

People really do give a shit

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:30 am

Politics always has the ability to surprise, but some things are constant. As everyone who has ever stood to be a councillor tells me, dog excrement is one of the most regular concerns raised with them. To be less subtle, the simple fact is that people do not like shit.

So it was hardly surprising that when Tory MPs voted against spending money to improve sewage overflow systems, with the inevitable consequence that human excrement would end up in rivers and on our coastlines, they really should have anticipated the anger coming their way.

The government's argument is that they cannot possibly afford to spend between £150bn and £650bn to update the UK's Victorian sewage systems. So, they say, we must live with the shit. This makes no sense at all.

Firstly, as I point out time and again, the UK is awash with savings looking for a secure return. What better than to issue accessible savings accounts to attract money for this purpose as well as for a Green New Deal? £70 billion a year goes into ISAs. More than £100 billion goes into pensions. The subsidy to them costs £60 billion a year, which we can apparently afford although we cannot afford a decent sewage system. And a sewage system can recover its cost through charges to cover the cost of interest and even capital repayments in the long term to pay a return to savers. But the government refuses to join up these dots. Why is that?

Second, why too are questions on the affordability of this tolerated? That makes no sense, at all. Those Victorian sewage systems on which we still rely created the greatest transformation in public health in our history. Let sewage go out of control now and we can be sure health will suffer immeasurably. But it is claimed we cannot afford to do anything about this. The reality is that we cannot afford not to. Add it to the list of things that we have no choice but do.

The simple fact is that we actually give a shit. It's time the government noticed.

It's time it secured the readily available funding to make a difference on this issue: offer people sewage bonds at 1% or so and they would buy them.

It's time we got the people together to deliver such projects. We cannot afford not to.

And yes, I know a lot of very ungreen concrete will be involved. The imperative to drive the rest of the economy to net zero is even stronger in that case.