

Written evidence submitted by the London Borough of Hackney

1. The London Borough of Hackney borders the River Lea, known to be one of the most polluted rivers in the country. During lockdown, a section of the River known as Hackney Beach became an infamous spot for wild swimming, with those participating either unaware of or undaunted by the frequent discharges of effluent. Despite the efforts of local people, campaign groups and the Council, notably through engagement with the Environment Agency and Thames Water, progress is extremely slow. The [latest available data](#) from 2019 provided the Lea with a damning assessment of water quality, with an overall classification of Bad, failing on chemical standards and ecological health. The Environment Agency's own figures show that Thames water discharged sewage into rivers in its area 18,443 times in 2020. The data suggests that regulation by the Environment Agency is not stringent enough.
2. The Environment Agency (EA) regulates a wide range of businesses and sectors, this includes water companies which the EA grants licenses to allowing them to discharge a controlled amount of sewage into the environment.
3. This sewage discharges into the environment via Combined Sewage Overflows (CSO) that are designed to relieve pressure on sewage treatment systems after periods of heavy rainfall. They are an integral part of how the system works, but data from Environmental Information Requests, readily available online, show that there have been multiple occasions where raw sewage above and beyond the permitted limit has been discharged into the River Lea from CSOs.
4. As a deterrent to this, the EA prosecutes water companies and a fine is paid when there is a breach of licence. However, as there are regular occurrences of these incidents every year, it highlights that the level of fine is not sufficient in deterring water companies from discharging raw sewage into the environment above the controlled level.
5. Therefore, it suggests that there is a weakness in the regulatory system which allows such incidents to occur at the level of frequency seen over recent years.

June 2021