

## River Lim Action group briefing

January 2023 - Celebrating a year of monitoring on the River Lim.

The River Lim Monitors got to work a year ago – a small group of volunteers who have monitored water quality on the Lim at eight locations every month. We originally raised concerns about water quality in August 2021 to the Environment Agency, South West Water and the Town Council. The monitoring is carried out under the auspices of the Westcountry Rivers Trust with the results uploaded to their Cartographer system. We are waiting for our first scorecard which will give us the overall results for the year.

By being the eyes and ears of the local community on the river, the Monitors have done so much more than carrying out citizen science monitoring. We have built good relations with South West Water and the Environment Agency and identified many of the problems on the river and the seafront. We have had tours of the Uplyme Sewage Treatment Works and the Gun Cliff Pumping station and have now managed to put together a map of the pumping and drainage system for the town.

The recently formed River Lim Action group is a broader group of people from the local community concerned about water quality and its impact on human health and the ecology. The group grows all the time and we plan to publish regular newsletters. The RLA has a small coordinating group who decide where to put our efforts.

We share the concerns aired nationally of all the UK river catchments being in various degrees of failing ecological status. An effective regulator to police the unlawful activities of privatised water companies must be put into place alongside a move towards legislative changes to reduce the devastating impacts of water pollution.

### **Unlicensed discharges**

Perhaps the most surprising of the problems we've unearthed are the unlicensed discharges in the river from Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) which South West Water attributes to recognised misconnections. These are probably contributing to the very high bacterial load that the Environment Agency reported in the river over the summer months. Thanks to pressure we have been able to apply, there has been some progress in cleaning these up. Although it is better now there is still a problem at Woodmead Road Bridge. We're pleased that the Environment Agency will monitor there in 2023 in addition to their monitoring lower down the river near the mouth.

### **Licensed discharges**

It is horrifying that a small river like the Lim received 680 hours of untreated sewage discharges in 2021. We await the 2022 figure. The majority of these came from the Uplyme Sewage Treatment works but – very concerningly – there were 10 discharge incidents along the river during the very dry spell between May and September in 2022. We have asked many questions using the Freedom of Information Act and the Environmental Regulations to find out why this would happen. Because Ofwat is investigating dry spills (which would be illegal under the current regulatory system) SWW has so far declined to answer our questions for legal reasons. They aim to reduce their permitted spills by 90% and we look forward to rapid progress on this but we will take further action if we find that there are spills happening outside the permits they have.

### **Pumping problems**

It is of further concern that what appear to be issues at pumping stations are adding to the sewage pollution in the town. The Horn Bridge pumping station has had repeated faults and there is as yet no permanent solution in place. This leads to sewage discharging into the river outside the permit. The Cobb Gate pumping station also appears to be conducting unreported discharges contributing to the sewage pollution at the Cobb end of town. This is exacerbated by the shortening of the outfall on the west side of the Cobb, which was shortened in 2018. The Environment Agency have pledged an assessment of the impact this shortening may have caused as we feel the desk top assessment carried out in 2018 was insufficient and there may be unforeseen effects.

### **Bathing beach issues**

The Environment Agency has found signs of sewage contamination from the freshwater drain within the groyne which runs out onto the designated bathing beach (Front Beach/Sandy Beach). SWW are due to look into this with cameras to trace the source of the problem. Following our intervention, SWIM, with support from the Town Council, has had its drain improved as blockages in the high season were leading to sewage issues on the seafront. We are also waiting for Dorset Council to clear the drains along Marine Terrace where sewage is regularly seen and smelt coming from the storm drains at the west end. In January, SWW also plan survey this area using CCTV. We asked the Town Council to convene a meeting of the key stakeholders responsible for this web of complex issues – this resulted in some of the actions above. Another meeting is due at the start of February.

### **Other achievements:**

- We're pleased that SWW has installed event duration monitors on all the CSOs in the town. These overflows allow sewage to spill out with excessive rainfall into the River or Sea supposedly only after very heavy rain. In future all such events will be monitored and SWW promises the information will be publicly available shortly afterwards (although no timescale has been provided). It's also good news that Lyme Regis has been added to the Beach Live alert system so we will know of any spills affecting Front Beach – although this only seems to operate in the summer bathing season (unlike the Wessex Water alert at Charmouth which operates all year round).
- The Environment Agency has now agreed to improve its monitoring next spring and summer with an additional point at Woodmead Road and an earlier start. They will also carry out some invertebrate monitoring and an extra test to track the biological origin of the sewage (ie human or not).
- We've secured funding from the Town Council for a river corridor ecological survey this spring and more funds for testing and communications
- We value all of our neighbouring groups who are working to address river pollution in our part of the world. We're working closely with the long established Axe Valley Rivers Association (AVRA). AVRA is more naturally our working partner than the rivers to the East as the River Lim is part of the Axe catchment and SWW covers both areas. We will join them in monitoring for invertebrates in the spring which will add to the data they are collecting. The EA have welcomed this intention.

### **Help needed from our MP**

**Church Beach:** the redesignation of Church Beach is a tricky issue because the pollution from the river affects Church Beach directly and the public are not currently advised of this. We appreciate your support for this and we have now gained the support of the Town Council. No one wants a

bathing beach that is contaminated with sewage. We want to use the redesignation process to make sure funds are directed at cleaning up the river and therefore the beach. SWW and the EA have indicated that the designation process will release resources that would not otherwise be available. The process requires surveys to be carried out on the 20 busiest days between May and September. We would appreciate your attendance at one of our survey days to help publicise the redesignation and associated water clean up.

**Dry spills:** Once the Ofwat investigation is complete we are happy to provide further briefings on the impact of dry spills and the need for proper regulation and enforcement. Questions in Parliament would be timely at this point so it is worth staying in touch with Ofwat about the timing on this.

**Communications:** Good water quality is vital for our local businesses which depend on attracting visitors to the town for pleasant walks down the River and sea swims. It's vital for our sea swimmers and other water users who enjoy the sea all year round. And it's vital for wildlife which can't survive in a contaminated habitat. We'd welcome amplification of these messages to make sure resources are put into the clean up that is needed so urgently.

We welcome your interest and support and will continue to provide you with updates and information that would be helpful.