

Public Bill Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA



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### **Submission of Evidence: Water (Special Measures) Bill**

Dear Dr Rupa Huq MP and Martin Vickers MP,

1. I am writing to you in your roles as joint Chairs of the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee. As the CEO of the Port of London Authority (PLA), I lead an organisation that operates as a trust port with no shareholders, reinvesting all proceeds for the benefit of the Thames. We are the custodians of the riverbed and foreshore up to mean high water for 95 miles of the tidal Thames, from Teddington Lock to the Estuary. Our Thames Vision 2050 outlines our ambition to grow the Port of London, already the UK's largest port, while achieving Net Zero emissions.
2. The Port of London Authority (PLA) is pleased to submit evidence to the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee. As custodians of the tidal Thames, we are uniquely positioned to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities this Bill addresses. Our submission outlines specific recommendations to enhance the Bill's provisions, ensuring they are practical, impactful, and aligned with the urgent need to reduce pollution in our waterways.
3. To assist Members of Parliament in their deliberations, we have compiled a list of targeted legislative measures in the annex titled "Proposed Bill Measures" in section 41. These measures provide actionable suggestions for strengthening the Bill's impact and supporting its implementation. We urge Members of Parliament to consider these proposals as potential amendments or additions to the legislation.

### **The Port of London Authority**

4. The tidal Thames is a vital ecological and cultural resource. It is home to diverse wildlife, supports local communities, and provides essential ecosystem services, including flood protection. While the river has made significant progress since being declared biologically dead in 1957, pollution—especially from sewage discharges—remains a major challenge.
5. The PLA works to protect and enhance the environment of the tidal Thames. With escalating climate challenges, ensuring the health of the Thames is vital for the environment and the economy. Section 200 of the Port of London Act prohibits pollution into the Thames, however these powers are not enough to stop pollutants being discharged into the river as its enforcement is limited to direct actions within the PLA's

remit, such as discharges from commercial vessels. Broader sources of pollution, including combined sewer overflows and diffuse run-off from urban areas, fall outside the scope of these powers, necessitating collaboration with other authorities and strengthened regulatory measures.

6. We want a river that is clean, free from pollution, and with a healthy ecosystem. We have a right and a responsibility to insist that the river is not damaged by the actions of others.
7. More than ever, our stakeholders, river users and the communities who live and work along the riverside, are demanding a clean river. Public and media outrage about pollution in the river has never been more vocal. Our own research on public attitudes tells us that tackling pollution is the top priority for people when they think about the River Thames.
8. We support the objectives of the Water (Special Measures) Bill to better regulate the water industry and better monitor sewage entering rivers and welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to this Committee. This submission focuses on the Bill's provisions relating to **monitoring of sewer overflows** and the **wider work to strengthen regulation**. Our evidence highlights key initiatives undertaken by the PLA and emphasises the importance of collaborative approaches to achieving cleaner rivers.

## Context and Evidence

### The Thames Vision and the Clean Thames Plan

9. Our 2050 Vision for the tidal Thames is of a clean, thriving river, free of sewage and other pollutants, supporting greater biodiversity and recreational use.
10. While improvements in infrastructure and policy have enhanced water quality, the Environment Agency reports that the tidal Thames is not meeting its water quality targets under the Water Framework Directive. Further action is urgently required to address pollution, especially from Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) and sewage treatment works.
11. In response, the PLA has taken a leading role in tackling pollution through partnership-driven initiatives<sup>i</sup>, including:
  - a. **Thames Litter Strategy (2018)**: This five-year strategy, developed with Thames21 and other stakeholders, addressed litter pollution through evidence-based monitoring, removal initiatives, and public engagement. Between 2018 and 2022, 80 per cent of the foreshore earned a Grade B or higher (predominantly free from litter), exceeding the original target of 75 per cent.
  - b. **Clean Thames Manifesto (2023)**<sup>ii</sup>: Building on the Thames Litter Strategy, this manifesto addresses broader pollution issues, including sewage discharges. It establishes a framework for collaboration with water companies, regulators, and other stakeholders.
  - c. **Clean Thames Plan (2024)**<sup>iii</sup>: The Clean Thames Plan outlines a comprehensive strategy to eliminate sewage discharges into the tidal Thames by 2050 through the implementation of advanced real-time monitoring technologies and the

integration of nature-based solutions such as green infrastructure and constructed wetlands. The plan emphasizes significant infrastructure investments to upgrade sewage treatment facilities and reduce Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs), while enhancing collaboration with water companies, regulators, local authorities, and community groups. Additionally, targeted public engagement and education campaigns aim to foster community involvement in pollution prevention and river stewardship, ultimately achieving substantial improvements in water quality, biodiversity, and the overall health of the tidal Thames ecosystem.

- d. **Thames Tideway Tunnel:** We have played a pivotal role in consenting the Thames Tideway Tunnel, a major infrastructure project aimed at significantly reducing sewage discharge events into the tidal Thames. By capturing and storing Combined Storm Overflows (CSOs) that would otherwise release untreated sewage, the Tunnel is expected to reduce these discharges by up to 95 per cent.

### **Commitments Secured Under the Clean Thames Manifesto**

12. Through the Clean Thames Manifesto, the PLA has achieved significant commitments to reduce sewage pollution:

- a. Thames, Southern, and Anglian Water, alongside their regulators, have committed to a strategic working group with the PLA to address sewage discharges in the tidal Thames.
- b. Thames Water has agreed to work with the PLA to tackle wet wipe accumulations on the foreshore.
- c. Thames, Southern, and Anglian Water will provide near real-time information on sewage discharges from all CSOs and storm overflows from treatment works.
- d. Ofwat has committed to supporting water companies in advancing investment proposals that deliver best value and align with long-term environmental goals.
- e. The Environment Agency has pledged to support water companies in expediting projects from their 25-year plans within the Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP).

### **Water (Special Measures) Bill**

#### **Clause 2: Pollution Incident Reduction Plans**

13. The PLA's leadership in the Clean Thames Manifesto provides a compelling example of how coordinated efforts between stakeholders can accelerate progress on reducing pollution. **The PLA strongly supports the inclusion of statutory requirements for water companies to publish annual pollution incident reduction plans.**

14. Based on our experience in developing a collaborative agreement with three water companies discharging into the tidal Thames, we have found that coordination between

water companies is essential to driving quicker, more impactful outcomes and fostering innovation in addressing systemic issues such as sewage pollution (as shown in the commitments in section 12). Annual pollution incident reduction plans should include a requirement for coordination between water companies operating within the same river basin, whether implemented as a specific legislative provision in the Bill or through Government or Ofwat guidance. This would ensure a joined-up strategy for managing each catchment and prevent siloed efforts.

15. We at the PLA recognise that the introduction of annual pollution incident reduction plans can significantly enhance water quality protection measures. By requiring undertakers to set out detailed strategies for reducing pollution incidents and to report on their progress each year, Clause 2 provides a valuable framework for accountability. In line with our Clean Thames Plan, we believe these plans should be evidence-based, transparent, and closely tied to practical interventions and clear targets for improvement. Through closer collaboration with key stakeholders and regular progress updates, these requirements can help deliver tangible improvements in river health and ecological resilience across the tidal Thames and beyond.
16. The Port of London Authority recommends that pollution incident reduction plans include specific targets that address the unique characteristics and challenges of local waterways, such as the tidal Thames. This ensures that undertakers prioritise pollution issues that pose the greatest risks to local ecosystems and communities.
17. The Bill's provisions for real-time reporting of emergency overflows represent a positive step forward in transparency and accountability. These measures align with the Clean Thames Plan's focus on real-time data and ensure that stakeholders can differentiate between permitted emergency overflows and unpermitted pollution events.
18. The PLA believes that consultation with key stakeholders and strategic partners like the PLA, when developing and reviewing their pollution incident reduction plans will ensure that the plans reflect diverse perspectives and priorities.
19. Given the urgency of reducing pollution in rivers such as the Thames, the PLA encourages the inclusion of provisions to fast-track high-impact measures in pollution reduction plans. The Clean Thames Manifesto's approach of calling for the acceleration of projects within the Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP) could serve as a model.
20. While Clause 2 could be further strengthened by addressing secondary impacts, such as microplastics and wet wipe accumulations, which have significant ecological consequences. Detailed recommendations are included in the annex.
21. Specifically, both pollution incident reduction plans, and implementation reports, should identify the potential scale and impacts of non-organic materials within sewage discharges and their plans both to minimise these materials and clean-up any accumulations, for example of river foreshores. Thames Water's commitment to addressing wet wipe issues under the Clean Thames Plan demonstrates the value of tackling interconnected pollution sources.

22. To enhance accountability, the PLA supports the involvement of independent bodies, such as the Environment Agency or Ofwat, in verifying the accuracy of implementation reports. This oversight would provide additional assurance to regulators, stakeholders, and the public.
23. The PLA recommends that pollution reduction plans prioritise upstream preventative measures, such as public education campaigns and infrastructure upgrades. These are aligned with the behavioural change objectives outlined in the Clean Thames Plan and can significantly reduce the incidence of pollution events.
24. Recognising the increasing pressures of climate change, the PLA urges undertakers to integrate climate resilience into their pollution reduction strategies, which is included in our recommendations for a specific legislative requirement in the annex. This includes measures to manage increased rainfall and storm overflow events, which are critical for safeguarding water quality in the tidal Thames.

### **Clause 3: Emergency Overflows**

25. We welcome Clause 3's requirement for near real-time reporting of emergency overflow discharges, which aligns with our commitment to transparency and responsiveness under the Clean Thames Plan. Ensuring that the public, regulators, and river authorities like ourselves have rapid access to discharge information is crucial for safeguarding water quality and minimising harm to local ecosystems and river users (for example those involved in recreational activities).
26. The PLA welcomes the requirement for near real-time reporting of emergency overflow discharges within one hour of starting and finishing. However, undertakers should provide contextual data (e.g., weather conditions, rainfall intensity, or infrastructure status) to help stakeholders understand why an emergency overflow was triggered.
27. The Bill stipulates that discharge information must be easily understandable and accessible to the public. The PLA supports this and recommends developing a standardised national platform (or an agreed minimum format) to share discharge data, mirroring approaches suggested by the Clean Thames Manifesto partners for consistent and clear public communication.
28. While the Secretary of State may set out exceptions to reporting, it is critical that these exemptions remain narrow and are clearly justified, such as in genuine force majeure events. This ensures that the overarching goals of transparency and accountability are not undermined. The Port of London Authority (PLA), as custodians of the tidal Thames and experts in managing its complex ecosystem, plays a pivotal role in safeguarding river health and maintaining navigational safety.
29. Given our unique expertise and longstanding experience, we strongly advocate for the involvement of environmental regulators and relevant stakeholders, including navigational and port authorities, in the consultation process. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the accountability of undertakers but also ensures that all

perspectives—particularly those rooted in practical, on-the-ground management of the river—are fully considered. By drawing on the insights and capabilities of stakeholders like the PLA, the process is more likely to achieve effective, comprehensive outcomes that uphold the health and resilience of the Thames.

30. In addition to this collaborative approach, the PLA recommends introducing legislative incentives that encourage undertakers to invest in infrastructure upgrades and preventative measures. These initiatives, such as improved screening mechanisms and real-time sensors, are essential for reducing the likelihood of emergency overflows and ensuring a more proactive approach to managing river health. Our experience demonstrates that preventative measures not only mitigate immediate risks but also contribute to long-term environmental resilience. By consulting with the PLA and other key stakeholders, legislators can ensure that these incentives are both practical and targeted, driving meaningful improvements in the management of emergency overflow risks.

### **Addressing Non-Emergency Flows**

31. We fully support the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)'s recently published guidance on the management and regulation of storm overflows. This guidance provides essential advice on implementing measures identified in the Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan (SODRP) and meeting the requirements set out in the Environment Act 2021.
32. Our Clean Thames Plan aligns closely with Defra's objectives by advocating for advanced monitoring technologies and robust regulatory frameworks to manage storm overflows effectively. We commend the emphasis on real-time data collection through Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) and Continuous Water Quality Monitoring (CWQM), which enhance transparency and accountability. By supporting these initiatives, we ensure that water companies are well-equipped to meet the stringent requirements set forth in the guidance, thereby reducing the environmental and public health impacts of sewage discharges.
33. Comprehensive data on all discharge types would enhance the evidence base for river clean-up strategies and further reduce pollution in the tidal Thames.
34. The PLA recommends that water companies be encouraged to adopt integrated management practices that consider both emergency and non-emergency overflows collectively. This includes prioritising low-impact, nature-based solutions (e.g., constructed wetlands) and partnering with local authorities for sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS).
35. Given the direct impact overflows can have on navigation, ecology, and water quality, the PLA advocates for mandatory engagement with local port and navigational authorities during any permit review or overflow management planning.

### **Clause 4: Nature Base Solutions**

36. We welcome Clause 4, which requires sewerage undertakers to incorporate nature-based solutions (NBS) within their drainage and sewerage management plans. Drawing on our Clean Thames Plan, we recognise the significant potential of NBS to improve water quality, enhance biodiversity, and bolster climate resilience in the tidal Thames and beyond. It will be important that, in addition to the proposed new legislative reporting requirement, successive Ofwat periodic price reviews, ensure sufficient resources are allocated for investment in nature-based solutions, which will be essential to deliver the long-term reduction in pollution incidents in the most sustainable way within a rapidly changing climate.
37. We believe it is essential for drainage and sewerage management plans to set clear, measurable goals for enhancing habitats and species diversity, alongside a robust framework for monitoring and reporting progress. Embedding these objectives as statutory requirements under Part IV of the Water Industry Act 1991 would reinforce the accountability of sewerage undertakers.
38. Encouraging collaboration through targeted incentives can be instrumental in driving large-scale, innovative nature-based solutions (NBS) projects. Rewarding such initiatives not only accelerates progress but also fosters partnerships that deliver broader environmental and societal benefits.
39. Although Clause 4 provides a solid foundation, introducing a statutory requirement for annual performance reviews of NBS would ensure that challenges are identified and addressed promptly, maintaining the momentum of these critical interventions. Furthermore, by explicitly integrating climate resilience into drainage and sewerage management plans, undertakers can adopt strategies that proactively manage flood risks and buffer against extreme weather, aligning with national climate adaptation goals.
40. Finally, the integration of conventional infrastructure upgrades with nature-based approaches offers an integrated approach. Combining these strategies enhances their cost-effectiveness while simultaneously delivering ecological and recreational benefits that extend beyond immediate pollution control, contributing to the overall health and vitality of the tidal Thames.

## **Proposed Bill Measures**

### Introduction

41. To further strengthen the Water (Special Measures) Bill and support its objectives, the Port of London Authority (PLA) proposes the following legislative measures and enhancements. These recommendations are based on our extensive experience managing the tidal Thames and addressing pollution challenges collaboratively with stakeholders. We encourage Members of Parliament to consider these additions and amendments as potential improvements to the Bill.
42. Clause 2: Pollution Incident Reduction Plans

- 42.1 Pollution incident reduction plans should include a statutory obligation for water companies discharging into the same river basin to coordinate their efforts. This provision ensures a holistic, catchment-based approach and prevents siloed planning.
- 42.2 Requirements should be incorporated for undertakers to set specific, measurable targets tailored to local waterways, such as the tidal Thames, to address unique challenges and risks.
- 42.3 The scope of pollution reduction plans should be expanded to include secondary impacts, such as wet wipe accumulations and microplastics, and strategies should be required to address and mitigate these issues.
- 42.4 Undertakers should be required to consult key stakeholders, such as environmental groups, and strategic partners like the PLA, when developing and reviewing their pollution incident reduction plans.
- 42.5 There should be a specific requirement to integrate climate resilience into pollution reduction strategies.

#### 43. Clause 3: Emergency Overflows

- 43.1 There should be a legislative requirement for undertakers to use a standardised national platform to report emergency overflow data in an accessible format, ensuring consistency and ease of public access.
- 43.2 Undertakers should be required to provide contextual data, such as rainfall intensity or infrastructure status, when reporting emergency overflow events to aid stakeholders in understanding the circumstances and prevent misuse of emergency classifications.
- 43.3 Pollution incident reduction plans, and implementation reports, should identify the potential scale and impacts of non-organic materials within sewage discharges and their plans both to minimise these materials and clean-up any accumulations, for example of river foreshores.
- 43.4 Mandatory consultation with local port and navigational authorities during permit reviews and overflow management planning should be ensured to account for broader ecological and navigational impacts.

#### 44. Clause 4: Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)

- 44.1 We recommend that regulators, working in partnership with stakeholders like ourselves, develop clear guidelines to ensure consistent and effective design, implementation, and maintenance of nature-based solutions.
- 44.2 Drainage and sewerage management plans should include measurable targets for improving biodiversity and habitats, with annual monitoring and reporting to track progress.
- 44.3 Provisions should be included to incentivise large-scale, collaborative NBS projects, rewarding innovative and impactful initiatives by water companies and their partners.
- 44.4 Specific measures within NBS plans should address climate change impacts, such as managing flood risk and extreme weather events, ensuring alignment with national climate goals.
- 44.5 Undertakers should incorporate community engagement initiatives into their NBS plans to foster behavioural change and local support for sustainable practices.



#### 45. General Recommendations:

- 45.1 Chief Executives should be required to consult external stakeholders, such as river management authorities, before approving pollution reduction and NBS plans to strengthen accountability.
- 45.2 A provision for independent verification of pollution reduction and NBS implementation reports by regulatory bodies such as the Environment Agency or Ofwat should be introduced.

#### Conclusion

46. The Port of London Authority is committed to protecting and enhancing the tidal Thames for future generations. The provisions in the Bill represent a significant step forward in addressing sewage pollution and strengthening regulatory frameworks.
47. We are committed to leveraging our expertise and resources to support the successful implementation of the Bill's objectives, ensuring cleaner and healthier waterways for future generations.

Sincerely,



Robin Mortimer

Chief Executive Officer

Enclosures:

Clean Thames Manifesto

Clean Thames Plan

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<sup>i</sup> Our Clean Thames partners: Active360, British Plastics Federation, British Rowing, Bywaters, Cory, Cross River Partnership, DP World, Drinkable Rivers, Environment Agency, Essex Wildlife Trust, Gravesham Borough Council, GreenSeas Trust, Hubbub, HR Wallingford, London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham, London Borough of Newham, London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Medway Swale Estuary Partnership, Natural England, Natural History Museum, Port of London Authority, Queen Mary University of London, River Thames Society, Royal Holloway London, South East Rivers Trust, Thames21, Thames Estuary Partnership, Thames Litter Forum, Thames Rivers Trust, Tideway, University of Reading, Way to Eco, Zoological Society of London (ZSL)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://pla.co.uk/clean-thames-manifesto>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://pla.co.uk/cleanthamesplan>

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