

# UK RIVERS ARE WORSE THAN EVER

11 July 2024

Reproduced entirely from a Twitter (X) thread by Steve Loftus (@LoftusSteve)

Full thread can be found here:  
<https://x.com/LoftusSteve/status/1659637753158545414>

Twitter and the media is awash with lies, half truths and misconceptions about the state of UK rivers, sewage overflows and water privatisation. It's a complicated topic.



Many reading this will think that the following points are true:

- ☐ UK waters are worse than ever
- ☐ EU water is much better
- ☐ Tories voted to dump sewage
- ☐ It happened after Brexit
- ☐ It's due to privatisation

All of these are wrong. I'll show you why.

Let's start with some basics. This is a bit dull but necessary.

There is 250,000 km of sewers throughout England of which around 100,000 km is combined. This means surface water (ie rain) and waste water use the same pipes. Since the 1960's new sewers have been separate.

When it rains heavily and the system gets too full, the options are for it to come back up your toilet or into water bodies via CSO pipes. All of these pipes have existed for 150 - 160 years. This is not a new problem. CSO's are not a bug, they are a feature.



Every sewer system in the world has CSO's. England has just under 15,000 of the UK's 22,000.

Europe has around 330,000 CSO's.

USA totals are sketchy but they release 800 BILLION gallons of combined sewage a year! □

They aren't going anywhere.

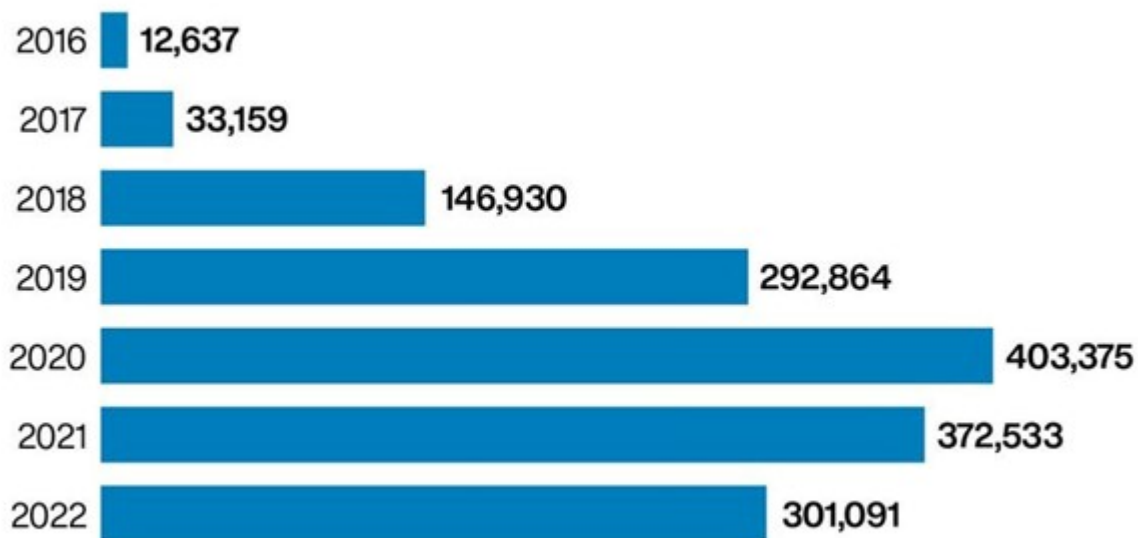
So why all the uproar about them now when sewage has been flowing into rivers

forever? More data. In 2014, Richard Benyon MP led the charge for all CSO's in England and Wales to be 100% monitored by 2023. In 2016 when the rollout started only 5% were monitored.

This led to misleading graphs like below being spread around Social Media and politic opponents of the Government using it to purposefully mislead the public. There was no increase in sewage overflows, only an increase in monitored events.

## Water company sewage spills

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PA graphic. Source: Environment Agency

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Here's an incredibly misleading story from

@SkyNews:

<https://news.sky.com/story/huge-increase-in-raw-sewage-released-into-uk-waterways-and-sea-data-reveals-12677730>





without even the bare minimum of scrutiny. If this is “Labour’s analysis” of the data as the story says, you have to question their ability to run the country.

It’s not just Sky. This story was on every news channel and in every newspaper without a single one of them mentioning it was down to more monitoring not more sewage.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/08/18/sewage-spills-water-firms-have-risen-29-fold-last-five-years>



It’s important to note that CSO’s work much like the overflow in your sink. It’s an automatic process that’s triggered when safety limits are reached.

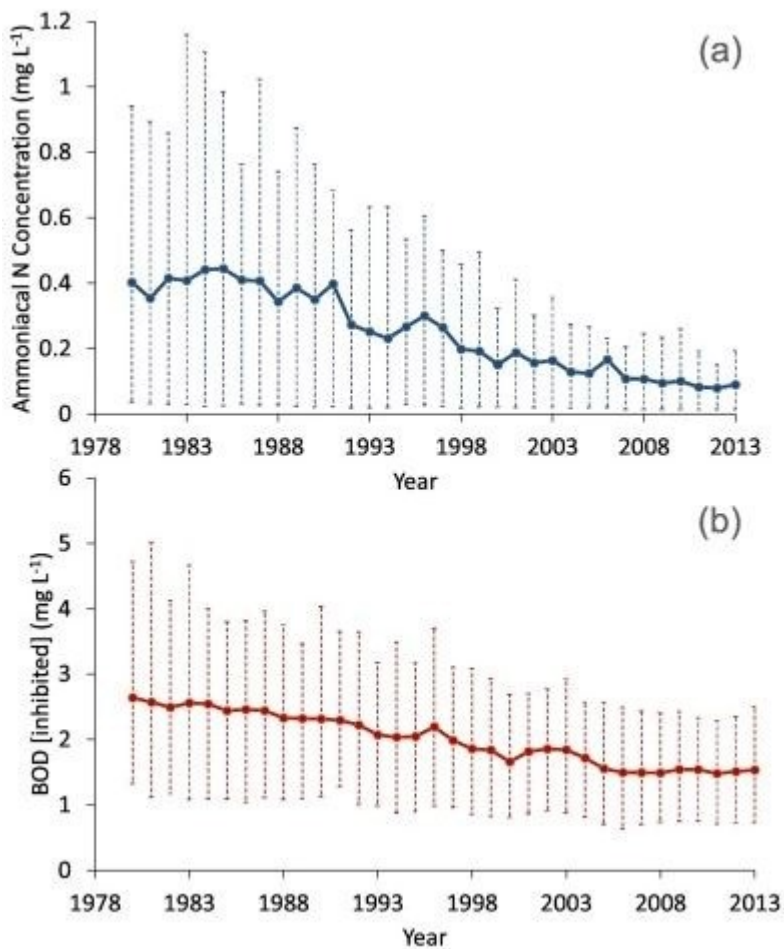
There is no fat cat CEO with a “Dump Sewage” button on his desk.



The systems that this Government brought in to improve the problem have been used very effectively against them. Many still believe the “The Tories voted to allow sewage dumping” lie.

<https://fullfact.org/environment/murky-claims-about-sewage-bill-fact-checked>

Despite a lack of monitoring the issue of sewage overflows has almost certainly got better, not worse. Especially in urban areas. Testing going back to the 70's shows Ammonia and BOD levels associated with sewage declining markedly in rivers.



Which brings us to water quality testing.

You will frequently see headlines such as the one below that highlight a decline in how “Good” our rivers are.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/17/rivers-in-england-fail-pollution-tests-due-to-sewage-and-chemicals>





Activists such as Feargal Sharkey often use them to show a decline in English rivers since 2009 when monitoring under the EU Water Framework Directive began.

*2009 25% of rivers in England meet 'Good' ecological status.*

*2015 17%*

*2016 14%*

*2023 14%*

*2027 6% (latest estimate from EA / Defra).*

*Original target under Water Framework Directive was that by 2027 100% of river would achieve 'Good' status.*

— Feargal Sharkey (@Feargal\_Sharkey) [May 15, 2023](#)

What nobody ever mentions is that a large reason for the decline is the EU added more substances to test for and thus fail against in 2015 leading to a decline in numbers. Then again in 2019 they added uPBT's.

Around 40% of the decline is due to these added substances.

The rest of the decline is likely not due to sewage. Only 36% of pollution is down to overflows says Owfat. The largest polluter at 40% is Nitrogen and Phosphorous

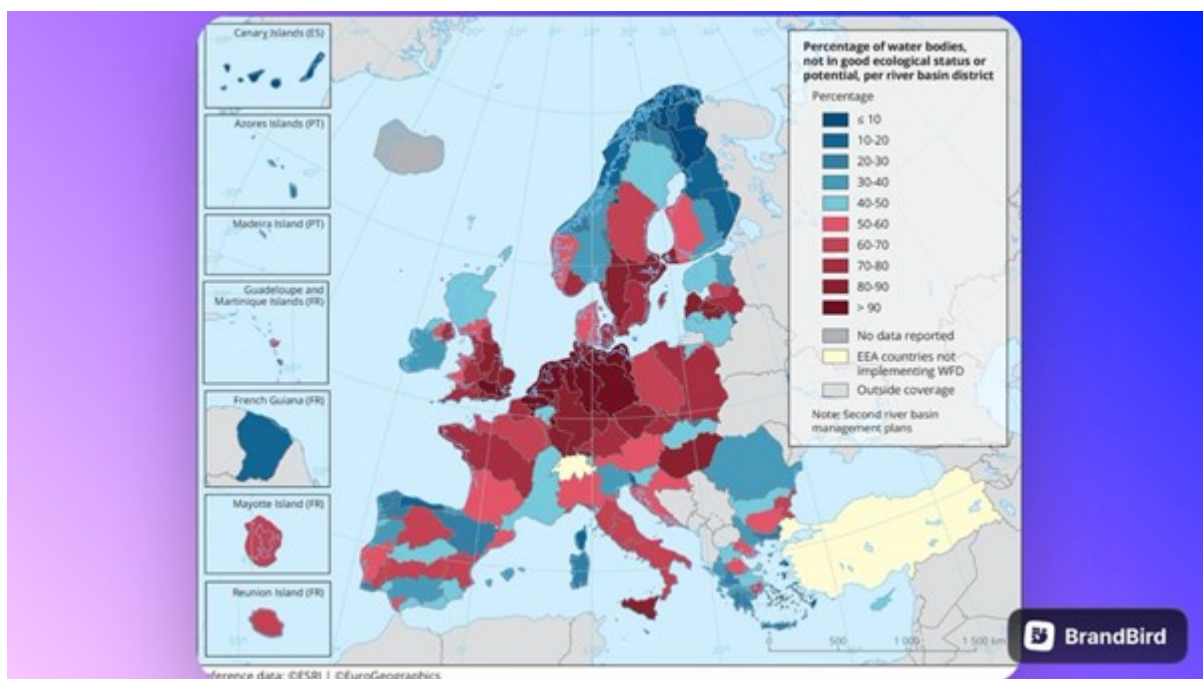
from farming run off.

Which is why the Gov introduced Farming Rules for Water in 2018.



What is always missing is context so that the UK seems like a poor outlier.

The UK may be 14% “Good”, around the same as Belgium, but Germany is only 8% and The Netherlands less than 4%. Most of mainland Europe is no better than the UK.



The same goes for coastal bathing waters. 93% of UK bathing waters are rated good or excellent, up from 70% in 2009 and nearly double what it was in the



1990's. This is comparable to EU countries where the average is also 93%.

<https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/water/interactive/bathing/state-of-bathing-waters>

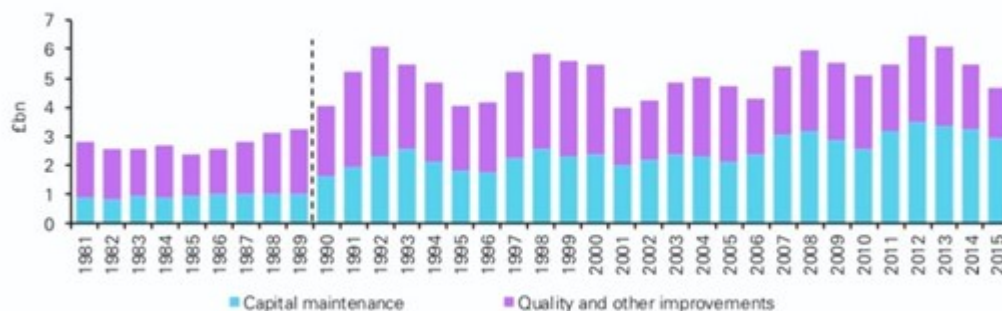
Another common attack line on English water is privatisation and lack of investment.

What those same people fail to mention is that Scotland and Northern Ireland are publicly owned, and Welsh Water is a not "Not for profit" funded by the Welsh Gov.

These problems persist in the devolved nations with large amounts of sewage via overflows. England has less clean water leaks per head in the UK. Nearly half those of Scotland and NI.

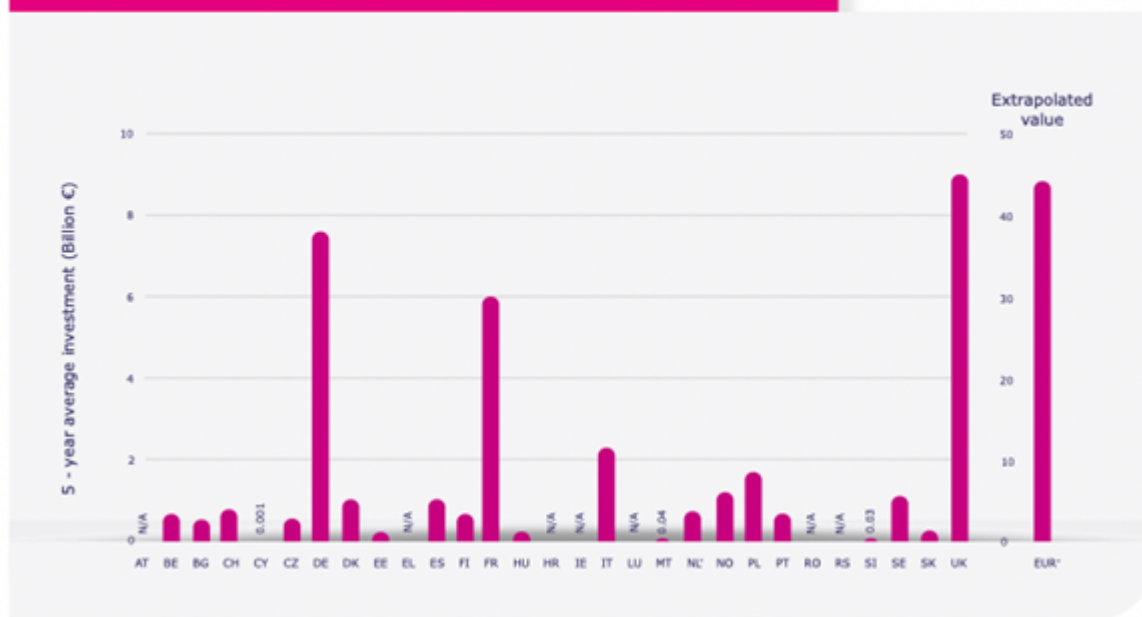
Since privatisation investment has increased significantly in England.

Figure 1 – capital investment in the English and Welsh water companies (2016-17 prices)<sup>5</sup>



Between 2020 and 2025 we are investing more in water infrastructure than any European country. And this is before the announcement yesterday (May 18th) of £10bn extra specifically for sewage upgrades.

**Figure 4**  
Total annual investment in drinking and waste water infrastructure (5-year average)



I could talk more on how the Water companies work and how our bills have not gone up in 20 years despite all the investment above but the excellent Robert Colville covered it in depth last year.

*Have written for @CapX on the water sector, and why so many of critics seem to be utterly ignorant of how it actually works. A quick thread below, with charts (1/?) <https://t.co/sjYQ98JpT4>*

— Robert Colville (@rcolville) [August 15, 2022](#)

Uk waters are better than they have ever been. More attention is being paid to it than ever before. More money is being spent on it that ever before. Believe it or not the current government have done more for water quality than any past government.

That's not to say they are perfect, there is more to be done. The Gov have been dragging their feet on removing the right for new builds to connect to sewers and more funding for the EA to monitor and prosecute water companies and farmers is required.

But things are nowhere near as bad as social media and the media would have us believe and things are better, not worse.

Just to add to this, Do not use flushable wet wipes. Wet wipes have increased blockages 400%. They cause the vast majority of blockages and overflows when it isn't raining. The Gov has been banning them for about 5 years but keeps dragging their feet.



I wanted to add another example of intentional misinformation with another excellent thread by Robert Colville tearing apart a Guardian article widely used to mislead.

*I did a massive thing on the water industry yesterday so don't want to repeat myself, but seeing some reputable people (eg [@paulwaugh](#)/[@Feargal\\_Sharkey](#)) repeat some stuff on investment in the sector that's highly misleading. Quick thread. (1/?)*

— Robert Colville ([@rcolvile](#)) [August 16, 2022](#)

Feargal has entered the chat.

It's very clearly not illegal, read the Water Industry Act.

And the EU took every EU country to court in 2012 as an act of political theater.

*What you described of course is illegal.*



*And that's not just me saying it, that is the European Court of Justice ruling when UK govt was taken to court by the Commission in 2012 and found guilty for allowing WCs to dump sewage into the environment.*

*But you knew that already.* <https://t.co/UyddYsioTp>

— Feargal Sharkey (@Feargal\_Sharkey) [May 20, 2023](#)

Sources:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969722041110>