

**iWharfe: The River Wharfe Big Health Check
Press Release**



A ground-breaking citizen science study of the River Wharfe in Yorkshire, published today, reveals that many of its most popular recreational sites were polluted and unsafe for paddling and swimming on a one-day Big Health Check.

1. The purpose of the iWharfe project is to raise awareness about the sources of faecal bacteria contamination and its potential impact on human health in the Wharfe.

Main Findings:

2. None of the popular sites used for recreation along the entire length of the river was “safe to swim in” on the day of sampling.
3. There were high concentrations of both *E. coli* and intestinal enterococci below the sewage works in Ilkley (Beanlands Island) as expected and as shown in previous analysis.
4. The high concentrations also observed at popular recreational sites in Upper Wharfedale, such as Linton Falls and Burnsall, were unexpected.
5. Concentrations were also relatively high from Ilkley downstream to the Ouse confluence at Cawood.
6. The lowest concentrations occurred in Langstrothdale and in the river stretch from the Cavendish Pavilion in Bolton Abbey to the Ilkley Suspension Bridge.
7. Our calculations suggest that even the sites with the lowest concentrations would fail to meet bathing water standards if judged according to EU legislation.
8. The dominant source of faecal bacteria pollution in the river is effluent from Sewage Treatment Works
9. The high concentrations of faecal bacteria in some tributary streams indicates that cattle and sheep also contribute to the pollution load but this is of lesser importance than sewage effluent in explaining the concentrations in the main river.
10. The report illustrates the need for legislation to be revised.

Background:

1. Citizen scientists drawn from local communities collected water samples along the length of the river at the same time on the same day, the 24th August 2020.
2. The sampling took place at 60 sites covering the whole of the Wharfe from the headwaters in Langstrothdale down to Cawood at the junction of the Wharfe with the River Ouse.
3. Thirty three of the sites were selected because of their recreational importance.
4. Samples were analysed to measure their concentrations of *Escherichia coli* and intestinal enterococci (IE), faecal bacteria in wastewater associated with gastro-intestinal illness.
5. River levels were high on the day of sampling causing effluent discharges from sewage treatment plants to be considerably diluted.
6. The samples were analysed in an accredited laboratory.

Additional Notes

1. The conclusions of the study are only based on a single sample at each site.
2. Unlike coastal sites current legislation does not require water companies to make river water safe for swimming by disinfecting effluent discharges.

3. The project benefitted from the support of many organisations including both the Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water.

Dr Martin Christmas, Regional Director of the EA said "Partnerships always seem to bring benefits greater than the sum of their parts. Being part of the iWharfe team has, and will be, a key part of making a real difference to the water environment in Wharfedale".

Yorkshire Water Corporate Affairs Director Richard Emmott said "The iWharfe team has done an excellent job with this report and it is really good to see a growing level of public engagement with Yorkshire's rivers. As more people use our rivers for recreation, this strengthens the case for more investment to improve river water quality. Our rivers are in far better condition that they were 30 years ago, but we'll need concerted work from all stakeholders to deliver the further improvements to meet growing public expectations."

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iWharfe partners include:

- Ilkley Clean River Group
- Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust
- Addingham Environment Group
- Environment Agency
- Upper Wharfedale Field Society
- Friends of the Dales
- Burley-in-Wharfedale Walkers are Welcome
- Otley 2030
- Wildlife Friendly Otley
- Boston Spa, Wetherby & Villages Community Green Group
- Dales to Vale River Network
- Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority
- The Rivers Trust

Funders include:

- Yorkshire Water
- Otley Town Council
- Ilkley Town Council
- Wetherby Ward Councillors
- Wharfedale Naturalists Society
- Salmon & Trout Conservation UK
- Patagonia
- EU WaterCog
- Alan and Penny Jerome
- 97 people who donated through Crowdfunding

The report can be downloaded [here](#), and further information about the project is available here: <http://www.yorkshiredalesrivertrust.com/projects/iwharfe/>

