

Calls to stop dumping sewage in the Water of Leith

by Cllr Jack Caldwell the Liberal Democrat councillor who represents the Leith Walk Ward.

The Liberal Democrat Group has lodged a motion at this week’s full council meeting asking that action is taken to monitor the discharge of sewage into the Water of Leith and other waterways in and Around Edinburgh.



Cllr Jack Caldwell PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

The Water of Leith deserves better.

It's been a freshwater resource for centuries – ebbing and flowing across Edinburgh, connecting the Pentlands to Colinton, Saughton, Roseburn, Stockbridge, Canonmills, Bonnington and Leith. Our communities were literally built around it and it's clean, fresh flowing water.

It's home to over 11 species of fish, thousands of plant species and is absolutely vital to Edinburgh's local ecosystem, providing a biodiverse habitat for birds, otters and ducks.

So why have we allowed it to fill up with untreated human waste?

There are 65 Combined Sewage Overflow Stations (CSOs) on the Water of Leith, 14 of which are between the Leith Shore and Warriston, a stretch of the river where you can typically find ducks nesting, or people simply enjoying public “green and blue space” as many of us escape from our gardenless flats.

As of January, none of these CSOs currently retain any data of how much sewage they pump out of them when the drains are overwhelmed by harsher weather, which is becoming more and more common due to climate change. However 24 of Scottish Water's 108 highest priority assets for urgent upgrade across the country are located here. New screens have been fitted on several CSOs in the past few years with varying anecdotal results, but the issue ultimately lies with sewage flowing into our precious river in the first place. But how much?

When the ‘Sewage Scandal’ broke last in 2021, data was published across the UK. Sadly Not in Scotland though. We know Sewage is being dumped in the Water of Leith, but we don't know the extent. We also know that extreme weather led to a 40% increase of raw sewage dumping across Scotland in 2021.

The data we do have in nearby rivers is concerning. In December 2019, the Newbridge CSO, which is monitored, spilled sewage water into the River Almond 13 times discharging over 2,100 litres of water in one month (source: SEPA FOI).

Lots of volunteer-led organisations are doing fabulous work trying to get more information or trying to help clean it up themselves. SOS Leith and the Water of Leith Conservation Trust both remove tonnes of litter every month from the river and surrounding paths. However, they can't, nor shouldn't have to, remove excrement and wet wipes.

Scottish Lib Dem MSP Liam McArthur has been pressing Holyrood Ministers to fix the issues, but locally the new Edinburgh and Lothians Drain Partnership must work with Scottish Water and SEPA (the Scottish Environment Protection Agency) to start by collecting data before we can even begin to seriously tackle the issue.

With several Scottish Government officials quoted saying Scotland is "way behind" England in terms of solving the raw sewage spill problem, our country, city and communities deserve better.

We need to stop taking Edinburgh's natural environment for granted. The Council recently declared a nature and biodiversity emergency. This is why Lib Dem councillors have tabled a motion at this Thursday's Council meeting to get a public meeting of the Edinburgh and Lothians Drain Partnership as agencies working together and collecting data is a key and urgent part of ultimately stopping the discharge of human waste into Edinburgh's longest river. It's a pity there aren't more in Holyrood who see the urgency of this issue, but I hope that Councillors can back our plan to move this forward.



Jack Caldwell at the Water of Leith

This is the text of the motion to be considered at the council meeting which will be held on 3 May 2023.

[All papers for the council meeting as well as ways of watching the council meeting live or afterwards as a recording are here.](#)

“Council –

Regrets

1) That there are a large number of Combined Sewer Overflow (CSOs) outputs in Edinburgh’s waterways, such as along the

Water of Leith, the River Almond and the Figgate Burn.

2) That many CSOs are not actively monitored, despite promises from Scottish Water and SEPA that a number of monitors would be installed by the end of 2022.

3) That although plans have come forward Scottish Water to reduce the amount of CSOs in total, action is still to be taken outwith 'upgrading' a small percentage of CSOs.

Notes

1) The important benefits that our rivers and coastline plays for our community, and that many voluntary organisations clean up our waterways, and thanks them for their ongoing service.

2) The current situation is contradictory to the City of Edinburgh Council's declaration of a Nature and Climate Emergency.

3) The City of Edinburgh Council is a member of the Edinburgh and Lothians Drain Partnership along with Scottish Water, SEPA and others.

Requests

1) The Edinburgh and Lothians Drains Partnership holds an extraordinary meeting to draft a publicly accessible plan of action and invites key stakeholders and campaign groups including (but not exclusive to) The Water of Leith Conservation Trust, River Almond Action Group, Figgate Friends, Forth Rivers Trust and SOS Leith with Full Minutes published on the Council website alongside a map of all river-based CSOs within the City of Edinburgh.

2) That Transport and Environment Committee is:

1. provided six-monthly updates on the installation of

sewage monitoring to the business bulletin.

2. provided ongoing data when this monitoring is live

3) The Council Leader write to the Scottish Government, Scottish Water and SEPA, outlining the Council's major concern that no-one knows how much sewage is being dumped in Edinburgh's biodiverse waterways.

Believes

that the ambition should be that Edinburgh's waterways are free from the discharge of human waste."

Moved by: Councillor Jack Caldwell

Seconded by: Councillor Hal Osler

–

Cllr Caldwell cited these sources:

– SEPA FOI disclosure log:
<https://www2.sepa.org.uk/disclosurelog/>

– Scottish Water Action Plans:
<https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/Your-Home/Your-Waste-Water/Prioritisation-of-Sewer-Overflows-in-Scotland>

– Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland:
<https://www.ercs.scot/news/sewage-polluted-waters-and-a-lack-of-monitoring-save-our-shores-leith/>

– The Ferret:
<https://theferret.scot/scotland-behind-england-sewage-leaks/>