# Campaigners demand resignation of water review chair amid fears of compromised independence



Leading campaigners in the UK water reform movement have voiced their profound discontent with a government review aimed at restructuring the water sector. In a letter from Ash Smith, chair of trustees at Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP), prominent advocates urged the resignation of the commission’s chair, Sir Jon Cunliffe, citing moral and ethical concerns. This deepening dissatisfaction stems from a series of grievances surrounding both operational practices of water companies and the inadequacies of government responses to escalating environmental crises.

The outcry follows a backdrop of increasing public dissatisfaction over rising water bills and the alarming frequency of sewage being discharged into natural waterways. Thames Water, the largest water provider in the UK, which services approximately 16 million households in Greater London and Oxfordshire, has faced significant scrutiny due to its financial struggles and operational missteps, including high-cost loans that could total up to £3 billion. In October 2024, the Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Steve Reed, announced a review intended to evaluate regulatory systems and propose reforms to better serve public interests and environmental standards.

However, as the commission prepares to release its findings, critics are questioning its independence and efficacy. The letter, which includes contributions from notable figures such as Feargal Sharkey, former lead singer of the punk band The Undertones, has pointedly critiqued the commission's exclusion of privatisation impacts from its focus. They regard DEFRA’s involvement in the secretariat role as fundamentally flawed. According to campaigners, that department has a history of misrepresenting essential facts to the public and facilitating conditions advantageous to pollution by water companies.

In the past year, Sharkey has emerged as a significant voice in the environmental movement, articulating the urgent need for comprehensive reviews of the UK's water management strategies. His prior comments have included stark assessments of the public health risks posed by contaminated waterways, blaming underinvestment and regulatory failure for the widespread pollution seen across England and Wales. Notably, he has highlighted the systemic failures leading to an average of 900 sewage overflows per week across the nation, advocating for a urgent restructuring of the industry.

Environmental Secretary Therese Coffey has faced severe backlash regarding the government's handling of sewage pollution and broader water management issues. Campaigners have characterised her plans as insufficient and desperate, pointing to her acknowledgment of the challenging nature of resolving these environmental crises. Recently, she faced calls for resignation from opposition MPs, illustrating the growing political pressure surrounding the government’s approach to these ongoing issues.

The letter from WASP clearly articulates the frustration within advocacy circles, calling for a comprehensive and independent review of the entire water sector, free from the influence of entities with vested interests. As they detail in their communication, failure to rectify these systemic issues could lead to significant long-term consequences for both public health and the environment. The campaigners’ stance is a clarion call for accountability, urging a reconsideration of how the UK manages its vital water resources.

As the commission prepares to finalize its recommendations, the calls for reform resonate louder than ever. Advocates believe that only a free, independent examination of the industry can sustain the necessary changes to safeguard both customer and ecological welfare. As Smith’s letter concludes, if Sir Jon Cunliffe cannot ensure such independence, his moral duty would necessitate his resignation to preserve the integrity of the review process.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25195409.feargal-sharkey-among-campaigners-slamming-water-review/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.windrushwasp.org/single-post/the-letter)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25195409.feargal-sharkey-among-campaigners-slamming-water-review/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/21/privatised-water-firms-imperiling-health-poisoning-rivers-flood-streets-rage), [[5]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/environment-secretary-water-london-wetlands-centre-river-thames-critics-b1072267.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/apr/09/every-river-in-this-country-is-polluted-how-feargal-sharkey-got-swept-up-by-the-clean-water-campaign), [[6]](https://www.itv.com/news/2024-08-21/weve-been-lied-to-environmental-activists-to-protest-over-water-pollution)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.itv.com/news/2024-08-21/weve-been-lied-to-environmental-activists-to-protest-over-water-pollution), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-54024479)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25195409.feargal-sharkey-among-campaigners-slamming-water-review/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.windrushwasp.org/single-post/the-letter)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25195409.feargal-sharkey-among-campaigners-slamming-water-review/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.windrushwasp.org/single-post/the-letter> - In May 2025, Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP) published a letter expressing concerns over the government's review of the water sector. The letter criticises the review's scope, independence, and the involvement of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as the secretariat. WASP calls for a truly independent review and requests the resignation of the commission's chair, Sir Jon Cunliffe, on moral and ethical grounds.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/21/privatised-water-firms-imperiling-health-poisoning-rivers-flood-streets-rage> - In August 2024, Feargal Sharkey, former lead singer of The Undertones and environmental campaigner, criticised the privatisation of UK water companies. He highlighted issues such as rising water bills, widespread river pollution, and the dumping of sewage into waterways. Sharkey called for a comprehensive review and restructuring of the water industry to address these environmental and public health concerns.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/apr/09/every-river-in-this-country-is-polluted-how-feargal-sharkey-got-swept-up-by-the-clean-water-campaign> - In April 2023, Feargal Sharkey discussed his involvement in the clean water campaign. He recounted his efforts with Fish Legal to compel the Environment Agency to protect water quality. Sharkey highlighted the widespread pollution of rivers in England and Wales, attributing it to underinvestment, regulatory failures, and political indifference. He emphasised the need for effective regulation and public mobilisation to address the crisis.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/environment-secretary-water-london-wetlands-centre-river-thames-critics-b1072267.html> - In April 2023, Environment Secretary Therese Coffey faced criticism for her water plan, which campaigners described as desperate. The plan aimed to address sewage pollution but was ridiculed by environmentalists. Coffey acknowledged the challenges in stopping sewage pollution overnight and faced calls for her resignation from opposition MPs, highlighting the government's struggle to control the water sector.
6. <https://www.itv.com/news/2024-08-21/weve-been-lied-to-environmental-activists-to-protest-over-water-pollution> - In August 2024, Feargal Sharkey and environmental groups announced plans to protest over water pollution. Sharkey accused the public of being misled about water quality and called for action against water companies responsible for sewage dumping. The protest aimed to raise awareness and demand accountability from both the government and the water industry.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-54024479> - In September 2020, Feargal Sharkey criticised Thames Water for discharging sewage into the River Kennet for over 12,000 hours. He described the practice as shocking and potentially illegal, questioning the exceptional circumstances that justified such actions. Thames Water acknowledged the discharges but stated they were due to storms and aimed to prevent flooding.