Liberals and Democrats for Nature and Climate

CAMPAIGN BRIEFING:
Chalk Streams (UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site) Bill

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

February 2026

Why are chalk streams so important?

- Chalk streams are one of the rarest habitats on Earth. According to The Wildlife Trusts, only around 200 are known worldwide, with England home to approximately 85% of them. These streams are concentrated mainly in southern and eastern England and notably overlap with a significant number of Liberal Democrat constituencies (see map).
- They are a unique part of our heritage, as precious to England as the Great Barrier Reef is to Australia or the Amazon Rainforest to South America. Restoring and protecting them is a matter of global importance.
- Chalk rivers emerge from the chalk aquifer, so the very pure water is rich in minerals and remains at a fairly constant temperature year-round. This means their crystal-clear waters are home to more plant species than any other English river and they host wildlife found nowhere else in the world.
- Chalk streams are critical breeding grounds for threatened species like Atlantic salmon and provide the perfect habitat for rare British species like water vole, brown trout, southern damselfly, water crowfoot and white-clawed crayfish (source).

Pressures facing chalk streams

- **Over-abstraction** is causing some chalk rivers to run dry in the summer when too much groundwater is drawn (source).
- **Wastewater and agriculture pollution:** Research by the Liberal Democrats found 48,626 hours worth of sewage was discharged into chalk streams in 2023, more than double the previous year. Only 17% of chalk streams meet 'good ecological status' and not one of our rivers, including chalk streams, are in good overall health.
- **Climate change**, including raising temperatures and extreme weather events, are compounding the multiple pressures on chalk streams (source). Research by the Environment Agency has warned that chalk streams may be too warm for trout by 2080.
- **Biodiversity collapse**: These pressures are threatening the unique species that rely on these habitats. Over 10% of our freshwater and wetland species are threatened with extinction in the UK. Salmon, genetically distinct to southern chalk streams, are at a tipping point of extinction, compounded by deteriorating water quality.

- **Inadequate legal protection**: Only eleven out of 220 British chalk streams have any legal protections as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)[1]. Worse still, only four are protected fully at the highest level as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC)[2].
- The Government's Environmental Improvement Plan 2025 committed to "*restore chalk streams to better ecological health, ensuring protections and investment towards these habitats*". However, last year, the Government also announced that they were ditching the Chalk Stream Recovery Pack.

How would UNESCO designation work?

- The World Heritage Convention ('The Convention') adopted in 1972 by UNESCO, is an international treaty for the protection of natural and cultural sites of 'outstanding universal value'. The United Kingdom ratified this treaty on 29 May 1984.
- Under Article 2 of the Convention, chalk streams could be classified under the definition of 'natural heritage' as they constitute the habitat of threatened species of outstanding universal value and they are precisely delineated natural areas. Under Article 3, it is the responsibility of the UK to identify and delineate these natural sites.
- Importantly, there have been some legal protections for chalk streams as a result of retained EU law. Article 5 would enhance these, as it clearly sets out obligations to:
    - Integrate chalk stream protections into comprehensive planning programmes
    - Appropriately staff and fund services for the protection, conservation and presentation of chalk streams
    - Develop scientific studies and research to counteract threats to chalk streams
    - Take the appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation of chalk streams
    - Support regional training centres and research on the protection, conservation, and presentation of chalk streams
- Designation would underline the international significance of chalk streams as a jewel in the crown of our natural heritage, helping to raise awareness and encourage public engagement in their protection.
- The UNESCO World Heritage nomination process for a natural site is multi-stage and led by the UK Government. The mandatory first step is inclusion on the UK's national Tentative List, which is an inventory of natural and cultural properties the Government intends to consider for nomination in future. Without being placed on the Tentative List, a site cannot be nominated. The UK currently has seven sites on its Tentative List, with the last review taking place in 2021.
- Once a site is on the Tentative List, the Government must develop and submit a full nomination demonstrating Outstanding Universal Value, a long-term management plan, and a Preliminary Assessment carried out by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at the Government's request. The completed nomination must be

[1] Hampshire Test, the Somerset Frome, Dorset Bere Stream, Wiltshire and Berkshire's Kennet, the Norfolk Nar, Yorkshire's Hull headwaters and Greater London's Crane.
[2] Wiltshire Avon, Hampshire Itchen, Norfolk Wensum and Berkshire Lambourn.

submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, with the World Heritage Committee taking a final decision, based on IUCN advice, at its annual meeting.
- The last review of the Tentative List recognised that the UK's current UNESCO World Heritage Sites is unbalanced, with just four of the 33 sites being natural sites. It emphasised the need to put forward natural rather than cultural properties as far as possible to address this.

The Chalk Streams (UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site) Bill would:

1. Require the Government to place chalk streams on the UK Tentative List
2. Mandate preparation of a full UNESCO nomination and management plan
3. Require consultation with local communities, experts, and stakeholders
4. Begin the formal process towards World Heritage status

This Bill builds on strong campaigning by the Liberal Democrats to highlight the issues facing our chalk streams and secure stronger protections for them, including by:

- Tabling amendments to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill in the House of Lords, leading to Government concessions to strengthen protections (see below).
- Securing a vote on a new Blue Flag status for rivers and chalk streams, to give them greater protection against sewage dumping.
- The introduction of the Rivers, Streams and Lakes (Protected Status) Bill by Victoria Collins MP and the Chalk Streams (Protection) Bill by Sarah Green MP.

What other action is needed?

Stronger protections in planning

- During the passage of the Planning and Infrastructure Act, the Government rejected amendments to create new planning protections for chalk streams. However, they recognised the international importance of chalk streams, with Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government saying: "*If our chalk streams were buildings, they would be UNESCO heritage sites. Let us protect them as though they were*".
- In response to the amendments the Government gave assurances that chalk streams would get "*explicit recognition*" which would make "*clear, unambiguously, our expectations for how plan makers and decision makers should treat chalk streams*" in the next update of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). However, despite these commitments, the two mentions of chalk streams are mere examples and it lacks the detail and strength needed to properly protect them.
- With the NPPF consultation still open, the Government should use this opportunity to designate chalk streams and their catchments with a bespoke protection by listing them alongside ancient woodland as an irreplaceable habitat. These protections should tackle direct harm and wastewater pollution.

Ringfenced funding in the Water Restoration Fund

- A significant funding gap hinders the restoration of England's waterways to the condition that the public expect (source). The Water Restoration Fund provides a mechanism to address that gap by reinvesting fines from polluting water companies for spending to improve the water environment and address pollution impacts. The future amount of funding could be significant after Ofwat proposed £168 million of fines for pollution breaches on Thames Water, Yorkshire Water and Northumbrian Water in August 2024.
- The Fund's first round reinvested £11 million from fines and penalties levied between April 2022 and October 2023. Despite concerns the Government were looking to scrap the Fund, they announced last year that all future fines and penalties will be reinvested into water restoration projects, with further details to be set out "later in the year".
- The Government should urgently set out when the next tranche of water company fines will be reinvested and ring-fence a portion of that budget for habitat enhancement of chalk streams given their uniqueness and vulnerability.

Case study - Dorset and East Devon Coast

The Dorset and East Devon Coast was inscribed as a natural UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001 in recognition of its exceptional geological and geomorphological value. The site presents an unparalleled record of the Mesozoic Era, spanning approximately 185 million years of Earth's history.

Since designation, World Heritage status has delivered a range of tangible benefits, including heightened public awareness, stronger protection, and improved access to funding. The inscription prompted widespread positive coverage in national and regional media, helping to foster enthusiasm, pride, and a shared sense of stewardship within local communities. This momentum, in turn, encouraged broader support for the site across different sectors.

Site managers identify two clear instances where World Heritage status has directly strengthened protection. In one case, the designation added significant weight to arguments against inappropriate development adjacent to the site. In another, World Heritage status was explicitly cited by the planning authority as a material consideration in the refusal of a private development application.

The designation has also led to a marked shift in the attitudes of funding bodies. Site managers report that World Heritage status reframed the coast as both a protected asset of global importance and a resource to be actively celebrated and shared. As they note, "*World Heritage gives a healthy approach to protected areas as important features in their own right, and also as things to celebrate and present to visitors that, if managed successfully, actively contribute directly to the local economy."*