



Embargoed until 00.01 Thursday 13th January

Please find our press release in response to the Environment Committee report on Water Quality in Rivers

We welcome the EC report which shows the extent of the sewage pollution problem in this country. Our rivers are open sewers. The analysis is comprehensive and clear. However, we are seeking an actual plan for reducing pollution rather than adding to the bureaucracy of the current system of monitoring regulation.

The Solution is Less Pollution

Our messages are:

1. The Water Industry must take responsibility for radically reducing raw sewage discharges.
2. The legislation is (and has been) in place to secure radical reduction in pollution. The regulators need to use it and be held to account for their role in the shocking state of the pollution of our rivers.
3. Three years of data through citizen science and local people campaigning in Ilkley has not as yet delivered a clean-up of the river so that it is safe for people to paddle play and swim, or for the river wildlife to thrive. There needs to be a will to act, not just to analyse.

Context

Ilkley Clean River Group is the first group in the UK to have applied for and been awarded Bathing Status for the River at Ilkley. We pioneered the citizen science protocol for water testing (by Prof Rick Battarbee) and held the agencies to account for their use of our money - as consumers through our bills to the water companies, and as taxpayers funding the regulators. We provided evidence to the Environment Committee for this report.

As local residents we pursued Bathing Status to secure EA testing of the quality of our river, signage so that the public knows how polluted the river is, and to ensure the regulators and water company to do their duty to clean up the river.

At the outset of the campaign 3 years ago we found that the Wharfe was treated as an open sewer. Raw sewage is discharged 1/3rd of the year into our river, and the 'treated' sewage is not treated sufficiently. There is no change to this position despite the vociferous public opinion and action locally. The EC report confirms the complacency of overseeing a Victorian sewage system that has not been maintained

nor adapted to meet the population and climate needs.

Action

1. This report is not a shock to us, but it does make the problem fully accessible and in the public domain. At Ilkley we have known the river is being treated as an open sewer for the last 3 years through our citizen science water testing. The difficulty we have had, and continue to have, is in securing any meaningful discussion on a solution.

2. There is still no comprehensive plan for cleaning up our river or any other river in the UK. This report calls for more monitoring, and for regulators to pursue companies that are in breach of their licence. Water companies have yet to provide clear plans for ensuring their compliance with the law and are still not being fully held to account.

3. The Environment Bill seeks a reduction in the effects of Storm Overflows (raw sewage discharges) but it is unclear what this means in terms of pollution. We are still seeking compliance with the Water Industry Act 1991 which requires all sewage to be 'rendered innocuous before discharging into rivers'. At present there are no plans that we have seen to secure compliance with this legislation from water companies. If this legislation was enacted in Ilkley, we would be seeing raw sewage discharges circa 3 times a year, not for 1/3rd of the year.

Data

2. Data: Providing real time data on pollution does enable the public to make choices about whether their children paddle and play in polluted water. However this does not actually prevent pollution, and given the extent of the pollution, any stretch downstream of a sewage works will not be safe. That means that most of the places where people go to paddle, play and swim in the summer are unsafe.

3. Whilst data is an important part of any campaign it has to lead to action. The Wharfe at Ilkley provides a very good model for any river with a similar catchment and paves the way for recognising that sewage plants are polluting our rivers at a level that is a danger to people and wildlife. More data will not solve this problem. Neither will better self-reporting. Acting on the data already available is needed now. Our data on the quality of the river at Ilkley was provided in 2019 (2 years ago) and there is no improvement in that water quality to date.

Bathing Status

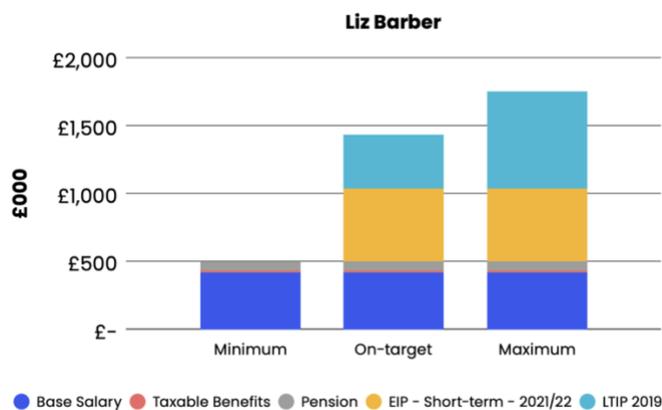
4. Securing one designated bathing site per water company by 2025 means that in the next 3 years England and Wales will go from 1 to 11 (an increase of only 10 sites). This is woefully inadequate. Bathing Status only secures regular testing and signage to inform the public. There is no reason that all rivers where significant numbers of people paddle, and play should be designated within the year. Defra needs to be clear what volume of usage is the baseline for designation so local communities know whether or not to apply. It is not difficult.

Note: Austria is a landlocked country (a third the size of the UK) yet it has 242 registered bathing sites. The UK has a total of 644 bathing sites, almost all of them coastal. France has 3,351 sites and yet its coastline is a third of the UK's.

5. Bathing status does not secure clean water - it only ensures the water is tested and signage provided which makes the problem visible. It is one step towards clean rivers, but it is not the solution. There has to be an ambition and a plan to clean up rivers.

Regulation

6. We welcome the focus on regulation and are pleased to see Ofwat's scrutiny of water companies (June 2021) performance on Storm Overflows and note Ofwat's concerns that companies have not acted on this, and in a letter to us that '*No water company has informed us that it cannot fulfil its obligations relating to its wastewater treatment works discharges.*' We look forward to Ofwat pursuing its view that environmental performance and compliance with obligations should be taken into account by companies when deciding on paying out dividends or executive bonuses. Yorkshire Water CEO is paid circa £1.5 million (Annual report 2021 p119)



7. The Environment Agency now states that it does not have the resources to regulate sewage pollution. In our experience this has been the case for many years, alongside an attitude that polluting rivers is not a priority or a problem. In our meeting with the CEO in 2019 we were told the case was made for real change in Ilkley, and that action would be taken quickly. In 2022 we still await the review of the permit at Ilkley sewage plant which is currently legally permitting raw sewage discharges 1/3rd of the year - in effect a licence to pollute. This review is entirely within the remit of the EA.

8. The report notes the lack of confidence in the regulatory bodies particularly the Environment Agency. We would expect the Board that has overseen such shocking pollution to be held to account.

Water Companies

9. Water Companies are now sophisticated money management companies. The structure of investments, loans, dividends all amount to significant financial gain which is clouded in a reporting web, with CEOs and Finance Directors being paid millions in salaries to secure financial return. We have been seeking infrastructure investment firstly to make our sewage system legally compliant; and to ensure our

sewage system is properly maintained. Neither have been achieved despite significant data now available about the pollution problems here in Ilkley.

10. The one investment that has been put in place ensures that (a) a non-compliant CSO is now compliant with the legislation; and (b) shifts pollution from the top end of our bathing designated site to further downstream. We are seeking:

1. UV stripping for the treated sewage to reduce pollution (which would radically improve treated sewage quality at low cost)
2. Infrastructure investment that ensures rainwater ends up in the river and sewage ends up in the treatment plant.

Agriculture

11. Agricultural pollution is not the cause of the nutrient pollution here in Ilkley, it is the sewage treatment works. Whilst it is a problem in the Wye it is not here and must not distract from the need to radically reduce pollution from the Storm Overflows and Sewage Treatment works.

Costs

12. We note the figure of £200 Billion to eliminate raw sewage discharges in the report (P72). This is different from the Storm Overflow Taskforce modelling used in the Environment Bill discussions, where we note the modelling of eliminating the worst and most damaging sewage pollution to be somewhere between £3.9- £62.7 billion. It is clear no-one knows or is transparent about the real costs. However, sewage companies have taken £57 billion in dividends between 1991-2019. That would surely cover the costs of cleaning up the worst offenders. We can think of no other industry that has been allowed to be so lax and profit so much.

13. Whilst we recognise the value of a multi-stakeholder development of sustainable solutions to the impact of population and climate change on our sewage system; water companies should be required to fund the radical reduction in Storm Overflows to secure clean rivers fit for people and wildlife.

We are currently supporting any community wanting to undertake citizen science or apply for bathing status.

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