

Deflection, obfuscation and red herrings

✓ Strategic Deflection of Blame

Water companies frequently shift the focus from systemic infrastructure failure to individual customer behaviour.

- **Customer Blaming:** Public campaigns often highlight "unflushables" (like wet wipes and fats) as the primary cause of sewer blockages and overflows, downplaying the impact of ageing, under-capacity networks.
- **Climate Scapegoating:** Companies frame sewage spills as an unavoidable consequence of "unusually heavy rainfall" or climate change, presenting a false binary choice between spilling into rivers or flooding schools and hospitals.

✓ Greenwashing & Linguistic Rebranding

To reduce public outrage, companies use "softened" terminology to mask environmental harm.

- **Rebranding Facilities:** Sewage treatment works are sometimes rebranded as "water recycling centres" to sound more environmentally friendly.
- **Dilution Narratives:** Discharges are frequently described as "heavily diluted rainwater," even when they contain significant untreated sewage that poses a public health risk.

✓ Co-optation of Environmental Groups

Companies attempt to neutralise opposition by forming partnerships with mainstream environmental charities.

- **Shared Principles:** By signing "shared principles" with major NGOs like the [RSPB](#) or The Wildlife Trusts, water companies gain environmental legitimacy.
- **Funding Influence:** Providing grants for local "nature-based solutions" (e.g., wetland restoration) can make these groups less likely to lead aggressive campaigns against the company's broader pollution record. Eg [Rivers Trust](#)

✓ Scientific Obfuscation & Doubt

Water firms use tactics similar to the tobacco and oil industries to undermine critical research.

- **Attacking Study Design:** When independent researchers link sewage to microplastic contamination or ecological decline, companies often attack the study's methodology or "reputable" individuals to manufacture doubt.
- **Limited Transparency:** Companies have been accused of a "scandalous cover-up" by failing to disclose the exact volume of sewage discharged, arguing that installing more monitors would be too expensive for bill-payers.

✓ Managing Expectations through "Sticker Shock"

To deter demands for rapid reform, companies inflate the projected costs of infrastructure upgrades.

- **Exaggerated Costs:** Figures as high as £660 billion have been quoted to upgrade the network, a tactic designed to make significant environmental improvements seem financially impossible for the public to bear.