Misconnected sewers

It was reported in 2025 that there appeared to be no reliable system to identify a potential misconnected sewer in the planning and building inspection process and no clear line of responsibility for investigating and taking action when issues become apparent.

Sewage overflows into the Thames were detected at Strand on the Green in West London and in other areas despite the Thames Tideway Tunnel capturing outflows during rainstorms. Rivers in other parts of London are being polluted also.

The cause is buildings in which the water and foul outflows have been connected together.

Internet searches indicate the latest position is that the GLA has moved from acknowledging the problem to adopting a London-wide programme, but it has not yet established a reliable planning/building-control detection system or a single authority responsible for every misconnection case.

In September 2025, the London Assembly Environment Committee reported that misconnections were generally found by tracing polluted outfalls back to properties, rather than through planning or building inspections. Thames Water could notify owners, but enforcement depended on borough councils and was often slow.

The Committee recommended that the Mayor:

- help fund a London misconnections officer to share expertise and speed up council enforcement;
- fund citizen-science investigations such as Outfall Safaris;
- work with Thames Water and other bodies on defined actions through 2034. London Assembly report

This followed press reports that Thames Water had identified 2,294 London misconnections over five years. These are often installed by builders, missed during inspection, and discovered only after pollution appears. The property owner normally bears the eventual repair liability. BBC Evening Standard

The Mayor published the Clean Rivers and Waterways Plan in July 2026. It expressly acknowledges "confusing rules, overlapping responsibilities and limited enforcement", as well as limited capacity to identify and repair pollution quickly.

The plan commits the GLA and partners to:

- map outfalls and improve shared data so boroughs, regulators and Thames Water can identify misconnections;
- target and fix priority misconnections;
- strengthen coordination, enforcement and accountability;
- fund Outfall Safaris for another four years;
- support at least 500 citizen scientists each year;
- focus early work on ten strategic locations;
- use milestones in 2027 and 2029 toward a ten-year programme ending in 2036.

The wider programme identifies more than £1.8 billion of partner investment by 2030, alongside more than £13.6 million in mayoral funding. That total covers the whole waterways programme, however, not just misconnections. Mayor's Clean Rivers and Waterways Plan

What remains unresolved

Based on the published plan, three important gaps remain:

1. No routine inspection safeguard: There appears not to be any published requirement for every relevant planning application or building-control completion inspection to verify foul and surface-water connections.
2. No single case owner: Responsibility remains divided among property owners, borough enforcement teams, Thames Water and the Environment Agency.
3. No confirmed dedicated officer: Although the Assembly recommended funding a misconnections officer, the July 2026 plan does not clearly confirm that this specific post has been created or funded.

So, the GLA response is now stronger on coordination, mapping, citizen detection and strategic funding, but it is still primarily a partnership programme, not a new statutory inspection and enforcement system. The core concern raised in 2025 has therefore been recognised but only partly resolved.