

How to save our chalk streams

A presentation to the Cam Valley Forum

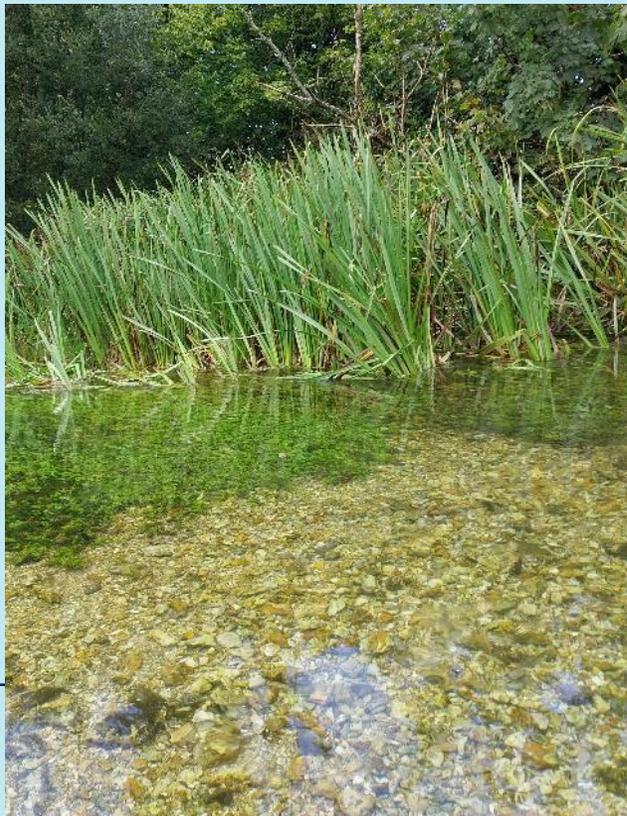
Presented by: Alison Matthews, Chalk Stream Programme Manager

Date: 16th March 2026

Topics to cover

- **Introduction to CaBA Chalk Streams Restoration Group**
- **Pressures on Chalk Streams**
- **What we are doing to protect chalk streams**
- **Hope for the future**





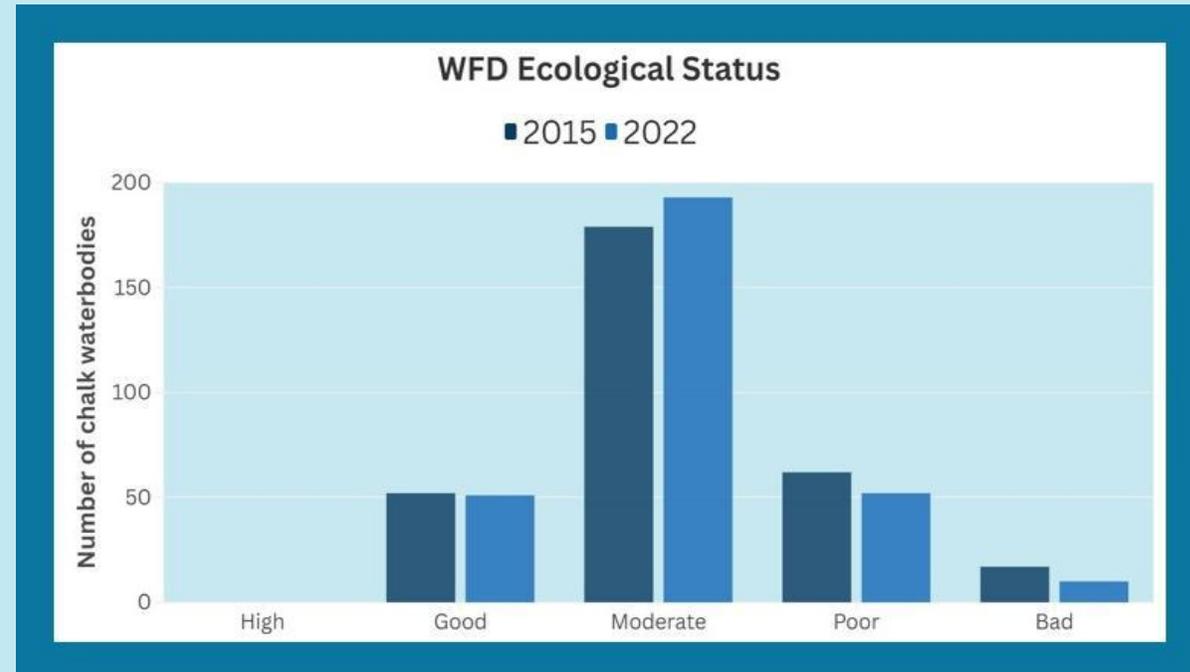
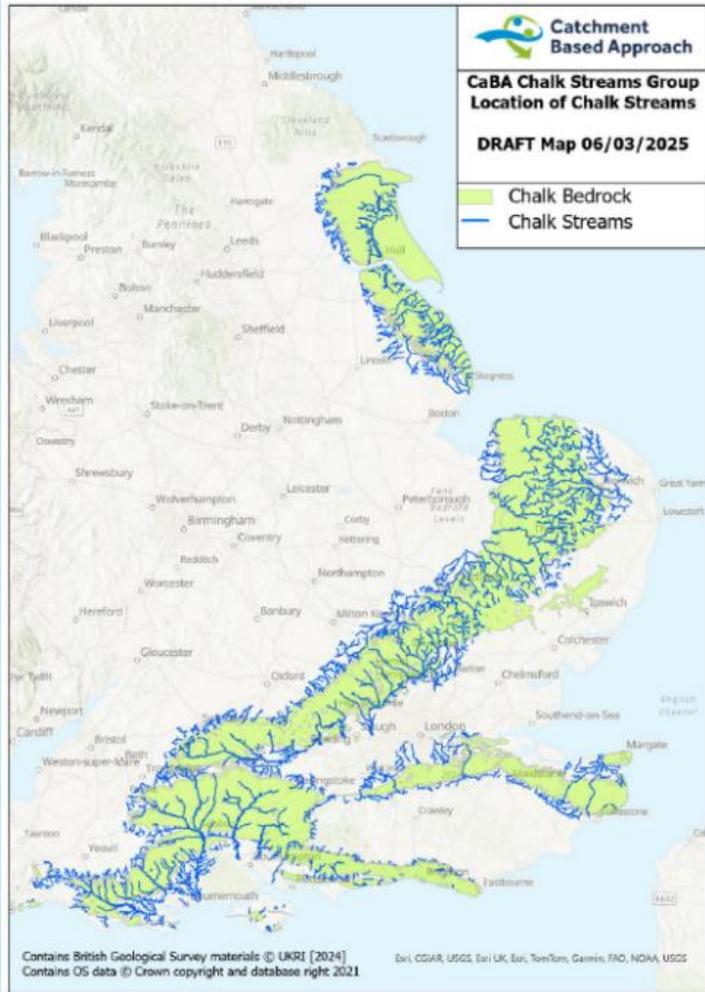
What makes a chalk stream?

A common set of characteristics:

- Clear, clean gravels
- Strong flow from chalk groundwater
- Limited surface run off so a stable flow regime
- Low energy system
- Low natural sediment input
- Importance of in channel and riparian vegetation
- Winterbourne reaches

Which lead to a fantastic habitat with great biodiversity

Condition of chalk streams



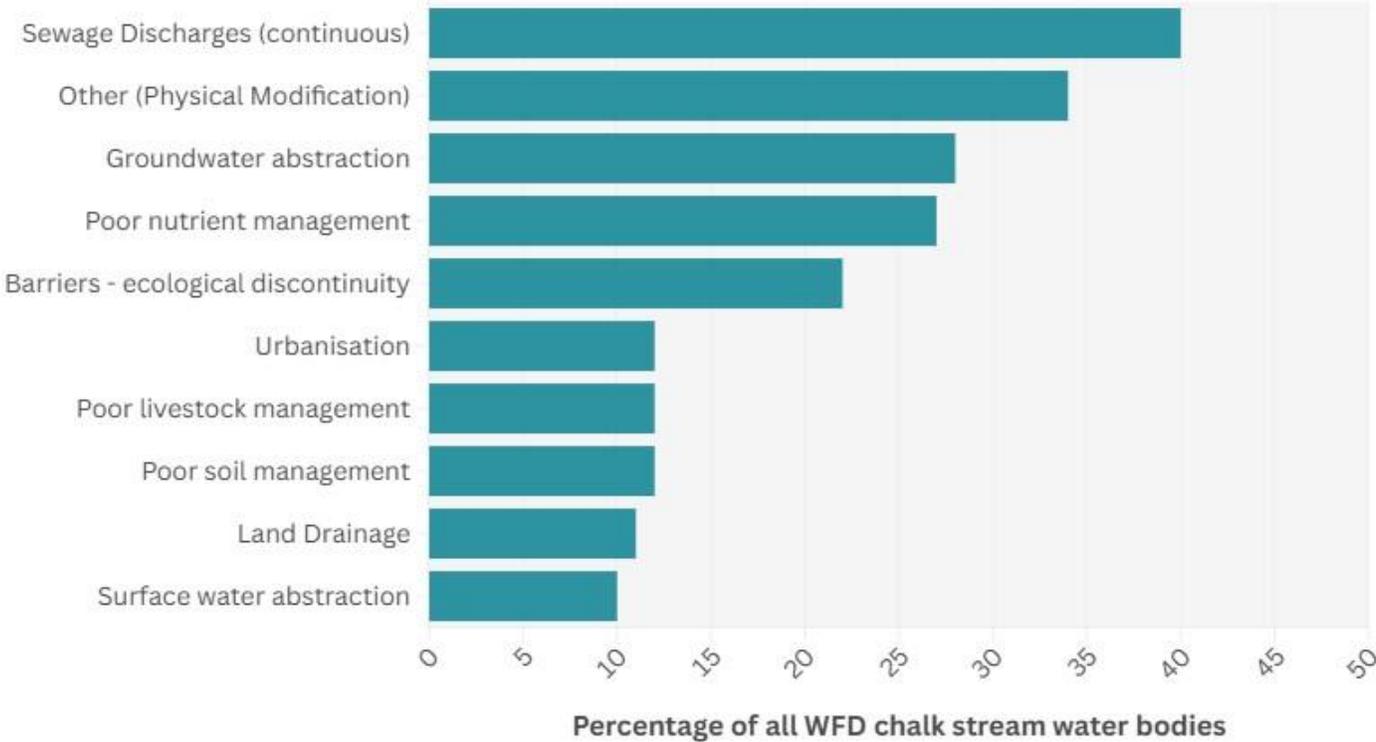
83% of chalk stream WFD waterbodies are not achieving Good Ecological Status

Pressures on Chalk Streams



Top 10 activities affecting WFD chalk stream waterbodies

Listed as Reasons for Not Achieving Good Ecological or Chemical Status



New and emerging pressures



A history of chalk stream protection

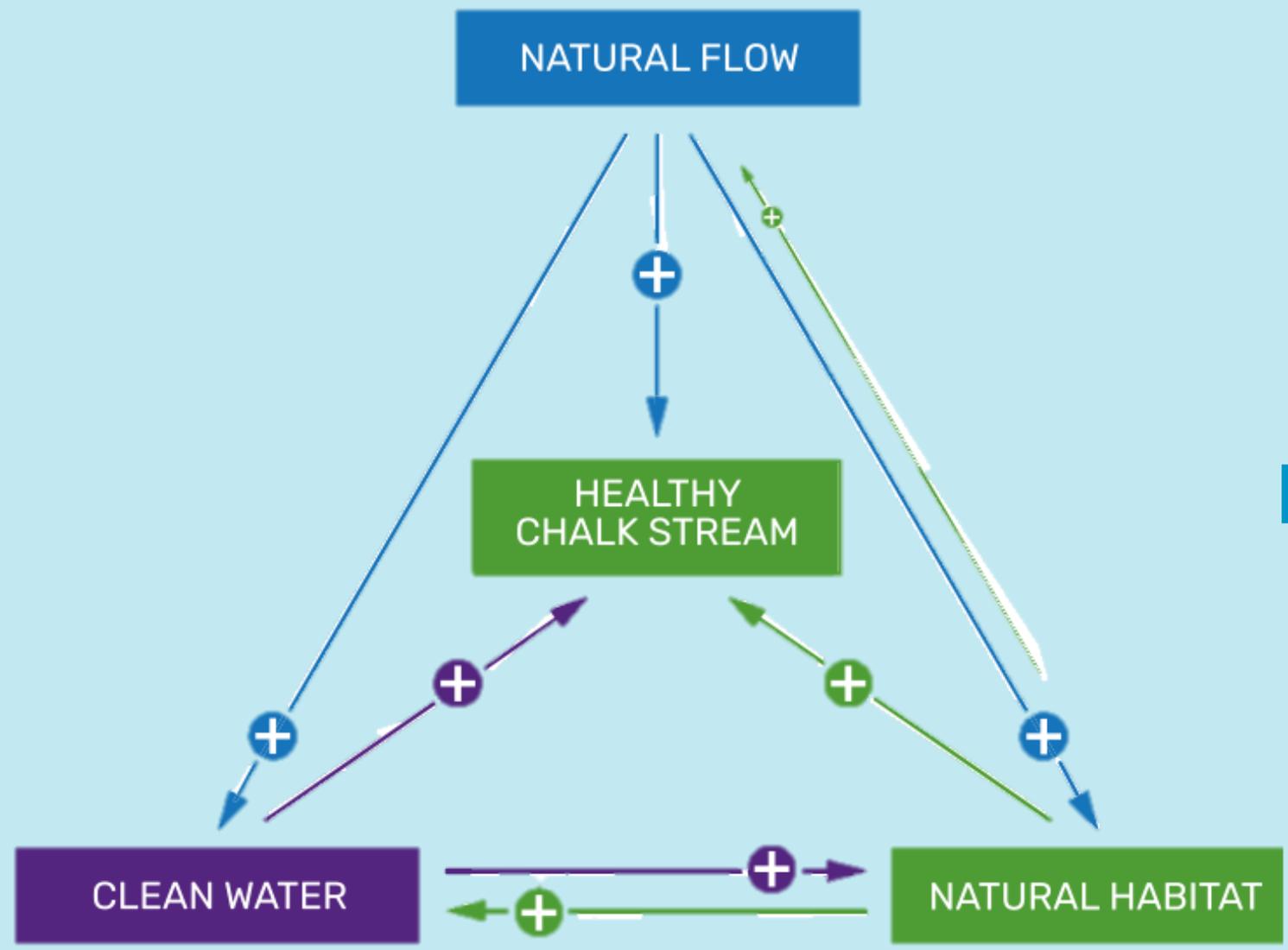


2004

The State of England's Chalk Rivers.

A report by the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group for Chalk Rivers





The Trinity of Ecological Health

CaBA Chalk Streams Restoration Group



CaBA Chalk Stream Support Group

Defra / EA / NE, Ofwat, Water Companies, eNGOs, Farming sector

Expert Panels

Water
Quality

Water
Quantity

Physical
Habitat

Wider academic and practitioner community

eNGO
Sub Group

Flagship
Projects

Delivery Partners

Rivers Trusts, Wildlife Trusts, Catchment Partnerships

Grassroots

Local chalk stream groups, local authorities, fishing clubs and associations, landowners, individuals

Annual Review



Collection

CaBA Chalk Stream Annual Review 2024/25

An update on the state of our chalk streams and the work of the CaBA Chalk Streams Restoration Group

Get started



1 Introduction and State of Chalk Streams



2 Championing chalk streams



3 Water Quantity Update



4 Water Quality Update



5 Physical Habitat & Ecology Update



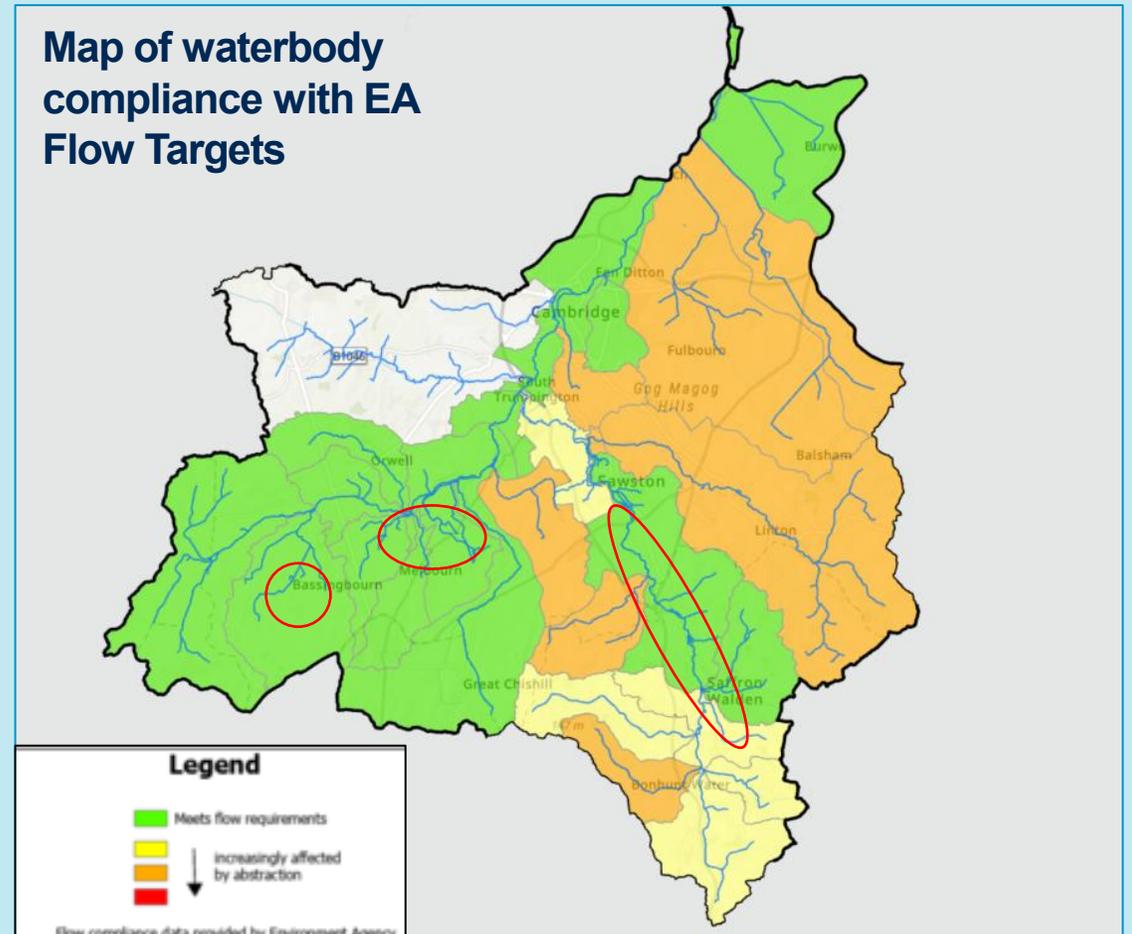
6 Summary and Way Forward



Some of the pressures on Chalk Streams in the east of England

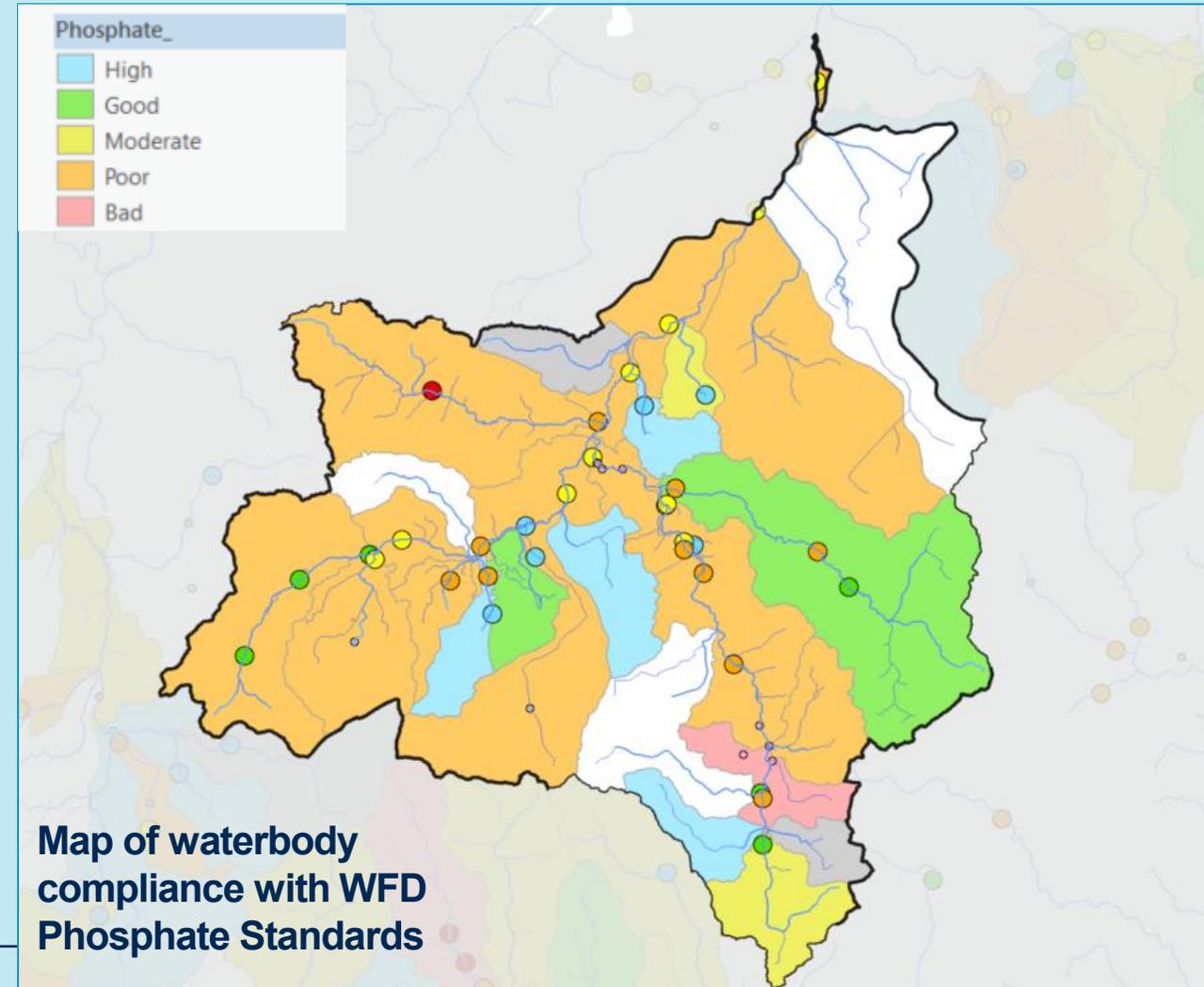
Abstraction Pressures in the Cam Valley

- ❑ The EA use the Environmental Flow Indicator (EFI) to show where flow is or is not **supporting** Good Ecological Status
- ❑ Further assessments are carried out to ensure protection of designated sites and to protect groundwater
- ❑ Often groundwater models are used to determine how abstraction affects various rivers
- ❑ The EA's methodology does not always adequately characterize impacted rivers such as the Mel, Shep and upper Cam
- ❑ Significant abstraction pressure from agriculture as well as public water supply



Water Quality Pressures

- ❑ Phosphate is of interest for chalk streams
- ❑ Majority of Cam catchment has Poor WFD status for Phosphate
- ❑ Individual samples show a more detailed assessment of impact
- ❑ Balance between Water Co and other sources varies
- ❑ High nitrates are also an issue



Other Water Quality issues



[Tackling chemical pollution of freshwater: The... | The Rivers Trust](#)

And not forgetting all the other challenges we need to keep working on....



We need to ensure our chalk streams are more resilient for a changing future



So what are we doing to improve the situation?

The 5 core themes in our Annual Review



One Big Wish

Our overarching ambition to ensure that chalk streams are recognized in a way that secures their protection and investment

Water Company Investment

We need to target water co investment to deliver the best outcomes and be able to track progress in delivery of environmental improvements

Innovate for faster action

The scale of the task to improve chalk streams is huge and we need to do things differently to deliver quicker, more resilient and cost effective solutions

Data and Evidence

Regulator datasets have been declining whilst citizen science initiatives are expanding – we need high quality, joined up monitoring programmes

Working together

We know we can achieve better outcomes and deliver better value for money when we work together

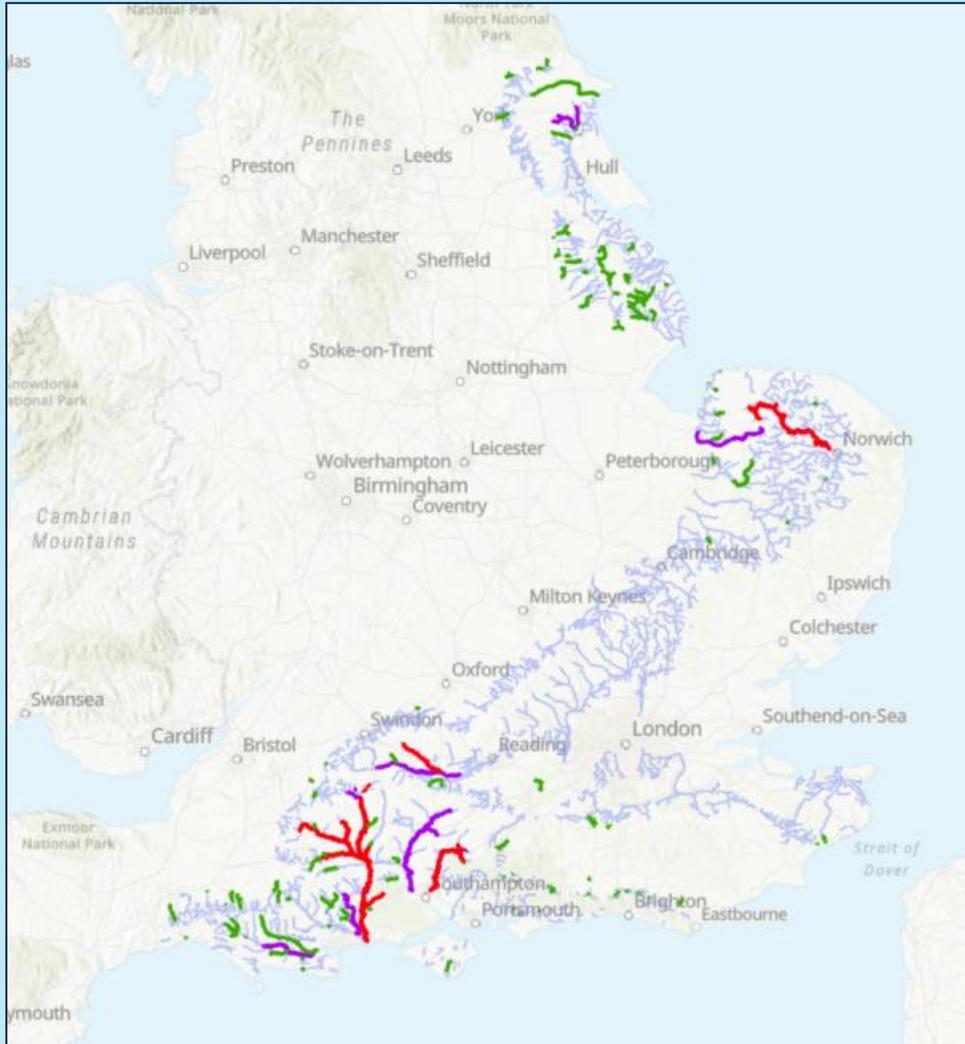
One Big
Wish



Our one big wish

“Rivers are found all over the world, but chalk streams are very largely English. They should be our pride and joy. Enhanced status which drives investment – whatever form that needs to take – will allow them to become so.”

Designation of chalk streams



 4 Special Areas of Conservation

 11 Riverine SSSIs

Local Wildlife Sites (not mapped)

 Priority River Habitat



CaBA Chalk Streams Recovery Pack



Following publication of the Chalk Stream Implementation Plan, Defra started to draft a Chalk Stream Recovery Pack

General Election called in Spring 2024

Status of Recovery Pack became unclear



Petitions
UK Government and Parliament

Closed petition
Don't abandon the Chalk Stream recovery pack

We think the chalk stream recovery pack would increase investment, regulation and transparency; improving the state of all rivers. We feel Chalk streams' rarity, cultural and ecological importance should make them a priority for conservation, sustainable water management and restoration initiatives.

[More details](#)

This petition is closed
All petitions run for 6 months

13,081 signatures

[Show on a map](#) 100,000

Some of what the Government said in response to the petition



*“This Government will restore our chalk streams to **better ecological health**, fixing the systemic issues in the water system is essential to address the multiple pressures facing chalk streams.”*

*“Our **Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan** ensures chalk streams are prioritised for improvement as part of the record £11 billion investment to improve nearly 3,000 storm overflows nationwide”*

*“**Water companies** will invest £2 billion over the next 5 years to deliver more than 1,000 targeted actions for chalk stream restoration as part of our Plan for Change”*

*“We're tackling one of the biggest impacts on chalk streams by reducing the **risk of harmful abstraction** by an estimated 126 million litres daily by 2030, through the amendment of water company abstraction licences, protecting vital water flows to these fragile ecosystems.”¹⁶*

What we want to see from government

We want to see:

- Chalk streams properly taken into account in **Government policy**
- Adequate **funding for catchment working** and delivery, including a greater mandate for CaBA partnerships
- **Time-bound goals** for addressing the multiple issues facing chalk streams and to use the best available information to target activity to the areas where we can have the greatest impact
- Greater direction to drive **innovation, collaboration and creative problem solving** so that we can see quicker delivery of improvements



Environmental Improvement Plan



Commitment 28 – Restore chalk streams to better ecological health, ensuring protections and investment towards these habitats

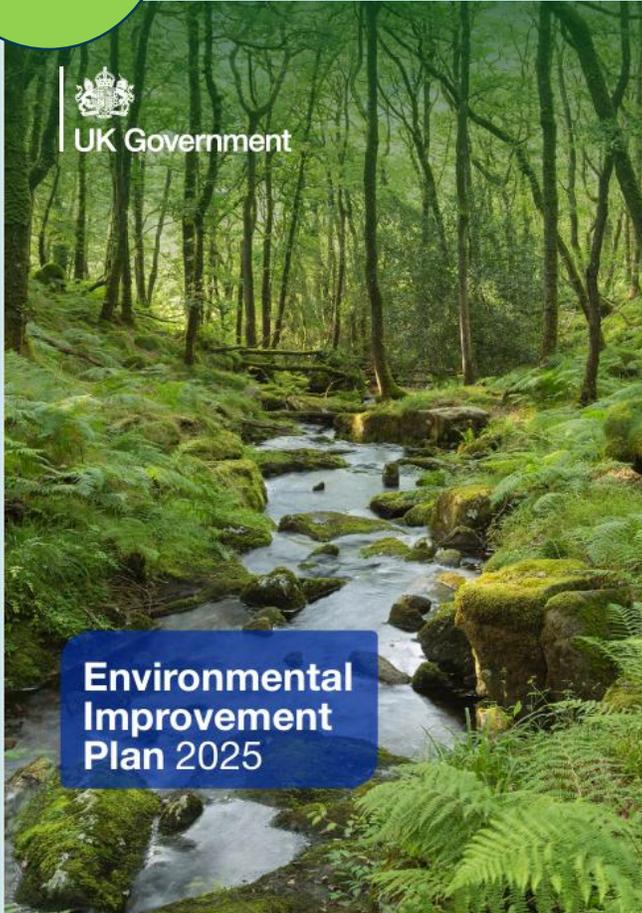
Reduce water company abstraction from chalk streams by 126 MI/d by 2030

Implement the EA's National Framework for Water Resources

Invest in chalk stream restoration through the Water Restoration Fund and WEIF over the next 2 years

Drive over £2bn investment from water cos into the restoration of chalk streams – including storm overflow high priority chalk sites

Support and facilitate 11 Flagship chalk stream projects through EA teams and through research and funding and holding water cos to account for delivery



Environmental
Improvement
Plan 2025

Embedding Chalk Streams into policy

Activity from 2025 – through to early 2026



Planning and Infrastructure Bill

NPPF Consultation

Irreplaceable Habitat Consultation???

Independent Water Commission (Cunliffe Review)

EIP

Water White Paper

Transition Plan

Water Reform Bill

MP Chalk Stream Event



Clean Water Now campaign



CLEAN WATER NOW.

Priorities for nature recovery,
pollution reduction and access to
a healthy environment

Wildlife and
Countryside **LINK** 

A coalition of 40 organisations aiming to try
and shape the Water Reform Bill.

Their aims are:

- Fix the System
- Stop the polluters
- More water, more wetlands, more wildlife

A new idea.....

2026

Chalk Streams (UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site)

A
BILL
TO

Require the Secretary of State to take the necessary steps to nominate the UK's unique chalk streams as a serial UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site

That: Pippa Heylings
Dr Roz Savage
Victoria Collins
Charlotte Cane
Liz Jarvis
Dr Danny Chambers
Vikki Slade
Alex Brewer
Olly Glover
Simon Hoare
Carla Denyer
Chris Hinchliff

present the Bill.

Pippa Heylings accordingly presented the Bill.



CaBA Chalk Streams Restoration Group Chair Ali Morse supporting Pippa Heylings 10 minute rule bill

Action in Local Government



Rights of the river

- Multiple councils now have rights of river motions or charters offering better protection for chalk streams

Adopting chalk stream policies

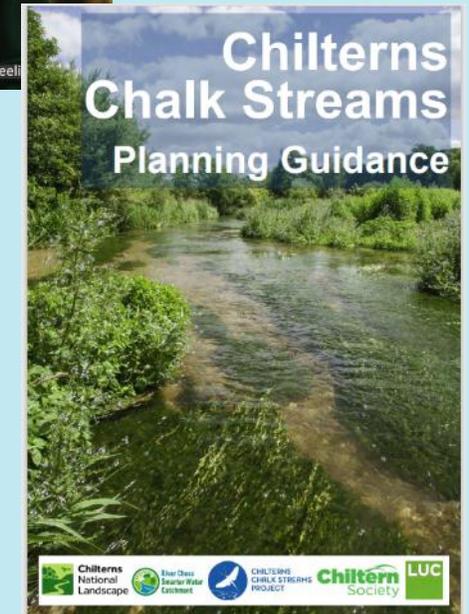
- Buckinghamshire Council have adopted chalk stream specific planning policies

Supporting local groups

- Many councillors are actively engaged with their local groups carrying out citizen science and supporting local work with their expertise and often funding too



<https://www.bbwt.org.uk/news/buckinghamshire-council-votes-unanimously-protect-local-rare-habitats>



Local Nature Recovery Strategies

- Working with Big Chalk to make sure chalk streams are recognised in all LNRS
- Generic measures include addressing obstacles, reconnecting rivers to floodplains, supporting catchment groups
- Chalk specific measures include reducing abstraction, monitoring and mapping chalk streams



Chalk streams

RD3 ► conserve and restore chalk streams, their water quality and associated habitats to preserve and improve their high ecological value to both nature and people

►► ENHANCE Actions

RD3A- establish natural or semi-natural buffer zones up to 50 metres wide adjacent to all chalk streams and their headwaters, winterbourne sections and springs to improve river water quality, and consequently their biodiversity value and ecological functionality.

This will help reduce sedimentation of rivers by better land management of the chalk river catchment to create habitats that help prevent soil erosion and stop sediments entering watercourses.

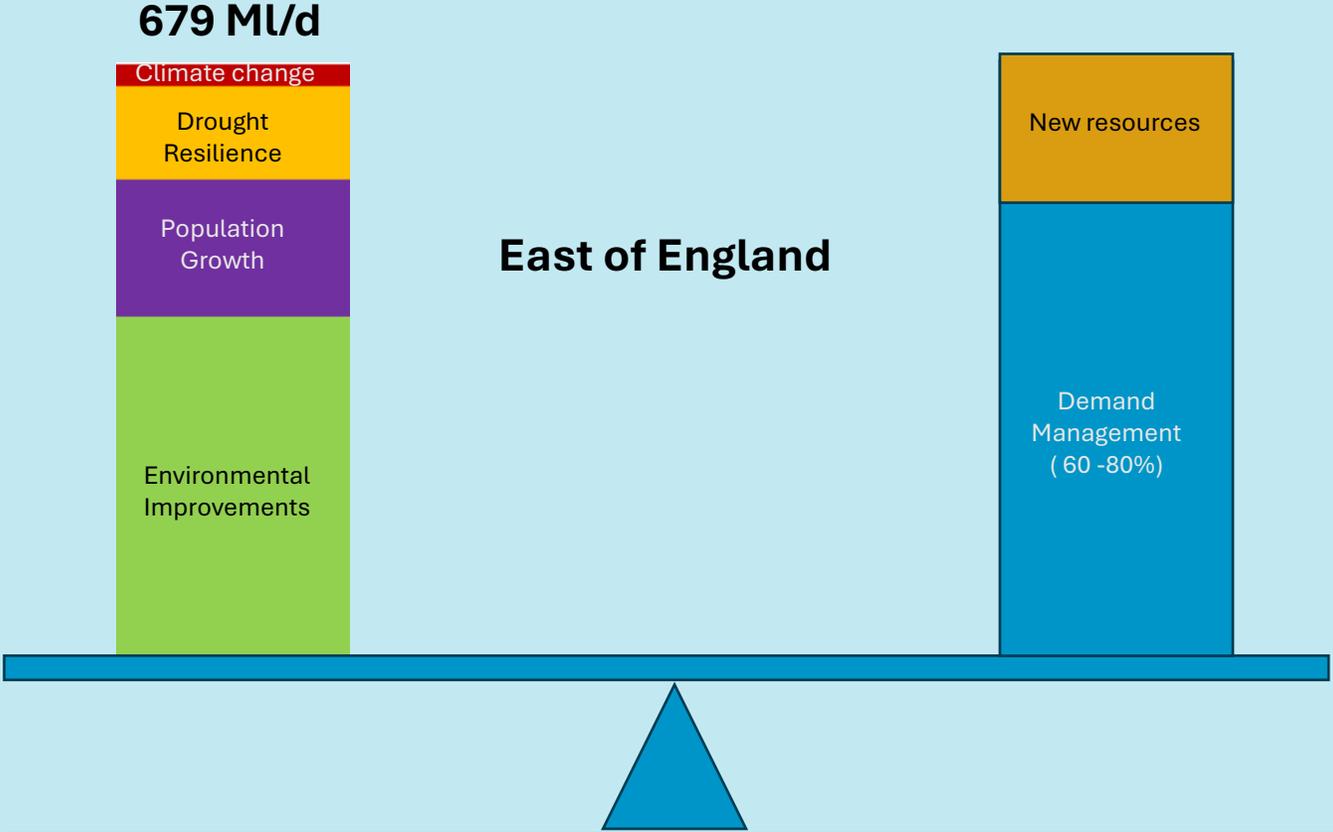
Working together

Planning for Future Water Needs

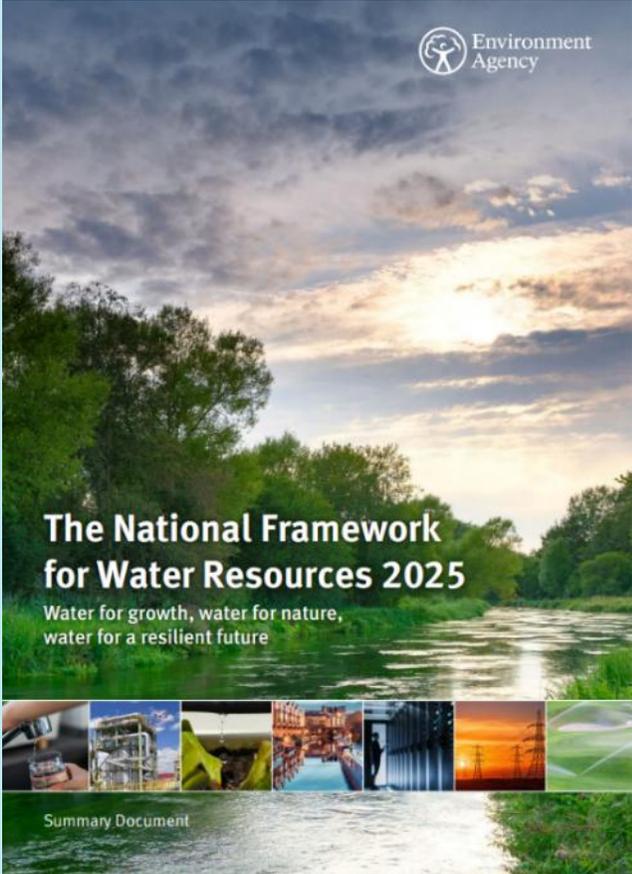


Additional public water supply needs between 2030 and 2055

How the challenge will be met



And more water will be needed for other abstraction sectors



[National Framework for Water Resources 2025: water for growth, nature and a resilient future - GOV.UK](#)

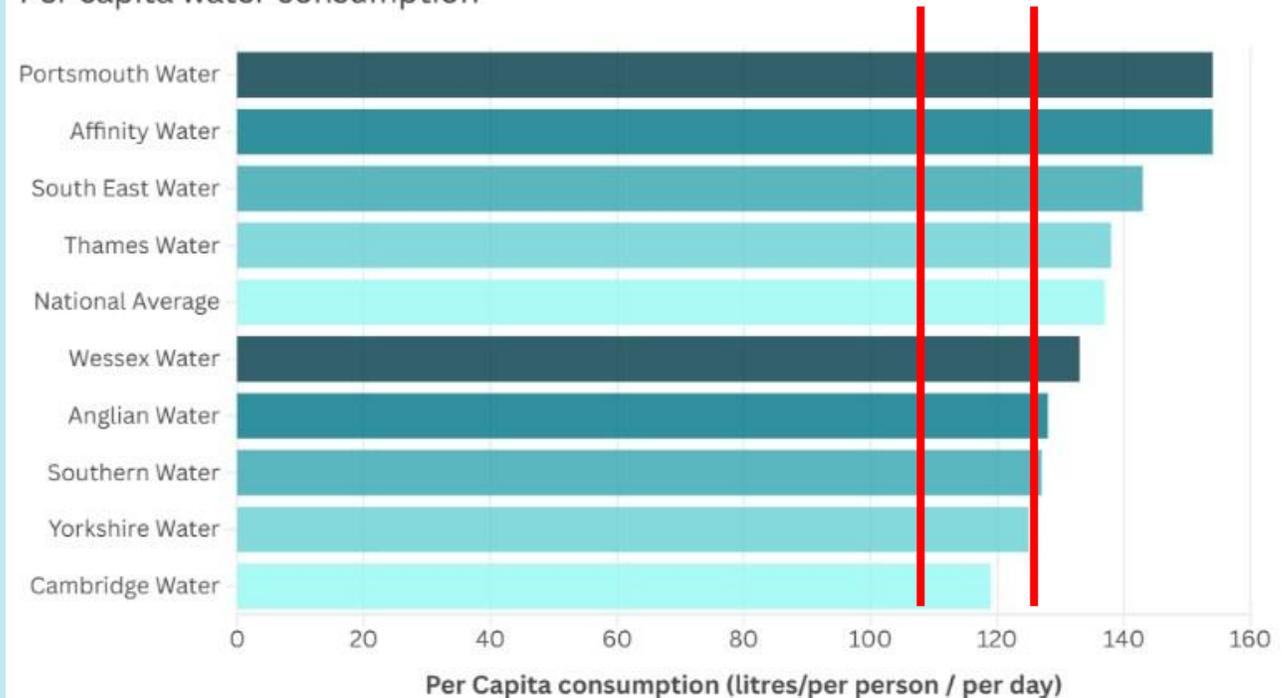
Are we ready for the challenge?

“Achieving greater water efficiency must be a national priority, requiring coordinated efforts from government, water companies and consumers.”

[Water resources 2024 to 2025: analysis of the water industry’s annual water resources performance - GOV.UK](#)

Chalk Stream Water Companies

Per capita water consumption



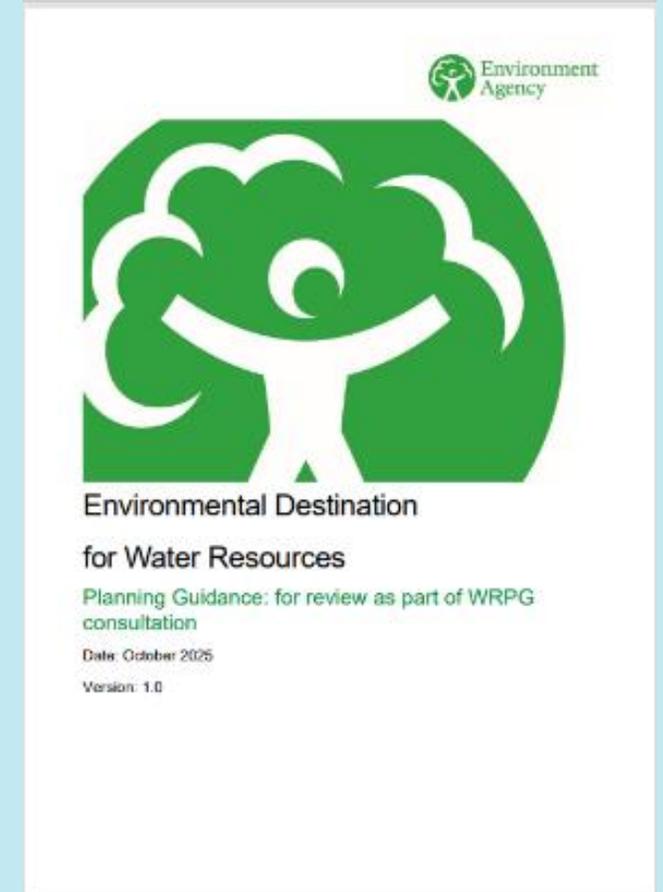
Working
together

Making sure the environment gets a fair share



The EA have recently consulted on guidance for establishing an Environmental Destination for Water Resources

- Led by Regional Water Resources Groups
- Working with local groups
- Evidence led
- Identifying options for securing water supplies
- Prioritising action to improve the water environment



Lots of questions on the Environmental Destination



How does it link to the Programme of Measures?

Which water bodies are most at risk from growth and climate change?

What is EA position on long term use of augmentation schemes?

We need to understand why so many rivers are still apparently impacted

How can we make sure the chalk streams that are most impacted are protected as quickly as possible?

How can we be more innovative and push for short to medium term actions to build resilience?

Water Resources Actions planned over the next 5 years



2025

2026

2027

2028

2029

2030

Environmental Destination Investigations

No Deterioration Investigations

Investigate effectiveness of 9 wells
scheme on the Hobsons Brook

River restoration (Cam, Granta and Wilbraham River)

Licence capping to be complete by 31/3/2030

(Mill River, Mel, Rhee, Cam, Soham & Bottisham Lodes, Granta)

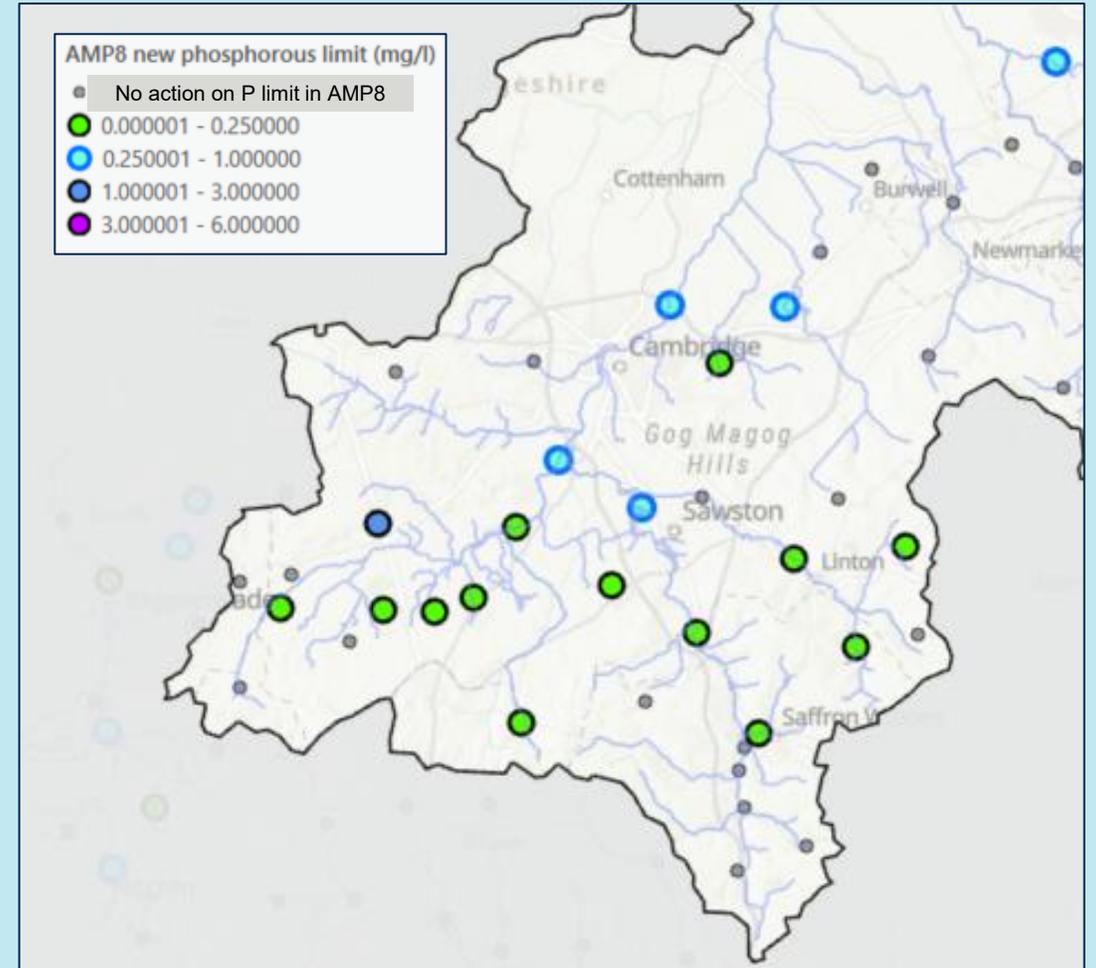
AMP 8 Planned Investment in Water Quality measures

**Significant investment in tightening
Phosphorous Limits across multiple sites**

Other work

Increase capacity at Sawston

Storm Tank / reduce storm overflows on the
Rhee



Water
Company
Investment

Innovate
for faster
action

Working with others to identify future WWTW improvements

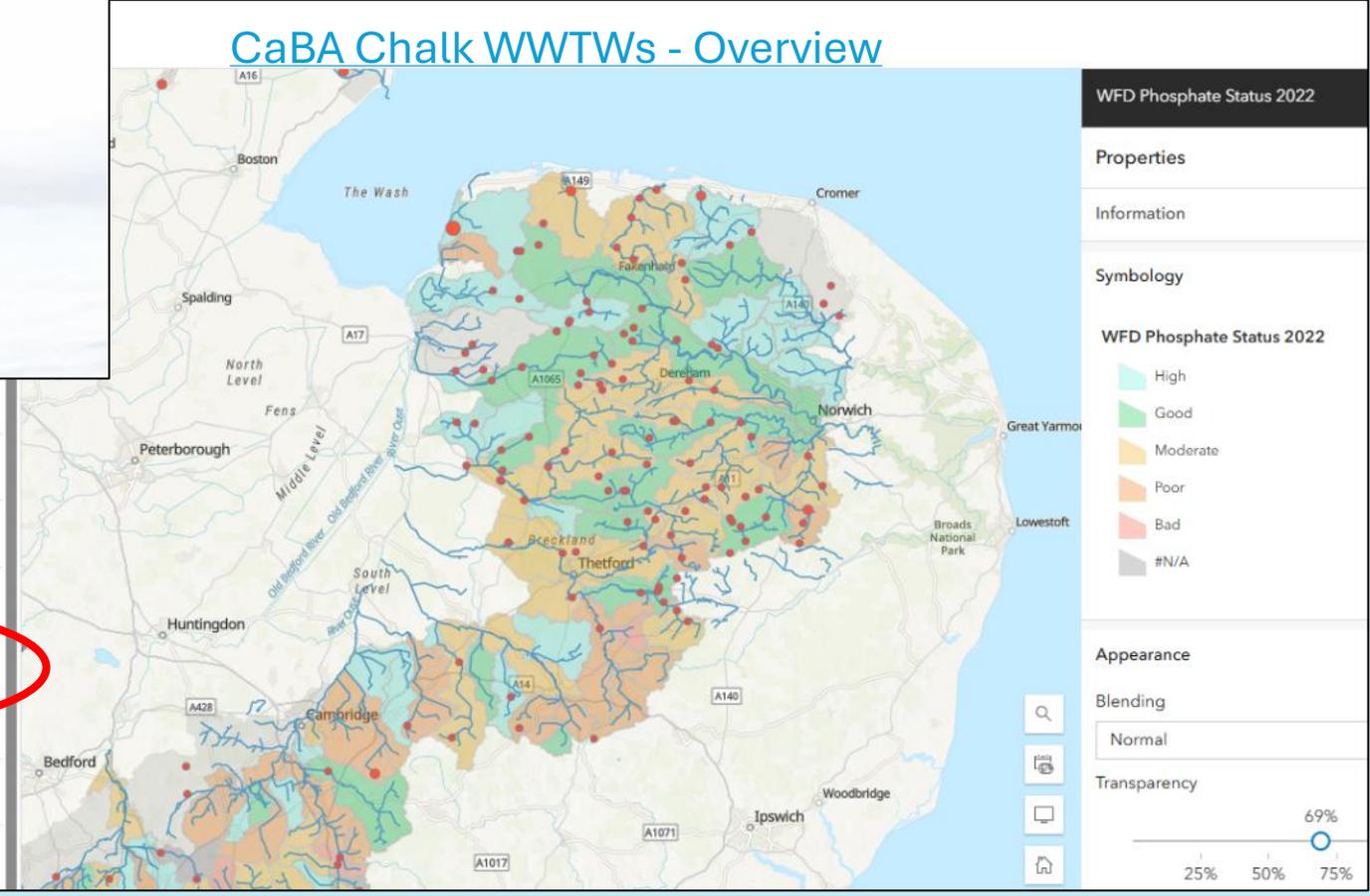


Headstart

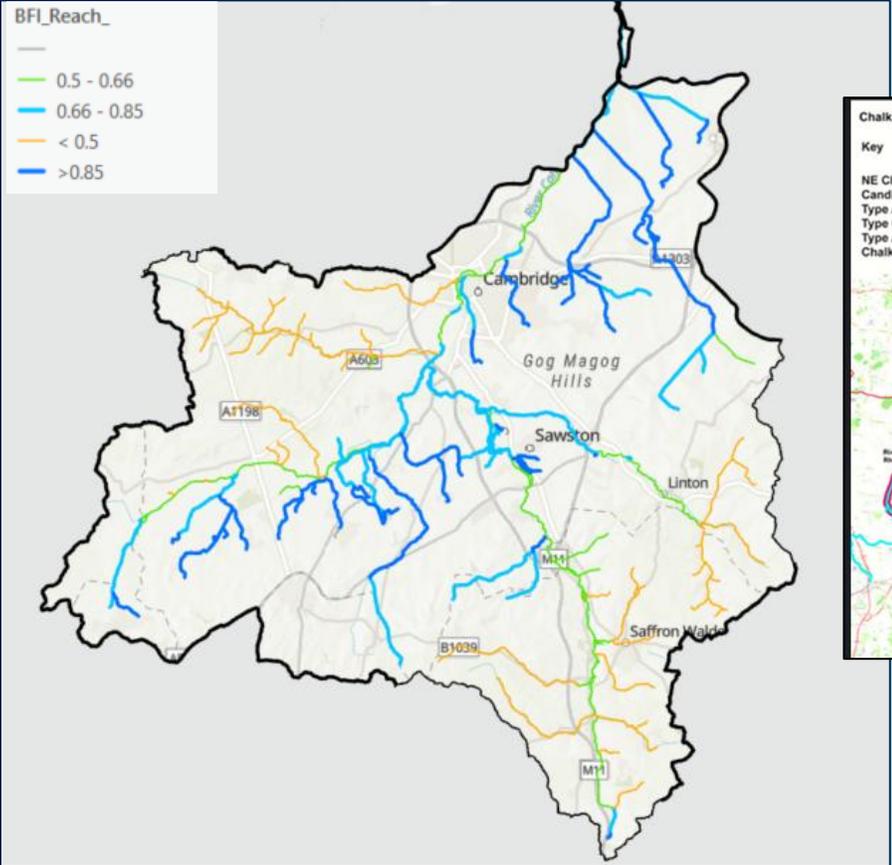
Using headwater catchments
to kickstart nature recovery

CaBA Chalk WWTWs - Overview

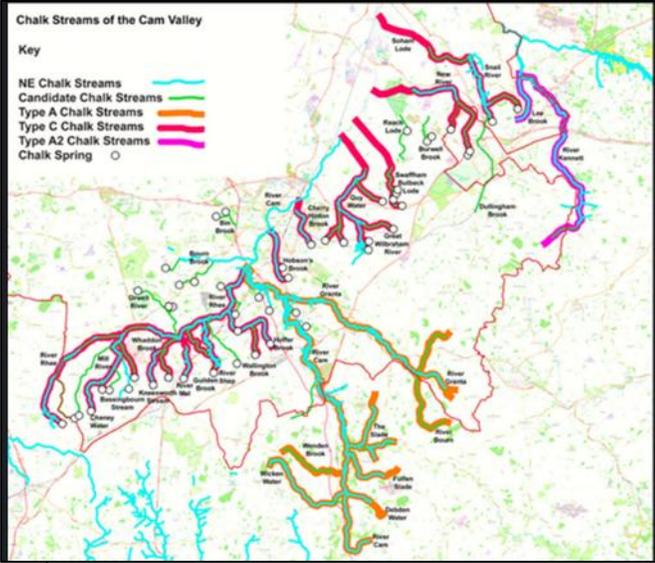
- AMP8 Schemes
- Stricest P limit at April 2020
- Stricest P limit at April 2025
- Stricest P limit at April 2030
- Sites with no P limit at April 2030**
- CaBA Chalk WWTWs
- WFD Phosphate Status 2022
- CaBA_Chalk_WBs_draining_to_chalk



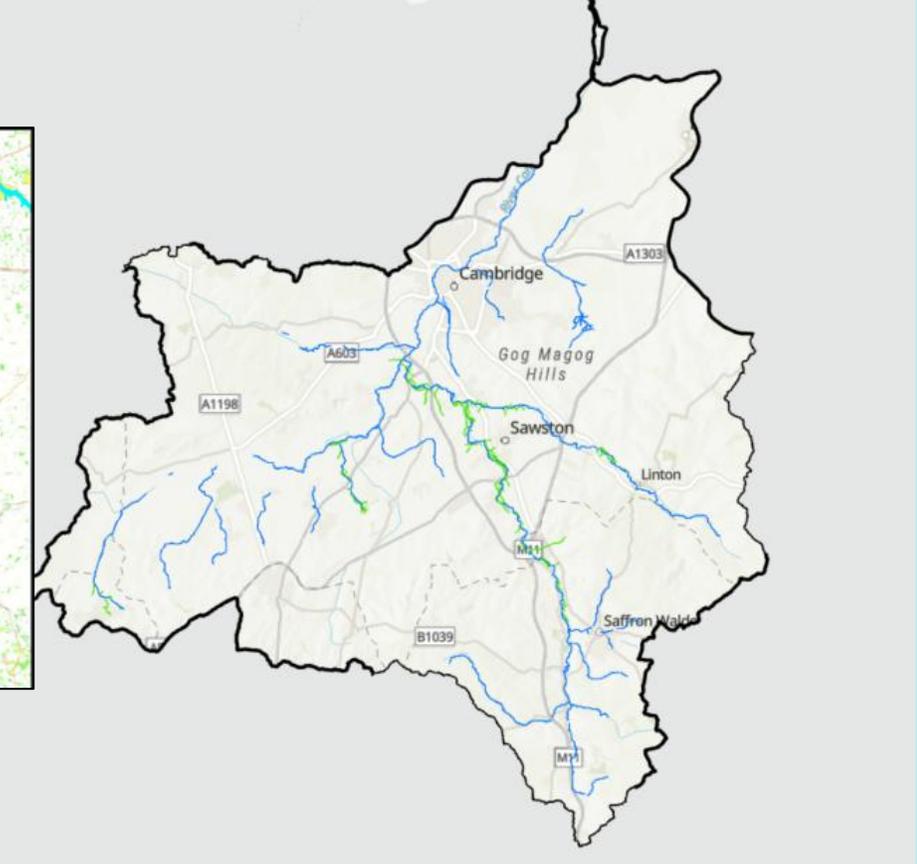
Data and Evidence - mapping



CaBA Working Map



Steve Boreham's Map



Natural England Map

Data and Evidence

The inspiring stories of Citizen Science



Detecting pollution and providing evidence for action

Smart Rivers monitoring contributing to filling in the gaps

[Home - CastCo](#)

Engagement and education

Fostering a connection to the local river environment

Developing new techniques to expand our impact



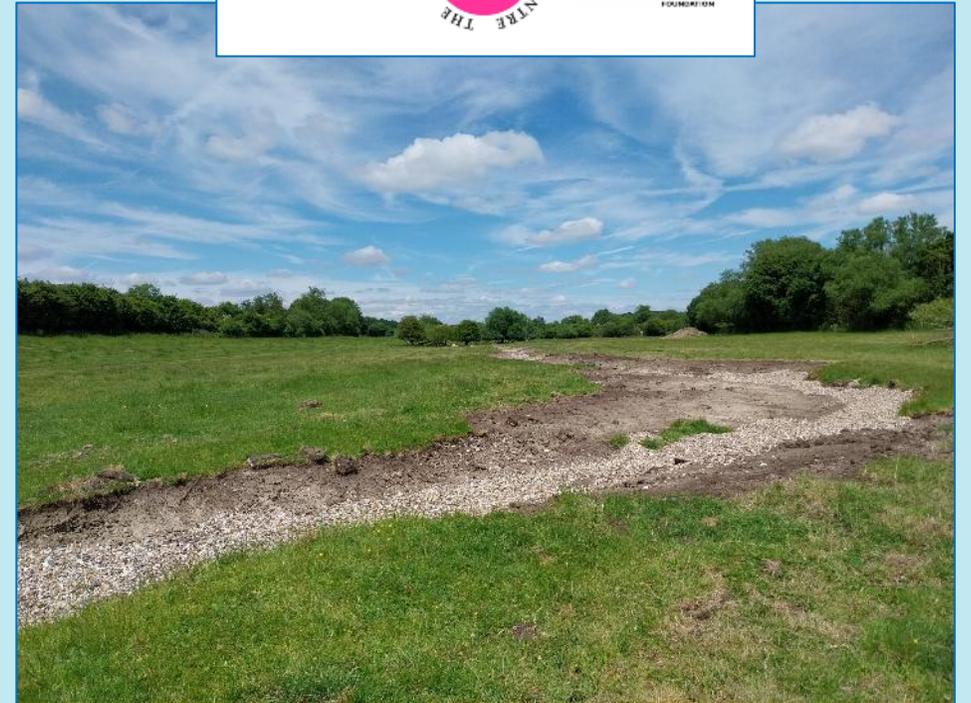
Working
together

River Restoration Hub



- Developing a River Restoration Hub and a chalk stream restoration community
- Workshop style webinar series
 - Starting with headwaters on 25th March
- Hosted site visits
- Updated chalk stream management guide
- Series of knowledge exchange videos

River restoration hubs



Working together

Working together to share knowledge, data and experience



Webinar: Chalk Streams Strategy Update

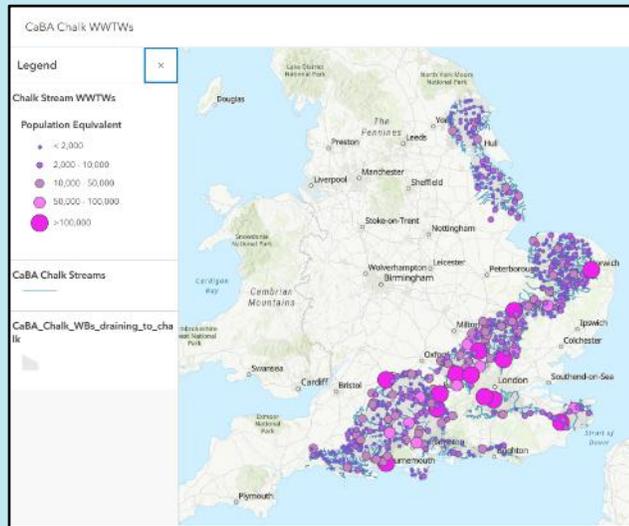
Categories:

Research | Delivering Improvements | Chalk Streams



Citizen Science on the River Chess
A report on our findings from 2021 to 2025

Chilterns National Landscape | Chilterns Green Systems Project | River Chess Inaugural Water Catchment



Did you know...

...that some of the chemicals we use in our homes and gardens can be found in the River Chess?

Ever Dose Invertebrate Catchment | Chilterns Green Systems Project | Chilterns National Landscape

WATERCRESS & WINTERBOURNES

Winterbournes Guidance

Heritage Fund

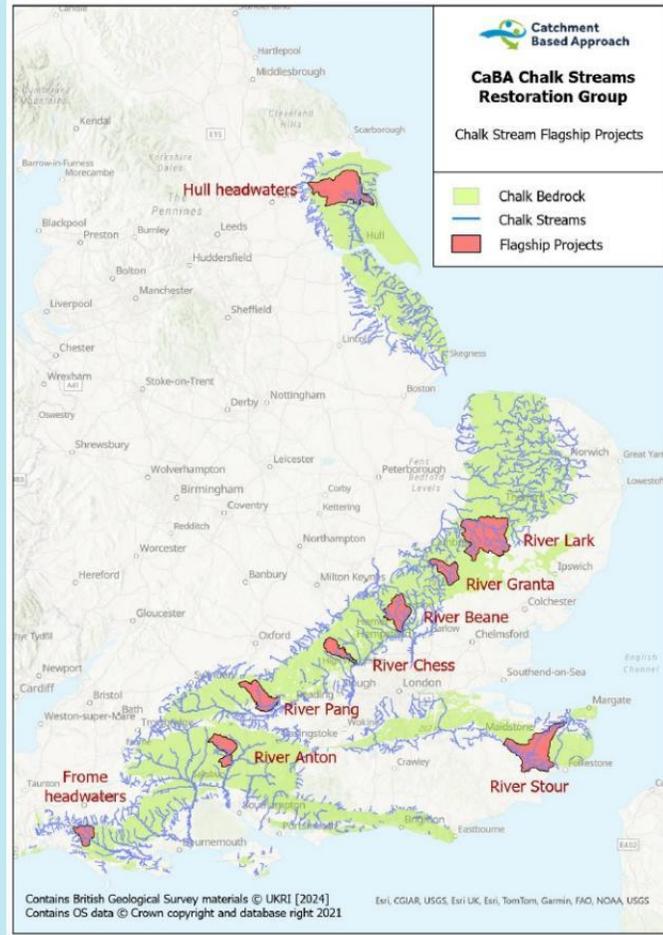
Working together

Innovate for faster action

Water Company Investment

Data and Evidence

Flagship projects



Flagship projects are intended to show what is possible and to act as exemplars to assist in the restoration of other chalk catchments

- They must be developed **collaboratively** with local stakeholder groups
- The aim is to restore natural physical and ecological processes to **restore ecosystem function**
- The plan should be at a **catchment scale** to show the ambition for the whole river, but broken down into accessible units detailing actions, costs and timescales for delivery
- The plan should cover **all aspects of catchment restoration** with an overall **aim to achieve good** or even high ecological status

River Chess – hope for the future



What can be achieved with funding, data and the right people...

- Extensive **Citizen Science** programme
- Abstraction has now stopped from several sources to **increase flow**
- Phosphate stripping has now been installed on the main WWTW and will improve **water quality**
- **River restoration** schemes
- Working with farmers and land owners to address **diffuse pollution**
- Involving and engaging with a wide group of stakeholders to drive **behavioural change**
- ...and there is more to come...

Our plans for 2026



Continue to raise the profile of the need to protect and restore chalk streams

Produce an **Annual Report** for 2025/26 to reflect on progress and the need for further action

Finish our inventory and map of chalk streams, build our **evidence base** and update datasets to guide action

Identify future water company investment needs to **improve water quality**

Start developing a Chalk Stream **River Restoration Guide** and support **Flagship projects**

Work with Regional Water Resources Groups, Water Companies, EA and others to help prioritise achievement of **sustainable abstraction**

Develop approaches to help address **agricultural and highways run off** into chalk streams

Practical action you can take (and probably already are!)

- Work together across catchment groups and show what can be achieved when we work together
- Build your evidence base
- Opportunity mapping like Cambridge Blue Lens
- Engaging in development of Programme of Measures
- Engage with WRE and tell them what is important to you
- Use our voices to make sure water is valued and is used as efficiently as possible by all water users
- Help me improve the chalk stream map so it can be used in policies
- Talk to politicians and decision makers

Regional Systems Planners



How to find out more



Take a look at our website and Annual Review

[Chalk Stream Strategy - CaBA](#)

Watch one of our webinars

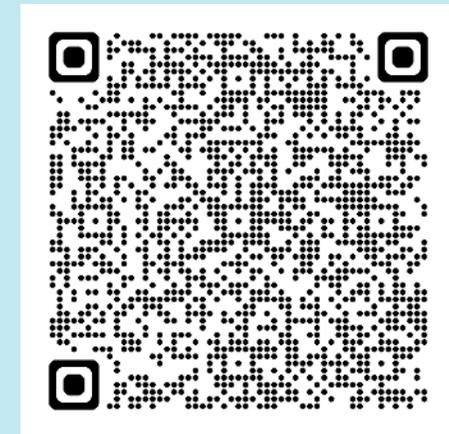
- River restoration
- Local Nature Recovery Strategies
- Chemicals in chalk streams
- Funding opportunities



Webinar: Chalk Stream Restoration

Categories:

Chalk Streams River Restoration & Wildlife

The image shows a thumbnail for a webinar. It features a photograph of a chalk stream flowing through a lush green landscape with trees and a wooden post in the water. Below the photo, the text reads "Webinar: Chalk Stream Restoration". Underneath that, it says "Categories:" followed by two buttons: "Chalk Streams" and "River Restoration & Wildlife".

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our email updates

Thank you for listening

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