sidings, etc., requires a heck of a lot of planning.

We need planning permission, we need land approval from landowners, we need environmental permissions from NRW.

There are seasons when we weren't allowed to work because of the sensitivity, etc.

So actually the speed at which you can lay a pipe of this, it does take time and clearly we've got to improve on that.

This took far too long and that is the problem and why we had to use emergency powers to get this last bit done.

Normally that wouldn't be allowed.

We would have to go through all the required permitting and sampling of water quality and ground sampling and providing all that data to NRW before we could do the kind of replacement, which is why a pipeline of this length would normally take 18 months to two years to deliver.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Hiya, my main concern is what are you doing about the children in our area?

I've written to Welsh Water a few times.

The summer's coming up and every child in this area loves Kenfig nature reserve.

Now some of them have got immune disorders and things wrong with them.

Now a few months ago my child was in the river down Morfa and then two days later, had sickness and diarrhoea.

But I thought that was just something, I didn't think it was anything to do with the river until I actually spoke to somebody else and was told that you were polluting our river.

Now it's not safe anymore for my children or my mother to go anywhere near the river anymore.

What are you actually going to do to keep our community safe?

Are you going to go to the schools and tell the children, not the parents, children, they don't have apps.

They're not able to go on the internet and realise how dangerous what you have done is doing to our area.

You need to go and see the children and explain to them how dangerous our water is. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

As a parent, I do understand the sentiment you're talking about, and I'm very sorry about the impact that's happened here.

Clearly, if people do have situations where they think that they're sick, it's important that you seek medical advice.

But you also let us know so that we can understand at that point, is that caused by sewage?

What I can say is that today, the water quality back to...now there's no discharge going in.

The actual water quality in the river from an oxygen point of view, from an ammonia point of view, from a biological point of view, is back to normal.

Now the bottom of the river, there is no life in there yet.

We've not got the invertebrates of these things.

There's a lot more to do to recover the river.

And it would be really good to engage with the local schools around this as well.

And I'm happy to take that further forward.

We're not hiding from this.

It is important that our children do understand the environment they're in and can enjoy rivers and can enjoy the nature reserve.

And I'm happy to work with the team and see what we can do with the local schools as well and bring them into this.

Response from questioner - when you go splashing in our river we will know its safe. You can go in our river before we go in there.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Angharad, can we go to one minute, please?

Alun Phillips, Chair

Stephen.

Stephen Kinnock MP

Just a question really, building on the lady's very good question there about why weren't certain measures taken in a preventative way.

And to be fair to you, Steve, you fronted up and you said, we messed up, we screwed up, this is what we should have done and it was a terrible mistake.

Has anyone been held accountable for that?

Have any heads rolled?

What is the personal accountability?

Because in a lot of organisations, when somebody really messes up, then there is some kind of performance management.

Either somebody gets managed out of the organisation or something happens to show some accountability.

And would you agree with the measure in the bill that we're putting through the UK Parliament at the moment, which is to say that if a water boss is found to have deliberately concealed a pollution incident, they will be held criminally liable for that.

And if for any areas where there is underperformance, no executive bonuses.

Do you agree with those measures? (strong applause)

And what's the accountability framework in Dŵr Cymru for when people mess up?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Clearly, if people, individuals mess up, we do take action.

But I would say this is more of a collective failure, and I'm not looking to single anybody out.

I'm here as the Chief Operating Officer, to say sorry and to take account for this.

I'm not looking to blame anybody in my team.

This is a system failure on our part and we've got to learn and get better around this.

Clearly, if we've acted in a criminal way, then justice will flow accordingly.

And yes, we do absolutely understand the situation with no bonuses paid to executives in these kind of in these kind of situations.

The reality is that this is an issue around investment and getting this right.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Moving on from the question of accountability, in July 2024, Ofwat held an enforcement investigation into Dŵr Cymru to investigate whether it was managing its wastewater treatment and motor networks appropriately.

On the 5th of June of this year, Lynn Parker, the Senior Director for enforcement at Ofwat, said, our investigation found serious and unacceptable breaches in how Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water has operated its wastewater assets, which has resulted in excessive spills to the environment.

Now, I know Mr Wilson you just said you were the Chief Operating Officer, which you took up in May this year, but 14 years prior to that, you were the Managing Director of Wastewater Services for Dŵr Cymru.

So these incidents have occurred on your Watch.

In view of this and ongoing failures of Dŵr Cymru, have you considered resigning?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

The Ofwat investigation, we are the 8th company to go through the same kind of findings.

And back to this is a systematic issue across the water industry in the UK.

Ofwat and it took a different interpretation of the urban wastewater treatment regulations.

But what's very important about that finding, and yes, we had messed up, and yes, there were too many storm overflow spills, and you know, the water industry was found to be wanting in this space.

What I've been working on is a £42m, £44m recovery plan to try and make sure that we improve the situation and that we actually get into a position where we're not in that situation again.

And as part of that, we're going to be spending money bringing forward further investment to improve the number of storm overflows.

And we're also investing in the community as well.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

Follow up from the questioner:

Yeah, there is no accountability.

Somebody must take responsibility for what's happened and the lack of action been taken.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Just to follow up on that, the question, sorry to remind you Steve, was, have you considered resigning?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Quite frankly, yes I have, actually.

I'm running Wales, the water industry for 30...I've been working in the water industry for 34 years, and I've been here in Wales as the wastewater director, as you pointed out, for a number of years.

Every day I'm working incredibly hard to try and improve things.

And when we mess up, it hurts, right?

It really does hurt. I hope you hear the emotion in my voice that when things go wrong, it kind of matters.

I don't get out of bed every day trying to think, oh, right, let's have an easy life.

I'm actually working very hard with my team and all the really committed colleagues who work day and night to try and improve the environment in Wales and to deliver the best service that we can.

And when we mess up, we will say sorry, and I am very sorry about that.

And look, if the Chief Executive and the Board decide that, you know, they want to get rid of me, that's up to them, okay?

But I am, up until that, I'm working really hard to try and improve things.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Why, with regards to the land and replacement and repair of the old pipe, I believe you would own the rights to the land.

You surely wouldn't need to check with the landowner's right to carry on digging a new pipe next to the old one, surely.

Can't you just get on with the job?

Why would it possibly take two years or more in planning?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Because actually the reality is that we have to seek permission from landowners.

We have access rights to go and repair the existing pipe.

But the minute we want to look at doing anything else from that, quite understandably, the legislation quite rightly protects landowners.

You know, we have to seek their permission.

And that's why it takes time.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Obviously, it was mentioned earlier about performance and you mentioned that you haven't performed very well.

I think somebody over there said who wanted to resign.

So you mentioned about bonuses and people shouldn't have bonuses.

So do you have a bonus given you performed poorly?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

No.

Continuation from questioner:

Okay, I just looked down the line now and said that the chief executive obviously of this organisation which is failing, has a base salary of £460,000.

The token remuneration last year was just short at £900,000.

So that's one hell of a bonus for a failing organisation.

How can you justify that?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Remuneration of the executive is the responsibility of our remuneration committee made up of independent non-exec directors.

I'm not going to comment on the pay of my boss.

Community follow up -

You mentioned bonus - I was asking how you justify it when they are having such massive bonuses for poor performance.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

As I said, pay of the executive is a matter for the remuneration committee.

It's all published in our annual report and accounts.

I'm here to try and solve the problem in the river and try and make good the damage that has been done.

That's what I'm focusing my efforts on.

And the levels of investment that we are talking about here required to fix this, the millions of pounds of pipe replacement that we need to put in the ground.

So hundreds of millions of pounds that we need to raise to fund all of this...

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, thank you.

This has all been said already, so rather than repeating what's been said, I'll save you the time.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Hi, I was a bit confused about the income.

You said you only get income from the bills from your customers, but you also mentioned income from Ofwat, that they can give you some money.

So, with the politicians in the room, is there any opportunity for you to push back on Ofwat?

When you said you didn't get the £58m, that could have helped you, maybe prevent some of this.

Is there any opportunity there to sort of think we could do better if Ofwat helped you in a different way, or something like that, not always being the customers?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yes, so Ofwat doesn't give us money.

What Ofwat does is it looks at our business plan and it sets how much we can raise the customer bills by.

So they ultimately decide what the bill rate will be for each company based on the proposals that we make and their kind of views.

They are an independent regulator.

I mean, I'm jumping in here for the politicians, but their job is to be independent of DEFRA to do this kind of job.

But clearly, as was mentioned by Huw and I think Stephen earlier on, there is a relook at the whole sort of setup around regulation.

The Independent Water Commission a guy called Sir John Cunliffe has done a report on how the regulatory system is broken at this moment in time and that it is favouring investment in new things and not maintenance, that it doesn't reflect what local companies need.

It tries to average everything out, so that does need fixing.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Conscious of the time, so we'll get the last questions in, Gareth.

I'm going to come to the landowner as well.

In fact, I'm going to the landowner first, because he was in the first.

Question from the community [name redacted]

Again, a question for Steve Wilson - you must be getting fed up with us asking questions tonight.

Stephen Kinnock suggested that heads should possibly roll in Welsh Water if it underperforms.

Do you think that should apply to the government as well, Ministers? (applause)

Comment from the audience - Yeah, absolutely.

Stephen Kinnock MP

Do that in a general election.

Back to the same questioner/question:

We, as probably with the biggest area of land that's been affected by this sewage leak, are more than happy to work with Welsh Water to mitigate what has been done and improve the environment, which is what we need to talk about tonight.

Now, what's happened in the past, no point in blaming X or blaming Y or blaming anybody, we need to fix what's done.

And I can say my farming family are more than happy to work with Welsh Water and NRW to solve the problem out.

Can I get confirmation from NRW and Welsh Water, they do the same with us to try and fix the problem.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Absolutely, yes.

Huwel Manly, Natural Resources Wales

Yes, certainly, happy to support any work that will rectify the problems and naturally, the programme of work that needs to be taken will be very aligned with you as the major landowner. Diolch.

Question from the community [name redacted]

And is this the final question?

I don't know.

OK.

Again, sorry, it's Steve Wilson.

Apparently this meeting was called tonight because of the pollution in the Kenfig River.

And you stated earlier on that the river now, after seven days, miraculously is coming back, and the oxygen levels, the nitrate levels...the river is in severe need of care.

It's blocked.

All that pathogens, all the sewerage that is coming down out of that outflow has collected right down the river in banks of poisonous silt.

So I can't see how you can't claim that the water is perfect.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yeah, look, I'm sorry if that was the impression I gave.

The point I was trying to make was the things like oxygen levels and ammonia levels can recover quickly, but we've got a long way to go before that river is back.

And if I gave the wrong impression, I'm very sorry.

The point I was just trying to make is that on some measures, you can recover quite quickly.

Oxygen levels are back; great, ammonia levels are very low; that's great.

But you are right, in the base of this river and in various pockets, there's still a lot of dead life and it's going to take time.

Please don't underestimate the fact that, you know, we are committed to spend as long as it takes to get this river back to good health, as we said before.

Follow up from the same questioner:

And the context of the question was someone saying what their children's health - in swimming, we are coming up to the summer months, children love water, play in that river there's poison everywhere.

We've really got to sort it out sooner than later.

And I hope that the Welsh Water and the NRW get your act together and assist in doing that. (applause)

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

Yeah, absolutely.

As I said, we get the tenders back in June, you know, end of this month.

And then we will work with NRW.

They have to give us permission if we're going to go into the river to do any kind of in-river activities.

But the job here is to recover that.

And I absolutely want it to get back as quick as possible.

We all want to see kids playing back in this river and back to good health.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Just on that note, we did some sampling in the river.

(inaudible comments from the audience) OK, the landowner has already said that they're happy to work with both organisations.

In terms of testing on the river, we've done some E. coli samples.

[names redacted] are not here this evening.

But the results on there were so high that it broke the lab.

So they're over 10,000.

That might not mean much to everybody here, but I know that means a lot to you [Steve Wilson].

And that was the full stretch of the river at 4 sampling points above, which is quite a concern, at, just down the stream and 3km downstream as well. All of them came back greater than 10,000.

So that's something obviously in terms of the E. coli cause and the safety of children that we are very concerned about because the E. coli is off the charts in terms of bathing safety.

Obviously it's not a designated bathing area.

We know that, but maybe you can, I don't know, some reassurance and testing further to E. coli, share the data with the community immediately, maybe on the website, on that live page that Welsh Water have got, possibly the same with NRW, I don't know, but something that can give you information, it's not necessarily dropping anybody in it per se, but it's giving the community that advice on whether to stay away from that water.

And that goes back to the no information point.

Can we maybe tighten that up a bit?

Community point [name redacted]

Sorry, it's not going to help our sick kids.

Are you going to say sorry for them being sick? (inaudible) the pets, the river isn't sick.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Steve, just before you do.

So I just, no, that's fine.

Just from our point of view, obviously that could be a question that Steve could answer, but I don't disagree with what you're saying, but there are a number of things in the river that can cause that.

So what I don't want to do is to blame Welsh Water for anything that we don't know has happened, if that makes sense.

So no, I know that's the case, but I won't ask Steve to answer that question because that might amount to that.

It is obviously not good.

Yes, and could you answer the question on maybe testing and warning?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So I've been really appreciative if you could share your data with us here, Alun, because if we're getting E. coli above the point of the outfall as well, we need to understand what's going on.

Clearly, look, we want to get this river back to good health. All mammals, you know, humans, as well as, you know, livestock, produce bacteria and E. coli.

And if we've got livestock in the river, we might have a source of that.

But clearly we want to clean this up and we want to make it as safe as possible.

It is a matter for NRW in terms of looking at the kind of safety of that, but we'll work with everybody to try and make sure that we get this in as best health as we can.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you.

Just in terms of a question from the back, in terms of signage, could there be anything mainly the local authority, Welsh Water, NRW can work on to improve where it is known that people access the river for the time being until this has gone, to just advise people so of if children are there, they are aware, obviously children are not here tonight.

So it would be a potential solution.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

We'll work with the local authority environmental health department.

It's a matter that we can discuss with them, yes.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Has anybody got any questions?

Community question [name redacted]

I guess this is a question for Steve, but I'm interested if everybody else wants to answer it as well.

I think a lot of the answers I've heard, it just feels to me that the culture within Welsh Water is very wrong.

Coming from a private sector background, it sounds as if you're a water person through and through, and I've not worked in your sector.

But when you talk about, you're very open-ended with your answers, the timing commitments, Stephen Kinnock tried to push you on when you're going to get tenders?

Okay, you've answered that.

Investigations, it feels like a burning platform.

There's no real deadlines.

Surely you should be heeding this, setting the deadlines and saying, I want this back by then.

It just feels very loose, very wishy-washy.

So, do you feel there's a culture issue?

And again, within that as well, you talk about bills being increased. So that's one way of 1 lever.

But you wouldn't, well, you wouldn't, because I guess turkeys don't vote for Christmas, but you wouldn't talk about restructuring within the organisation.

You sort of hid away from the bondholders being a not-for-profit when truly it's not a not-for-profit.

So putting bills up is just one way of improving efficiency.

There's no sort of cultural sort of awareness.

So answer that or maybe somebody else wants to answer.

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

So we have, so we have actually just restructured the business around how we're going to try and operate to improve performance, to try and tackle the problems of poor, poor performance.

There are only three basic models for what you can do as a water business.

You can have a nationalised industry, you can have a fully privatised industry, or you can have our not-for-profit model.

There aren't many other kind of ways of doing it.

I don't think there's any perfect model.

You can look at examples of nationalised ones in Northern Ireland and in Scotland.

You can look at, you know, and performance, you know, isn't very much better.

The problem here is not one of a model.

The problem is one of levels of investment and what we value water and the environment and how much we're prepared to pay for it.

And that's the conversation that society really needs to have now.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Thank you, Steve.

Going back to renationalisation, Steve, would you support renationalising the water industry in Wales or the UK?

Steve Wilson, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

It's not a matter for us as a company.

I can't pass comment on that.

It's down to government.

But as I said, you can look at Scottish Water's performance, look at Northern Ireland Water's performance, both nationalised.

You can look at Thames Water, Southern Water as privatised companies, or you can look at Dŵr Cymru as a not-for-profit.

There are problems in the water industry in the UK that needs a lot of societal work to look at how much we value water, value the environment, and how much we're prepared to pay for the improvements that are clearly needed.

Alun Phillips, Chair

So, quarter to 10, has anyone on the panel got anything else to say?

If not, could you shut off that microphone?

Stephen Kinnock MP

Just thank you to you for organising it and to A Peace for Nature.

Alun Phillips, Chair

Good night, Nos da.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much to everybody.

Acknowledgements

A Peace for Nature would like to thank all members of the public who attended the meeting and contributed to the discussion.

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