

**World Water Day 22nd March 2025**

**People's Assembly for Water  
Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury**

***“How will we ensure that  
future generations have clean  
water and healthy river  
ecosystems?”***

**The Report**



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## Introduction

A People's Assembly on Water was held in Shrewsbury on the 22 March 2025. It started with a procession from the local college to the Severn theatre to highlight to the public the importance of clean water and the threats to the River Severn and the Water it provides for humans and non-humans.

The Assembly, with a hundred people in attendance, began with a blistering commentary from Feargal Sharkey on the ineffectiveness of the current water management system. A beautiful Severn Wild video produced by a team of young people was shared after which James Lock from the River Don project presented radical alternatives for a more collective and connected approach to the way we manage our natural resources especially rivers.

Having heard both the problems and potential solutions, people formed into facilitated groups (nine groups, 76 people) to address the question:

***'How will we ensure that future generations have clean water and healthy river ecosystems?'***

The solution-oriented recommendations from the groups are presented below. They are rich and informed by the wide knowledge of participants who ranged from being ecologists to anglers, farmers, parish councillors, former EA and water company staff and local residents with experience of flooding and sewage damage in and near their homes.

## The solution-oriented recommendations

Recommendations are mostly ordered according to the number of groups endorsing them<sup>1</sup>.

### **1) Improve communication between people, the public, and organisations campaigning for water management system transformation (8 groups)**

Organizations campaigning for change must provide more emotive and consistent messages to the public and encourage greater political will. They need to be talking with people, the public and youth and cross-pollinating ideas about how to transform the management of water so it is available for future generations.

We need to encourage greater coordination and understanding between the diverse interest groups that manage, regulate and use water resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Time constraints meant there was limited time for debate about recommendations. Rather group representatives were invited to stand up to indicate their group interest following the presentation of a recommendation.

Campaigning groups need to be visible and shouting that we care and support politicians that support transformative change in water management and note that we are willing to pay more for targeted outcomes.

## **2) Take Water back into Public Ownership (6 groups)**

Water shouldn't be monetised. It needs to be in community hands and managed in similar ways as a community land trust.

We must not continue the failed privatised experiment, which has been in place for the last 35 years; especially as water will become scarcer in the future. While change is urgent action needs to be thoughtful and the longer term and future generations kept in mind.

Learning and adapting based on existing successful public ownership models in other countries such as the Swiss examples for ensuring clean water and sustainable waste disposal management will ensure our success.

Decentralisation<sup>2</sup> of water management needs to go hand in hand with the renationalisation of water companies. This is a key imperative to transforming our water management systems.

A stewardship rather than an ownership model of water resource management is needed. Stewardship could promote the commonwealth of the River and ensure ecology comes before profit.

The water catchment management system is currently too fragmented and needs to be made coherent. Proposed is a whole water catchment community ownership approach where mandatory citizen involvement is required in all parts of the water catchment management system. This more local approach will ensure that accountability lies with local people though all stakeholders should be involved in system management including: experts, councils, NGOs and community members. To start, we need to bring all stakeholders together to understand the problem and design a plan to rectify it that has legal status.

## **3) Transform Planning and regulatory Authorities (4 groups)**

Planning and regulatory authorities are failing including OFWAT and the Environmental Agency (EA) to safeguard our natural resources.

We need to start with the planning authorities such as local councils and hold them accountable and responsible for the health of the ecosystem in their area.

OFWAT and the EA need to be reformed, given the resources – funds, people, responsibility, authority and power to take action that will protect natural resources from harm. They need

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<sup>2</sup> Decentralisation of responsibility was support by 4 of the 9 groups.

to enforce current regulations and laws and start sanctioning non-compliance by corporates and individuals.

There needs to be an independent citizen democratization process established throughout the regulatory system with clear links to our rivers so that regulators can be held to account. An open dialogue between stakeholders and citizens (e.g. NFU, EA councils and water companies) is needed to develop the process.

#### **4) Educate the public particularly the youth (5 groups)**

Current and next generations need to be educated about our rivers and water systems. The ways we engage with the public to raise awareness and communicate needs re-imagining. For instance, use art, culture such as singing, festivals to challenge norms and educate people on water and its importance for humans and non-humans.

Find ways to engage people in positive actions that improve the situation. Such as, sponsor a Festival of the River to raise awareness plus celebrate the festivals and other amazing events/films happening across the UK. Find ways to connect people across the country to share ideas. Use concepts such as 'Drinkable Rivers' to widen public engagement.

Engage youth by showing videos in schools, organise young people's assemblies and find ways to communicate and engage with young people about water and natural resources.

Educate people about the effects of what they do – e.g. using washing up liquid that is "harmful to aquatic life", leaving dog poo bags in the environment, the toxic effects of using flea and worm treatments on our pets. *'It all gets into our water courses eventually. People need to know and understand and this comes from education'.*

#### **5) Encourage individual and personal care of natural resources (3 groups)**

We need to acknowledge individual responsibility for use and care of natural resources. We need to encourage people to individually and personally take action that shows their commitments of care for natural resources (land, water and air).

We need to encourage every person to feel empowered to steward resources in a way that feels good to them whether it is through politics, art, poetry, education, personal behaviors of care, etc.

We need everyone to respect clean water, stop wasting it and stop treating rivers as open sewers.

We must acknowledge our own culpability in this too. It is our own consumerism and endless desire for MORE that is driving the proliferation of massive chicken units in catchments. Quite apart from ethical concerns about the birds' welfare, these units often are the cause of terrible phosphate pollution in watercourses. If we choose to change our diets to eat less meat it will reduce the demand and the market will follow.

## **6) Encourage a Community Groundswell to Bring about Change (1 group)**

There needs to be a groundswell of community activism to bring everyone together to demand and ensure systematic change in how our waters are managed. A public groundswell, demanding that government declare a Water Crisis could encourage rapid and meaningful transformation of the water industry; including pressure for water companies to spend their own money rather than continuing to increase customer bills.

Definitely the current management strategy is not sustainable! A more democratic, transparent way of managing the commons is needed.

## **7) Promote composting (1 Group)**

Compost human waste to make soil and use it in our fields. It absorbs water and provides the nutrients to grow nutritious food. It can help crops to grow without the need for expensive fertilizers and without it being mixed with other contaminants like road run-off at sewage treatment plants. Ways of composting our waste are already being used in Switzerland where waterless loos are also used widely.

## **8) Promote Natural Solutions and Land Management (1 group)**

Positively encourage the reintroduction and spread of beavers throughout the UK. Beavers are ecosystem engineers who work for free making “leaky” dams on watercourses which hold back water (preventing flooding downstream) and slowing the flow so that sedimentation and re-oxygenation occur – processes which naturally clean the water. The knock-on effects for wildlife are multitudinous. We must re-educate farmers to accept beavers on their land – maybe pay them compensation.

Farms are too big - split them up. Re-instate hedges and plant more trees. Encourage farmers to leave wide buffer zones of uncultivated land between their fields and any watercourses (as Ed Tate has done on the Isle) so that any agricultural run-off is absorbed before it reaches and pollutes the water.

As was shown in the young people’s film, rivers have been straightened and dredged in a mistaken attempt to funnel water quickly through human settlements. ‘We now know that it’s better all round (for wildlife and to avoid flooding events) if watercourses are more meandering and shallow’.

Rewild our rivers by putting the bends back in and start managing riverbanks to reduce erosion. This will better control run-off and everything else that now goes into rivers as well as reduce flooding (supported by 3 groups).

Create more reedbeds adjacent to rivers, and restore peatbogs in the uplands so that water is retained there and filtered naturally by vegetation. Liaise with the Wildlife Trusts when it comes to natural solutions – there is a lot of expertise there.

## **Unique recommendations from individual groups are:**

- Make local council structures appealing for younger people to be a part of.
- Require MPs in taking office to sign up to an eco-standard.
- Create a Bill of rights for all eco-systems and integrate it into our legal system so that nature is de-commodified and becomes part of the commons.

## **Local actions recommended for Up Sewage Creek (USC)**

At the end of the Assembly, participants highlighted the need for Up Sewage Creek and its growing membership to organise regular public engagement events (poo-o-meter discussions on Pride hill), support more people's assemblies, and invite and engage with more politicians on water and waste management.

Also encourage members to write to their MPs to promote their solution-oriented ideas for transforming the water management system and support MP Clive Lewis, Private Members Water Bill.

## **Conclusion**

Participants were energized by the Assembly with many committing to become involved in Up Sewage Creek. They agreed that the report on recommendations should be shared with: the People's Commission on the Water Sector

<https://www.thepeoplescommissiononthewatersector.co.uk>, the Office of Clive Lewis, MP for Norwich South in support of his private members bill which calls for a national conversation about the future of water management and ownership in the UK

<https://www.clivelewis.org> and all Assembly participants via the Up Sewage Creek website <https://www.upsewagecreek.com/>