



Clean Dee – Consultation Report

Background to the Consultation

Responding to increasing local concerns about river cleanliness, the Council set up a cross-party task group of councillors to investigate this issue. One of the task group's recommendations was that the Council should explore whether an application for part of the river to be designated as a bathing water would be feasible.

It is a requirement of the DEFRA guidance on designated bathing water applications (published 3 July 2023) that a public consultation is open for at least six weeks during the bathing season (15 May to 30 September) in the same year an application is submitted. The guidance also provides direction on specified consultees.

This consultation was carried out from mid-July to the end of August and in accordance with the published guidance.

How the survey was carried out

The six-week consultation was primarily online but paper copies were also available on request and at awareness raising events. It was publicised by media release and social media messaging and was targeted towards local residents, community groups and other key stakeholders. In addition to the online survey, respondents also had the opportunity to give their views by email, by letter or by requesting a paper version of the survey.

Prior to the start of the consultation, letters were hand-delivered to all businesses and residents whose properties border the River Dee in the area under consideration for potential designation. The letter explained the background, context and the proposal and alerted these stakeholders to the consultation.

During the consultation period, a series of awareness-raising and engagement events took place at weekends in the form of 'pop-up' information stands on the Meadows, in Exchange Square in the city centre and at the Groves.

During the consultation period, 'pop-up' information points were set up and operated on three days in August, the first on the Meadows to coincide with the Dee Mile swimming event, the second in Exchange Square in the city centre and the third on the riverside at the Groves. The Council also invited views from key stakeholders, including Welsh Water, as the water company responsible for the combined sewer outflows in the city centre; from farmers upstream of the proposed site; and from Chester Zoo, the National Farmers' Union and others who had provided evidence to the Member task group.

In total there were 1,352 responses to the consultation, which includes 1,347 surveys, four email responses and a detailed response from Chester Zoo that is included at the end of this report.

Overall key messages

92% of respondents agreed with the proposed designated bathing area.

There was strong support for the initiative, as many respondents felt it would be a powerful driver for improvements in water quality, health and safety, and would have a positive impact on the community and environment.

Nearly all respondents (98%) felt it was important for the river water to be clean, with 93% considering it to be very important.

The most important reason to respondents was that river water should have clean bathing water status as standard and not as a privilege and as a source of drinking water, the river should not be contaminated with raw sewage.

Many respondents expressed the importance of the River Dee being clean for all river users. There was also strong feeling that all rivers and waters should be clean. Many felt that clean water is a basic right and essential for people and wildlife.

Respondents commented that the river is a great 'free to use' asset for the area, both for health and wellbeing. Improved water quality will encourage more people to make use of this and will be beneficial to tourism in the city.

The majority of respondents (78%) were residents of Cheshire West and Chester.

Detailed findings from the survey

The following pages detail the specific responses to the consultation questions as well as any key messages arising from respondent feedback.

Graph 1: How do you use the river or surrounding riverbanks?

Answer Choices		Response Percent
1	To swim	44%
2	To paddle	37%
3	To lie or sunbathe on the riverbank	24%
4	To row	13%
5	To canoe	24%
6	To fish	5%
7	To walk on the riverbank	81%
8	Other (please specify):	16%

How do you use the river or surrounding riverbanks?







To swim 44 percent, To paddle 37 percent, To lie or sunbathe on the riverbank 24 percent, To row 13 percent, To canoe 24 percent, To fish five percent, To walk on the riverbank 81 percent and Other 16 percent.

Answered by 1,347 respondents. Please note that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages may not add to 100 percent as respondents were able to choose more than one answer.

This question aims to gain an understanding of how people use the river or riverbank. Graph 1 shows the majority of respondents (81%) walk on the riverbank. Almost half of respondents swim (44%), and just over a third (37%) use the river to paddle. Just under a quarter (24%) lie or sunbathe on the riverbank or use the river for canoeing, while 13% use it to row. Other ways people use the river or riverbank include to:

- Fish
- Paddleboard
- Sail
- Walk their dogs (including some dogs swimming in the river)
- Watch wildlife, including photography
- Kayak
- Run
- Sit and enjoy the surroundings and picnic
- Cycle
- Scuba dive
- Litter pick
- Coach water sports
- Water ski
- Work as a tourist guide

Graph 2: How often do you use the river or riverbank?

Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Daily		10%
2	Once a week or more		41%
3	Once a month or more		21%
4	Several times a year		18%
5	A few times a year		9%
6	Never		1%







How often do you use the riverbank?

Daily 10 percent, Once a week or more 41 percent, Once a month or more 21 percent, Several times a year 18 percent, A few times a year nine percent, Never one percent.

Answered by 1,347 respondents. Please note that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

The above chart shows that just over half of respondents (51%) use the river or riverbank at least once a week, with 10% using it daily. Just under a quarter (21%) use it at least once per month.

Graph 3: How important to you is having clean water to swim and play in the river?

Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Very important		93%
2	Fairly important		5%
3	Neither important or unimportant		1%
4	Fairly unimportant		<1%
5	Very unimportant		1%
6	Don't know		<1%

How important to you is having clean water to swim and play in the river?

Very important 93 percent, Fairly important five percent, Neither important nor unimportant one percent, Fairly unimportant less than one percent, Very unimportant one percent, Don't know less than one percent.

Answered by 1,347 respondents. Please note that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

The above chart shows that the majority of respondents (98%) consider it important for the river water to be clean, with 93% considering it to be very important.

Reasons for responses to the question about the importance of clean river water







Respondents were also invited to provide some details to explain their answer to the question about the importance of clean water.

Below are the key messages from the 1,171 comments received in response to this question.

- The most important reason to respondents was that river water should have clean bathing water status as standard and not as a privilege (giving users confidence at all times); and as a source of drinking water, the river should not be contaminated with raw sewage.
- A high number of respondents expressed concerns about their health (and some including that of their dogs) after using the river. Infections and illness, some very serious, have been experienced by some people after contact with polluted water.

- Many people also expressed a view that clean water is vital for the ecosystem. Many have noticed a decline in wildlife, which they attribute to increased pollution of the river.
- Many respondents reported that they had been discouraged from swimming and other recreation activities in the river due to concerns about water quality and their health and some had noticed bad smells and the appearance of sewage pollution and other items discharged into the river.
- Many people commented felt it was important for water companies and other polluters to be held to account.
- Many respondents said that they currently use the river for swimming or other water sports and many felt that good river water quality encourages fitness, wellbeing and fun in the outdoor environment. The river is a great 'free to use' asset for the area, both for health and wellbeing.
- Some respondents commented that free to use, local, swimming facilities are limited at present, and some felt that the river teaches children about water safety as well as having fun.
- Some people commented that good river water quality is essential for tourism and improved water quality will encourage more people to make use of it and will be beneficial to tourism in the city, while a small number of respondents said the river is an important asset to have near to home.
- Many people said that water companies, farmers and waterside industry must be held to account for pollution incidents and some said penalties should be more stringent.
- A small number of people who responded by e-mail provided photographs of what appeared to be sewage pollution.

Graph 4: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the proposed designated bathing water application?

Answer Choices			Response Percent
1	Strongly agree		82%
2	Agree		10%
3	Neither agree nor disagree		3%
4	Disagree		1%
5	Strongly disagree		1%
6	Don't know		2%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the proposed designated bathing water application?

Strongly agree 82 percent, Agree 10 percent, Neither agree nor disagree three percent, Disagree one percent, Strongly disagree one percent, Don't know two percent.

Answered by 1,347 respondents. Please note that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

The above chart shows that the majority of respondents (92%) agree with the proposed Designated Bathing Water application, with 82% saying they strongly agree.

Reasons for responses to the question about the proposed Designated Bathing Water application.

Respondents were also invited to provide some details to explain their answer to the question about potential designation.

Below are the key messages from the 444 comments received in response to this question.

- Many respondents agreed with and expressed strong support for the initiative
- Many respondents commented that the River Dee needs to be clean for all river users, while others felt that all rivers should be clean and protected.
- Many people expressed concern at pollution levels and felt they should be addressed. There was strong feeling that water quality of the River Dee is poor and no longer safe for swimming, leisure or wildlife.
- Some respondents reiterated their support for the proposal, as they felt it would be powerful driver for water quality and health and safety improvements and have a positive impact on the community and environment by reducing contamination through additional monitoring and protections and some felt that designation was long overdue.
- Some respondents expressed the view that the designated bathing area should be extended, including to Eccleston Ferry, Farndon and tributaries like Caldley Valley Nature Park, or that there should be more than one designated area or that the whole river should be included.
- Many respondents said that dumping sewage in the river should stop and several people elaborated on this, for example, by expressing the view that water companies should be responsible for rectifying issues; that we pay a sewerage charge for water companies to deal properly with sewage; that there should be investment in correct treatment systems; that antiquated sewerage systems should be updated; that sewage overflow should stop; and suggesting that underground holding tanks could be used for excess water.
- It was felt by some respondents that the polluters should be held accountable, for example, by making it harder for them to avoid responsibility and by

making it an offence. There was some concern that water companies will continue to pollute by dumping sewage.

- Concern was expressed by some respondents that DEFRA only considers site facilities and the number of bathers (100 a day) when considering applications, when pollution levels will already be discouraging site use.
- There was agreement that the river is both a natural and economic asset to Chester, with many respondents commenting that they use the river for wild swimming, although some expressed the view that it is no longer safe for swimming.
- Many people commented that the river is a natural and economic asset to Chester, and a clean river would boost visitor numbers, tourism, and sport. Some expressed the need to have access to clean local bathing water, rather than having to drive miles away to a clean area.
- Many respondents said that clean water is essential for both humans and wildlife, while some said that a clean river encourages wildlife and will improve the quality of this vital habitat and contribute towards the recovery of the city's biodiversity. Conversely, poor water quality poses a hazard to health and wildlife.
- Many respondents also said that a clean river supports activities that are good for wellbeing, some of whom commented that the river is a free natural resource.
- Many respondents wanted better information on water quality, for example, by providing details of any testing already carried out. River users can then make informed decisions about the bathing risks. People still need to be aware of other waterborne diseases and take precautions. Warning signs and safety guidance on daily tides and currents would be helpful.
- Many respondents said that it is necessary to ensure the correct funding, regulation and safety controls and some also expressed the view that water should not be managed by water companies that are only focused on profit or that water companies should invest in correct infrastructure and should be prohibited from making profits until they rectify the issues.
- Many respondents felt that polluters should be held accountable for their actions and made responsible for rectifying issues. Many felt that water companies should invest in the correct treatment systems and infrastructure to prevent sewage entering the environment.
- Some people suggested that monitoring should be carried out at key points to identify pollution sources.
- Some respondents expressed general concern about river swimming, some of whom felt that this initiative may increase general river safety by reducing people/children using it in a way which could be dangerous, and fair and necessary controls could be introduced. Some people felt there should be warning signs and safety guidance on daily tides and currents.








- Some people expressed concern that the designated bathing area will attract a huge influx of visitors to that site and if it does, this would exacerbate already dangerous overcrowding. There would be a risk of boat collisions and reduced access for the fire service and rescue boat.
- Some respondents said that Sandy Lane should be renovated and cleaned and that more facilities should be created, with suggestions including a river bathing pool and a footbridge across the river.
- A small number of respondents said that planning laws should be properly applied, for example, builders should be responsible for providing adequate drainage systems on new buildings, while a further four said that the drains around Chester should be cleared.







Action to be taken following the survey

The feedback from the consultation will form part of a report to be presented to Cabinet in October 2023, to inform a decision on whether to submit an application to DEFRA for part of the River Dee to be designated as a bathing water.

Profile of respondents

Please note percentages on the graphs have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Are you responding as...? (Please select all that apply)				
	Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	A resident of Cheshire West and Chester		78%	1048
2	A resident whose property borders or is close to the river		17%	223
3	A business or a business representative		1%	18
4	A business or a business representative whose business borders or is close to the river		1%	13
5	A visitor to Cheshire West and Chester		13%	171
6	A member of a local sports group that uses the river (e.g. a rowing club, canoe club etc.)		18%	244
7	A school representative		1%	15

Are you responding as...? (Please select all that apply)				
8	A member of a group with a specific interest in the environment or conservation		7%	99
9	An elected member of Cheshire West and Chester Council		1%	7
10	A local town or parish councillor		1%	10
11	An employee of Cheshire West and Chester Council		1%	20
12	A representative of a voluntary or community organisation		4%	51
13	Prefer not to say		1%	13
14	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>	5%	74
Are you responding as....?				
A resident of Cheshire West and Chester 78 percent, A resident whose property borders or is close to the river 17 percent, A business or a business representative one percent, A business or a business representative whose business borders or is close to the river one percent, A visitor to Cheshire West and Chester 13 percent, A member of a local sports group that uses the river (e.g. a rowing club, canoe club etc.) 18 percent, A school representative one percent, A member of a group with a specific interest in the environment or conservation seven percent, An elected member of Cheshire West and Chester Council one percent, A local town or parish councillor one percent, A representative of a voluntary or community organisation four percent, Prefer not to say one percent, Other five percent.				

Answered by 1347 respondents. Please note percentages do not total 100% as the respondents could select more than one answer.

- The majority of respondents (78%) were residents of Cheshire West and Chester while 17% were residents whose property borders the river.
- 18% of respondents were members of a local sports group that uses the river (e.g. a rowing club, canoe club etc.), and 13% of respondents were visitors.

Responses were received from respondents representing the following organisations:

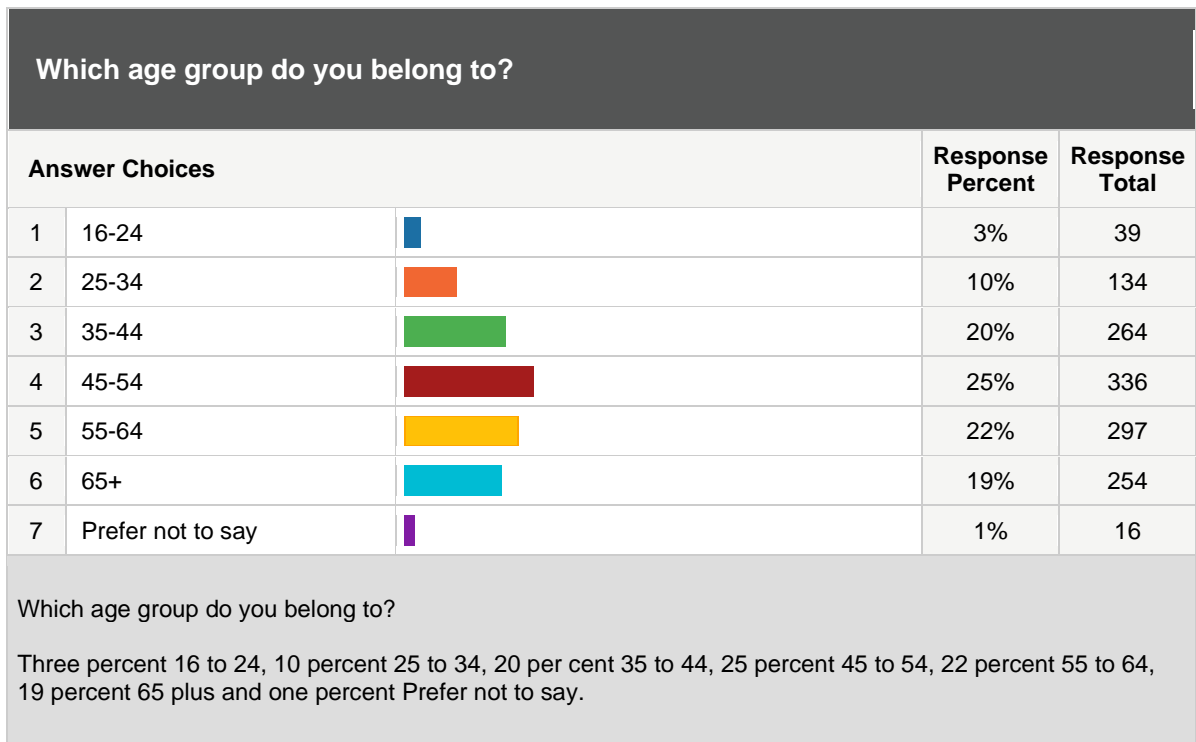
- Aquatic Social Society
- Bluetits Chill Swimmers
- Cheshire Bluetits
- Chester District Scouts and 18th Chester Scout Group
- Chester Federation of Women's Institutes
- Cheshire Wildlife Trust
- ChesterFrosties
- Chester Humanists
- Chester Motorboat Club
- Chester National Park City

- Chester Riverside Canoe Club
- Chester Sailing and Canoeing Club
- Chester Sustainability Forum
- Chester Swim Club
- Chester Triathlon Club
- Chester World Development Forum
- Chester Zoo
- Chilly Dippers
- Dee River Kayaking
- Dee Waters Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids Seed Group
- Deva Canoe Club
- Faiths4Change
- Forest City Projects CIC
- Friends of Caldy Nature Park
- Friends of the Countess of Chester Country Park
- Friends of Grosvenor Park and the Groves
- Friends of the Earth Chester and District
- Friends of the Meadows
- Greenpeace
- Grosvenor Rowing Club
- Handbridge Women's Institute
- Little Sutton Women's Institute
- Liverpool Friends of the Earth
- Marketing Cheshire
- Merseyside Extinction Rebellion
- Mold Canoe Club
- Neston Earth Group
- North Wales Bluetits
- The Firs School
- Queen's Park High School Rowing Club
- Royal Chester Rowing Club
- Sherrington Associates
- Transition Chester
- Welsh River Dee Trust
- Widnes Waders
- Wirral Environmental Network
- Wirral Sub-Aqua Club Open Water Swimmers
- Wreccsam Tri
- Wrexham Waterpolo Club

Respondents who answered 'other' stated that they were responding as:

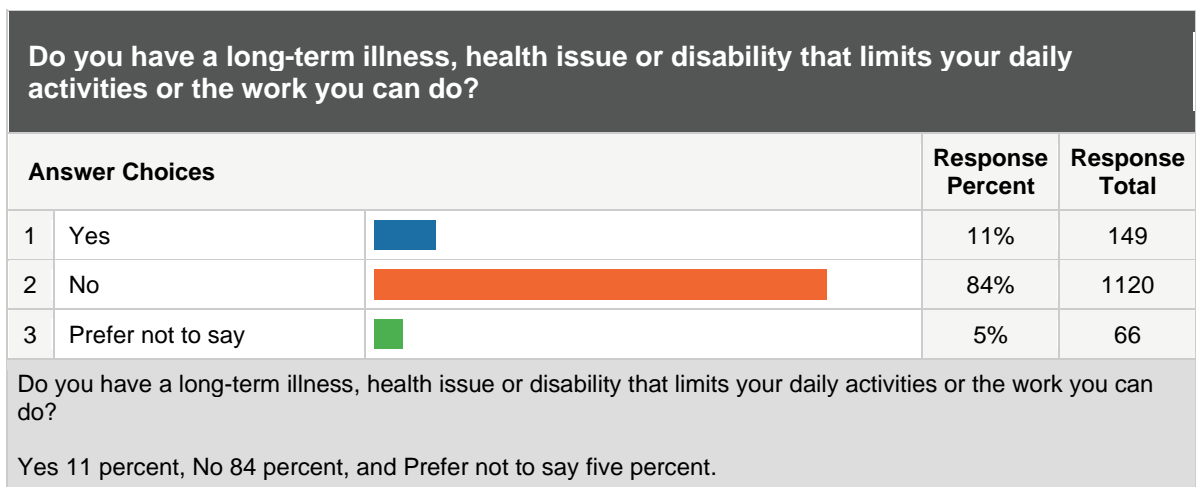
- Parents of river users
- Members of social swimming groups
- Residents of neighbouring areas
- Employees working in Chester
- Former residents
- Anglers
- Licence holders (motorised boats)

- A Dee Mile competitor
- A member of an animal rescue group
- A church leader
- A concerned citizen
- A university student/term-time resident











Answered by 1,340 respondents.

- A quarter of respondents were aged between 45 and 54 and almost a quarter (22%) aged between 55 and 64. 20% were between 35 and 44 (20%) and 19% in the 65 plus age category.
- 10% of respondents were between 25 and 34 and 3% in the 16-24 age category.



Answered by 1,335 respondents.

The majority of respondents (84%) did not report having a long-term illness, health issue or disability that limits daily activities or the work they can do, while 11% reported they did, and a small number preferred not to say.





If you answered 'yes' please indicate which of the following applies to you? (Please select all that apply)				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Physical impairment that causes mobility issues, e.g. wheelchair user		21%	36
2	Visual impairment		3%	6
3	Hearing impairment		14%	24
4	Learning disability or difficulty		3%	5
5	Mental health issue		23%	40
6	Long standing illness or health condition		44%	77
7	Prefer not to say		12%	21
8	Other (please specify):		11%	19

If you answered 'yes' please indicate which of the following applies to you? (Please select all that apply)

Physical impairment that causes mobility issues 21 percent, Visual impairment three percent, Hearing impairment 14 percent, Learning disability or difficulty three percent, Mental health issue 23 percent, Long standing illness or health condition 44 percent, Prefer not to say 12 percent and Other 11 percent.

Answered by 174 respondents.

- Almost half of respondents (44%) reported having a long-standing illness or health condition, while 23% said they had a mental health issue and 21% a physical impairment that causes mobility issues.

Are you...?				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Male		40%	540
2	Female		56%	744
3	Prefer not to say		4%	45
4	Prefer to use own term:		1%	7

Are you...?
Male 40 percent, Female 56 percent, Prefer not to say four percent, Prefer to use own term one percent

Answered by 1,336 respondents.

- Over half the respondents were female (56%), while 44% were male. A small number of respondents preferred not to say or to use their own term.

Which of these groups do you consider yourself to belong to?				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British		89%	1190
21	Prefer not to say		5%	69
22	Other (please specify):		2%	26
Which of these groups do you consider yourself to belong to?				
White British 89 percent, Prefer not to say five percent, Other two percent All other groups less than one percent.				

Answered by 1,339 respondents.






- The majority of respondents were white British (89%)

Which of these best describes your religious belief/faith?				
Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Buddhist		1%	10
2	Christian		37%	495
3	Hindu		0%	0
4	Jewish		<1%	3
5	Muslim		<1%	2
6	Sikh		0%	0
7	None		46%	612
8	Prefer not to say		13%	170
9	Other (please specify):		2%	32
Which of these best describes your religious belief/faith?				
Buddhist one percent, Christian 37 percent, Hindu zero percent, Jewish less than one percent, Muslim less than one percent, Sikh zero percent, None 46 percent, prefer bot to say 13 percent, Other two percent.				

Answered by 1,324 respondents.

- Almost half of respondents (46%) reported having no religion, followed by 37% who said they are Christian, and 13% who preferred not to say.

Which of these best describes your sexual orientation?

Answer Choices			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Heterosexual/Straight		80%	1054
2	Bisexual		2%	26
3	Gay/Lesbian		2%	25
4	Prefer not to say		14%	191
5	Prefer to use own term:		2%	22

Which of these best describes your sexual orientation?

Heterosexual/straight 80 percent, Bisexual two percent, Gay/Lesbian 2 percent, Prefer not to say 14 percent, prefer to use own term two percent.

Answered by 1,318 respondents.

- The majority of respondents (80%) said they are heterosexual or straight, and 14% preferred not to say.

Letter from Chester Zoo in response to the consultation



Chester West and Chester Council
Public Protection Service,
The Portal,
Wellington Road,
Ellesmere Port, CH65 0BA

24 August 2023

To Whom it May Concern,

Please accept this letter as our contribution to the ongoing consultation on bathing water designation on the River Dee in Chester.

Like many in our community, we have been extremely disappointed by the recent unacceptable discharges of sewage into the River Dee. The River Dee is of international importance for biodiversity and a significant natural asset, both locally and nationally. The Dee Estuary Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation, and Ramsar site represent the international importance of the Dee estuary, playing home to many rare and declining birds such as redshank, curlew, black-tailed godwit, and pintail, as well as declining habitats including saltmarsh, Atlantic salt meadows and mudflats.

The river also hosts important populations of wildlife including declining invertebrates like the critically endangered Scarce Yellow Stonefly - found along a 20km stretch of the River Dee in Wrexham County Borough - which was rediscovered in the river in 2017 after being presumed extinct for almost twenty years. This is the only known site for this critically endangered species in the UK, and one of only a handful in western Europe. More information on our Scarce Yellow Stonefly project can be found [here](#).

Pollution of the Dee puts species such as the Scarce Yellow Stonefly at risk, as well as many others which rely on a clean and healthy environment to survive, and undermines the protection afforded.

As pointed out by the consultation document itself, bathing water designation can be the first step in ensuring action is taken to improve water quality by reducing contamination. This is clearly evidenced by the improvement in the number of bathing waters in England which now meet the highest quality standards of 'good' or 'excellent' in 2022, compared to ratings in previous years.

We believe that the additional monitoring and protections from pollution which come from a bathing water designation presents an opportunity for similar improvements in the water quality in the River Dee. This would, in turn, improve the quality of this vital habitat at Sandy Lane, as well as further along the river, and contribute towards the recovery of our city's biodiversity.

Because of this, we would support the designation of the Sandy Lane section of the River Dee as a bathing site. Alongside this designation, we would encourage the development of signage that highlights how swimmers can enjoy this section of the river alongside the fauna and flora which live there - allowing both swimmers and our wildlife to utilise the river together.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of this consultation process.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Simon Dowell".

Dr Simon Dowell
Conservation Science and Policy Director