

Caring for the country's rivers

A report of school pupils' views to the Environment Agency

For its consultation on River Basin Planning – Challenges and Choices

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On behalf of the Pupils 2 Parliament organisation: a project to secure the views of school pupils for submission to Parliamentary, national government and national organisation consultations.

Submitted in relation to all river districts in England.

It is agreed that this submission may be quoted and published.

Consultation found through UK Government website.

Introduction

1. This report gives school children's views for the consultation on *River Basin Planning: Challenges and Choices*.
2. The report gives the views of 88 children aged 9 to 11 at Colley Lane Primary Academy, Halesowen, West Midlands, Eardisley CE Primary School, Herefordshire, and Quarry Bank Primary School, Brierley Hill, West Midlands.
3. We explained the questions and issues of river and water health and supply, from the government consultation document and the accompanying challenge documents and videos.
4. All views, voting results and proposals came spontaneously from the pupils, with no prompt or 'lead' on what they should say or how they should vote, and all the views they gave us are reported here without selection, addition or comment.
5. Pupils 2 Parliament is an established project enabling school pupils to consider and feed in their views to parliamentary, national government and national body inquiries and public consultations.
6. The project has been approved by the Clerks of both Houses of Parliament to use the term 'Parliament' in its title.



The idea of restoring rivers, wetlands and coasts to a more natural state (Consultation questions 2, 3, 5, 11, and 14)

7. The children in all three focus groups agreed overall with the big idea of trying to return rivers and other waterways, flood plains and wetlands, as near as possible to their natural state before humans had changed, polluted and diverted them. "We need to focus on the water itself and get it back to how it used to be"
8. All three groups thought this was the way ahead to have a good supply of clean water for the future. We will always need a good supply of fresh water if we are to keep healthy, and we "might not have enough water in the future".
9. There was general agreement that manmade blockages, gates and weirs should be removed where possible: "remove all the manmade weirs and return to natural flooding, especially with the smaller rivers". There was though a clear view that remaining and future weirs and gates "would need to be eco-friendly so fish and animals weren't trapped by them".
10. But the children thought some diversions, weirs and gates would have to stay, and it would not be possible to return everything back to its natural state. "I agree with the idea (of returning rivers and wetlands to their natural state), but I feel it would nearly be impossible because of the amount of damage we have done."

As one pupil asked, given the damage already done, “how are we going to fix it?” Getting rivers more natural again would cost a lot, probably need help from charities, and “it would take a lot of time and effort to change”. One child commented, things “in the old days were less complicated than nowadays”.

11. Some thought that there were good reasons for keeping some existing manmade obstacles in rivers; “we should remove some of the unnatural elements on the water that we have put in”, but “we should check whether we still need the manmade elements, which may be helping”.
12. We were consulting children at a time of lots of discussion and disagreement about Brexit, and some children made comments about improving our rivers against this background. Two views were “I think we should get Brexit done first before we focus on our rivers”, and “I think we should forget Brexit and focus on our rivers”.
13. Most children saw reducing and removing litter and pollution as a priority. “Need to take all the plastics and leaves out”, it is “killing the animals”. “People are just throwing plastic in the river and wildlife is dying”. Some were particularly worried about the effects of water pollution on particular river or sea creatures – such as turtles. They thought removing plastics and pollution would take many years.
14. More recycling, less use of plastic and simple steps like replacing plastic straws were seen as important things everyone could help with. Not littering in and by water is important. “People need to look after our rivers, with pollution levels being high. We need more bins by rivers. People don’t use bins correctly.”
15. One proposal for improving the quality of water in polluted parts of rivers was to look into the possibility of pumping out polluted water and replacing it with fresh water from somewhere else – a “water transplant”.
16. In another group, proposals were developed for dividing rivers into a number of zones. Some stretches might be restored to a fully natural state (and as a reserve for water wildlife), others made and kept suitable for swimming, play, boating and other recreational use (“to muck about in”), and some stretches made suitable for water abstraction for water works, farms and factories. The different ‘use divisions’ of a river would be marked by flags, not walls or anything else in the water itself.
17. Some stretches could be for more than one use, and some uses may in some places need separate stretches – such as a swimming area and a ‘heavier watersports recreation’ area. There was also a suggestion that some stretches may need to be kept for experiments and research.
18. A counter view in that group was that it would be difficult to divide each river into different stretches, as this might be bad for the wildlife which uses the whole length of a river. Instead, different rivers as a whole could each be designated for one of the particular uses being discussed. An aim might be to return half of all rivers to a natural state.

19. We told the children about ‘alien invasive species’, using the information in the government documents. There was general agreement that returning rivers to a natural state should include removing ‘alien invasive species’ from them. One group proposed positive action to protect our natural river life and to remove the ‘aliens’ that are damaging our rivers. “There should be a team of people who protect the curlew etc, and a team that try to capture ‘aliens’ from our rivers, working to protect the natural wildlife.” There should also be a telephone number for people to ring to report any river wildlife that needs help from the team.



Individual changes versus big projects

(Consultation question 2)

20. We asked the children to say whether they thought the first priority for the Environment Agency in improving our rivers and wetlands should be to encourage us all to do what we can as individuals to save water, stop polluting it, and help rivers and waters to be healthy – or whether the first priority should be for the Environment Agency to get started on some big projects, like clearing manmade obstacles and diversions from rivers and waterways and restoring natural water routes.

21. 82 children voted on this. By a strong majority, the children wanted the first priority to be getting each of us ‘doing our bit’ as individuals at home, at school or at work. 60 children voted for this, compared with 22 who voted for the first priority to be the Environment Agency getting started on some big projects.

22. All three groups voted in favour of the first priority being to get individuals doing what they can. “Everyone should try to make a difference.”



Improving all rivers a bit, versus focusing on the worst rivers

(Consultation question 2)

23. We also asked whether, for rivers, the children thought the Environment Agency’s first aim should be to make an improvement to all rivers, or instead to focus its time, people and money on making an improvement first to the worst rivers and stretches of river.

24. Again, 82 children voted on this question. This time though, they were equally divided in what they thought should be done. Exactly half (41) voted that the Environment Agency should first aim to make an improvement to all rivers, and exactly half (41) voted that it should focus first on improving the very worst rivers and stretches of river.

25. The three groups voted differently. Two voted in favour of starting with the very worst rivers and stretches of river, while the third voted in favour of starting by improving all rivers to some extent.
26. Three pupils summed up the different views of many. One said “we should try to attend to all the environmental river needs”. Another said “I think we should focus on the bad parts first”. The third was concerned that “if you focus on one at a time, then the others could get worse”.



Timescale for improving rivers, groundwater and water supplies

(Consultation question 2)

27. The government’s consultation document says that only 16% of our waters are close to their natural state – and that at the rate we are working on it now, it will take 200 years to get three quarters of our rivers and waters back to near their natural state. As the Environment Agency sees getting our waters back to their natural state as the best way to deal with the water problems of climate change, things need to be improved faster than this. Very fast work on this would cost a lot and may not be possible – but slower work on it might mean things are not getting sorted out in our lifetimes, but would be for future generations.
28. We asked our three groups of children the tricky question of which generation should be the one to have the benefits of most rivers and other waters being back close to their natural state.
29. We asked them whether the aim should be to get it done in their own lifetimes, or their children’s (if they have children), or their grandchildren’s, or their great grandchildren’s.
30. 6 of the 88 children abstained on the question. Exactly half (41) of the 82 who voted said the aim should be to get rivers and waters sorted for their own children’s generation.
31. Only one in five (17) thought things should be sorted in their own lifetimes. Nearly a third thought things should be sorted for their grandchildren’s or great grandchildren’s lifetimes. 11 voted for things to be done for their grandchildren, and 13 for things to be done for their great grandchildren.
32. There were differences in view between our three groups. In two groups, the top vote was for things to be sorted for their children’s lifetimes, but the top vote in the third group was for them to be sorted for their great grandchildren.

Controlling water flows

(Consultation questions 5, 6 and 7)

33. The consultation documents described a number of issues to do with river flows and levels. We asked our three pupil groups to consider the appropriate action on two of these – flooding in high-rainfall winters, and having enough water to access and take from rivers in low-rainfall summers.
34. We asked the children how they would react in controlling sluice gates on a river about to flood with a high level of water. Would they close sluice gates to prevent flooding downstream of a town with houses built on a former flood plain, at the expense of flooding a town upstream? Or would they open sluice gates to protect the town upstream, but allowing the town with houses on the former flood plain to flood?
35. In the first group we asked, 18 children voted by a majority of two to one (with another 5 children abstaining) that they would open the sluice gates to allow the river to flow naturally downstream, even if this meant flooding housing built on a former flood plain.
36. However, the second pupil group we asked proposed that they should not vote between these two extreme options, because they would want to take a different action - of partly opening the sluice gates to control the water flow to share the risk of flooding between the upstream and downstream towns. So we allowed them to choose between opening the sluice gates, closing the sluice gates, or partly opening the sluice gates. We also offered these three options to the third and final group.
37. Out of the 59 children in the two groups who voted between these three options, three quarters (45) voted that they would partially open the sluice gates, even though this would probably flood both upstream and downstream towns – but not to the depth that either fully opening or closing the gates would flood just one of the towns. They saw sharing the flooding between the two towns as the fairest solution to the problem.
38. Of those children across the three groups who did choose either fully opening or fully closing the sluice gates, more voted for opening the gates and allowing the water to flow naturally and flood the downstream town with buildings on a former flood plain, than those who voted for closing the sluice gates to save that town from flooding but to flood the upstream town instead.
39. Pupils explained some of the factors that would make a difference in deciding what they would do with the sluice gates. One factor was the number of people whose homes or businesses would be flooded as a result of each decision. Another was whether those who got flooded would be richer or poorer people. A third was the possibility that even if the sluice gates were closed to try to save the downstream town from flooding, the floodwater in the upstream town would still flow quickly down through the countryside to flood the downstream town as well.

40. The key factor leading to the decision to open the sluice gates halfway to share the flooding between the towns was that it was thought better to end up with a lower depth of floodwater in two towns, affecting a larger number of people, than to end up with deeper floodwater in only one town, affecting a smaller number of people.
41. Shallower flooding would be less damaging and easier to recover from than deep flooding. People would have “less chance that they can’t go back home”; and “less deep is more important – more chance of getting back into their homes”. The shallower flooding would also probably be less dramatic; “it will spread wider and not so fast”.
42. We then put the opposite problem to all three groups of pupils – that is, how they would control river flow during a dry summer in which there was a lack of water in the river. Would they shut sluice gates to ensure that the town and farms upstream would have sufficient flow and depth of water to abstract the water they needed, but the town downstream would not be able to abstract much water?. Or would they open sluice gates to allow sufficient water flow for the downstream farms and town to abstract the water they needed? Or would they partly open the gates to share the water flow and level there was, but with the result that none of the farms and neither of the towns would be able to abstract the amount of water they needed? We allowed pupils to choose this option of partly opening the sluice gates in all three groups.
43. Sharing the problem was again the childrens’ preferred action. 49 (just under two thirds) of the 80 children who voted chose the option of partly opening the sluice gates to control water flow, in order to share water for abstraction as fairly as possible between the upstream and downstream farms and towns.
44. Whether controlling water flow to counter flood risks or to enable sufficient abstraction of water for towns and farms, the majority of the children chose to control the flow to share either flood risk or water shortage fairly between upstream and downstream towns and farms.
45. Unlike the voting for flow control to deal with flood risks, however, this time those children who chose either to open or to close the sluice gates fully, voted two to one in favour of closing the sluice gates to hold water back for the farms and town upstream to abstract the amount then needed, even though this meant that the farms and the town downstream being unable to abstract more than a little water.
46. A compromise proposal was made in one group – that the town that ended up with a better water level to abstract from should ‘give back’ some of its abstracted water to the town that was left with a poor water flow.

The Check – Clean – Dry code

(Consultation question 12)

47. The consultation document asks how the “Check – Clean – Dry” code for avoiding spreading invasive species can be promoted.
48. In response to this question, we asked two of our three groups of children – one group in a school in a town area and the other in a rural village – how many had heard of the Check – Clean – Dry. Fewer than one in ten children (6 out of 65) had heard of it.
49. Their view was that it clearly needs to be better known, probably promoted as part of notices beside rivers and waterways asking people to follow this code, as well as not throwing their litter in or by the water. For example, there should be signs about both issues in places where people camp by the waterside. The message should also be promoted through schools.



Paying for restoring flood plains

(Consultation question 27)

50. One of our groups themselves raised the proposal that flood plains that have been built on should be cleared, to allow natural overflowing of rivers without houses or other buildings being flooded. They discussed how this could be achieved, and who should pay for this to happen and for rehousing people.
51. If possible, people should give their permission to move to new houses built for them somewhere else, so that houses on flood plains could be cleared, and the flood plains returned to their natural state of holding river floodwater. The pupils as a group then built further on this idea, given that not everybody would be likely to agree to move.
52. Some pupils added to the idea with ways of encouraging people to move off flood plains, and of making it easier for them to move. Part of their relocation costs could be paid for them, and they could be offered houses to rent while new houses were being built for them. Some thought better terms should be offered to get people to move, such as buying their houses off them but adding a bonus to their real value to encourage them to sell and move. Some proposed simply paying the full cost of their new house, or offering them a better house than their old one for the same price.
53. The group thought some people would need to be forced to move, even with all these encouragements. They should have to sell their houses (the children in fact thought up a system that is already known as ‘compulsory purchase’), and refusal should involve the police and possible punishments.

54. Finally, the group added two new proposals to the ideas about getting people to move out of houses on flood plains. One was that house owners should be able, if they wanted, to keep owning their plot of land after their house had gone and they had moved away, so that they could use the land as good ground to grow things on when it was not being flooded.

55. The other proposal was that people who refused to move from a house on a flood plain should be offered the alternative of staying where they were likely to get flooded, but given money and a team of helpers to make their old house floodproof.

56. On paying to restore floodplains, pupils saw the main cost as that of moving people and businesses elsewhere. One view was that “the government should pay for some rebuilding as it is their concern”. Others thought the cost should be shared between the government generally, the local community, and the Secretary of State concerned.



57. I am grateful to the Heads and staff of the three schools for enabling this consultation discussion with their pupils, especially to the members of staff who took notes of the pupils’ views and votes, and above all to the pupils themselves for their views and fresh thinking.

Roger Morgan
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