

Written evidence submitted by 38 Degrees to the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee (WSMB09).

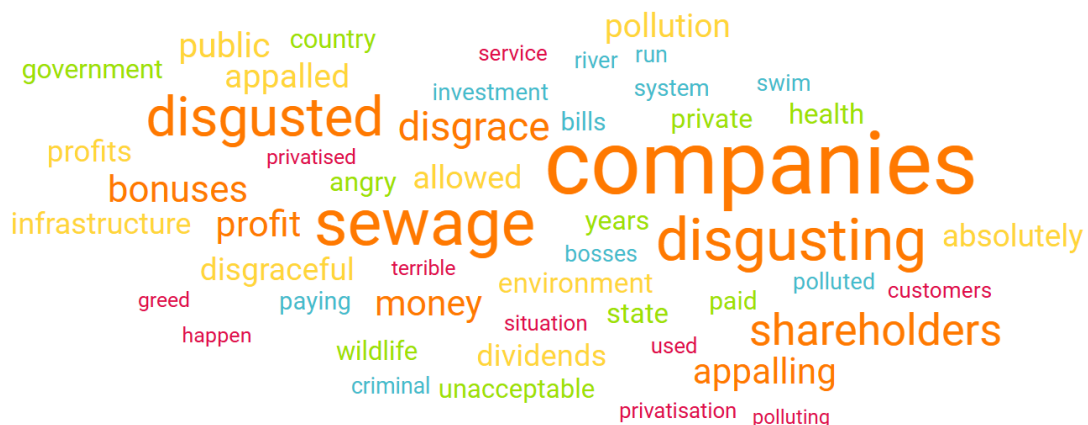
Written evidence submitted by on behalf of the British public regarding the Water (Special Measures) Bill

1. Executive summary

- a. 38 Degrees, a people-powered campaign group representing almost one million people across the country, has been campaigning to end the sewage crisis for many years. [1]
- b. In response to the Public Bill Committee's request for written evidence, 38 Degrees launched a survey to gather insights from our supporters, drawing on the lived experiences and expertise of thousands of people who care deeply about our rivers and seas.
- c. This report synthesises over 50,000 responses to provide a detailed, evidence-based submission to the Committee. It reflects the anger, frustration, but also hope of those who see the Water Bill as a vital opportunity for transformative change. By compiling these voices into a cohesive consultation response, we aim to ensure the public's views are represented during the Committee's scrutiny process.
- d. We hope this report will help the Committee strengthen the Water Bill to meet the scale of the challenges we face - protecting our environment, holding polluters accountable, and safeguarding public health for generations to come.

2. What the public thinks and why it matters

- a. The responses from 50,415 members of the public regarding the state of sewage in our rivers and seas reveal widespread anger, disgust, and frustration, with a strong demand for urgent action. Many described the situation as "disgusting," "shameful," and "appalling," with a sense of despair for the environmental damage and risks posed to human health. There emerges a deep sense of sadness and betrayal, as many reflect on cleaner rivers and seas in past decades, contrasting starkly with their current state.



The word cloud above collates the most common words used by respondents in answering the question: 'Can you tell us how you feel about the current state of sewage in our rivers and seas?'

3. Environmental and health impacts

- a. Survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that regulators must shift their focus away from safeguarding corporate interests towards protecting the environment.
- b. When asked, "to what extent do you agree that protecting the environment should be a top priority for the water regulator, Ofwat - not just protecting water companies finances?", **95% of respondents said they strongly agreed that protecting the environment should be the top priority for regulators like Ofwat.**
- c. The public clearly understands the environmental impact of water mismanagement and wants to see regulators adopting a more proactive stance. Specifically, respondents highlighted concerns about the destruction of aquatic ecosystems, harm to wildlife, and risks to biodiversity. Many highlighted the moral need to protect waterways for future generations. Fears of illness from polluted waters have also deterred recreational activities, with significant implications for tourism and public health.

"It [sewage] has stopped me swimming, fishing, and enjoying life in and around water."
Glyn Lewis, Harrow East

“It is astonishing that in 2024 we are still allowing water companies to regularly dump their waste into our waterways, causing untold damage to the environment and those fauna and flora that live there.”

Daniel Higgs, Essex

“As an angler for over 50 years I must confess to never having seen our lakes and rivers in such dire condition.”

Stephen J Boyle, Wirral

4. Criticism of privatisation and calls for nationalisation

- a. The survey responses revealed a near-unanimous rejection of the privatisation of water companies. When asked, *“Do you think water companies should be privately owned and run for profit?”* **95% of respondents strongly opposed private ownership.** Just 3% of those surveyed expressed support for the current system.
- b. When asked to elaborate, respondents frequently criticised companies’ prioritisation of shareholder profits and executive bonuses over improving infrastructure and protecting the environment.
- c. Responses underscored a sense of powerlessness, with many expressing frustration over the monopolistic structure of the water industry that leaves customers with no choice but to rely on providers they feel have failed them.

“Clean water is too precious a resource to be left to the vagaries of the market and the exploitation by private sector shareholders. It should be nationalised.”

Dave Lowrie, Gateshead

“Utilities should not be in private hands. I feel powerless to affect the situation as there is no competition, and my money has been stolen to make rich people richer.”

Bob Paton, Southampton

“Change the model of ownership and you’ll find a dramatic improvement in quality of water and waste management. Water companies should be held to account by local residents for their performance. Break up the regional water companies into much smaller community owned companies that are run for the local community (as in Switzerland). Making it harder for local water companies to fail their local communities.”

Simon Rydings, Surrey

5. Accountability and enforcement

- a. Respondents largely view the current regulatory framework as insufficient in deterring bad practices, and expressed a strong demand for greater accountability.

- b. When asked, “*to what extent do you agree that the Water Bill should ensure water company bosses whose firms cause sewage pollution are automatically banned from receiving bonuses?*” **96% of respondents strongly agreed**, with an additional 3% of people selecting somewhat agree. The public also overwhelmingly supported stricter enforcement measures, with a clear emphasis on imposing larger fines and ensuring personal accountability for executives.
- c. Responses showed great frustration towards the perceived leniency afforded to water companies. Many advocated for criminal charges against CEOs and directors responsible for environmental violations, alongside the forfeiture of bonuses and profits. Respondents also highlighted the disconnect between public expectations and the reality of corporate governance within the sector. There is a clear call for reforms that would ensure meaningful consequences for misconduct and restore public trust.

“It’s disgraceful. If I poisoned my local river, I’d be jailed. These people are poisoning the whole system, and they get pay rises.”

Stephen Connolly, Spen Valley

“This has been going on for years now and the message water companies are getting is that they will only face tiny fines relative to their profit each year and so can continue to dump sewage just as they have been. Consequences have to be relative to profit or they’re not consequences.”

Sarah Lyst, Wellingborough

“The move to private was meant to make bills cheaper and improve services. The only thing it has done is to make bosses and shareholders richer and service worse. Quite rightly the public wants to see people held accountable for this, even criminally, but certainly financially. They have done well out of running the company into the ground, they should now pay the penalty for that.”

Malcolm Reeves, Cotswolds

6. Public trust and broader implications

- a. Respondents expressed clear opposition to the trend of operational failures resulting in increased costs for consumers. When asked, “*to what extent do you agree that the Water Bill should protect customers from having to cover the costs of failing water companies?*” **98% of respondents agreed**.
- b. This sentiment suggests a demand for systemic reforms that incentivise responsible management and prevent cost-shifting. It highlights a growing expectation for water companies to internalise the risks and costs of their failures rather than externalising them onto the public. Many respondents commented that infrastructure investment should have been made before the situation became critical.

“Recouping the huge sums historically taken out of water companies should also be addressed NOT just the future management of the water industry. Private owners have used the water companies as 'cash cows' while failing to fulfill their obligations.”

Dr Ian Miller, Wales

“Where water companies make profits those are passed on to shareholders, but where they face losses, consumers have to accept higher bills. This is not reasonable. Investors chose to invest, knowing the risks. Consumers are paying a high price for something essential to life. Consumers are paying more and more for less and less. Water rates rise and water companies are performing worse every year.”

Liz Roach, Wales

“Clean water is a basic human right, profit for shareholders is not, pretty simple really.”

Geoffrey Haynes, Leicester

7. Sustainable solutions

- a. Respondents voiced widespread support for systemic reforms aimed to address the root causes of the challenges facing the industry. Many advocated for mandatory upgrades to outdated infrastructure - particularly the Victorian-era sewer systems - to ensure the sector can meet the demands of a growing population and the escalating impacts of climate change.
- b. Responses reflected a sense of urgency, often pointing to the inadequacy of current regulation.
- c. Innovation also emerged as a key theme, with respondents calling for the adoption of sustainable practices, such as wastewater reuse for energy generation, and stricter regulations on developer contributions to infrastructure. These responses indicate a strong appetite for long-term solutions that prioritise sustainability, innovation, and public interest over short-term corporate gains.

“A plea to lawmakers...”

Please, just take a look across the channel at any European country and compare a few statistics and understand just how beyond the pale the situation is in Britain compared to that of European countries(...). A big key in my mind is the feebleness of regulation in Britain. Ofwat certainly needs its mandate tightened up. This requires money, and people. Neither of which we have at the moment. You can toughen laws all you like but without the means to enforce them...

Camilla Stephens, Kingston upon Hull

“Our environment is precious. With technology advances and the ingenuity of humans there is no excuse for polluting our rivers and seas. By prioritising innovation over profit, these problems could be solved.”

Elin Heron, Derbyshire

“My message to the Government is...encourage water companies to invest in green infrastructure solutions, such as sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and nature-based solutions. These approaches can help reduce pressure on the sewage system and provide wider environmental benefits.”

Desiree Ratcliffe-Lattimore, Isle of Wight

8. Additional evidence: Rapid Response Voter Panel

- a) In December 2024, in response to Ofwat’s announcement of a 36% bill increase over the next five years, 38 Degrees commissioned researchers JL Partners to conduct a Rapid Response Voter Panel (RRVP) - a unique same-day qualitative poll - which was covered by *The i Paper*. [2]
- b) Key themes emerging from the responses included widespread outrage at the rise in water bills - particularly when contrasted with water company executives’ substantial bonuses and companies’ profits - and a feeling of powerlessness, with voters feeling they have no choice but to swallow increased costs. Whilst opinion was divided on Ofwat’s performance and future, a clear demand for stronger regulation shone through. These insights underscore the public desire for meaningful action to address rising costs, executive accountability, and inadequate regulation.

9. Conclusion

- a) The thousands of public responses summarised here show significant public opposition to privatisation, with a deep distrust of water companies and frustration with regulatory failings. There is a clear call for transformative change to ensure transparency and accountability, with overwhelming public support for banning bonuses and penalising environmental breaches. Environmental concerns shine through, with a clear public demand for regulators to prioritise environmental protections over corporate interests.
- b) Whilst the proposed Water Bill's measures to block bonuses, impose criminal charges, enforce fines, and enable independent monitoring are seen as positive steps, there is a clear demand for the Government to go further. The data showed strong support for government intervention, and a growing inclination toward public ownership or stricter state control of essential services. In sum, the public demands action to renationalise water services, modernise infrastructure, and protect the environment and public health.
- c) Parliament must seize the critical opportunity presented by the Water Bill to deliver systemic reform, restore public trust, and ensure clean, safe waterways for generations to come.

10. Methodology

a) Survey:

- i) To gather public opinion on the Water (Special Measures) Bill, we conducted an open survey distributed to our supporters from across England and Wales between December 22nd 2024 to January 4th 2025. The survey invited participants to share their views on the Bill and propose solutions to address sewage pollution and improve water management in the UK. This open-ended format encouraged detailed responses, allowing us to capture a wide range of perspectives, including environmental, economic, and ethical concerns. Over 54,000 responses were received, reflecting widespread public engagement with the issue.

b) Rapid Response Voter Panels:

- i) The Rapid Response Voter Panel is a pioneering, same-day qualitative poll we've developed with pollsters JL Partners. These panels allow us to respond to critical moments and breaking news by getting reaction quotes from the general public. In an update on traditional focus groups, JL Partners ask people to explain their views and dig underneath the surface of support or opposition.
- ii) For this panel, a representative sample of 100 UK adults online were asked to share their reactions to Ofwat's decision to increase water bills.

- c) This mixed-methods approach enabled us to present a comprehensive view of public opinion, combining in-depth qualitative insights with measurable data to inform actionable recommendations for the Bill.

References

[1] 38 Degrees: [About Us](#)

38 Degrees: [Decades of criminality in the water industry: Our fight for clean water continues](#)

38 Degrees: [It's time to stop water companies profiting from pollution](#)

38 Degrees: [Do you think the sea is safe to swim in?](#)

[2] The i Paper: ['Disgusted': Labour, Tory and Reform voters united in anger at water bill rise](#)

[3] JL Partners: [About Us](#)

Additional qualitative responses

"Companies should be moved to a Not for Profit model and investment by hedge funds or foreign companies outlawed as they just asset strip and front-load the businesses with massive debts. Making a profit has no place in managing a vital utility. Investment is what is needed to keep it working properly for the population."

Carol Lincoln, Leicestershire

"I worked for a water company 30 years ago and this didn't happen. It's greed that's causing it."

Rodney James Clifton, East Sussex

"They should be told, in no uncertain terms, that they are in the last chance saloon. I believe they should not be allowed to raise prices, but like all businesses, cover the costs of their own failures and amendments. Isn't that what we have all been doing as individuals in the last 14 years?"

Carol Linda Wardell, Staffordshire

“Any industry that needs to be “regulated” should ban former employees of that industry from joining the regulator, and ban employees of a regulator joining the industry.”

Stephen Scrutton, Northamptonshire

“My kids can’t paddle in the summer and there’re no safe wild swimming spots nearby.”

Emma Forest, York.

“They need to act NOW. Living in the west country we are so aware of sewage in water. Our beach at Exmouth was closed for swimming in the middle of the summer because of sewage in the water.”

Marian Murray, Exmouth

“When it floods my grandchildren have sewage flowing in the road outside their house.”

Jill Greenland, Salisbury

“Absolutely disgusted!!! We need clean water for humans and all our wildlife and plant life to survive the coming and existing climate crisis.”

Cathy Watts, Baldock

“The quality of our water is fundamentally important, not just to our everyday lives but to the environment and in the case of a financially struggling country to our tourism, it has to be protected.”

Erica Youngman, Nantwich

“DEVASTATED. I learnt to swim as a child in the river Ribble at Settle and spent many happy hours playing in, and by the river catching lots of small fish, and releasing them! My grandchildren will never enjoy that wonderful experience.”

Jenny Brown, Long Ashton

“Under no circumstances should sewage pollution be allowed. Our rivers and coastlines are massively important for tourism, so even if money is all these companies care about, the government must look at the big picture as this is part of our economic prosperity too.”

Nicola Welsh, Cornwall

“I understand customer costs increase but it must be in proportion to fund improvements needed. Environment health and no pollution must be key non-negotiable targets for water companies.”

Sonia Wilson, London

“Water is essential to all life so it is not something that should be at the whim of investors. It should be treated as a health issue the same as the NHS is.”

Mark Desborough, Lowestoft

Who we are

38 Degrees is a community of a million people who - in a moment away from their busy days - take small actions on issues they care about, which all add up to something bigger, a movement for a better Britain for everyone who calls our country home. With supporters in every UK constituency, we come from all walks of life; we're nurses, taxi drivers, parents, shopkeepers, pensioners and more.

With on and offline campaigning technology, a creative and dedicated staff team and a people powered movement, we work to change lives, communities and our country, and by coming together we can have an impact far greater than any of us could achieve alone. Whether it's the grieving wife who forced the Government to review betting laws after the tragic loss of her husband to gambling-related suicide, or the hundreds of thousands of us who convinced the Culture Secretary to keep Channel 4 public, every time we win, we move our country a step towards the fairer, more sustainable place we're fighting for, where we are treated - and treat each other - with respect.

Who makes up the 38 Degrees Community

- **We live in every part of the UK:** There are hundreds of 38 Degrees supporters in every single UK constituency.
- **We vote for all parties and none:** Convincing us matters: prior to the July 2024 election there were 96 UK constituencies where the number of 38 Degrees supporters is higher than the local MP's majority.
- **We unite the Red Wall and the Blue Wall:** Our supporters live - and vote - in the areas watched most closely by politicians. Prior to the July 2024 election there were 125,744 38 Degrees supporters in key Red Wall seats, and 179,413 in the most vital Blue Wall constituencies.
- **We chip in to make change:** Over the last year, people from every single UK constituency have contributed money to make our eye-catching tactics a reality.

January 2025.