



**The countryside charity**  
**Bedfordshire**

CPRE Bedfordshire  
43 Bromham Road  
Bedford  
MK40 2AA

Telephone: 01234 880624  
Email: [info@cprebeds.org.uk](mailto:info@cprebeds.org.uk)  
[www.cprebeds.org.uk](http://www.cprebeds.org.uk)  
CIO: 1202399

## **CPRE Bedfordshire Briefing Document: October 2025**

### **Anglian Water using River Great Ouse in Bedfordshire as an “Open Sewer” putting a stop on large housing developments in Bedford Borough until 2030**

Data recently released by Anglian Water detailing the number and duration of Storm Water Overflows of sewage from their principal Sewage Treatment Works along the Bedfordshire section of the Great Ouse during 2024, show a further massive increase compared to 2023, which was already unacceptably high.

#### **Storm Water Overflows and the Great Ouse**

Storm Water Overflows occur when the Sewage Treatment Works, already operating beyond their design capacity levels in the case of Anglian Water, are no longer able to cope and so discharge raw sewage directly into our rivers.

New regulations introduced two years ago mean that water companies are now obliged to release this data annually.

According to the Environment Agency and Government, overflows are expected to only occur very rarely, in the most exceptional circumstances.

However, at Anglian Water’s Principal Sewage Treatment Works located in Odell parish, just upstream from Felmersham, and at the Bedford site near Priory Country Park, overflows of raw sewage have now increased dramatically since 2023 and have become a regular occurrence.

The 2023 and 2024 data can be found on page 5 of this document.

**As far as CPRE Bedfordshire can ascertain, they are the highest levels of raw sewage discharge anywhere along the entire length of the River Great Ouse from source to sea. They are also some of the highest in England.**

These sewage overflows are causing very high levels of river water pollution and in particular E-Coli which can cause severe health problems to swimmers, boat users and others in contact with the water, as well as fish and other local wildlife.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e-coli-advice-issued-amid-rise-in-cases>

A Citizen Science programme, monitoring river water quality recently undertaken by the Charity, Bedfordshire Great Ouse Valley Environmental Trust (Beds GOVET), has shown that pollution levels in our River Ouse are at dangerously high levels including in Bedford itself.<sup>2</sup>

The Environment Agency (EA), whose job it is to regulate these Sewage Works, issue Anglian Water with Environmental Permits for each site to which they must comply, but it is clear that Anglian Water has taken no notice of their environmental obligations.

CPRE Bedfordshire is very concerned indeed that the EA has refused to take its responsibilities seriously and regularly monitor Anglian Water's compliance to their Environment Permit for each site, and that this has led to the current totally unacceptable situation.

In addition, we understand that so far, the EA has been very slow to publish the river water pollution data that Beds GOVET has collected, perhaps not wishing to see it in the public domain.

### How does this impact local people and our environment?

The two Sewage Treatment Works in question (now referred to as Water Recycling Centres by Anglian Water) are located close to areas used for bathing & boating.

**Odell Sewage Treatment Works** is situated around 100/200 metres upstream of Felmersham which has a slipway where children from Sharnbrook School and others launch boats and paddle boards, and where children and adults swim regularly.

The **Bedford Sewage Treatment Works** is upstream of Great Barford Bridge which is also a popular place for swimmers.

The River Great Ouse and its valley area is North Bedfordshire's most important environmental asset and the home of immensely valuable biodiversity, already under extreme pressure due to Climate Change.

### What does this mean for house building in Bedford Borough and beyond?

Around two years ago, CPRE Bedfordshire strongly objected to the planning applications for 500 houses at Sharnbrook which will use the Odell Sewage works and 500 houses at Clapham which will use the Bedford Sewage Works.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.bedfordtoday.co.uk/news/people/warning-that-half-of-bedfordshire-great-ouse-sites-unsafe-for-bathing-5335876> and <https://bedsgovet.org/>

One of our principal objections to these very large developments was on the basis of the lack of sewage capacity and the currently unsafe river water pollution levels.

It is now clear from the Storm Overflow data released, together with the water quality data collected by Beds GOVET, that our concerns were completely justified.

At the same time the government are currently pushing higher and higher housing targets for Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire as part of their Ox-Cam Corridor – “*development at any cost*” agenda – without a care for the environmental impact.

The water and sewage requirements of the proposed Universal Studios project will also be extremely high as we have mentioned in our response to the government’s Planning Consultation.<sup>3</sup>

CPRE Bedfordshire can now report that in the last few weeks, Anglian Water has now, in effect admitted, as evidence mounts from all sides, that it is the source of serious pollution of the River Great Ouse, treating it as an “Open Sewer”.

**Anglian Water has now stated, in response to recent planning applications that it may no longer have the capacity to accept sewage from housing developments in Bedford Borough before 2030.** You can read the response in full on the Bedford Borough Council website.<sup>4</sup>

This probably means that the housing developments planned for Sharnbrook and Clapham may not go ahead, at least not for the time being.

## **Why have these unacceptable levels of pollution been allowed to happen?**

CPRE Bedfordshire believes that lack of investment by Anglian Water over many years is the principal cause of this environmental disaster.

They have paid large bonuses to their Executives over the years and provided their private sector shareholders with excessive returns on their investment and on loans provided to Anglian Water, rather than investing in an environmentally sustainable sewage system.

Furthermore, the Official Regulators, the Environment Agency together with government, have failed in their duty to monitor the activities of Anglian Water and other water companies across the country.

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3 <https://www.cprebeds.org.uk/news/cpre-bedfordshires-seven-key-asks-for-universal-studios/>

4 <https://edrms.bedford.gov.uk/OpenDocument.aspx?id=gPUja%2f%2fNOsvOBfK5Z28lqg%3d%3d&name=25+01681+MAO+w+CONSULTEE+ANGLIAN+WATER+250924+COMMENTS.pdf>

Announcements from the government In the last few days would see automatic fines of up to £20,000 issued for some minor offences and make it simpler to punish more serious offences – they are unlikely to be successful.

CPRE Bedfordshire believes that fines of this level are pocket change to billion-pound companies like Anglian Water and are unlikely to be effective.

**Higher penalties and urgent, wholesale reform of the Water Companies are essential to prevent negligent firms polluting our rivers and short-changing their customers.**

## Appendix: Sewage Storm Overflow Data for 2023 and 2024<sup>5</sup>

### Odell Sewage Treatment Centre (Nr Felmersham) EA Permit Number AW1 NF1081

#### 2023

- 79 separate sewage storm overflow incidents
- A total of 1,054 hours – equivalent to 44 days

#### 2024

- 165 separate sewage storm overflow incidents. This is an increase of 109%
- A total of 2,997 hours – equivalent to 125 days. This is an increase of 184%

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### Bedford Sewage Treatment Centre (near Priory Country Park) EA Permit Number AW1 NF 2460

#### 2023

- 91 separate sewage storm overflow incidents
- A total of 1,095 hours – equivalent to 45 days

#### 2024

- 92 separate sewage storm overflow incidents
- A total of 1,291 hours - equivalent to 53 days

However, Anglian Water said that their storm overflow recording machinery failed after operating for only 27.83% of the year. Therefore, we can expect that the overflows from the Bedford plant would have continued at the same rate – equivalent to 3,873 hours of storm overflows or 161 days. This represents an increase over 2023 of 257%

*Note: It is common practice for water companies to resort to machinery breakdown as an excuse when they have very serious pollution problems.*

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<sup>5</sup> Data source: <https://therivertrust.org/sewage-map>