# Welsh Water faces record sewage spills and fines amid rising customer bills and executive pay



Concerns regarding Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water have reached a critical point following a series of revelations about the company's management of water quality. A recent discussion in the Senedd highlighted a £1.3 million fine imposed on the utility for failing to monitor water quality at 300 sites, alongside 800 offences related to its operations. Rhys ab Owen voiced his frustration, noting that 2023 saw over 118,000 sewage discharges, translating to a staggering spill every five minutes and marking the highest frequency among all UK water companies.

Mr ab Owen’s comments resonate with growing unease among consumers, especially when juxtaposed with the increasing remuneration of the company’s executives. He articulated the disbelief of his constituents in light of ongoing operational failings, stating, “It sticks in the back of the throat – that executives are paid eye-watering sums, that there are discussions for them to be paid even higher salaries,” while the average household bill soared by 27 per cent this year, adding £86 to annual costs.

In response to these concerns, Huw Irranca-Davies, the deputy first minister responsible for water, underscored Welsh Water's plans to invest £6 billion between 2025 and 2030, which includes £1.2 billion specifically targeted at environmental enhancements and addressing nutrient pollution. He acknowledged the public's demand for tangible improvements, asserting, “Customers in Wales expect to see real, tangible improvements.” Despite assurances of future investments, the stark reality remains: the company has been slow to rectify past shortcomings.

The scale of the issue is further underscored by alarming statistics released for 2023. Welsh Water recorded an unprecedented 105,943 sewage spills, nearly all categorised as significant. This was largely attributed to wet weather, with Water UK indicating that heavy rainfall has played a pivotal role. Nonetheless, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) has reiterated its commitment to drive performance improvements, expressing dissatisfaction with the existing levels of compliance which saw a worrying drop in water discharge permit adherence to 98 per cent.

The context is deepened by past infractions, with November 2023 witnessing Welsh Water admitting to illegally discharging untreated sewage from 40 to 50 wastewater treatment plants. This prompted a Westminster inquiry questioning the effectiveness of the company’s self-reporting mechanisms and the broader regulatory framework. Professor Peter Hammond's analysis also highlighted particularly concerning data from the Cardigan plant, which had discharged untreated sewage for over 1,000 days since 2018.

As the situation unfolds, Janet Finch-Saunders, the Conservatives’ shadow climate secretary, expressed her incredulity regarding the ongoing discourse without immediate action, remarking, “Whilst we’re talking about it, there’s probably dozens of pollution incidents taking place right now.” Her indignation was compounded by the reported remuneration of chief executive Peter Perry, totalling £892,000, including a £91,000 bonus for 2024—a figure that she deemed “scandalous.”

Natural Resources Wales’ recent reports confirm a bleak outlook for Welsh Water's operational performance, marking it as the company’s poorest showing to date. The ongoing rise in serious pollution incidents, particularly following incidents like the major sewer pipe burst on the River Taff earlier this year, poses pressing concerns for both regulatory bodies and the public alike.

As scrutiny intensifies, stakeholders are eager to see if Welsh Water can deliver on its ambitious environmental commitments while restoring public trust damaged by ongoing operational missteps. The call for transparency, accountability, and positive action remains louder than ever, reflecting a growing impatience among residents who rely on the company for essential services.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25184211.senedd-hears-welsh-water-customers-get-a-raw-deal/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25184211.senedd-hears-welsh-water-customers-get-a-raw-deal/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 3: [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-68683708), [[4]](https://www.brecon-radnor.co.uk/news/welsh-water-faces-stark-warning-from-nrw-amid-rise-in-serious-pollution-incidents-707249)
* Paragraph 4: [[3]](https://nation.cymru/news/dwr-cymru-bosses-to-face-westminster-grilling-following-sewage-dumping-admission/), [[5]](https://www.watermagazine.co.uk/2024/07/24/further-decline-in-dwr-cymru-performance-outlined-in-nrw-annual-review/)
* Paragraph 5: [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy681530py2o.amp), [[7]](https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/flowing-downstream-a-timeline-of-dwr-cymru-s-performance/)
* Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25184211.senedd-hears-welsh-water-customers-get-a-raw-deal/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://www.watermagazine.co.uk/2024/07/24/further-decline-in-dwr-cymru-performance-outlined-in-nrw-annual-review/), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy681530py2o.amp)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25184211.senedd-hears-welsh-water-customers-get-a-raw-deal/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-68683708> - In 2023, Welsh Water released sewage into rivers, lakes, and the sea for over 916,000 hours, recording 105,943 spills, 93% of which were significant. The 68% rise in hours of spills compared to the previous year was attributed to wet weather, accounting for about 20% of all discharges across Wales and England. Water UK acknowledged the record levels but linked them to heavy rainfall. Natural Resources Wales (NRW) stated it would continue to push for improvements in performance and a reduction in spills.
3. <https://nation.cymru/news/dwr-cymru-bosses-to-face-westminster-grilling-following-sewage-dumping-admission/> - In November 2023, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water admitted to illegally dumping untreated sewage at 40 to 50 of its wastewater treatment plants. Analysis by Professor Peter Hammond revealed that the Cardigan plant in west Wales discharged untreated sewage on 1,146 days from 2018 to May 2023. This led to a Westminster inquiry where MPs scrutinized the company's actions, the effectiveness of self-reporting, and the regulatory response to such pollution incidents.
4. <https://www.brecon-radnor.co.uk/news/welsh-water-faces-stark-warning-from-nrw-amid-rise-in-serious-pollution-incidents-707249> - Natural Resources Wales (NRW) issued a stark warning to Welsh Water after an annual report showed a rise in serious pollution events in 2023. The company was responsible for 107 sewage pollution incidents, with serious pollution events increasing from five to seven, including a major incident involving a burst sewer pipe on the River Taff at Pontypridd in March. NRW expressed concerns over a decline in water discharge permit compliance, dropping to 98%, and emphasized the need for Welsh Water to reverse its downward performance trends.
5. <https://www.watermagazine.co.uk/2024/07/24/further-decline-in-dwr-cymru-performance-outlined-in-nrw-annual-review/> - Natural Resources Wales (NRW) published its 2023 performance reports for Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, highlighting the company's worst performance on record. Welsh Water was responsible for 107 sewage pollution incidents, with serious pollution events rising from five to seven, including a major incident involving a burst sewer pipe on the River Taff at Pontypridd in March. The report also flagged concerns about a decline in water discharge permit compliance, dropping to 98%, and noted improvements in the self-reporting of pollution incidents, which rose to 70% during 2023 but still fell short of the minimum 80% target.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy681530py2o.amp> - A damning report from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) warned Welsh Water of potential prosecution after highlighting its worst-ever performance in 2023. The company was responsible for 107 sewage pollution incidents, with serious pollution events increasing from five to seven, including a major incident involving a burst sewer pipe on the River Taff at Pontypridd in March. NRW also expressed concerns over a decline in water discharge permit compliance, dropping to 98%, and noted improvements in the self-reporting of pollution incidents, which rose to 70% during 2023 but still fell short of the minimum 80% target.
7. <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/flowing-downstream-a-timeline-of-dwr-cymru-s-performance/> - This timeline provides a detailed overview of Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's performance, including key events such as the 2023 Event Duration Monitor (EDM) data submission to Natural Resources Wales (NRW), which reported 105,943 spills, 93% of which were ranked 'significant', and storm overflows operating for over 916,000 hours. The timeline also covers the UK Parliament’s Welsh Affairs Committee's inquiry into water quality in Wales, discussions on the company's environmental performance, and NRW's annual reviews highlighting concerns over pollution incidents and permit compliance.