

Due to an accident at the Port of Tyne in July, billions of tiny plastic pellets, known as nurdles, were spilled into the Tyne and out to sea. This is one of the most serious environmental incidents our region has faced in recent years. The nurdles have travelled through the river system and have been washing up along the coast as far as Yorkshire, and they continue to spread.

Hundreds of people have spent thousands of hours on the beaches helping to clean up nurdles. They are using mesh bags sewn by volunteers, dustpans, sieves, and even clever machines invented by volunteers. Thousands of hours of work have been put in, but with every tide more are deposited on the beaches — eaten by animals mistaking them for food and ground further into the sand by people walking on the beach, unaware of the damage they are causing.

I have been out to help clean myself, and it is quite disheartening to see the scale of the problem. This incident has highlighted a wider issue with plastic pollution and the way certain materials are handled. Local volunteers have called for the Government to introduce a legal mechanism to prevent further spills and create risk-management plans, similar to the recent EU Plastic Pellet Loss Regulation. Such a move would require risk-management plans, independent audits for large handlers, and improved transportation methods to prevent large spills like this.

The recent All-Party Parliamentary Group report on microplastics highlights the growing threat posed by plastic pollution, including nurdles, and calls for improved regulation, better monitoring and faster response. Microplastics are now pervasive across ecosystems, food chains and even the human body, and action is needed to halt further cumulative and potentially irreversible harm.

However, plastic is not the only serious concern this incident has highlighted. While volunteers were on the beaches clearing nurdles, there were active sewage discharges happening at the same time, with all the unpleasantness that implies. Such discharges have been a growing problem across the UK. Figures from the website “top of the poops¹” show that across Gateshead last year, there were 1,976 sewage discharges lasting over 6,500 hours — the equivalent of nine months of continuous contamination. Taken together, plastic and sewage pollution are two of the biggest threats to water quality and the health of the Tyne.

This motion was sparked by a similar one proposed in North Tyneside, where councillors have been working alongside volunteers cleaning up the beaches. Local MPs have promised a parliamentary debate and future government action to prevent further spills. The North East Mayor has stated her intention to hold those responsible accountable for the clean-up. And I have written to our own party’s environmental spokesperson, who is also a member of the microplastics group, and

¹ <https://top-of-the-poops.org/>

he has raised the issue with DEFRA and with other parliamentary colleagues. Officers from local councils have been involved in the response, representatives from the Port of Tyne are interested in improving resilience against future incidents, and charity groups such as Surfers Against Sewage, Nurdle UK, Fidra and others have been deeply involved in the response and in pushing for national change. This shows that concern crosses party lines and spans local, regional and national levels.

Although there are existing mechanisms for responding to incidents like this — including the Local Resilience Forum — there is an opportunity for collaboration between local authorities and council members on future policy. The LRF is an important part of the system, and the work that Gateshead council officers and members contribute to it is essential, but it is only one part of the picture. As representatives of local residents, elected members should be ensuring public accountability and guiding regional priorities so that local concerns shape wider decision-making. Having a councillor representative in any wider regional effort, such as the proposed Summit, would help ensure that Gateshead's perspective is included in discussions about future policy. We should also be thinking about the long-term implications of these situations and ensuring that Gateshead plays its full part in protecting the Tyne and the coast.

Councils elsewhere have adopted similar motions aimed at encouraging more action on water quality and river health. Cornwall, for example, recently convened a Rivers and Seas Summit which brought councils, regulators, water companies, academics and community groups together. The ambition for a Clean Tyne seeks to do something similar here — to begin a sustained effort to clean up the Tyne from source to sea. We know this will take time. A similar clean-up of the River Rhine at Basel took thirty years, but it resulted in a river that is safe to swim in. And we know the consequences of pollution: in Sunderland, participants in a triathlon became ill after swimming in contaminated water. Taking action for a clean River Tyne now will help prevent similar incidents in our area.

With that in mind, this motion aims to do four things: to acknowledge the outstanding work of volunteers and Council officers; to welcome the collaborative work already underway; to explore participation in a Tyne Water Summit; and to evaluate creating a Water Quality Champion from among this Council's membership.

This motion is about recognising that the Tyne is one of the region's greatest natural assets, and that protecting it — and the people who use it — requires cooperation across council areas, agencies and political perspectives.

I ask that you pass this motion.

Cllr Amanda Wintcher



COUNCIL MEETING

24 September 2026

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

NOTICE OF MOTION

Councillor Amanda Wintcher will move the following motion:

Ambition for a Clean River Tyne

Council notes:

1. with deep concern the plastic pellet (nurdle) spill from the Port of Tyne in July
2. the findings of the APPG report on microplastics, which emphasises the need for improved regulation, monitoring, and rapid response to incidents of this kind.

Council believes:

1. that Gateshead must work proactively and collaboratively with partners to respond effectively to incidents such as the Port of Tyne nurdle spill.

Council resolves:

1. to thank Gateshead residents, river users, and the volunteer community for their outstanding work in responding to the nurdle spill.
2. to welcome ongoing work across Gateshead and neighbouring authorities where officers, Northumbrian Water and the Environment Agency are collaborating to tackle contaminated groundwater, improve monitoring, and reduce pollution entering the Tyne.
3. to instruct the Chief Executive to collaborate with other relevant local authorities to investigate the costs, scope and feasibility of convening a Tyne Water Summit, bringing together Northumbrian Water, Regional and Local Government, environmental charities, academic experts, and community campaigners to work collectively to improve water quality across Gateshead and along the Tyne.
4. to instruct the Chief Executive to evaluate the creation of a Water Quality Champion from among the membership of this Council, to participate in regional efforts, strengthen Gateshead's voice in catchment-wide work, and report back to Council.

Proposed by: Councillor A Wintcher

Seconded by: Councillor I Patterson

Supported by: Councillor P Craig
Councillor S Craig