

FOR INFO EAC Follow up session on previous report on water quality in rivers

The Environmental Audit Committee has today announced a follow-up evidence session on water quality and water infrastructure, to take place on Wednesday 15 May 2024.

The Committee will consider what progress has been made since the Committee's 2022 report on 'Water quality in rivers'.

As we saw from its 2022 report, the Committee called a step change in regulatory action, in water company investment and in cross-catchment collaboration, so as to restore rivers to good health and prevent further damage. MPs demanded far more assertive regulation and enforcement from Ofwat and the Environment Agency.

Several recommendations made in 2022 appear to have influenced Government and regulator policy. However there remain questions about the level of progress the Government has made on water quality since.

The Committee will return to its recommendations, examining the ongoing role of the environmental and economic regulators in enforcing responsible behaviour by water companies and taking action against unpermitted sewage discharges. Members will want to examine whether current plans for investment in infrastructure improvements are adequate, timely and deliverable, and how permitted sewage discharges are being monitored.

Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Philip Dunne MP, said:

“Since the 2022 report of the Committee's major inquiry into water quality in rivers, and the regulatory changes which Government and Parliament made in the Environment Act, much has changed. Public concern about the health of the UK's waterways has grown, such that this issue is now an important topic of political debate and the focus of several high-profile campaigns.

As concern has risen, so has Government and regulator activity. Announcements made over the last few months include a consultation on 27 new inland bathing sites, a Water Restoration Fund funnelling water industry fines directly back into improvements, and an action plan for the River Wye.

We are also soon expecting Ofwat decisions on the industry's capital expenditure plans for 2025 to 2030, as some private sector water companies are understood to be facing significant pressures.

With the end of the Parliament fast approaching, the Committee would like to take stock of the current position as the political parties put together their policy proposals on water for the electorate.

Mr Dunne also said that ahead of the session the committee is inviting and 'encouraging' written evidence submissions – whilst they haven't stated a deadline, should we wish to submit something I expect that would need to happen in the next 10 days or so to inform the forthcoming session.