

Swimmable rivers: Towards clean and healthy waterways in London

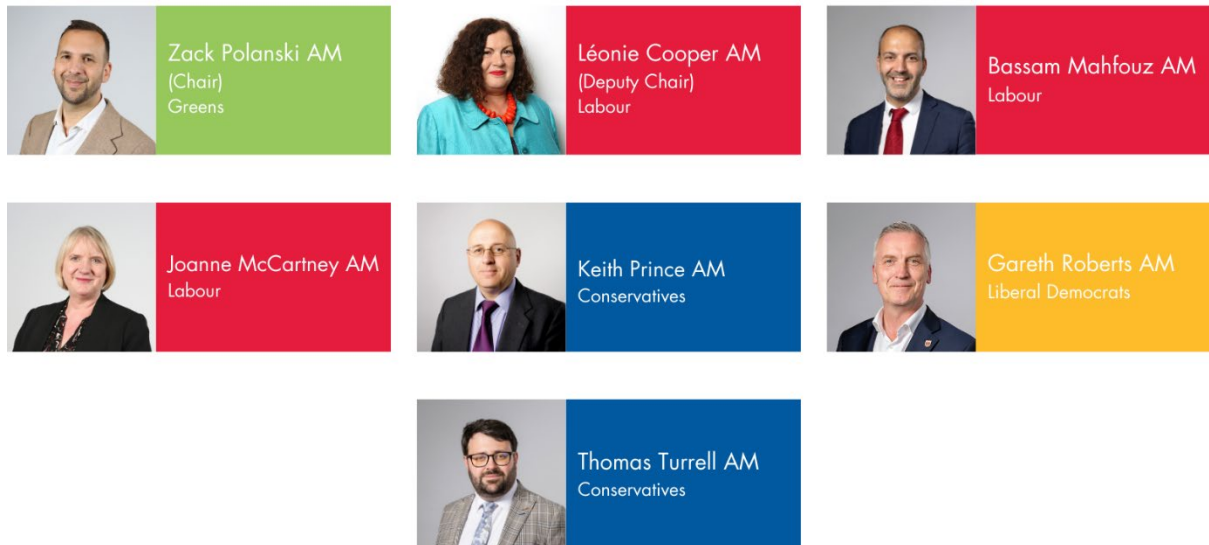
Environment Committee

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LONDONASSEMBLY

Environment Committee



This investigation was carried out by the Environment Committee in 2024-25, with Zack Polanski as Chair, and the Assembly Members listed above.

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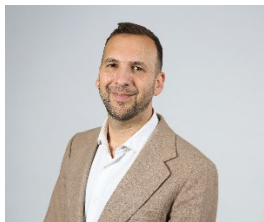
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Foreword



Zack Polanski AM
Chair of the Environment Committee 2024-25

We all depend on access to clean, safe and reliable water – not just humans, but nature too. Right now, we have open water in London that is polluted, and Londoners are right to be outraged.

Air in London has become cleaner thanks to concerted efforts over many years, including actions by the Mayor of London. This Committee was a core part of that journey, and it is essential that cleaning up London's water also involves the Mayor and Assembly working together to represent Londoners' concerns.

While the goal of clean water in our waterways sounds simple, the problem has become too complex – there are overlapping responsibilities, and a lack of direct powers for the Mayor. The issues include situations where new build flats have been connected to the wrong pipes – leading to raw sewage in rivers – and dirty runoff of stormwater from roads.

The Mayor's manifesto committed to clean up London's rivers, which we support. The idea of rivers and bodies of water being swimmable is powerful and improving access to waterways for Londoners to safely enjoy – whether from riverside paths or, where appropriate, on or in the water – is an important part of the Mayor's plans.

Private water companies must be on notice that they have to deliver. The water system simply has to function, and the governance of water must become more democratic. A wealthy city should not be embarrassed as London is by sewage in rivers, and we must reform water for the health of all.

Our investigation raised a wide range of issues – there is much that must be addressed. I hope this report is a strong contribution to the debate on what London needs. This is the time for an ambitious plan that ensures clean rivers in the coming years, and for future generations.

Executive Summary

In his manifesto for the May 2024 elections, the Mayor stated that he would “launch an ambitious plan to make rivers in London swimmable within ten years.”¹ As a Committee, we held meetings with expert stakeholders and sought the views of Londoners and organisations to understand what the commitment means and to inform our scrutiny of how the Mayor is taking forward this commitment.

Over the last year, the Mayor has made a series of announcements that have provided more detail about his plans. This includes a broader focus on ‘clean and healthy waterways,’ with a nature-first approach to improve water quality and increase biodiversity.

We welcome the Mayor’s ambition and aspiration to make all of London’s waterways clean and healthy.² The consequences of pollution are devastating, killing fish and other wildlife, and making many rivers unpleasant or unsafe for people to use. Urgent action is needed. This is a complex challenge and will take coordination from multiple stakeholders such as Thames Water, landowners, local councils, regulators, community groups, and charities to help bring about long-term improvements.

Thames Water has a particular role in addressing these issues, including through increasing investment. The new Thames Tideway Tunnel – completed in 2024 and now fully operational – is expected to significantly improve water quality in the central London area, by reducing the amount of untreated sewage released into the River Thames between the Acton sewer outfall at Chiswick and the treatment works at Beckton, by around 95 per cent. However, challenges remain around sewage entering London’s rivers in other areas, through misconnections, damaged pipework or overflows following heavy rainfall. The Mayor can also play a role in bringing together Thames Water and other stakeholders, including local councils and Transport for London (TfL) to ensure plumbing is correctly connected and slowing and storing rainwater runoff from roads with an expanded network of sustainable drainage systems (SuDS).

During this investigation we also heard about the benefits that arise from giving people the opportunity to access and experience nature, particularly when this goes alongside fostering a sense of responsibility and support to care for it. Improving Londoners’ access to waterways and helping people to have a greater sense of connection to their local rivers, are a welcome stated part of the Mayor’s plan.

Helping communities engage with local waterways offers a promising way of ensuring that any issues are identified and resolved. Catchment partnerships offer a way to co-ordinate these improvements. In March, the Mayor announced £6 million of new funding for improvements that would support river health, alongside £1.8 billion in existing funding from Thames Water

¹ Sadiq Khan, [Making London Greener](#), Manifesto for May 2024 election

² London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.2

and £800,000 from the London Wildlife Trust.³ In June 2025, the Mayor announced more details of how the GLA's funding will be available for organisations to bid for, as 'clean and healthy waterways' is a 'priority theme' of his new Green Roots Fund.⁴ We welcome this announcement, but far more investment will be needed to achieve the Mayor's ambitious goals. We also would like transparency around how this funding is allocated and a strategic prioritisation of locations for improvements.

There are many groups who currently access London's waterways – including in some places for swimming – and more that would want to if it could be done safely and conveniently. It is vital that any activities in or on the water are supported by appropriate safety measures. The Mayor has recognised this in his approach to the plan, which has included promoting supervised open water swimming sites across London. He also has a role in working with stakeholders to improve awareness around water safety. The Committee recognises that there are also potential tensions between encouraging more active leisure uses of wild sites, and sensitive habitats – particularly in popular locations – which need to be carefully managed, which is why a planned approach to improvements is important.

The Mayor's plan is still being developed. The Committee's conclusions and recommendations are therefore primarily focused on the kinds of actions we would expect to see in a plan, based on what we heard during our engagement with stakeholders through three meetings and the responses to a call for evidence, as well as a survey. The plan must have clear targets and deliver real improvements by the end of the Mayor's term in 2028, as well as the longer-term goals for 2034.

³ Mayor of London, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London's rivers](#), 13 March 2025

⁴ GLA, [Green Roots Fund Prospectus](#) [Accessed August 2025]

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

As part of his 'clean and healthy waterways' plan, the Mayor should work closely with catchment partnerships and a broad range of other stakeholders, including London boroughs, to:

- define in full the outcomes of the plan by March 2026 and how these improvements will be measured
- set ambitious and transparent targets for improving specific sites with clear annual milestones up to 2034, including a clear set of measurable outcomes by 2028
- fund opportunities to allow local communities to identify locations for improvements and engage in activities that help them connect with their local waterways
- develop costed estimates of potential improvements and clearly set out how the Mayor and other funders will fund them.

Recommendation 2:

The Mayor should ensure that funding for improvements to London's rivers and waterways is clear and transparent. As major landowners with responsibilities for many rivers and other waterways across the city, the Mayor should prioritise large-scale funding for councils including by issuing additional guidance for the clean and healthy waterways 'priority theme' of the Green Roots Fund. The Mayor should also provide more information about how the £6.65 million the GLA committed will be spent and publish progress reports and evaluations to track impact. The Mayor should look to secure additional funding for 'clean and healthy waterways' projects through partnerships with stakeholders such as the Environment Agency, Port of London Authority (PLA), Thames Water and other funds.

Recommendation 3:

The GLA should establish a diverse stakeholder board, representing views across inner and outer London – including councils, to assess progress at least annually on the commitment, with published minutes and an annual update. This board should include a representative of the London Assembly Environment Committee.

Recommendation 4:

In developing the plan, the Mayor should ensure the perspectives of a wide range of Londoners are included – holding a range of events both with groups already active in using London's waterways and reaching out to include those that are currently less represented amongst users of rivers and waterways.

Recommendation 5:

As part of the plan, the GLA should work with Thames Water and other partners to set out key actions between now and 2034 to reduce sewage pollution, including from sewer overflows and misconnections. These should include the following:

- a clear and easily accessible plan of how Thames Water will identify and prevent sewer overflows in London and resolve infrastructure failures
- funding and support for citizen-science projects to map pollution discharges
- contributing funding for a 'misconnections officer' to help councils speed up enforcement action to compel people to ensure their wastewater is correctly plumbed into the sewer system and doesn't end up in local rivers
- a role for the Mayor of London on the board of Thames Water to review progress and ensure accountability for progress.

Recommendation 6:

The GLA should work with the Environment Agency and the proposed new 'integrated water regulator' to co-develop a targeted enforcement strategy for London's rivers, aligned with the Mayor's clean and healthy waterways plan.

Recommendation 7:

As part of the plan the GLA should set out key actions between now and 2034 to address road runoff including:

- publishing the maintenance plan for road gullies on the Transport for London (TfL) road network
- scaling up current sustainable drainage system (SuDS) targets, by working closely with local authorities, Thames Water and TfL, and providing an annual update on progress and effectiveness
- reviewing funding models which could secure sustained investment in SuDS and pollution control infrastructure across London
- ensuring the new London Plan includes a requirement for sewer separation and SuDS in all new developments
- funding more research into the nature of contaminants in road runoff in London, and how they can be reduced at source.

Recommendation 8:

The GLA should work with key river stakeholders, such as the Port of London Authority (PLA), Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), to review existing guidance on water safety, and develop a plan to provide clear and consistent guidance on water safety for all of London's rivers and water sites by April 2026. The Mayor should host a 'one-stop shop' page on the GLA website to link to all key information. This should be accompanied by regular high profile water safety campaigns and promoting safe supervised locations to swim.

Recommendation 9:

The GLA should work with Thames Water, the Environment Agency (and/or the new integrated water regulator), and boroughs to ensure real-time data on water quality for rivers and waterways in London is monitored and published in one place using continuous monitoring technology, such as that used in the Paris Olympics, in key locations with water-based activity, by 2028.

Recommendation 10:

The Mayor's plan should target designating four new sites as bathing waters by 2028 and a further six by 2034 with a clear delivery plan, by year. These should be geographically distributed across the capital, where possible, starting with river locations which are already used for recreation. The Mayor should support stakeholders to develop detailed plans for putting in place the necessary improvements to improve water quality and provide facilities such as toilets and changing facilities where appropriate.

Recommendation 11:

The Mayor should ensure that the clean and healthy waterways plan:

- identifies locations where there is least access to waterways or opportunities to experience the benefits of being in, on or by water safely in the natural environment
 - works with different groups to identify and remove barriers that they face, including improving perceptions of safety through interventions to clean up areas and widen access for different groups
 - supports water safety courses and free opportunities to learn to swim or gain confidence in open water at suitable locations across London
 - ensures that costs are not a barrier to accessing activities. This could include working with the PLA's Active Thames Fund, to increase access to sports and recreation on London's waterways.
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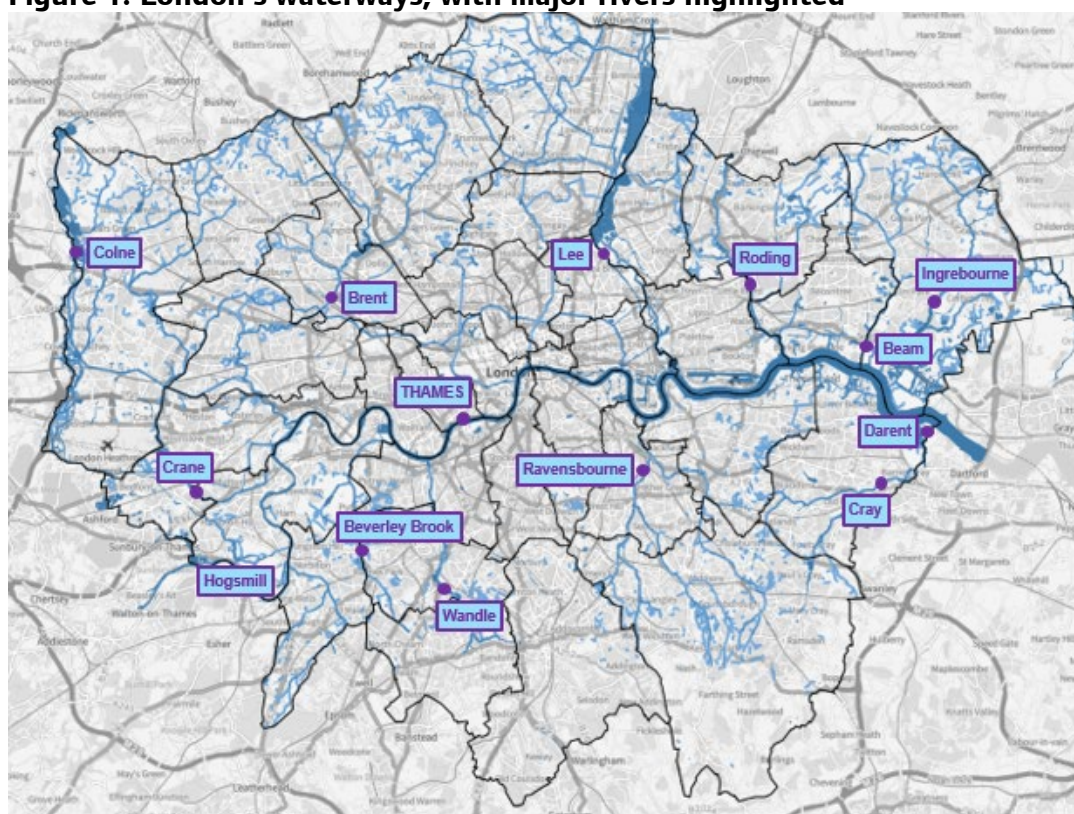
Recommendation 12:

A full environmental assessment should be undertaken with a range of stakeholders at scoping and project implementation stage, where changes to access by or into waterways are proposed. The Mayor should fund research to fill any gaps in knowledge for these assessments and to monitor their ongoing effectiveness, such as for the impact of nature-based solutions. A long-term management plan, including maintenance should be provided for any projects funded through the Mayor's plan, with the aim of sustaining improvements in biodiversity over time.

London's rivers and waterways

There are nearly 400 miles of waterway in Greater London (Figure 1).⁵ These cross political boundaries and include wide tidal stretches of river, small streams, docks, tributary rivers, canals, lakes and ponds.⁶ Every London borough contains some form of waterway – 17 border the Thames and 15 contain canals.⁷

Figure 1: London's waterways, with major rivers highlighted⁸



London's waterways are some of the capital's wildest and most special places. In summer, shady riverside paths provide cool places to walk and rest. Many offer the chance to spot a range of wildlife. They are also places for leisure with waterside routes for walking, cycling, and activities on or in the water, such as canoeing, rowing or swimming where safe to do so. However, too many of London's rivers are blighted by pollution from sewage, litter, or runoff from the capital's roads.

⁵ Thames21, [River Partnerships in London](#), [Accessed 17 April 2025]

⁶ The London Environment Strategy defines them as the River Thames and its tributary rivers and canals, as well as other water spaces including docks, lakes and reservoirs.

⁷ Mayor of London [The London Plan 2021](#), March 2021, Para 9.14.1, p.389

⁸ London Assembly Research Unit, [London's Rivers and Waterways: Cleanliness, safety, wildlife, transport and recreational use](#) January 2025, p.5

None of London's rivers currently achieve 'good' status in the Environment Agency's official testing, based on the EU's Water Framework Directive.⁹ This assesses overall river health under two main categories, chemical health – which considers pollutants in the water – and ecological status – which measures what is living in the river, and how modified the waterway is.¹⁰

"There are 41 classified London rivers under the Water Framework Directive. Thirty-six of these are moderate, three are poor and two are bad."

Charlotte Wood, London Area Director of the Environment Agency¹¹

Our investigation

The Mayor has committed to developing a plan to clean up London's waterways in ten years – by 2034. This was a core manifesto commitment as part of his election campaign ahead of the May 2024 elections.

We launched our investigation in the summer of 2024 when there was little information about what the Mayor's commitment would mean in practice. We had questions about the scope of what would be covered – whether it would be just rivers, or whether it would include all waterways in London. We also had questions about how 'swimmable' would be measured, and which rivers should be prioritised.

We held three meetings, a survey with Londoners and a call for evidence from expert organisations. There is more information about these in Annex 1. The London Assembly Research Unit also carried out an [evidence review](#) on London's rivers and waterways, which provides detailed analysis of relevant data and statistics.¹² The Committee also visited an outdoor swimming site at the Royal Docks in Newham run by NOWCA to learn about how it is managed.¹³

The Mayor's developing plan

As the investigation has progressed, we have received more clarity around the Mayor's plans. In September 2024, the Mayor announced that representatives of six organisations had joined him to sign a 'pledge to work together to clean up London's waterways.'¹⁴ He also launched a guide to Outdoor swimming sites in London, which highlights eight locations where Londoners can already swim outdoors safely in nature.¹⁵

In March 2025, the Mayor held a roundtable event with stakeholders, including the government, water companies, and environmental groups to gather views and formally launch

⁹ GLA, [River Health](#); The Rivers Trust [The State of Our Rivers 2024](#);

¹⁰ The Rivers Trust [The State of Our Rivers 2024](#);

¹¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 4 December 2024, p.1

¹² London Assembly Research Unit [London's Rivers and Waterways: Cleanliness, safety, wildlife, transport and recreational use](#) January 2025 [Accessed 17 April 2025]

¹³ Love Open Water, [The Royal Docks](#) [Accessed 16 May 2025]

¹⁴ Mayor of London, [Mayor brings together partners to clean up London's rivers](#), 18 September 2024.

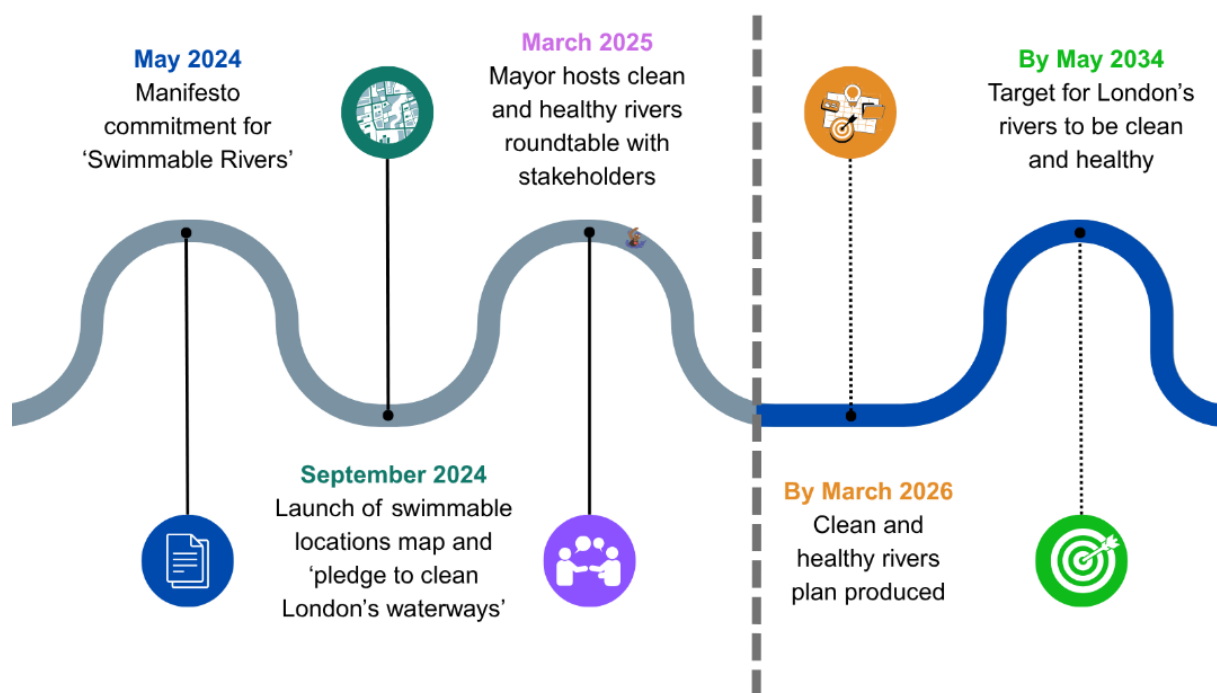
Organisations listed were Canal & River Trust, Zoological Society of London, London Wildlife Trust, Port of London Authority and Thames Water.

¹⁵ GLA, [Outdoor Swimming Guide](#), September 2024

the process of developing the plan.¹⁶ The GLA also has now confirmed that their aim is for the plan to be finalised by the end of March 2026.¹⁷

In July 2025 the Independent Water Commission, chaired by Sir John Cunliffe, published the findings of its review into the water sector in England and Wales.¹⁸ While our investigation was carried out ahead of its recommendations being announced, we refer to its conclusions where relevant to inform the Mayor's future plans.

Figure 2: Swimmable rivers: Timeline of key events in the Mayor's plan



¹⁶ GLA, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London's rivers](#), March 2025

¹⁷ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.14. Note: this refers to the end of the 2025-26 financial year.

¹⁸ UK government, [Roadmap to rebuild trust in water sector unveiled in major new report](#), 21 July 2025

Developing a plan for London's waterways

Attempts to clean up London's rivers and waterways are not new. In 2023 the Port of London Authority launched the Clean Thames Manifesto, a collaborative plan to reduce the amount of sewage and other pollutants like chemicals and plastic rubbish in the river.¹⁹ In 2024, the government "fast-tracked" £180m of investment to prevent sewage spills polluting waterways across England.²⁰ Yet, as the Mayor has previously highlighted, pollution in London's rivers is still a major issue.²¹

The GLA has emphasised that the Mayor's plan aims to take a "nature-first approach to improve water quality and increase biodiversity", and would set "clear priorities for reducing pollution, restoring biodiversity, and increasing public access".²²

Pete Daw, Head of Climate Change at the GLA, told us that there will be four broad "themes or work areas [...] one around water quality, one around biodiversity and habitat, one around inclusion and engagement and one around access."²³ The Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy Mete Coban MBE told us that all rivers and waterways in London were in the scope of the plan, saying: "The aspiration is to clean all of our water sites across London and all of our rivers in the next ten years."²⁴ However, he clarified that:

"It is about creating clean and healthy rivers. What we want to see in addition to that is where we can create more access to swimmable sites, but at the first point, we want to create clean and healthy rivers and waterways recognising that it is not going to be possible to swim everywhere."²⁵

We welcome the fact there is greater clarity around the scope of this commitment. The ambition to clean up all of London's rivers and waterways will be hugely challenging. Given that the target date to achieve this commitment falls two electoral cycles into the future, it will be important for the plan to define clear outcomes and how improvements will be measured alongside specific annual milestones up to 2034, including a clear set of outcomes by the next GLA elections in May 2028.

"Properly funded" partnership-based working

In developing the plan, the Mayor will need to work across, and with, the many different bodies with responsibility for London's waterways. As Barnes Common Ltd, a charity that delivers

¹⁹ PLA, [Clean Thames Manifesto](#), 2023

²⁰ Defra, [Over £180m of investment fast-tracked to prevent sewage spills](#), 11 March 2024

²¹ GLA, [Mayor calls out 'scandalous' five-fold increase in sewage dumped into London's rivers](#), January 2024

²² GLA, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London's rivers](#), March 2025

²³ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.12

²⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.2

²⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.8

conservation management on Barnes Common and the Beverley Brook in south-west London, told us:

“The law is complex, given that rivers have no legal persona, and ownership is shared by all riparian owners who, in theory are responsible for their portion of the riverbank and half of the water course.”²⁶

In order to mitigate this complexity, we have heard support for the Mayor to work with and through existing partnerships, such as the 13 main river catchment partnerships that cover London. These are part of the River Partnerships in London (RiPL) group hosted by the charity Thames21.²⁷ Rob Gray who is Chair of the Crane Valley catchment partnership in West London told us “partnership-based working, which is properly funded”, is the “one thing” that he has “seen making significant beneficial change at scale.”²⁸ Catchment partnerships were set up with funding from the Environment Agency, with the aim of fundraising additional funds from other partners.²⁹

In March 2025, the Mayor took a major step towards that partnership approach as he convened a roundtable event with stakeholders from across the water sector, including the government, water companies, and environmental groups.³⁰ It is disappointing however that while the Chair of the Environment Committee was verbally invited to attend the roundtable by the Deputy Mayor for Environment,³¹ a formal invitation for a London Assembly representative to be there did not follow. To date the GLA has not published any formal agendas, minutes or outcomes for this roundtable and the groups involved.³² This is regrettable and greater transparency about the plan and the decisions around it is needed.

At the event, the Mayor announced he was committing £7.15 million in funding to support the delivery of his plans - £6.65 million from the GLA and £500,000 from TfL. The London Wildlife Trust also announced that it planned to spend £800,000 to improve London’s waterways.³³ Thames Water, which operates the wastewater drainage system in London, also announced at the roundtable that it would be spending £1.8 billion on improvements that relate to improving the health of London’s waterways. We understand that this funding covers improvements identified in its Water Resources Management Plan for 2025 to 2050 (WRMP24) and included its asset management and price review periods from 2025 to 2030 (AMP8 and PR24), regulated by the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat). However, given that the Mayor told the Assembly in July 2024 that pollution incidents had increased between 2020 and 2022 despite Thames Water reporting investment of £1.3 billion over the same period,³⁴ it seems unlikely

²⁶ Written evidence submitted by Barnes Common Limited [\[SW002\]](#), p.10 -12

²⁷ Thames21, [River Partnerships in London \(RiPL\)](#), [Accessed 22 April 2025]

²⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.4

²⁹ Catchment Based Approach, [Income generation report of Catchment Partnerships](#) [Accessed 18 July 2025]

³⁰ GLA, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London’s rivers](#), March 2025

³¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.5

³² MQ2025/2154 [Clean and Healthy Waterways Roundtable \(1\)](#), 19 June 2025

³³ Mayor of London, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London’s rivers | London City Hall](#), 13 March 2025

³⁴ MQ2024/1250 [Water Pollution in London](#), 23 May 2024

that this funding will be sufficient to deliver the scale of improvements required to improve all of London's waterways.

Further, the disparity in funding made available from these sources is indicative of the limited scope the Mayor has to act directly on addressing these issues. It emphasises the importance of ensuring that Thames Water is delivering the required investments and the need to work with a range of stakeholders to monitor and support improvements. The Deputy Mayor told us this would be the approach taken by the GLA, explaining that the GLA would "bring some of those partners together to think about how we align our resources, how we can align data, share data and how we exchange information."³⁵

The issue of funding for river improvements was raised by Bromley Council, who highlighted that London's boroughs are often the main landowner with responsibility for smaller waterbodies, and shared concerns about whether there are sufficient additional resources to match the improvements that the Mayor is aiming for, alongside other ongoing challenges that they face.³⁶

In June 2025, the Mayor announced some more details of how the GLA's funding will be distributed, as 'clean and healthy waterways' is a 'priority theme' of his new Green Roots Fund.³⁷ Organisations are able to apply for grants of between £10,000 to £500,000, with five grant rounds between summer 2025 and spring 2028.³⁸ However, limited information has been provided in the supporting documents around what the 'priority theme' means in practice, including the proportion of the total funding that will be allocated. Given that the total Green Roots Fund is £12 million, and the Mayor previously announced £6.65 million of funding for clean and healthy waterways, it appears that around half of the Green Roots funding will be allocated to this theme, but this is not explicitly stated. We would like clarity on how clean and healthy waterways will be prioritised within the wider fund and encourage the Mayor to prioritise large-scale funding for Councils, as major landowners with responsibilities for many rivers and other waterways across the city.

We support the Mayor's partnership-based approach to working on this commitment. It is important that catchment partnerships have a role in identifying priorities for how new funding for London's waterways is used and are supported to co-ordinate partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, including Councils, community groups and other landowners, and to develop new projects to address sources of pollution and improve river health.

The Independent Water Commission recommended a regional approach to water system planning, to potentially include local authority representatives on the strategic board.³⁹ We think this could be a positive step. Given that the GLA was represented on the advisory group

³⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.11

³⁶ Bromley Council, Council meeting 10 March 2025 [Annex B: Questions from Members of the Council for Oral Reply](#), p.2

³⁷ GLA, [Green Roots Fund Prospectus](#), [Accessed August 2025]; While the total Green Roots Fund is £12 million, we understand that the amount allocated to actions that will contribute to clean and healthy waterways will be in line with his original £6.65 million commitment.

³⁸ GLA, Green Roots Fund Prospectus

³⁹ Independent Water Commission, [Final Report](#) July 2025, para 114 p.66

to the Commission,⁴⁰ we expect the GLA will remain actively engaged with the government around this to ensure the opportunities for improvement in London are seized as part of any emerging changes to the governance framework for water.

Working with London's communities

Fostering a strong sense of public ownership and responsibility for local waterways will be key to delivering on the Mayor's commitment. Throughout this investigation, various organisations have emphasised the importance of community-led initiatives and inclusive engagement strategies to protecting and improving river ecosystems. As James Wallace from the campaign group River Action told us, a powerful approach is to "help people to fall in love again with the water that sustains them", by "giving them a reason to care" about their local river.⁴¹

The Port of London Authority highlighted to the Committee the value of targeted public engagement, coupled with educational campaigns in promoting river stewardship.⁴² Ben Seal, Head of Access and Environment at Paddle UK, the national governing body for paddle sports such as canoeing and stand up paddleboarding, echoed the importance of locally tailored approaches.⁴³ He also urged the Mayor to involve people who already use rivers – rowers, swimmers, sailors, paddleboarders, and kayakers – to share their understanding of the issues.⁴⁴

Abby Crisostomo, Head of Green Infrastructure at the GLA, told us that the GLA plans to balance working with existing groups and also finding new ways to include people who currently don't have access:

"One of the key things we will be looking at as part of the planning process is identifying where there are gaps, especially in terms of this idea of inclusion, making sure there are places with well organised groups that we want to continue to support, but there are also places that do not have those groups."⁴⁵

The Deputy Mayor told us that engaging Londoners was an important part of the plan, with 'engagement and inclusion' one of the four main work areas. However, he acknowledged that at this stage there were not detailed plans, saying that these "will be fleshed out as we move through the process and the team will work on the best ways to best engage with Londoners."⁴⁶

It is clear that the most sustained and motivated engagement comes from positive experiences and involvement. This is often mediated by a sense of community and a desire to care for a place. Done well, this can help generate the kind of enthusiasm and energy needed to help bring about significant and sustained change.

⁴⁰ MQ2025/0661 [Independent Water Commission Call for Evidence](#), 25 February 2025

⁴¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.26

⁴² Written evidence submitted by The Port of London Authority [[SW008](#)], p.29

⁴³ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.14

⁴⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.18

⁴⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.13

⁴⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.10

Box1: Responsibilities for waterway management in London



Landowners on the banks have responsibilities for rivers, including preventing pollution and protecting wildlife.⁴⁷ They also control public access and have health and safety responsibilities as appropriate.



The Port of London Authority (PLA) is responsible for a 95-mile stretch of the tidal Thames, from the estuary to Teddington with responsibility for navigation safety, conserving the Thames, safeguarding the environment, and promoting the river for both business and recreational purposes.⁴⁸



The Environment Agency is responsible for monitoring water quality in rivers and assessing bathing water quality at designated sites. It has powers to manage flood risk on the non-tidal Thames and other main rivers – but is not obliged to do so.⁴⁹ It also has a role in permitting activities and powers to enforce breaches of rules.



Local authorities have a role in managing many smaller water bodies, as well as riverside parks or countryside areas. They also are responsible for 95 per cent of London's roads – which mostly drain into waterways.⁵⁰ as well as enforcing health and safety regulations in local sports clubs and leisure premises, including water-based activities.⁵¹



Water companies, such as Thames Water, are not directly responsible for London's rivers, but are responsible for any water that they take out (for drinking water) or outflows (such as sewage) that they put into the rivers, and improvement actions agreed under the Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP).⁵² Thames Water is responsible for all of London's wastewater network.



The Canal & River Trust is responsible for 100km of canals and other waterways in London. These include the Grand Union Canal, the Regents Canal, the Lee Navigation and Limehouse Cut.⁵³



Catchment partnerships are responsible for bringing together the full range of stakeholders for the catchment (the area that water flows from into a particular river) – including councils, charities, water companies and landowners, to help improve water environments.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Environment Agency, [Owning a watercourse](#) [Accessed 24 April 2025]

⁴⁸ London Assembly Research Unit, [Port of London Authority overview](#), October 2024, p.5

⁴⁹ Environment Agency, [Your watercourse: rights and roles](#), p.6 [Accessed 17 April 2025]

⁵⁰ Mayor of London, [Mayor's Transport Strategy 2018](#), p.96

⁵¹ HSE, [Is HSE the correct enforcing authority for you?](#) [Accessed 17 April 2025]

⁵² Thames Water, [Improving river health in the River Thames catchment](#), May 2024

⁵³ Canal & River Trust, [Unlocking the potential of London's canals and rivers](#), July 2019

⁵⁴ Environment Agency, [Catchment partnerships](#)

Recommendation 1:

As part of his 'clean and healthy waterways' plan, the Mayor should work closely with catchment partnerships and a broad range of other stakeholders, including London boroughs, to:

- define in full the outcomes of the plan by March 2026 and how these improvements will be measured
- set ambitious and transparent targets for improving specific sites with clear annual milestones up to 2034, including a clear set of measurable outcomes by 2028
- fund opportunities to allow local communities to identify locations for improvements and engage in activities that help them connect with their local waterways
- develop costed estimates of potential improvements and clearly set out how the Mayor and other funders will fund them.

Recommendation 2:

The Mayor should ensure that funding for improvements to London's rivers and waterways is clear and transparent. As major landowners with responsibilities for many rivers and other waterways across the city, the Mayor should prioritise large-scale funding for councils including by issuing additional guidance for the clean and healthy waterways 'priority theme' of the Green Roots Fund. The Mayor should also provide more information about how the £6.65 million the GLA committed will be spent and publish progress reports and evaluations to track impact. The Mayor should look to secure additional funding for 'clean and healthy waterways' projects through partnerships with stakeholders such as the Environment Agency, Port of London Authority (PLA), Thames Water and other funds.

Recommendation 3:

The GLA should establish a diverse stakeholder board, representing views across inner and outer London – including councils, to assess progress at least annually on the commitment, with published minutes and an annual update. This board should include a representative of the London Assembly Environment Committee.

Recommendation 4:

In developing the plan, the Mayor should ensure the perspectives of a wide range of Londoners are included – holding a range of events both with groups already active in using London's waterways and reaching out to include those that are currently less represented amongst users of rivers and waterways.

Cleaning up London's waterways

The Mayor has compared cleaning up London's rivers and other waterways to cleaning up London's air,⁵⁵ although the Deputy Mayor acknowledged to us that the Mayor has more powers on air quality than he does on water quality.⁵⁶ For air pollution, the Mayor adopted an approach that identified the main pollutants and took action to reduce them at source so that they fell below acceptable limits.

We support a similar approach to cleaning up London's waterways. This must involve actions to reduce sewage entering waterways from the water industry and to limit road runoff, given they are the sectors with the greatest impact on London's rivers, according to the Environment Agency.⁵⁷ Sewage contains e-coli and other disease-causing bacteria that affect human health, whereas road runoff contains a range of chemicals and particles that are harmful to aquatic life.⁵⁸ As we heard from Stormwater Shepherds, a charity that aims to prevent pollution entering waterways, "any investment in pollution control should, first and foremost, be about the protection of aquatic life, and so toxic pollution should be a priority."⁵⁹

The solutions to addressing the sewage and road runoff pollution in London's waterways are largely known, but require significant investments, both in new infrastructure but also routine maintenance. It is vital therefore that the Mayor's plan both sets out the cost of actions and who will be responsible for funding and delivering them between now and 2034 to reduce sewage pollution and road runoff.

Less is known about another emerging area of concern – 'forever chemicals' or PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), which have been widely found in rivers across the UK.⁶⁰ The campaign group Thames Blue Green Economy told us that "we don't currently have a clear understanding of the dangers posed" of these,⁶¹ and the River Roding Trust described this as an 'unknown unknown'.⁶² The Drinking Water Inspectorate has a series of notices in place with water companies, including Affinity Water and Thames Water on the presence of PFAS in drinking water.⁶³ More work is needed by the Environment Agency and other researchers to understand the risks and develop an effective plan for monitoring and regulating these to improve river health.

⁵⁵ The Mayor of London, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London's rivers | London City Hall](#), 13 March 2025

⁵⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.5

⁵⁷ Written evidence submitted by Environment Agency [\[SW004\]](#), p.18

⁵⁸ Written evidence submitted by Zoological Society of London [\[SW019\]](#), p80-82; ZSL also highlighted silt and pesticides as other concerns.

⁵⁹ Written evidence submitted by Stormwater Shepherds UK [\[SW020\]](#), p.98

⁶⁰ The Guardian [Toxic Pfas above proposed safety limits in almost all English waters tested](#) 11 July 2025.

⁶¹ Written evidence submitted by Thames Blue Green Economy [\[SW013\]](#), p.53

⁶² Written evidence submitted by River Roding Trust [\[SW010\]](#), p.37

⁶³ Drinking Water Inspectorate [Affinity Water Limited – AMP8 PFAS Strategy](#), 20 August 2024; Drinking Water Inspectorate [Thames Water Utilities Limited – AMP8 PFAS Strategy](#), 24 June 2024

Reducing sewage

Tackling discharges and sewer overflows

In central London, many of the problems with river pollution have stemmed from the combined sewer system, which handles both surface water and sewage and struggles to cope with heavy rainfall. These issues are expected to be largely resolved by the new Thames Tideway tunnel. According to Thames Water, the Tideway, along with two earlier upgrades (increased treatment capacity and the Lee Tunnel) are projected to reduce the frequency of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) by 90 per cent.⁶⁴ This indicates welcome progress and should enable a stronger focus on tackling the remaining discharges as part of the Mayor's plan.

However, as the Thames Blue Green Economy pointed out in its submission to the Committee, a considerable number of CSOs remain – such as at the Mogden sewage works in Isleworth – and many others on upstream tributaries will continue spilling until Thames Water upgrades its outdated infrastructure.⁶⁵

We also heard that not all discharge locations across London are even known. Paul Powlesland from Friends of the River Roding told us “There are likely dozens of others on the Roding alone, which nobody even knows about.”⁶⁶ And even when discharge locations are known, the actions needed to address the problems have not always been forthcoming. The Zoological Society of London (ZSL), a science-driven conservation charity, for example told us of an example of “an illegally discharging CSO” on the River Roding in Aldersbrook, which “despite being reported over three years ago... is still awaiting repairs.”⁶⁷ ZSL stated that enforcement action would only be taken by the Environment Agency if there was evidence of a fish kill, despite “the fact many rivers in London are in such a degraded state that there is no fish left to be reported as being impacted by sewage spills”.⁶⁸

Identifying these locations and addressing them must be a key part of the plan. Without this information, the Mayor and the partners he convenes, will not know where, how or what interventions are needed. This also needs to come attached with dedicated funding from Thames Water or other stakeholders to deliver the improvements.

Investing in improvements

Since privatisation, Ofwat has set the framework for future investment in improvements to Thames Water's network through price reviews. Thames Water has been bound by the decisions of Ofwat on how much it can charge customers. In recent years Ofwat has prioritised keeping bills low over investment increases.⁶⁹

Thames Water told us that as part of its next regulatory period (2025–2030) it proposed spending more than £8bn in wastewater sites across the Thames Water region to reduce storm overflows and pollution incidents. It also stated that it planned to invest over £4bn in critical

⁶⁴ Thames Water, [Improving river health in the River Thames catchment](#), May 2024, p.19

⁶⁵ Written evidence submitted by Thames Blue Green Economy, [\[SW013\]](#) p.55

⁶⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 9 January 2025, p.11

⁶⁷ Written evidence submitted by Zoological Society of London [\[SW019\]](#), p.85

⁶⁸ Written evidence submitted by Zoological Society of London [\[SW019\]](#), p.85

⁶⁹ This point is made by both the UK Parliament EFRA Committee [Priorities for water sector reform](#) June 2025, paras15, 38 and 41; and also the Independent Water Commission [Final Report](#), July 2025 para 385 and Box 26

assets to reduce sewer flooding and maintain the safe removal of wastewater.⁷⁰ In our February 2025 meeting, Alex Nickson, Director of Environmental Compliance and Partnerships at Thames Water, described Ofwat's response as "a really tough settlement",⁷¹ and subsequently Thames Water requested that the determination be referred to the Competition and Markets Authority,⁷² for it to consider if Thames Water should be allowed to raise customer's bills further than Ofwat has allowed. Thames Water subsequently asked for the formal reference to be deferred while it looked at options to refinance the company.⁷³ At the time of writing, there is still no clear path forward. But the Environment Secretary confirmed in June 2025 that all options remained open, including nationalisation.⁷⁴

Even before these developments, we heard from guests that the financial issues at Thames Water were limiting investment in London. River Action told the Committee that the company is "trapped in a cycle of unsustainable debt servicing", highlighting that the company's costs of borrowing are far higher than the government faces. It said that this has led to a "diversion of resources away from critical infrastructure investments".⁷⁵ In our meeting in February 2025 James Wallace, Chief Executive of River Action, called for the government to take action and suggested that the Mayor should have a larger role in the governance of London's water system.⁷⁶ When asked about this, the Deputy Mayor stated: "We do not want Londoners to foot the bill for their [Thames Water's] shareholders. We have been engaging with Ofwat... to really make sure that they [Thames Water] are able to deliver on the changes that need to happen."⁷⁷

It is beyond the scope of this investigation to consider the detailed financing and regulatory decisions that are needed to secure Thames Water's future. What we are mindful of – in the context of the Mayor's commitments – is that the current asset management period runs to 2030. Without sufficient delivery of investment in this period in the necessary improvements, we fear this plan will only ever be aspirational.

Given the scale of the challenge and how vital London's water and wastewater infrastructure is for Londoners, we feel it is important that the Mayor and London Assembly, as the politicians with the greatest mandates in London, should have a formal role on Thames Water's board to ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with the city's priorities, including the clean and healthy waterways commitment.

Enforcement

While investment and infrastructure improvements will be essential to reducing sewage discharges into London's waterways, they must also be matched by strong enforcement action against pollution incidents.

⁷⁰ Written evidence submitted by Thames Water [\[SW014\]](#), p.59

⁷¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.6

⁷² Thames Water, [Final Determination referral](#), 14 February 2025

⁷³ Ofwat, [Ofwat refers five companies' redetermination requests to the Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\)](#), 18 March 2025

⁷⁴ [HC Debate \(2025\) \[River Pollution\]](#), 19 June 2025, Vol 769 cc. 561-562

⁷⁵ Written evidence submitted by River Action [\[SW009\]](#), p.32

⁷⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.4

⁷⁷ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.7-8

The Environment Agency currently regulates intermittent discharges from sewer overflows and wastewater treatment works through environmental permits. If an overflow becomes ‘unsatisfactory’, the Environment Agency can review a water company’s environmental permit or take enforcement action against a company that is in breach of its permit.⁷⁸

Yet, we have heard enforcement action by the Environment Agency often takes too long. James Wallace of River Action for example highlighted a case from 2017 that killed 15,200 fish which took six years to prosecute.⁷⁹

In December, we asked the Environment Agency about its enforcement plans for rivers. It told the Committee that it expected to almost triple inspection and compliance work on rivers nationally over the next three years, from 4,000 inspections by the end of March 2025 to 10,000 a year by March 2026 and 11,500 a year by March 2027. As part of this work, the Environment Agency announced it would recruit 42 new staff in the Thames Water catchment area. This is a positive step.⁸⁰

In July 2025, the Independent Water Commission recommended a change in the regulatory approach, replacing Ofwat with a new ‘integrated regulator’ to cover both environmental and economic functions and would also include some compliance and enforcement functions currently covered by the Environment Agency.⁸¹ The government immediately accepted this recommendation and announced plans for a new regulator.⁸²

The Committee welcomes this step towards a more cohesive approach to water regulation. In addition, we would like to see long-term commitment to inspection and enforcement beyond 2027, and for the government and new regulator to set out how resources will be used most strategically to achieve the aims set out in the plan. We agree with what we heard from Friends of the Thames, a community-organisation that supports action to clean up the river, that the Mayor has a role in “advocating for stronger enforcement of environmental regulations”.⁸³ Because without holding polluters to account, the incentives to comply weaken, and the risk of continued environmental harm remains high.

Misconnections

In areas of London with separate wastewater and stormwater drainage systems – which is mainly outer London – misconnected pipes can lead to raw sewage and other wastewater from sinks and washing machines, being discharged directly into London’s rivers. Thames21 told us that 7,385 misconnections had been identified from 3,403 properties in the Thames Water area between 2020-25 (11 per cent of which are toilets).⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Environment Agency, [Water companies: environmental permits for storm overflows and emergency overflows](#), 2018

⁷⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.4

⁸⁰ Environment Agency, [Letter to Environment Committee in response to questions](#), 15 January 2025

⁸¹ Independent Water Commission, [Final Report](#) Recommendation 16, 21 July 2025, p.165

⁸² UK government, [Ofwat to be abolished in biggest overhaul of water since privatisation](#), 21 July 2025

⁸³ Written evidence submitted by Friends of the Thames [\[SW006\]](#), p.22

⁸⁴ Written evidence submitted by Thames21 [\[SW015\]](#), p.65

Misconnections are often only discovered by tracing storm outflows back to individual households. Thames Water funds ZSL to work with volunteers to identify these through ‘Outfall Safaris’.⁸⁵ We heard evidence that while there is a process for Thames Water to inform householders about misconnections, enforcement relies on local authorities and is often slow.

Thames21 suggested that the GLA support a new misconnections officer role to address this.⁸⁶ This point was made by others including River Action, who recommended that “the GLA could step in by supporting an officer to undertake these enforcement actions, ensuring greater accountability and more effective pollution control.”⁸⁷ In our meeting, we asked stakeholders who should pay for this. Thames Water said this was a matter for local authorities, although it said it was open to exploring if there is more that it could do.⁸⁸

In May 2025, the Mayor said that GLA officers are working with the regional and national misconnections group, which includes Thames Water as well as boroughs to understand the barriers and potential solutions to prioritise tackling misconnections.⁸⁹ In June 2025, it announced that it had recently obtained more recent data from 2020–25 on misconnections, which will be added to its River Health Map.⁹⁰ The map combines data on different aspects of river health, including catchment partnerships, type of sewer system, monitoring systems and water quality classification.⁹¹

We have heard strong evidence that the Mayor’s plan should include contributing to funding for a ‘misconnections officer’ to share learning between Councils to simplify the process for Councils to take enforcement action to address misconnections. The Mayor should also provide funding to co-ordinate citizen-science activities with community volunteers, such as ‘Outfall Safaris’,⁹² to help map and track pollution from discharge pipes.

Recommendation 5

As part of the plan the GLA should work with Thames Water and other partners to set out key actions between now and 2034 to reduce sewage pollution, including from sewer overflows and misconnections. These should include the following:

-
- a clear and easily accessible plan of how Thames Water will identify and prevent sewer overflows in London and resolve infrastructure failures
 - funding and support for citizen-science projects to map pollution discharges

⁸⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.10

⁸⁶ Written evidence submitted by Thames21 [\[SW015\]](#), p.65

⁸⁷ Written evidence submitted River Action [\[SW009\]](#), p.32

⁸⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.10

⁸⁹ MQ2025/1493 [Misconnections to the sewage systems \(1\)](#), 28 May 2025

⁹⁰ MQ2025/2161 [Misconnections to the sewage systems](#), 19 June 2025

⁹¹ Mayor of London, [River Health Map](#)

⁹² Catchment Based Approach, [Outfall Safari Guide and Resource Pack](#)

- contributing funding for a ‘misconnections officer’ to help councils speed up enforcement action to compel people to ensure their wastewater is correctly plumbed into the sewer system and doesn’t end up in local rivers
- a role for the Mayor of London on the board of Thames Water to review progress and ensure accountability for progress.

Recommendation 6

The GLA should work with the Environment Agency and the proposed new ‘integrated water regulator’ to co-develop a targeted enforcement strategy for London’s rivers, aligned with the Mayor’s clean and healthy waterways plan.

Road runoff

Road runoff happens when pollutants like oil residue, tyre particles, and brake dust accumulate on roads and are washed into rivers and streams when it rains. Urban and transport pollution is responsible for around 20 per cent of river pollution in the Thames Water area.⁹³ Through this investigation, we heard it is likely to be an even a larger issue in London. John Bryden from Thames21 told us that “road runoff is probably the biggest pollution issue affecting rivers in London”.⁹⁴

Given the likely outsized impact of road runoff on water pollution in London, it needs to be a key element of the Mayor’s plan. And there are opportunities for the Mayor to take decisive action on this. At its core this will be about investing in and scaling up Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), such as ‘rain gardens’, where rainwater is temporarily stored in permeable or gullies rather than flowing directly into the drains. This can help reduce the amount of water going into storm overflows, reducing sewage pollution, as well as controlling road runoff. Thames Water told us:

“In heavy rainfall a paved area of six square metres can contribute the same volume of flow to the sewer network as the wastewater from 100 homes. SuDS can also help to reduce and remove pollutants from highway runoff, another major contributor to poor river water quality.”⁹⁵

Road sweeping and adequate maintenance of road gullies are also vital. Sam Longman, Head of Sustainability and Corporate Environment at TfL explained that gullies have a ‘pot and trap’ design with debris falling to the bottom and oil floating on top, while the water is discharged to waterways through the middle. However, these need to be maintained to ensure they are working as intended.⁹⁶

Recent research by Stormwater Shepherds identifies options for removing sediment such as natural filters as well as operation and maintenance and reducing pollution at source.⁹⁷ Barnes Common Ltd, a charity delivering conservation activities in South-West London, told us that

⁹³ Written evidence submitted by Thames Water [\[SW014\]](#), p.57

⁹⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 9 January 2025, p.13

⁹⁵ Written evidence submitted by Thames Water [\[SW014\]](#), p.61

⁹⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.18

⁹⁷ Stormwater Shepherds and CIWEM, [Highway runoff and the water environment](#), May 2024

additional research is also needed to assess any changes in road runoff from electric vehicles, as well as testing of new technologies to pilot new approaches to retrofitting existing gullies.⁹⁸

As Chair of the TfL Board, the Mayor can direct it to take action to reduce surface road runoff and its contribution to water pollution. TfL is directly responsible for managing about 5 per cent of London's total road network,⁹⁹ but as Sam Longman told the Committee this "does carry 30 per cent of the traffic".¹⁰⁰ However, he explained that while TfL has responsibility for ongoing maintenance of gullies, incident response and cleaning spillages, London's boroughs are responsible for sweeping roads, including those controlled by TfL.¹⁰¹

London boroughs are therefore responsible for the majority of London's roads. Sam Longman told us that TfL offers guidance and learning, but it does "not get into the detail of their maintenance regimes". It instead provides "data and modelling to look at where the opportunities are".¹⁰² This includes funding research and a road pollution solutions tool, which identifies priority locations for road runoff treatment.¹⁰³

The London Borough of Bexley told us that investing in nature-based solutions to address road runoff have many benefits, but require sufficient funding to cover their ongoing maintenance:

"Nature-based solutions such as this [SuDS], would not only mitigate against the impact of road runoff but can also bring about multiple benefits to the local community and area [e.g., improved biodiversity and nature recovery, mitigation of flood risk, carbon storage, more natural green and blue spaces that contribute to community wellbeing]. However, to make these projects feasible, a priority should be to ensure sufficient revenue funding can be secured at the outset to cover costs of resourcing their long-term management."¹⁰⁴

Investing in SuDS can also help meet the objective of the London Climate Resilience Review – which highlighted that "Given the acceleration in surface water risk in London, action needs to be taken at a strategic London level to deliver this scale of integrated water management much sooner than 2040."¹⁰⁵

The Mayor set a target in his Environment Strategy for 200 hectares of land to drain into SuDS by 2030. In 2025, the GLA stated that it currently has a record of at least 81 hectares of land draining into SuDS since 2016, although it lacks data for over half the schemes, and is looking to improve this.¹⁰⁶ TfL has a target of ensuring at least 5,000 square metres of catchment draining into highways SuDS are installed on TfL's road network each year.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸ Written evidence submitted by Barnes Common Limited [SW002], p.6

⁹⁹ TfL, [Vision Zero action plan](#), Jul 2018, p.52

¹⁰⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.20

¹⁰¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.18

¹⁰² London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.20

¹⁰³ Mayor of London, [Road Runoff Water Quality Study](#), 2019; Thames21, [Road pollution prioritisation tool](#)

¹⁰⁴ Written evidence submitted by London Borough of Bexley [SW007], p.24

¹⁰⁵ Emma Howard Boyd CBE, [The London Climate Resilience Review](#), July 2024, p.81

¹⁰⁶ MQ2025/0758 [Updating London's target for sustainable drainage \(1\)](#), 28 February 2025

¹⁰⁷ TfL, [TfL publishes new Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity Plan to further support creating a greener city](#), March 2024

In March 2025, the Mayor announced that £500,000 would be spent by TfL as part of the plan to improve London's rivers but did not set out how this will be allocated. This will, however, be a fraction of what is likely to be required to transform the way that London's drainage system works – one study estimated that SuDS for high priority locations in London is likely to require around £1 billion of investment.¹⁰⁸ Therefore the Committee was reassured to hear the Deputy Mayor talk about other funding models to deliver these improvements. He told us, “we need to think about much more innovative green finance models on how we could accelerate the investment into SuDS across the city.”¹⁰⁹

Pete Daw, Head of Climate Change at the GLA, told us that the Thames Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (TRFCC) is a key partner in the work, and that it would be important to “unlock” funding from the TRFCC and “activate” catchment partnerships.¹¹⁰ The London Surface Water Strategy (LSWS), published in May 2025, will also help to contribute to the Mayor's waterways plan,¹¹¹ and proposed ten new hydrological catchments, which – although broadly linked to river catchments – are defined by common wastewater flows to treatment works.¹¹²

The LSWS estimates that there is around £168 million of annual funding available for surface water management across London from a mixture of government and private sources (such as Thames Water),¹¹³ but estimates that a further £42 million a year is required to significantly reduce flood risk.¹¹⁴ Harnessing this existing funding, as the GLA are looking to do, to maximise the co-benefits for both river health and flooding reduction, is an approach we support, but there is also a need to identify new sources of funding. The LSWS similarly recommended strategic updates to the London Plan to include sewer separation and inclusion of SuDS in all new developments – which would also be positive steps.¹¹⁵

Recommendation 7

As part of the plan the GLA should set out key actions between now and 2034 to address road runoff including:

- publishing the maintenance plan for road gullies on the Transport for London (TfL) road network

¹⁰⁸ MQ2022/0015 [London's Sustainable Drainage System requirements](#), 24 January 2022

¹⁰⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.21

¹¹⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.22

¹¹¹ Flood Ready London, [The London Surface Water Strategy: Increasing resilience through collective action 2025-30](#) May 2025, p.15

¹¹² Flood Ready London, [The London Surface Water Strategy: Increasing resilience through collective action 2025-30](#) May 2025, p.28-29

¹¹³ Flood Ready London, [The London Surface Water Strategy: Increasing resilience through collective action 2025-30](#) May 2025, p.76-77

¹¹⁴ Flood Ready London, [The London Surface Water Strategy: Increasing resilience through collective action 2025-30](#) May 2025, p.78

¹¹⁵ Flood Ready London, [The London Surface Water Strategy: Increasing resilience through collective action 2025-30](#), May 2025, p.34

- scaling up current sustainable drainage system (SuDS) targets, by working closely with local authorities, Thames Water and TfL, and providing an annual update on progress and effectiveness
 - reviewing funding models which could secure sustained investment in SuDS and pollution control infrastructure across London
 - ensuring the new London Plan includes a requirement for sewer separation and SuDS in all new developments
 - funding more research into the nature of contaminants in road runoff in London, and how they can be reduced at source.
-

Making waterways safe for swimming

As the GLA has been taking forward the Mayor's manifesto commitment, the language that the Mayor is using has evolved from "swimmable rivers" to "clean and healthy waterways".¹¹⁶ Given the range of safety, infrastructure, and water quality challenges involved in enabling safe swimming, this evolution is sensible.

We heard throughout this investigation the need for safety to be given paramount importance. The Port of London Authority raised safety concerns around swimming in London's rivers and waterways and highlighted the need to be very careful about messaging, stating that it does "not support the use of the word 'swimmable' in relation to this plan" due to concerns "about this encouraging swimming in dangerous conditions, even with more nuanced safety messaging."¹¹⁷

However, it is important that the aspiration to make sections of London's rivers suitable for swimming is not lost. The Mayor's plan should take forward the commitment in a pragmatic and phased way –focusing on safe access, improved water quality, and supporting facilities –while continuing to pursue the goal of enabling Londoners to enjoy London's waterways for leisure safely and securing official bathing water status.

Towards swimmable rivers

The Mayor has committed to identifying and prioritising potential new sites for open-water swimming. In September 2024, the Mayor launched a guide to outdoor swimming sites in London. This highlights eight locations where Londoners can already swim outdoors safely in nature, and four where it may be possible in the future (Figure 3).

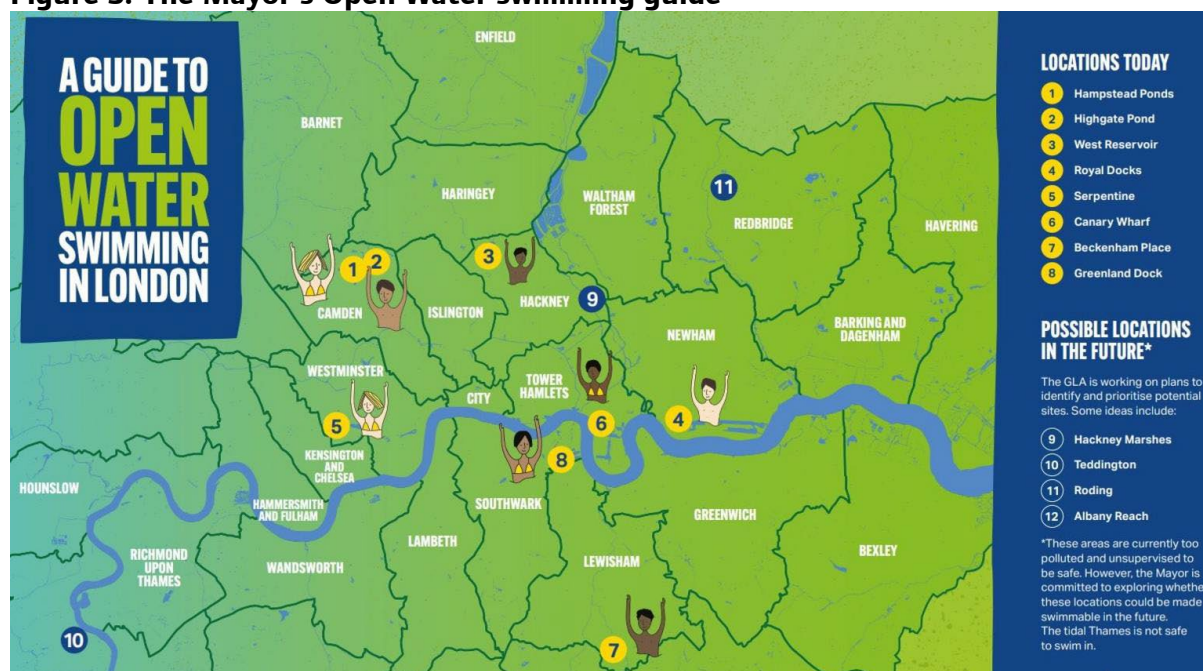
None of the current locations are on rivers – all are in docks or ponds. The Deputy Mayor, told us that the eight locations identified as current sites in the GLA's guide are "where there is a lifeguard, and water quality is deemed safe to be swimmable."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.8

¹¹⁷ Written evidence submitted by Port of London Authority [\[SW008\]](#), p.25

¹¹⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.1

Figure 3: The Mayor's Open Water swimming guide¹¹⁹



As part of our investigation, we heard of many further suggestions of locations that could be prioritised for water quality improvements and have the potential to be ‘swimmable’ or ‘paddleable’ – beyond the four listed by the GLA.¹²⁰ Indeed, several of our guests noted that they already regularly swim in rivers in London. Marlene Lawrence, founder of the wild swimming group Teddington Bluetits, told the Committee:

“I will always say that the river is swimmable. The River is used by a wide variety of people in the summer, families come down to Ham. It is affectionately known as the Costa del Ham in the summer. We swim mindfully because we realise it is a moving body of water. It has river craft and other river users, very different from an enclosed body of water. I am very keen to promote swimming in the River.”¹²¹

We also heard from Chris Romer-Lee, who has developed proposals for a floating lido in London, about potential approaches to filtering water in rivers to make it safer for swimming – including an approach being developed in New York.¹²² He also shared experiences from a number of other international cities, including Paris, which the Mayor could draw on and learn from through the Swimmable Cities network.¹²³ We support efforts to explore a range of different options that could provide safe access to waterways.

¹¹⁹ GLA, [River Health](#) [Accessed 19 May 2025]

¹²⁰ Question 3 of the Committee’s Call for Evidence asked this, with many submissions including multiple suggestions. Page 22 of the Committee’s survey also lists suggestions potential areas. The term ‘paddleable’ was suggested by the Crane Valley Partnership for rivers and streams too shallow to swim in. It also refers to paddle sports.

¹²¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.1-2

¹²² London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.6

¹²³ [Swimmable Cities • Urban Swimming Culture](#) [Accessed 18 July 2024]

Safety and education

Despite enthusiasm for opening up rivers in London to be made more swimmable, we have heard loud and clear the need for safety to be a paramount consideration. Different stakeholders highlighted the complex and changing risks involved in swimming in natural environments, including potential submerged structures, historic pollution, and dangers associated with water temperature and river flow.¹²⁴

Bexley Council highlighted that encouraging swimmable rivers could “place additional burdens on landowners with increased liabilities, insurance costs and claims associated with increased risks to public safety, water quality, access and egress, and the need for signage.” It advised that general access to rivers for recreation, travel and nature is likely to be “more important and easier to achieve.”¹²⁵

Swimming is prohibited in the Thames between Putney Bridge and Crossness, although it is allowed in other areas. The Port of London Authority, which is responsible for the river, does not encourage swimming and urges caution.¹²⁶ Grace Rawnsley from the PLA told us: “While we permit swimming up the western end of the River from Putney up into Teddington Lock, we do not encourage it. That is because it is a tidal river. We have a lot of safety concerns within that river.”¹²⁷

The Committee heard that large numbers of people wanting to use London’s green and blue spaces can create challenges. We heard from Cllr Louise Krupski of Lewisham Council who explained that in summer 2019 Beckenham Place Park was opened for wild swimming with support from the Mayor but had to be closed shortly after because of safety concerns. It is therefore vital that if there are any plans for new bathing sites, they have a safety plan. Cllr Krupski told us that the Council now implemented a managed approach: “What we have now is a very regulated, carefully monitored swimming facility where people use flotation devices and children have a test.”¹²⁸

During the Committee’s site visit to the Royal Docks on 5 March 2025 where members of the Committee received a tour of the Royal Docks Swimming site ran by Love Open Water/NOWCA.¹²⁹ NOWCA provided an overview of its open water swimming site and explained the safety measures it takes – such as agreed ratios of lifeguards to swimmers.¹³⁰ However, even in locations where managed activities take place, we are aware of the risks of serious incidents if people try to enter the water at other times, and this needs to be considered and carefully managed.

Chris Romer-Lee told us “The launch of a programme that educates Londoners about water safety should be implemented as soon as possible.”¹³¹ The PLA told us about existing initiatives

¹²⁴ Written evidence submitted by Environment Agency [\[SW004\]](#), p.14

¹²⁵ Written evidence submitted by London Borough of Bexley [\[SW007\]](#), p.23

¹²⁶ Port of London Authority, [Swimming in the tidal Thames](#) [Accessed 25 April 2025]

¹²⁷ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.1-2

¹²⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 9 January 2025, p.8

¹²⁹ NOWCA is the UK’s largest network of safe open water swimming venues; [NOWCA](#) [Accessed 25 April 2025]

¹³⁰ NOWCA informed the Committee during the 5 March 2025 site visit

¹³¹ Written evidence submitted by Studio Octopi [\[SW011\]](#), p.43

such as the Tidal Thames Water Safety Forum which actively educates the public about the dangers of swimming in the Thames and has established relationships with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and London Fire Brigade to ensure a coordinated approach to river safety.¹³² The London Coastguard, part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), looks after search and rescue on the River Thames.¹³³

Recommendation 8:

The GLA should work with key river stakeholders, such as the Port of London Authority (PLA), Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), to review existing guidance on water safety, and develop a plan to provide clear and consistent guidance on water safety for all of London's rivers and water sites by April 2026. The Mayor should host a 'one-stop shop' page on the GLA website to link to all key information. This should be accompanied by regular high profile water safety campaigns and promoting safe supervised locations to swim.

Improving data on water quality and achieving bathing water status

While the Mayor has set the goal to clean up London's waterways, the GLA told us that no decision has yet been made about how this would be measured. Abby Crisostomo, Head of Green Infrastructure at the GLA explained:

"there is the EA [Environment Agency] classification system, but I think part of the investigation that we are going into for the development of this plan is to identify what the activities are that people want to be doing in, on and around rivers. Whether or not swimming or bathing water quality is the right metric or not is still a question because [...] there are other things you can enjoy recreation in and around rivers that do not necessarily require that same level of water quality as swimming. Part of the conversation is trying to understand what that mix of activities is, and then what the different ways are to then measure that kind of quality."¹³⁴

Currently four swimming sites in London are tested as part of the Environment Agency's bathing water quality testing – three ponds on Hampstead Heath, and the Serpentine in Hyde Park. Other sites identified as safe for swimming are West Reservoir in Hackney, Canary Wharf, Greenland Dock in Southwark, the Royal Docks and Beckenham Place in Lewisham.¹³⁵ We heard on our visit to the Royal Docks open water swimming site that such locations currently pay for private water-quality testing to ensure that they meet the required standards.¹³⁶

Charlie Wood, London Area Director, Environment Agency, told the Committee that assessing water quality in rivers is challenging as it requires significant amounts of testing to get a complete picture. She also said "Designation as a bathing water does not necessarily mean that

¹³² Written evidence submitted by Port of London Authority [SW008], p.27

¹³³ House of Commons Library, [Future of coastguard search and rescue helicopter services](#), January 2025

¹³⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.9

¹³⁵ GLA, [A guide to Open Water Swimming in London](#)

¹³⁶ Committee visit to NOWCA/Love Open Water, Royal Docks, 5 March 2025

you will meet bathing water standards. It means that you will have that monitoring in place to understand the quality of what you are getting into.”¹³⁷

Monitoring and communicating water quality

We heard widespread support for better testing and communication of information about water quality, particularly in areas that are already commonly used for water sports or swimming. Ben Seal from Paddle UK told us of the water-quality testing that a number of clubs are doing to try to assess the water themselves for the tidal Thames, but added that “the whole process of testing is quite difficult for private citizens and non-scientists to do.”¹³⁸

Organisations like sewagemap.co.uk are already using Thames Water’s data to map sewage outflows, which can give an indication of likely pollution levels. But James Wallace from River Action suggested that there should be more routine monitoring of water quality levels. He highlighted that technologies exist for ongoing monitoring – such as the Fluidion water quality assessment system that was used in the Paris Olympics – that could be used.¹³⁹

Much of this additional monitoring responsibility could fall to the water industry. Alex Nickson from Thames Water told the Committee that the company plans to install water quality monitors on 25 per cent of its sewage treatment outfalls and Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) by the end of 2030, with full coverage by 2035. However, he said there are currently no plans to assess bathing water quality. While Thames Water is exploring whether space could be left in future infrastructure for such monitoring, there is no firm commitment.¹⁴⁰

Alex Nickson also told us in February 2025 that Thames Water had no plans to invest in improving the water quality so that rivers achieve bathing water quality standards in London, as no rivers in London had yet been designated by the Environment Agency as bathing water sites. He noted that any future investment in this area would likely need to be considered as part of its 2029 price review.¹⁴¹

It is concerning that under current plans agreed with regulators, Thames Water is unlikely to invest in new improvements to bring London’s rivers up to bathing water quality standards for at least the next five years. Existing plans to install water quality monitors on sewage overflows also do not include equipment for assessing bathing water standards. Yet, these are fundamental to achieving the Mayor’s ambition for ‘swimmable’ rivers. We consider it vital that any swimmable sites in London come with both continuous monitoring and live real-time data in an easy-to-understand format.

During our investigation the government consulted on proposed changes to bathing water designations. In March 2025, it announced that it was proposing to expand the definition to include participants in other water sports in the next round of applications, which opened in

¹³⁷ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 4 December 2024, p.15

¹³⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.8

¹³⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.16-17

¹⁴⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.16

¹⁴¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.17-18

May 2025.¹⁴² However, campaigners (such as Thames21) have criticised the Environment Agency's decision to include a 'feasibility test', which they say will reduce the chances of inland river sites achieving designation.¹⁴³ Given this decision, it will be necessary to bring together stakeholders to map out the actions needed and to demonstrate how this standard could be achieved.

One practical step needed if a waterway is to reach bathing water standards is the provision of appropriate facilities. The Environment Agency requires designated bathing sites to have toilet facilities within a short distance (up to about 500m) from the site. It also requests information about other facilities for bathers, such as parking, public transport, changing facilities, lifeguards, first aid facilities, litter bins and cafes or kiosks. For a site to be eligible for designation, it needs to have at least 100 bathers a day during the bathing season.¹⁴⁴

Thames21 suggested areas that are "popular sites for swimming/paddling/accessing the water should have facilities (such as public toilets and changing rooms) added to ensure these sites can be officially designated as bathing water sites and are well used".¹⁴⁵ We support this where appropriate.

Anyone using London's waterways should be able to enjoy them without running the risk of falling ill. While the bathing water standards have limitations, they are a good benchmark for assessing the suitability of new swimming sites in London and developing a plan for improvements. In recognition of the challenges in achieving these standards, it will be important to set clear and achievable targets for the number of sites in order to galvanise partners to overcome these.

Recommendation 9:

The GLA should work with Thames Water, the Environment Agency (and/or the new integrated water regulator), and boroughs to ensure real-time data on water quality for rivers and waterways in London is monitored and published in one place using continuous monitoring technology, such as that used in the Paris Olympics, in key locations with water-based activity by 2028.

Recommendation 10:

The Mayor's plan should target designating four new sites as bathing waters by 2028 and a further six by 2034 with a clear delivery plan by year. These should be geographically distributed across the capital, where possible, starting with river locations which are already used for recreation. The Mayor should support stakeholders to develop detailed plans for putting in place the necessary improvements to improve water quality and provide facilities such as toilets and changing facilities where appropriate.

¹⁴² UK government, [Bathing water reforms keep pace with Britain's love of swimming](#), 12 March 2025

¹⁴³ The Guardian, [Changes to bathing water status test will deny rivers protection, say critics](#), 12 March 2025 [Accessed 25 April 2025]

¹⁴⁴ Environment Agency, [Designate a bathing water: guidance on how to apply](#) [Accessed 14 September 2025]

¹⁴⁵ Written evidence submitted by Thames21 [SW015], p.66

Overcoming barriers and increasing access

Despite London's rivers and waterways suffering from pollution, many are still beautiful spaces with important environmental value. However, accessibility to these spaces differs along their course. The early statements from the GLA indicate that the Mayor's plan will include a focus on improving access to London's waterways and making a range of improvements that will benefit Londoners as well as the environmental health of waterways.

In the course of this investigation, we have heard that the Mayor's plan must provide a variety of ways for people to access and enjoy nature – including for those who prefer to enjoy them from the side of, rather than in or on, the water. This includes opportunities for sitting, walking, cycling, and simply being near rivers and waterways. The plan should also aim to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits of access to nature, while carefully balancing this with the need to protect sensitive habitats and enhance valuable natural sites.

Health and wellbeing benefits of waterways

As part of this investigation, Londoners told us about how they use rivers and waterways today. The most common answer to the Committee's survey was walking (or running or cycling) alongside a river. The next most popular response was spending time with friends and family.¹⁴⁶

Professor Caroline Scales, Professor of Technology in Society at Brunel University told us that these types of activities – which involve being both in and around water – have “exceptionally strong benefits for mental and physical health.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, we heard from Marlene Lawrence (who leads swims with the Teddington Bluetits in the Thames) that “people find it joyous swimming in a natural body of water.”¹⁴⁸

These benefits were echoed back to the Committee in the responses to our survey. Almost eight in ten of the Londoners we surveyed (76 per cent) highlighted the positive mental health and wellbeing benefits from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways. A further three in ten (30 per cent) stated that access to nature and wildlife is a benefit when spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways (Figure 4).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ London Assembly Research Unit, [Key findings from an Environment Committee survey about London's rivers and waterways](#), August 2025 p.5

¹⁴⁷ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.13

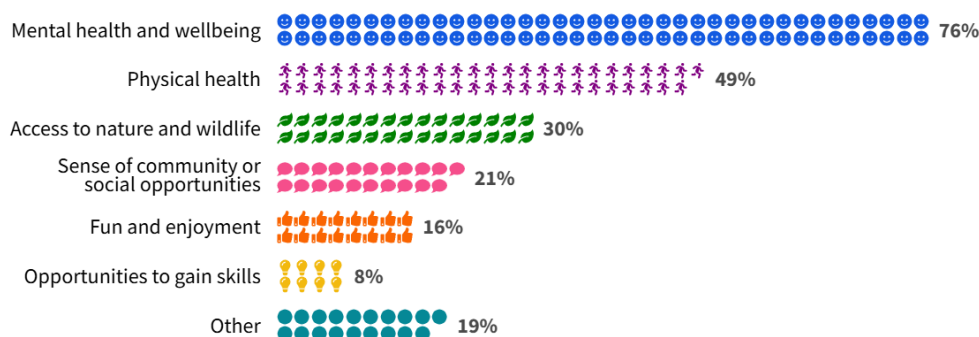
¹⁴⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.6

¹⁴⁹ London Assembly Research Unit, [Key findings from an Environment Committee survey about London's rivers and waterways](#), August 2025, p.8

Figure 4:

What benefits, if any, do you get from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways?

% of respondents



“Cool, healthy space to cool down, see wildlife and immerse oneself in nature. Feeling closer to the local environment and feeling less claustrophobic in a big urban city.”¹⁵⁰

Survey respondent – benefits of rivers and waterways

Through the Mayor’s plan, there are opportunities to build on these positive health and wellbeing outcomes for Londoners.

Overcoming barriers to swimming

Many people in London, however, face financial and cultural barriers to accessing swimming or other recreational activities on waterways. While many outdoor swimming sites offer discounts for concessions with prices as low as £2.50, costs of swimming in some supervised outdoor locations can be as high as £12.30.¹⁵¹

Nathaniel Cole, co-founder of Swim Dem Crew, told us that the costs of supervised swimming can be a barrier that puts some people off.¹⁵² Swim Dem Crew is a swim group that aims to create a more inclusive and social space for Black and ethnic minority people and encourage more people into swimming. We heard positive feedback on the work of Swim Dem Crew (and others) from fellow guest Phil Brownlie, Head of Public Affairs at Swim England, in addressing the “huge inequalities and discrepancies” in access to swimming. In London, he highlighted:

“You only have to look at the statistics from the Active Lives Children [and Young People] Survey to see. If you are a kid in Richmond, 81 per cent can swim. It is 40-something in Brent. For white British children in years 7 and 8, over 80 per cent can

¹⁵⁰ London Assembly Research Unit, [Key findings from an Environment Committee survey about London’s rivers and waterways](#), August 2025, p.10

¹⁵¹ London Assembly Research Unit, [London’s Rivers and Waterways: Cleanliness, safety, wildlife, transport and recreational use](#), January 2025, p.39

¹⁵² London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.9

swim. If you look for Black children in years 7 and 8, it is below 50 per cent again. If you look at children from the poorest backgrounds, it is about 30-something per cent and from the richest over 80 per cent.”¹⁵³

The Deputy Mayor told the Committee he saw the commitment not simply as an environmental ambition, but also “very much a social and racial justice issue”.¹⁵⁴ Abby Crisostomo told us that inclusive recreation opportunities were being considered as part of the plan. We also heard that the GLA Environment team “have been having discussions with our Communities Team, our Youth Team and Sport Team, trying to look at the problem holistically if we are thinking about getting more people, especially more inclusive access for folks, to recreate.”¹⁵⁵ We are pleased to see that the commitment is being approached in a joined-up fashion, linking together the environmental and social issues.

We hope that this joined up approach ensures that opportunities for people to learn swimming skills also form part of the plan. The GLA has run the ‘Splash’ for local residents in the Royal Docks, and a water safety course.¹⁵⁶ This is planned again for 2025. The Mayor should explore whether similar initiatives could be rolled out in other parts of London as part of the plan.

There may also be opportunities to work together with other partners to work on other forms of access. The PLA for example told us it had established an Active Thames Fund, which provides community funding for water sports and walking on or by the tidal Thames and inland waterways in London, Kent and Essex.¹⁵⁷ The fund has provided around £500,000 of funding, “with a key priority of advancing inclusion and increasing diversity within those sports clubs to get more people who are not necessarily accessing the Thames to access the Thames through sporting endeavours.”¹⁵⁸

Riverside improvements to improve accessibility

“It [the Thames] is London’s largest public space, and probably the least accessible public space.”¹⁵⁹ That is how Chris Romer-Lee described the River Thames to us. An avowed advocate for a floating pool on the Thames, Chris Romer-Lee suggested to the Committee that such a pool could help address that accessibility challenge. And pointed to the Royal Docks as a perfect location.¹⁶⁰

But, he also noted that facilities for swimming in rivers in London could be more basic, “infrastructure for swimming can be as little as a ladder or a ramp to enable someone to safely get into the river. It could also be, at the other end of the scale, a floating pool”.¹⁶¹

¹⁵³ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 4 December 2024, p.10

¹⁵⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.1

¹⁵⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.15

¹⁵⁶ Presentation by Royal Docks team to Committee; Royal Docks, [Swim Safe @ Royal Docks Summer Splash](#) [Accessed 22 April 2025]

¹⁵⁷ [Active Thames](#) [Accessed 23 April 2025]

¹⁵⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.15

¹⁵⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.1

¹⁶⁰ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.1

¹⁶¹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 9 January 2025, p.4

We also heard from Paul Powlesland from Friends of the River Roding that access to the river is limited by landowners in some areas. He told us:

“We have been trying for five years now to open up a path alongside the river from Barking to Ilford. It would be the largest riverside path opened up in London for decades and would link up with the existing riverside path. The land was owned by Transport for London (TfL), and it was basically blocking it for many years.”¹⁶²

In other cities, and on other rivers, this has been addressed. Chris Romer-Lee told us that many European cities have developed facilities for swimming in their urban rivers. For example, Basel in Switzerland has infrastructure that allows swimmers to enter the water safely at certain points, as well as showers and toilets along the riverbank. He compared this to a site in Teddington which is used by swimmers, “where it is a slippery, muddy entry point”, and where people who aren’t confident “could find it difficult to get out again”.¹⁶³

We also heard that personal safety or fear of violence can be a concern in some waterside areas. Rob Gray told us that from his experience in the Crane Valley, the gender balance of riverside path users gives a good indication of perceptions of safety in a space, with those closest to a 50/50 male/female ratio being perceived as most safe. He also indicated that there is a “very direct” link between “degraded spaces and poor socioeconomic situations”.¹⁶⁴

The Canal & River Trust told us that part of its work with communities in areas with the highest social deprivation is to help them see “the canal as part of somewhere for them, absolutely building on that vigilance and community sense that makes people feel safe and self-perpetuating.”¹⁶⁵

Identifying areas where riverside walks can be opened up, and promoting opportunities to engage in nature and help care for it should form part of the plan. The Mayor should undertake a review of potential sites on land that he controls to increase access to nature, as well as inviting proposals to support waterside improvements across the capital. This should also include disabled access – as waterside routes need to be flat and uncluttered in order to be accessible to those with limited mobility.¹⁶⁶

Recommendation 11

The Mayor should ensure that the clean and healthy waterways plan:

-
- identifies locations where there is least access to waterways or opportunities to experience the benefits of being in, on or by water safely in the natural environment

¹⁶² London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 9 January 2025, p.9

¹⁶³ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025 p.4

¹⁶⁴ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.25

¹⁶⁵ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 1](#), 5 February 2025, p.25

¹⁶⁶ Survey Respondent. London Assembly Research Unit, [Key findings from an Environment Committee survey about London’s rivers and waterways](#), August 2025, p.14

- works with different groups to identify and remove barriers that they face, including improving perceptions of safety through interventions to clean up areas and widen access for different groups
 - supports water safety courses and free opportunities to learn to swim or gain confidence in open water at suitable locations across London
 - ensures that costs are not a barrier to accessing activities. This could include working with the PLA's Active Thames Fund, to increase access to sports and recreation on London's waterways.
-

Protecting and enhancing nature

The Mayor has made it clear that the plan for clean and healthy waterways will take a “nature-first approach”.¹⁶⁷ Describing the approach, the Deputy Mayor told us, “We want to have good nature-based solutions that we can introduce into our ecosystem and to different sites across London where we can start to see, like we brought back beavers, for example, to London.”¹⁶⁸ But, as Abby Crisostomo noted, “nature-based solutions are not going to be enough to tackle this [clean and healthy waterways].”¹⁶⁹

To maximise the benefits of nature-based solutions, they must be carefully targeted. As ZSL highlighted “to achieve the most from these nature-based solutions it is vital that they are planned strategically at catchment scale through the existing Catchment Partnerships in London.” They suggest that river restoration, including daylighting of rivers and streams to remove them from culverts, and restoration of keystone species, such as water vole or beaver, should be priorities for the plan.¹⁷⁰ While we welcome the Mayor's enthusiasm for innovative projects –such as New York's Billion Oyster Project, which the Deputy Mayor referenced in evidence to the Committee –we are mindful that limited funding must have the widest impact for Londoners.

Where the Mayor's plan involves changes to access, it will also be essential that environmental pressures on sensitive habitats are managed. Through our investigation, we heard concerns that large numbers of people gathering in wild locations can cause environmental damage to habitats. The Wildlife Gardens of Haggerston explained:

“The area of the Old Lea that became known as ‘Hackney Beach’ was degraded in a number of ways and this impact was one of the main drivers that led Hackney Council and local organisations and individuals to work to lessen and then reverse the problems caused.”¹⁷¹

Similarly, Barnes Common Ltd suggested that some areas are unlikely to be suitable for recreation:

¹⁶⁷ Mayor of London, [Mayor brings together landmark coalition to deliver major new improvements to London's rivers | London City Hall](#), 13 March 2025

¹⁶⁸ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.4

¹⁶⁹ London Assembly Environment Committee, [Panel 2](#), 5 February 2025, p.23

¹⁷⁰ Written evidence submitted by Zoological Society of London [\[SW019\]](#), p.87

¹⁷¹ Written evidence submitted by Wildlife Gardens of Haggerston [\[SW018\]](#), p.74

“It would be sensible to establish areas where access should be controlled, either due to risk or in order to safeguard nature (such as spawning grounds or where habitat is being improved or species such as water vole being reintroduced), leaving other areas where open access remains possible. Consideration should still be given to viewing in these areas, which can bring considerable benefits to wellbeing.”¹⁷²

ZSL told us of the importance of “well designed and coordinated community science schemes” to “generate robust data and support environmental literacy and stewardship”. This includes monitoring riverfly numbers, as a way of detecting river pollution events, and also involving communities in monitoring the effectiveness of constructed wetland sites.¹⁷³

We support the Mayor’s aims to promote improvements that will benefit both people and nature. Identifying sensitive habitats and having a plan for managing access to these sites must be a key consideration in developing the plan, as well as ongoing monitoring and evaluation of impacts.

Recommendation 12

A full environmental assessment should be undertaken with a range of stakeholders at scoping and project implementation stage, where changes to access by or into waterways are proposed. The Mayor should fund research to fill any gaps in knowledge for these assessments and to monitor their ongoing effectiveness, such as for the impact of nature-based solutions. A long-term management plan, including maintenance should be provided for any projects funded through the Mayor’s plan, with the aim of sustaining improvements in biodiversity over time.

¹⁷² Written evidence submitted by Barnes Common Limited [\[SW002\]](#), p.7

¹⁷³ Written evidence submitted by Zoological Society of London [\[SW019\]](#), p.89

Annex 1: Committee Activity

The Committee decided to examine the Mayor's manifesto commitment to "Develop a bold plan for swimmable rivers within 10 years."¹⁷⁴ We decided to consider what a 'swimmable river' is and how the GLA and the Mayor can work with partners across London to deliver improvements to water quality and make rivers clean and accessible for Londoners to enjoy safely.

In this investigation, we therefore decided to look at:

- how 'swimmable rivers' is defined and how it can be measured
- what a successful framework for an effective 10-year plan could look like
- how the Mayor and GLA can use its powers and responsibilities to target support, such as funding, infrastructure projects and planning and regeneration
- how the Mayor can ensure that 'swimmable rivers' are accessible to all Londoners, especially those from minority communities
- how improvements for 'swimmable rivers' contribute to nature recovery and also considers the needs of other river users.

The investigation consisted of three formal meetings which focused on actions needed to create rivers clean and accessible for swimming. It primarily focused on water quality and safe access and on this occasion, the Committee decided to not consider wider issues such as air quality from vessels on rivers.

The London Assembly Research Unit also carried out an **evidence review** on London's rivers and waterways, which provides detailed analysis of relevant data and statistics.¹⁷⁵

In the first meeting in **December 2024**, the Committee heard from London Waterkeeper, Environment Agency, Brunel University, Swim England, Paddle UK and Swim Dem Crew. The meeting focused on how the Mayor can work with different user groups across London to deliver improvements and ensure waterways and rivers are accessible for all Londoners to enjoy safely.

[Panel 1](#)

- Theo Thomas, Chief Executive, London Waterkeeper
- Charlie Wood, London Area Director, Environment Agency.

[Panel 2](#)

- Professor Caroline Scarles, Professor of Technology in Society, Brunel Business School Brunel University London
- Philip Brownlie, Head of Public Affairs, Swim England
- Ben Seal, Head of Access and Environment, Paddle UK
- Nathaniel Cole, Founder, Swim Dem Crew.

¹⁷⁴ Sadiq Khan, [Making London Greener](#), Manifesto for May 2024 election

¹⁷⁵ London Assembly Research Unit [London's Rivers and Waterways: Cleanliness, safety, wildlife, transport and recreational use](#) January 2025 [Accessed 17 April 2025]

In **January 2025**, the Committee heard from Port of London Authority, Studio Octopi/Thames Baths, Swimmable Cities, Teddington Bluetits, Friends of the River Roding and River Roding Trust, Thames21 and Lewisham Council. This meeting focused on improving London's rivers and what a 'swimmable' River Thames could look like in practice.

[Panel 1](#)

- Grace Rawnsley, Director of Sustainability and Net Zero Transition, Port of London Authority
- Chris Romer-Lee, Co-Founder & Director, Studio Octopi, Future Lidos & Thames Baths and Steering Group Member, Swimmable Cities Alliance
- Marlene Lawrence, Founder of Teddington Bluetits.

[Panel 2](#)

- John Bryden, Head of Improving Rivers, Thames21
- Councillor Louise Krupski, Deputy Mayor and Environment, Transport and Climate Action, Lewisham Council (Joining remotely)
- Paul Powlesland, Founder, Friends of the River Roding and River Roding Trust.

The final meeting took place in **February 2025**. This meeting focused on potential swimmable locations around London and allowed the Committee to put questions to the Deputy Mayor and TfL around current plans.

[Panel 1](#)

- James Wallace, Chief Executive, River Action
- Alex Nickson, Director of Environmental Compliance and Partnerships, Thames Water
- Rob Gray, Chair and Director, Crane Valley Community Interest Company / Friends of the River Crane (FORCE)
- Ros Daniels, Director, London and South East Region, Canal & River Trust.

[Panel 2](#)

- Mete Coban MBE, Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy
- Abby Crisostomo, Head of Green Infrastructure, GLA
- Pete Daw, Head of Climate Change, GLA
- Sam Longman, Head of Sustainability and Corporate Environment, TfL.

The Committee published a **call for evidence** from 11 December 2024 to 20 January 2025. The Committee received [submissions](#) from the following organisations: Albany Outdoors, Barnes Common Limited, Development Manager, Crane Valley Partnership, Environment Agency, Friends of the River Crane Environment (FORCE), Friends of the Thames, London Borough of Bexley, Port of London Authority, River Action, River Roding Trust, Studio Octopi, Swimmable Cities, Thames Blue Green Economy, Thames Water, Thames21, Tidal Thames Swimmers, Transport for London, Wildlife Gardeners of Haggerston, Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and Stormwater Shepherds UK.

The Committee published a **survey via an online survey** platform between 11 December 2024 and 24 February 2025. The survey explored how Londoners use rivers and waterways in London and gather their thoughts on how rivers and waterways could be improved. In total, there were 143 completed responses to the survey. A summary is available [here](#).

Other formats and languages

If you, or someone you know needs this report in large print or braille, or a copy of the summary and main findings in another language, then please call us on: 020 7983 4100 or email assembly.translations@london.gov.uk

Chinese

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Email 与我们联系。

Vietnamese

Nếu ông (bà) muốn nội dung văn bản này được dịch sang
tiếng Việt, xin vui lòng liên hệ với chúng tôi bằng điện
thoại, thư hoặc thư điện tử theo địa chỉ ở trên.

Greek

*Εάν επιθυμείτε περίληψη αυτού του κειμένου στην γλώσσα
σας, παρακαλώ καλέστε τον αριθμό ή επικοινωνήστε μαζί
μας στην ανωτέρω ταχυδρομική ή την ηλεκτρονική διεύθυνση.*

Turkish

Bu belgenin kendi dilinize çevrilmiş bir özetini
okumak isterseniz, lütfen yukarıdaki telefon
numarasını arayın, veya posta ya da e-posta
adresi aracılığıyla bizimle temasa geçin.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਸ ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼ ਦਾ ਸੰਖੇਪ ਅਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਲੈਣਾ
ਚਾਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਫ਼ੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜਾਂ
ਉਪਰ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਡਾਕ ਜਾਂ ਈਮੇਲ ਪਤੇ 'ਤੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज़ का सारांश अपनी भाषा में
चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये
गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

Bengali

আপনি যদি এই দলিলের একটা সারাংশ নিজের ভাষায় পেতে চান,
তাহলে দয়া করে ফো করবেন অথবা উল্লিখিত ডাক ঠিকানায় বা
ই-মেইল ঠিকানায় আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করবেন।

Urdu

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یا مذکورہ بالا ڈاک کے پتے یا ای میل
پتے پر ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

Arabic

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Gujarati

જો તમારે આ દસ્તાવેજનો સાર તમારી ભાષામાં
જોઈતો હોય તો ઉપર આપેલ નંબર પર ફોન કરો
અથવા ઉપર આપેલ ટપાલ અથવા ઇ-મેઇલ સરનામા
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