

NATION FOCUS: WALES

SECTION EXTRACTED FROM THE
SURFERS AGAINST SEWAGE WATER
QUALITY REPORT 2023. SCAN TO
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HOW IS SEWAGE MANAGED IN WALES?

Water is a complicated area of devolution in Wales as many rivers flow between England and Wales such as the River Severn and River Wye.

Water company boundaries are also based on networks of pipes that predate devolution and therefore cross national borders meaning there's a lot of cross-over between Welsh and English water policy. There are two companies in Wales, the largest of which is Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water) which is not-for-profit and operates solely in Wales. The other is Hafren Dyfrdwy (part of Severn Trent).

Senedd Cymru and the Welsh government have the power to set the environmental regulations that both companies should follow, and Natural Resource Wales (NRW) manages these water companies' compliance with these environmental regulations. Like England, Wales is financially regulated by Ofwat.

The Welsh government have set out the 'Environmental Regulation of Overflows: Action Plan'.¹ Which is their plan for how to deal with the discharging of untreated sewage.

THE TRUE SCALE OF SEWAGE DISCHARGE

There are a total of 1,995 sewage overflows in Wales, owned and managed by two separate water companies; Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water) and Hafren Dyfrdwy.

Both of Wales' water companies have good records for monitoring overflow events; 100% of Hafren Dyfrdwy's overflows are fitted with event duration monitoring equipment, and 99.8% of Dŵr Cymru's are fitted with monitoring equipment. Although monitoring levels are pretty top-tier, the amount of sewage coming out of sewage overflows in Wales is not.

HOW MUCH SEWAGE DOES HAFREN DYFRDWY ACTUALLY DISCHARGE?

Hafren Dyfrdwy's relatively small size, combined with the fact that it is owned by parent company Severn Trent (an English water company) means that it is often overlooked when considering sewage infrastructure, assets and discharges in Wales.

However, despite Hafren Dyfrdwy's sewage overflows making up just 2.45% of the total number in Wales, they discharged a total of 1,422 times in 2022, for 10,631 hours. That is an average of 7.5 hours per discharge. Many of these sites discharged into popular rivers amongst water users, such as the upper lengths of the famous River Severn.

In the grand scheme of things, Hafren Dyfrdwy's discharge hours may seem small in comparison to the mammoth 602,987 hours discharged by Dŵr Cymru in 2022.

Some of these discharges have been identified by Natural Resources Wales (NRW), the regulator, as being non-compliant, meaning that the water company has failed to do what was agreed in their permit. In 2022, Hafren Dyfrdwy were identified as not complying with permits for one of their pumping stations, with a storm overflow seen to be discharging in non-storm conditions (in breach of its permit) due to a 'blockage'.

¹ (2022) Environmental regulation of overflows: action plan, accessed 26th October 2023
<https://www.gov.wales/environmental-regulation-overflows-action-plan-html>

Other assets were also found to be non-compliant due to failing to supply information required by improvement conditions in their permits.

For Dŵr Cymru, a staggering 170 permitted storm overflows were found to be in breach of permits, for a variety of reasons including failing to supply data, failing to supply improvement information, and discharging in non-storm or non-emergency conditions. Both Hafren Dyfrdwy and Dŵr Cymru have subsequently been issued with warnings from NRW, and in October 2022 were issued with fines amounting to £8 million for Dwr Cymru and £400,000 for Hafren Dyfrdwy by Ofwat for their ongoing failure to meet targets.

All in all, this paints a picture of a nation riddled with sewage problems. Many Welsh beaches and rivers are situated in national parks, near sites of special scientific interest, or are popular with water users (whether designated as official bathing waters or not). Despite this they are subject to hundreds of thousands of hours of annual sewage discharge – a total of 613,618 hours, that’s equivalent to 25,567 continuous days of sewage discharge in 2022.

Figure 16

Location of Hafren Dyfrdwy’s wastewater service area and the locations of sewage discharges that occurred during the 2022-23 bathing season.



WHAT ARE THE TWO WELSH WATER COMPANIES DOING ABOUT THIS?

Whilst Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy are some of the first water companies to achieve near-full monitoring of their sewerage assets, this is only the start of fixing the problem. The data is, as with many other water companies, largely provided retrospectively. It is vital to provide real-time and easily accessible discharge data to communities and the public.

Dŵr Cymru have outlined their ambition to report on 150 sites in near real-time by January 2024 with the aim to have all 2,300 sites reporting by March 2025.

Knowing how much sewage is discharging is only the start – it’s gathering the data before the real work begins. Now Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy need to turn their attention to significantly reducing their discharges of

untreated sewage, that are plaguing Welsh beaches and popular river swim spots throughout the country.

As this work to implement solutions progresses, in Wales and across the rest of the UK, it’s essential that water companies prioritise the use of nature-based solutions. From sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and constructed wetlands at a local level, to landscape scale restoration projects, nature has huge potential to relieve the pressure on sewerage systems and prevent the use of overflows.

When used in the right place and cared for effectively, they can be the most cost effective option with the co-benefits of trapping carbon, improving biodiversity and reducing flood risk.

Q WALES SPOTLIGHT: IS WELSH WATER ABOVE THE LAW?

Cardigan Bay in West Wales is home to some of the UK’s most diverse and exciting marine wildlife. One of only two resident populations of Bottlenose Dolphins in the UK inhabit the bay, making it a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The River Teifi, which flows into the bay at Poppit Sands, is also a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) meaning that it is protected by law due to its geological and ecological importance.

But over the last year, Welsh Water (Dŵr Cymru) dumped raw sewage into the River Teifi an average of 5.2 times a day². Poppit Sands (a bathing water consistently rated as “excellent”) flew its Blue Flag this summer despite its known pollution. Just one year previous, it was named the worst Blue Flag beach in the whole of the UK, due to 79 sewage dump incidents³.

Sewage pollution in the River Teifi also directly affects one of Wales’ best surf spots at Gwbert. Some local surfers there have simply accepted they will get sick every time it’s firing.

So, it’s no wonder the River Teifi recently hit the headlines. Dŵr Cymru admitted to breaching permits and discharging untreated sewage at a number of treatment plants, with one of the worst cases being in Cardigan.

Illegal Activity?

Dŵr Cymru’s treatment works operate under an environmental permit issued by Natural Resource Wales (NRW). These permits set out the rules for what each overflow can do.

Permits specify the conditions the site must meet and when they can discharge. NRW is responsible for checking and enforcing compliance with these permits.

The permit system for overflows is complex, antiquated and a breeding ground for loopholes and illegal discharges.

Let’s look at two examples.

1. Unpermitted Discharges

A water treatment works can only legally discharge sewage from an overflow if it has a permit. Therefore, logic would imply, all unpermitted discharges are illegal. We didn’t have to look far to find suspicious activity on unpermitted overflows. Dŵr Cymru published a whole database of unpermitted sewage overflows on their website, with 142 unpermitted overflows discharging 4,197 times last year. Why?

2. Emergency Overflows

There is a specific overflow called an emergency overflow (EO). These are only allowed to discharge if there is a catastrophic or emergency event, as defined in their permit.

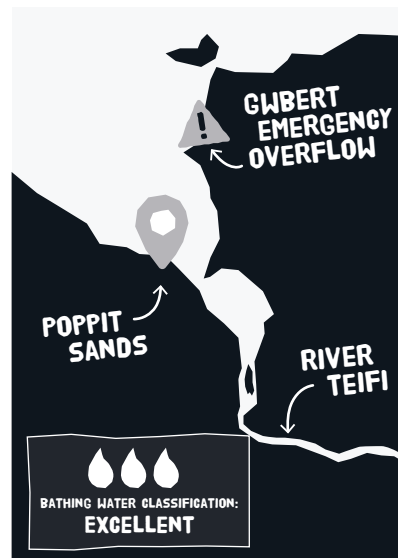


Figure 17
Location of Poppit Sands.

The Gwbert Emergency Overflow, which impacts the bathing water of Poppit Sands, discharged 24 times in the last two years. This indicates a clear breach in their permit.

Rather than addressing the discharges, we anticipate Dŵr Cymru will ask for an upgrade to this permit, which would essentially legalise these discharges. Ironically, even if this overflow had an upgraded permit, it would still fail to meet targets as it would not be allowed to discharge more than three times a year due to its impact on a bathing water.

Another emergency overflow in Abergavenny discharged the equivalent of twice a week last year. Did this particular sewage works really have 123 catastrophic failures last year?

IT'S COMPLETELY UNACCEPTABLE.

Dŵr Cymru is using their assets in whichever way they want, regardless of permit, regardless of impact on environment, and regardless of regulators taking notice. If the simple logic in permits is not being followed, the water companies have freedom to continually pollute and continually get away with it!

Annie McKelvey, Water Quality Data Officer & Freya Harris, Campaigns Officer

- 2 (2020, 2021) Top of the Poops, accessed 30th October 2023, <https://top-of-the-poops.org/company/dwr-cymru-welsh-water>
- 3 Fresh pollution fears raised at Blue Flag Poppit Sands, accessed 30th October 2023, <https://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/23595939.fresh-pollution-fears-raised-blue-flag-poppit-sands/>

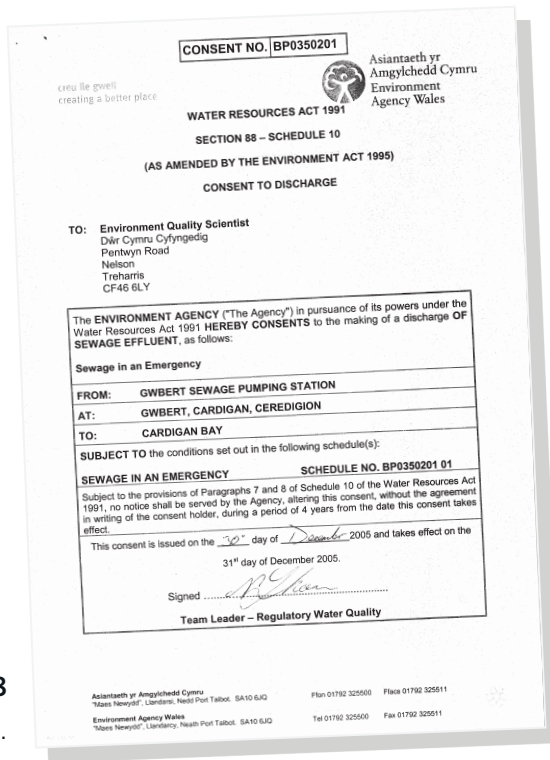


Figure 18

Gwbert Pumping Station Permit.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

We are calling on this and the next government to;

REVEAL THE TRUTH

We need UK wide transparency about sewage pollution.

- ✓ Accurate and accessible real-time water quality information year-round
- ✓ A transparent bathing water application process
- ✓ Water quality testing that shows the full picture
- ✓ Transparency across the sewage system

ENFORCE THE LAW

We have the regulations and laws we need to end sewage pollution. Now we must enforce them.

- ✓ Regulators uphold the law
- ✓ Regulators are well funded and resourced
- ✓ Polluters pay

EMPOWER A NATURE LED APPROACH

Harness the power of nature to end sewage pollution.

- ✓ Remove barriers to the adoption of nature-based solutions
- ✓ Require water companies to prioritise the use of innovative and effective nature based solutions



SCAN FOR THE FULL WATER QUALITY REPORT, WATCH THE HUMAN IMPACT STORIES AND SHARE THE FINDINGS.

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