

Freshwater





Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
Mid-strategy review – Executive Summary



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July 2025



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been produced by Resources for Change and funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. We would like to thank all those who were involved for their time and insights. We would also like to acknowledge our appreciation for the help and support from the Esmée team.

Established in 1997, **Resources for Change (R4C)** is a socially responsible, employee-owned consultancy with an excellent reputation for supporting social, community and environmental projects and organisations. We do this through varied evaluation approaches and through research, as well as large-scale consultation exercises that help to inform, for example, national strategy formation for government and NGOs. As a company motivated to make a difference ourselves, we encourage clients to critically examine progress with their priorities, as well as celebrating what has gone well.

The company has three directors (Mike King, Neil Smith and Deio Jones) and a wider team of experienced employees and associate consultants.

About this report

In January 2025, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation ('Esmée' or 'the Foundation') commissioned Resources for Change to undertake a mid-strategy review of their Freshwater work.

The Foundation published its Strategic Plan in 2020. The purpose of this commission was to look at how Esmée was working in the freshwater space, what had changed in the context since the publication of the Strategic Plan, and what progress had been made towards achieving its objectives over the last five years. The review also sought feedback from stakeholders on the opportunities for Esmée to add value to the freshwater sector.

The review was framed by six research questions:

1. The changing context for Esmée's goals: in what ways is it better or worse in 2025?
2. The need for Esmée's support: what's changed in the funding situation for Freshwater from 2020 to 2025?
3. The opportunities for progress: what are the levers for change in 2025?
4. What are the blockers for progress in 2025?
5. What difference has Esmée's work and funding made since 2020, and where is it struggling?
6. What feedback is there on the way Esmée is working in Freshwater?

The review was primarily undertaken through a series of structured conversations including a scoping discussion with the Esmée team, semi-structured interviews with team members, supported organisations and other stakeholders and a validation workshop where findings were shared with team members. This deliberative process was underpinned by extensive desk research into the wider context, and an analysis of information supplied by Esmée on supported projects.



Key findings

The review looked at changes in drivers, blockers, the external context for Esmée's freshwater goals and the impact of Esmée's work under four themes:

- **Policy, law and regulation**
- **Environmental data**
- **Funding and finance**
- **Public engagement and activism**

It also reviewed current data on the state of freshwater across the UK.

The findings are summarised against each of the four themes, drawing on interviews with stakeholders together with the desk research.

Overview

“Recent assessments ... show that over four in five (surface water bodies) are not in good ecological condition, or on a trajectory towards it. We have seen little change in recent years, despite measures designed to improve matters.”

Glenys Stacey, Chair, Office of Environmental Protection, 2024

The context for this review is that the quality of freshwater in the UK shows little or no improvement, even accounting for the lag in the data from the Water Framework Directive assessments. Freshwater in the UK remains heavily impacted by agricultural runoff, wastewater discharges, physical modification of rivers and in some cases, climate change-driven pressures like low flows and warming waters.

At the same time there are some encouraging signs of progress on the ground – for example, an increase in the pace and ambition of river restoration e.g. on the River Wye and River Lugg, more comprehensive catchment approaches involving a wide range of important stakeholders, a growth in farmer-led initiatives and a greater focus on and recognition of the role of nature-based solutions and natural flood management approaches.

There are also many interesting developments over the past five years across all four themes explored in the review from the upsurge in activism and political momentum, and the growth in citizen science, to the record level of investment approved through Ofwat's latest Price Review settlement for England and Wales.

I. Policy, law and regulation



Changing context, drivers and blockers

Since 2020, all four UK nations have made moves towards stronger regulatory legislative and policy frameworks to address the declining state of freshwater and freshwater habitats, yet significant concerns and issues remain, and there is a need for fundamental reform of the system.

Political momentum

Freshwater has rarely achieved such a high political profile as during the 2024 General Election campaign, driven by public concern over pollution, activism and media scrutiny. There are signs of increased political willingness to act but questions remain about the resolve to follow through over the long-term.

Weak enforcement

Weak enforcement is one of the biggest blocks to progress across the UK, with enforcement agencies under-resourced and over-stretched. In Wales there is a lack of an effective, permanent, environmental oversight body. Agricultural regulation remains particularly challenging.

Nonetheless, after years of decline, there are some positive signs; for example, the Environment Agency is increasing its monitoring work again 'to crack down on water sector pollution'¹ by increasing elements of its monitoring programme, including on-the-ground inspections of water company assets, and Ofwat is holding water companies more to account on environmental performance.

¹ [Inspection surge to crack down on water sector pollution](#)

Lack of joined-up policy

A lack of joined-up policy is another block to progress, with policies on urban development and economic growth increasingly seen as conflicting with freshwater goals. There are some positive efforts to improve cross-sector integration such as [Regional Land Use Partnerships \(Scotland\)](#), but these remain limited in scale.

Overall...

Progress is being driven by growing political attention on the water sector, along with stronger legal and regulatory frameworks, greater focus on enforcement and emerging policy support for nature-based solutions. However, these advances are held back, most notably by a long history of weak enforcement, fragmented and conflicting policies, erratic funding, and short-term political cycles that undermine much needed long-term reform. Without tackling these systemic issues, recent momentum risks stalling. Real impact will depend on sustained political will and better coordination across sectors.



I. Policy, law and regulation



Impact of Esmée's support

Esmée's support has played a critical role in enabling environmental organisations across the UK to influence freshwater policy, law and regulation, areas often overlooked by traditional funders.

By supporting core costs, Esmée has empowered NGOs to engage in strategic advocacy, holding polluters and public bodies to account, and to contribute expert input to national policy, resulting in stronger environmental protections.

Their investment has also addressed regional disparities in policy capacity, particularly in Wales and Northern Ireland, and supported long-term planning in England. Esmée has helped link grassroots activism, public engagement, legal action and scientific evidence to drive systemic change. This support has positioned a number of organisations as key players in the sector and has strengthened their ability to respond to emerging challenges.

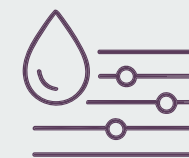


“Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's support is crucial for addressing challenges in freshwater policy advocacy.”

Interviewee feedback



2. Environmental data



Changing context, drivers and blockers

Since 2020, there have been notable developments in how freshwater and freshwater habitat data is collected, shared, and used across the UK. While technology and transparency have improved, important gaps in coverage and consistency of monitoring remain.

Patchy monitoring and data gaps

Government agencies have struggled to maintain water quality monitoring programmes due to funding and operational challenges. However, the expansion of Event Duration Monitors (EDMs), particularly across England and Wales, has been a major step forward, providing real-time data on sewage overflows.

Important data gaps remain, particularly for small water bodies such as ponds, headwaters, and streams, which are vital for biodiversity but often excluded from formal programmes.

Emerging technologies and citizen science as drivers

Citizen science initiatives have emerged as a major force in data collection but there are issues regarding integrating the data into official systems and decision making. Initiatives like [CaSTCo](#) (Catchment Systems Thinking Cooperative) aim to standardise citizen science protocols and represent promising steps forward.

Technologies like satellite imagery, machine learning and environmental DNA (eDNA) are helping to fill data gaps.

Overall..

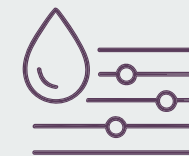
The UK's freshwater data collection and availability is improving in some areas, particularly through new technology and citizen science, but remains fragmented and inconsistent elsewhere. Limitations on official monitoring, challenges incorporating citizen science generated data into decision making, and limited coverage of ecologically important small water bodies continue to hold back progress. In Northern Ireland, public access to water quality data remains more limited than elsewhere in the UK, and concerns

have been raised around a lack of transparency and public engagement – for example in relation to the Lough Neagh ecological crisis.

For environmental data to better support freshwater recovery, progress will depend on aligning traditional monitoring with new technologies, working with citizen science in ways that enable collaboration with it as a credible data source, and addressing the gaps in current monitoring and data collection.



2. Environmental data



Impact of Esmée's support

Esmée's support for citizen science is playing an important role in strengthening the UK's capacity to understand and protect its freshwater ecosystems.

By investing in high-quality data collection, empowering communities and fostering collaboration between grassroots groups and regulatory agencies, Esmée's support is helping to create a more informed, engaged and resilient approach to freshwater conservation, for example like the [Riverfly Partnership](#) and [Angling Trusts Water Quality Monitoring Network](#).

This investment is helping to build confidence in data collected by volunteers and demonstrating the part that they can play in improving our understanding of the state of the freshwater environment and the issues affecting it.

In turn, this plays an important part in driving systemic change and the long-term stewardship of the freshwater environment.



3. Funding and finance



Changing context, drivers and blockers

Since 2020, the funding and finance environment for freshwater and freshwater habitats in the UK has evolved in several important ways.

Water industry investment

Public and political pressure have helped drive record investment, most notably, Ofwat's £104 billion Price Review settlement (England and Wales, 2025 – 2030). Whilst welcome, this comes after decades of underinvestment which has left infrastructure outdated and overstretched. The value of Nature Based Solutions (NBS), and Natural Flood Management (NFM) are increasingly recognised in policy as an important driver, yet investment in them remains modest.

Agricultural reform and farmer-led collaboration

Post-Brexit agricultural reform is key to progress in freshwater recovery, yet rollout of new schemes is slow and uneven. Lack of clear incentives or stable support for agriculture is an important block to progress. Farmer-led, collaborative initiatives are increasingly seen as an important mechanism to drive change, particularly given the prominence of agricultural sources of freshwater pollution.

Trust and foundation support

Trust and foundation support for freshwater lags behind other environmental priorities despite an overall rise in green philanthropy. Competition for limited funds has intensified, with smaller NGOs often struggling to access larger grants or secure the core or long-term funding needed for sustained delivery.

Green finance

Governments are increasingly turning to green finance to fund environmental outcomes, but nature markets remain underdeveloped, with weak governance frameworks, a lack of demand from investors and inadequate regulation. There is growing ambition, but the practical mechanisms are still being put in place. The government may also weaken Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements.

Overall...

Political focus on freshwater has helped drive funding but major blockers remain, including uncertainty around agri-environment schemes, a long-term persistent lack of investment infrastructure, and the slow progress in the development of nature markets and green finance. A continued public and political focus, clearer frameworks for green finance, and long-term support for catchment-scale approaches are seen as important to driving finance and funding for improving the quality of the UK's freshwater.



3. Funding and finance



Impact of Esmée's support

Esmée's support plays a critical role in strengthening the core capacity of environmental organisations, enabling them to develop and deliver impactful projects that deliver meaningful change for freshwater ecosystems.

The support enables organisations to attract additional investment and maintain a greater degree of independence, but more funding is needed from other philanthropic sources to co-invest. The strategic backing of early-stage ideas has catalysed innovation and laid the groundwork for long-term, sustainable solutions but this work is needed at scale, requiring more resources to help achieve Esmée's strategic goals.



4. Public engagement and activism



Changing context, drivers and blockers



Growth in public awareness and grassroots activism

Since 2020, public engagement with freshwater issues in the UK has grown rapidly, driven by widespread outrage over sewage pollution and amplified by media coverage, grassroots activism and greater data transparency. An increase in activities like wild swimming and paddleboarding have brought people into closer contact with rivers and lakes, making water quality concerns highly visible and personal.

Grassroots groups have gained traction, often proving more agile and vocal than traditional NGOs, and there has been a rise in digital campaigning and youth-led activism linking freshwater to broader environmental justice. Activist organisations have collaborated and played to their mutual strengths to good effect. For example, River Action, working with Surfers Against Sewage, are providing the secretariat to the Water Pollution All Party Parliamentary Group.



“It’s people that power change, and that’s local action, local activities.”

Interviewee feedback

4. Public engagement and activism



Changing context, drivers and blockers (continued)

Sustain the activism, broaden the focus

This momentum has been a powerful driver of political attention and accountability, with public pressure directly influencing parliamentary action and industry reform. Sustaining this pressure is seen as essential. However, stakeholders note a need to broaden the conversation beyond sewage to include agricultural pollution and climate impacts. Some also caution against becoming stuck in campaigning mode rather than building collaborative, solution-oriented strategies.

Behaviour change, trust and collaboration

A key challenge remains translating public concern into behavioural change. Many people do not connect their everyday actions and choices – such as water use, food choices or pesticide application – to the health of freshwater systems and the environment more widely.

Trust and collaboration at a local or catchment scale are vital to building effective responses with the public, or with specific groups such as the farming sector. Building trust requires long-term engagement, inclusive processes and investment in capacity, both for communities of place and interest.

Overall...

Public engagement and activism have become a major force in freshwater conservation, driving political momentum and holding polluters to account. To translate this into long-term change, the movement must broaden its focus, deepen collaboration, and connect public concern to personal and collective action. Harnessing this energy, while building trust and relationships, is essential for systemic reform.



4. Public engagement and activism



Impact of Esmée's support

Grassroots activism around freshwaters has emerged as a result of people's anger at the state of rivers and lakes where they live, with campaigning groups supported by Esmée drawing attention to these and keeping the more energising issues in the public eye.

The effectiveness of campaigning and activism has been increased through better sharing of data by regulators and the water sector.

More specifically, Esmée funding has enabled campaigning organisations like River Action and Surfers Against Sewage to build their support for community campaigners and amplify their voices to drive change by politicians, regulators and polluters.

By funding organisations that support grassroots efforts, inclusive and innovative approaches and collaborative campaigning, Esmée supports communities to become active stewards of their local freshwater. This demonstrates the potential of helping local voices to be heard and shows that communities can help to lead meaningful, systemic change.



Esmée's support

Overview of funding and support

ESMÉE'S FUNDING TOWARDS FRESHWATER

Freshwater
is the primary focus

£10.3m



Other funding where freshwater is a secondary benefit

Space for nature

£3.5m



Nature-Friendly
Farming

£2.7m



Peat

£1.6m



Fishing in tandem with
nature

£1.3m



Community-led art
and creativity

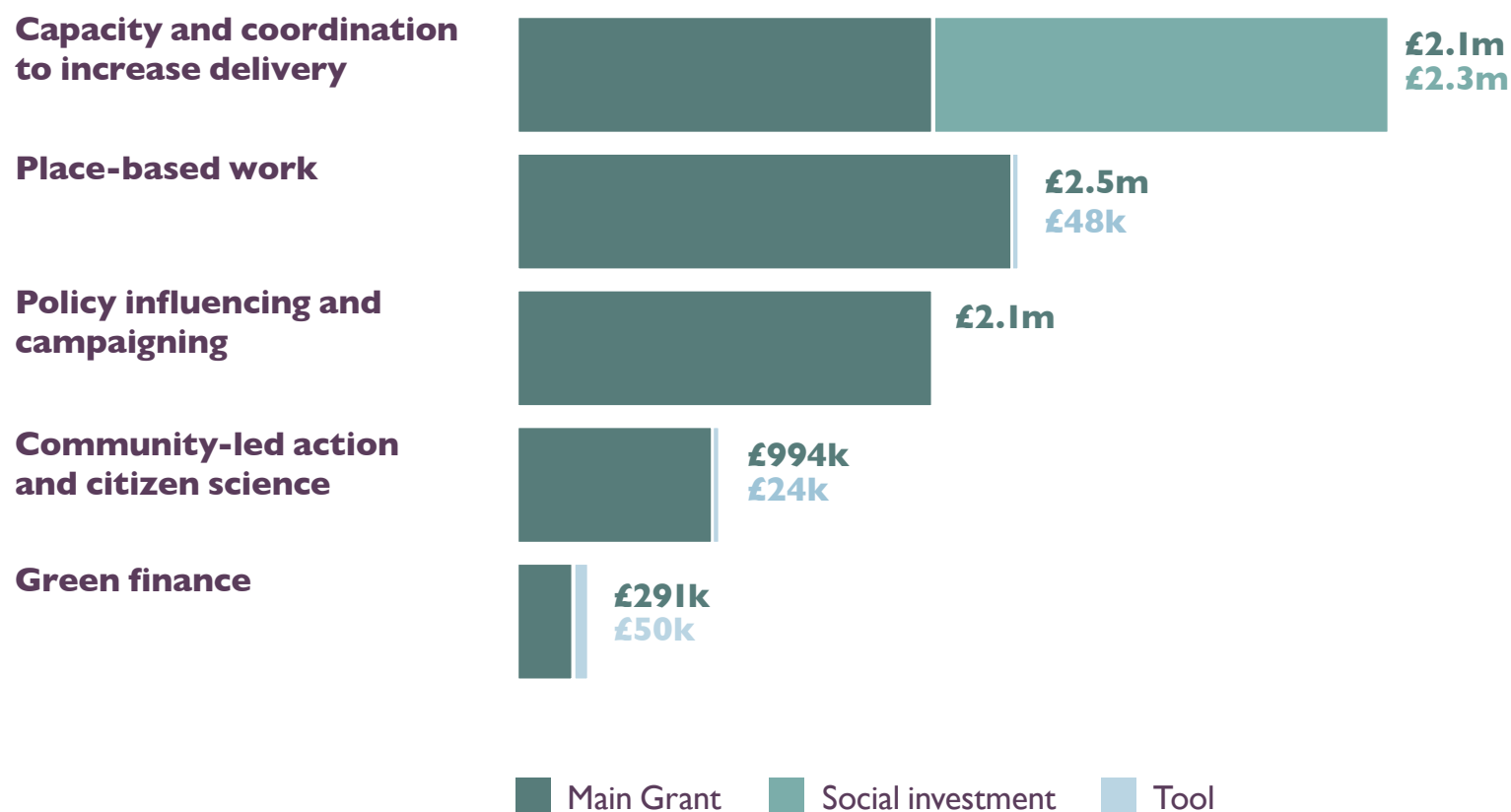
£152k



This chart shows the amount of Esmée's funding (active as of January 2025) where freshwater is either the primary or secondary focus.

Esmée's support

ESMÉE'S FUNDING BY AREA OF FOCUS AND SUPPORT TYPE



Esmée offers both grants and social investment. They also have a 'Tools' budget for work where Esmée plays a more proactive role such as convening and connecting organisations, and commissioning research or other consultancy support. One example of a Tool is commissioning a specialist communications agency to work with freshwater community campaign groups across the UK.

This chart shows the breakdown of funding by area of support and support type.

Esmée's support

Stakeholder feedback on working with Esmée

The interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive experiences from organisations supported by Esmée, highlighting the value of its flexible, long-term and independent funding. This approach enables organisations to respond to emerging needs, invest in their people, innovate and grow with confidence.

Esmée's support is particularly valued for enabling advocacy, community engagement, citizen science and grassroots initiatives, areas which are often overlooked by other funders. Esmée's role in supporting early-stage initiatives and community engagement can help to ensure the long-term sustainability and impact of activism and campaigning. By enabling policy advocacy and fostering financial resilience, Esmée acts as a key enabler of progress in freshwater conservation.

The straightforward application and reporting processes were also praised, as was the open, collaborative relationship with the Esmée team, which fosters trust, confidence and meaningful dialogue. While some funded organisations suggested greater clarity around funding priorities, there was a strong appreciation for the balance Esmée strikes between structure and flexibility. Overall, Esmée's approach is seen as empowering, supportive, and instrumental in enabling impactful and sustainable change across the freshwater sector.

“Esmée's funding means that they can remain independent from government funding, which allows their organisation to challenge the government and regulators effectively.”

Interviewee feedback

“The funding from Esmée Fairbairn allows flexibility in supporting policy work, enabling the organisation to focus on key areas while remaining adaptable to new policy developments.”

Interviewee feedback

“There's this kind of novelty cycle of like, always wanting to see something new, whereas actually, persistence in good work at this moment in time is probably the most valuable of commodities for us.”

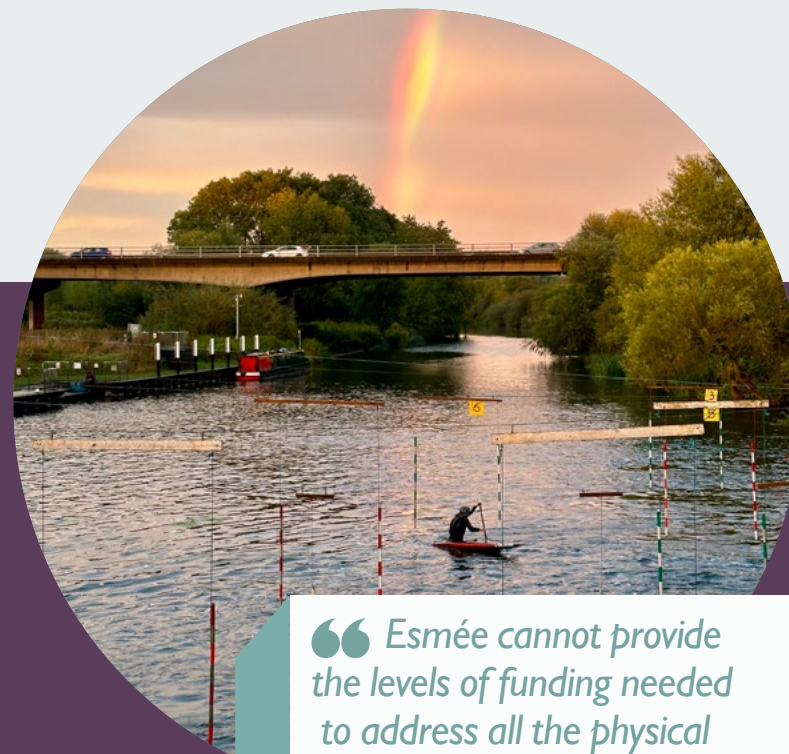
Interviewee feedback

Esmée's support

How Esmée could add value in the future

Across all themes explored, funded organisations consistently expressed appreciation for Esmée's flexible, and collaborative approach to funding. At the same time, there is a strong appetite for Esmée to build on this foundation by adopting an even more strategic and convening role within the freshwater sector. By strengthening knowledge-sharing mechanisms, supporting innovative funding models like green finance, enabling collaboration at scale, and facilitating catchment-based, community-driven approaches, Esmée can amplify the impact of its investments and catalyse wider systemic change.

While funded organisations recognise the importance of maintaining Esmée's light-touch, some also see potential for them to lead the way in shaping more integrated, impactful freshwater restoration efforts across the UK. Looking ahead, Esmée is well-placed to help foster a more cohesive, resilient and well-supported freshwater movement that is equipped to respond to growing environmental pressures while empowering communities and delivering meaningful, long-term change.



“Esmée cannot provide the levels of funding needed to address all the physical challenges, but they can make a difference to the organisations trying to make things happen – support bringing organisations together.”

Interviewee feedback

“If green finance is going to work, it needs to be absolutely embedded in the corporate environment.”

Interviewee feedback



Recommendations

The evidence from the findings is of a need to double-down on freshwater. With relatively small amounts of funding to allocate, funding interventions need to be focused on achieving stronger outcomes at scale in fewer high-priority areas. In effect, we think this means more of the available resources should be focused for longer with high-impact organisations who can drive systemic change. There is an important role for funding development work and supporting a range of organisations, but if the priority is improved freshwater quality in the UK, then the urgency of the situation means that funding should be concentrated for maximum effect.



THE REPORT OFFERS NINE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1

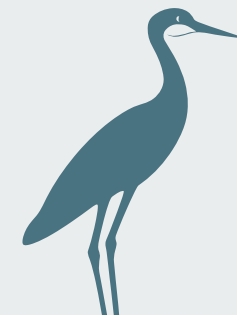
Focus the funding

Concentrate funding on fewer, high-impact organisations with longer-term, higher levels of support. Whilst continuing to support innovation and new entrants, we recommend the overall balance should shift towards support for those with proven or emerging potential to drive systemic change, and those effective at building momentum and cross-sector collaboration, creating examples of best practice, or addressing priority issues such as agricultural pollution. Funding should be rebalanced towards the areas of greatest geographical need.

2

Strengthen the sector

Facilitate peer learning amongst supported organisations through structured support such as events, digital platforms and case studies. Esmée should act as an active learning partner, strengthening networks, and amplifying the activities that work most effectively.



Recommendations

3

Support more collaboration

Encourage collaboration among funded organisations, particularly around data gaps, knowledge areas where expertise is lacking and priority freshwater bodies. Build on work to improve coordination and usefulness of water quality monitoring – including citizen science – and promote use of modern technologies (e.g. eDNA, remote sensing) to boost data and engagement.

4

Broaden the debate

Encourage a focus beyond sewage to include agricultural and urban runoff and climate impacts. Support advocacy and cross-sector collaboration on diffuse pollution, urban runoff and climate linked pressures to build greater shared understanding and practical action.

5

Explore Green Finance opportunities

Shift the emphasis from a focus on supply side to supporting work to embed and scale viable green finance markets and investment models. Help supported organisations and potential investors connect more effectively. Support collaboration to create investable projects.

6

Address key delivery risk

Invest in the capacity challenges faced by supported organisations, particularly staff retention, skills development and organisational resilience. Consider minimum five-year funding terms (with review points) for most areas.

Recommendations

7

Provide a steer

Clarify funding priorities without being overly prescriptive. Support applicants to link activity to outcomes with clearer guidance and examples, encouraging applicants to show how their work contributes to planned outcomes.

8

Amplify voices

Provide communications support to raise the profile of successful projects. Help supported organisations improve messaging and visibility to influence policy, attract allies and enhance the impact of Esmée's freshwater strategy. Build on Esmée's position as a convenor.

9

Capture and share learning

Encourage funded organisations to adopt practical learning approaches focused on impact. Support light-touch tools for reflection and knowledge sharing to strengthen a learning culture and continuous improvement.

Appendix

Organisations interviewed

Action for Conservation	Natural England	Wales Environment Link
Afonydd Cymru Wales	Natural Resources Wales	WRAP
Anglian Water	Nature Finance	Welsh Dee Trust
Beaver Trust	NatureScot	WildFish
Buglife	North Wales Wildlife Trust	Wyre Rivers Trust
Cardiff Water Research Institute, Cardiff University	Northern Ireland Environment Link	Zoological Society of London
Devon Wildlife Trust	Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum	
Dyffryn Dyfodol (Future Valley)	River Action	
Fishmongers Company	The Rivers Trust	
Greenhouse Communications	Spey Catchment Partnership	
Involving Young People Collective / HUDL Youth Development Agency	Surfers Against Sewage	
National Trust	University of Cambridge	



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Page 8: Water quality monitoring © Paul Colley for The Rivers Trust

Page 10: Dragonfly © Simon Wightman

Page 11: Hustings hosted by River Action and Surfers Against Sewage © River Action

Page 13: No sewage protest sign © Lucy Bilcock for River Action

Page 17: Person kayaking with rainbow above © Gina Crane

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