
Looking after Water

A Report of Children's Views to the Environment Agency

*Submission to the Environment Agency consultation on updating the draft river basin
management plans*

April 2015

Introduction

1. Pupils 2 Parliament is a new project, which gives pupils at school a say in decisions being made by Parliament, the Government and other national organisations. It works with schools to help pupils take part in public consultations, when these organisations ask what people think about decisions they are going to make for our country. Permission has been given by the Clerks of both Houses of Parliament for us to use the word 'Parliament' in our name.
2. Our reports set out what pupils have said, and nothing else. We don't leave out any views pupils gave us. We don't add anything, and we don't make comments on what the pupils have said. This report is pupil views and nothing but pupil views.
3. We know, from talking with children over many years, that pupils can and do think for themselves through the issues that go into major decisions. They come up with valuable challenges and ideas. Pupils bring the value of their own fresh thinking to problems. For the children themselves, we aim to give the experience of taking a real part in democracy by feeding their views and ideas into real decisions. What pupils say through our reports can make a real difference.
4. The Pupils 2 Parliament project started in July 2014. This is our fifteenth report. Our earlier reports gave children's views on the future rules for nurses, on the future of motoring, on rules for using driverless cars on the road, on the future use of biometric data like fingerprints and eye scanning, on the government's Heroism Bill, on the UK Space Plan, on the design of the new £1 coin, on the Government's plans to get more people cycling and walking, on the Regulations for those working or travelling on buses, on the idea of a New Magna Carta, on keeping records of people's messages, on monitoring the quality of the air, on teaching skills, and on making traffic safer.



About this report

5. The government's Environment Agency works to look after many different sorts of water. This means making sure there is always enough clean water for us to use from our taps at home, and making sure there is enough water for farm animals, factories and to water growing crops. It means getting rid of sewage from our homes and waste water from factories and farms. It means getting rid of rainwater so it doesn't cause floods. It means looking after rivers, lakes, canals, ponds and ditches, estuaries and water round the coast. It means looking after 'groundwater', which is a lot of water in different places



underneath the ground, rather like the water you find if you dig down into the sand on the beach or if you dig a well in ground which has water underneath it. It means making sure waterways are healthy for the fish and other creatures that live in the water, and for the plants that grow in and by the water. And it means making sure people can travel by boat and have fun swimming and doing sports in and on the water.

6. As well as all this, it means planning to deal with the extra heat waves, droughts and floods that the scientists say are likely to happen in the future because of climate change.
7. The Environment Agency are planning how they are going to look after all the water in each of the big water areas of the country. These areas are the 'river basins' of our biggest rivers, each of these is the area where the rainwater, streams and smaller rivers all flow into that area's big river.
8. We explained that the Agency says it has some big problems to deal with in looking after our water. Some of the main ones are dealing with pollution getting into our water from sewage, farms and factories, and keeping up with the amount of water people are using. Then there are things like building work that changes how rainwater runs away and can lead to flooding. There are also plants and animals from other parts of the world that invade our waterways and cover them over or clog them up. And there are the problems scientists tell us will need to be dealt with because of climate change.
9. The Environment Agency wants to know what people think of their plans for each of these 'river basin' areas, before they make their final decisions on looking after all the different sorts of water there.
10. We asked pupils in five different primary schools for their views. The pupils we consulted all lived in the River Severn river basin, which means that their biggest nearby river was the River Severn, which flows into (and mixes with) the sea at the Severn Estuary.
11. This report gives views from a total of 117 pupils aged 9 to 11 from primary schools in the West Midlands. The schools were: Colley Lane school, Halesowen; Howley Grange school, Halesowen; Gig Mill school, Stourbridge; Priory school, Dudley; and Quarry Bank school, Brierley Hill. These schools had been put forward by the UNICEF organisation of the United Nations as part of their work on their Rights Respecting Schools awards.
12. We held a discussion and voting session with pupils at each school, each lasting just over an hour and a half. One person from Pupils 2 Parliament asked pupils for their views and votes on a series of questions. Members of the school staff took notes of what they said for this report. Pupils voted on some questions using voting tokens, and on others by a show of hands.



13. We didn't suggest any answers, and took great care not to lead the pupils towards any particular views. We used the information in the Environment Agency's consultation document to explain things to the pupils.
14. All the points made by the pupils are in this report. As we find with all our Pupils 2 Parliament discussions, their views were sensible and thoughtful, there were no silly comments, the discussions kept going for the whole session, and nothing was raised which wasn't to do with the subject. These were serious discussions and the pupils' views deserve to be taken seriously into account.



What we asked

15. When we talked to the Environment Agency about this Pupils 2 Parliament consultation, they asked us to put five special questions to the pupils. So after explaining things, we put these five questions to each group of pupils. These questions were:
 - i. Tell us the name of the waters that you care about most, and the town and county they are in.
 - ii. Is the health of these waters important to you? Why?
 - iii. Do you think these waters are healthy? Why?
 - iv. Do you think more should be done to save the waters you care about? If so, what?
 - v. Would you like to be more involved in decisions made about the health of our wetlands, rivers, streams, lakes, beaches and estuaries? If so, how?
16. After recording the pupils' answers to these five questions, we went on to ask them to vote on three of the big choices the Environment Agency has to make in its plans. We took these questions from what the Agency was asking the public in its main consultation document. For each of these three questions, we asked pupils to vote on which of two decisions they thought the Agency should take about spending its money on looking after our water.



The water children care about

17. We had told the pupils about each of the different types of water the Environment Agency looks after, from rivers to estuaries, rainwater to tap water, groundwater, canals, lakes, sewers and the coast. We took our explanations



from the Agency's consultation document. We explained that each sort of water can be good and healthy, or be bad and unhealthy. Even sewage can be of good or bad quality – bad quality sewage has things in it that shouldn't be there and which clog up the system – like masses of cooking fat, baby wipes that don't break up in the water like toilet paper does, or rubbish that shouldn't be flushed down the toilet.

18. The Environment Agency had asked us to find out the name of the waters the pupils cared about most. So we asked the pupils to tell us the name of any special place they cared about because of the water there, or to tell us which of the sorts of water the Environment Agency deals with they cared about most.

19. None of the pupils gave us the name of a special place they cared about because of the water there. All the pupils who told us what water they cared about most, chose one of the types of water the Environment Agency has to look after.

20. Here are the top five types of water the children care most about, in order with the one they care about most at the top of the list:

1. tap water
2. the sea
3. coastal water at the beach
4. river water
5. rainwater.

21. Other sorts of water, but each chosen by fewer than one in twenty pupils, were (in order):

pond water
bath or washing water
canal water
groundwater
sewage
water in swimming pools
lakes
ditches
wells
ice in skating rinks.

22. We asked pupils the reasons for their choices of what water they cared about most. The main reason for choosing tap water was that we all need it to drink, and without it we would die. We need to drink clean water often to stay alive; "you can live longer without food than you can without water", "if no water, won't live very long", we "drink to live". If we don't have enough drinking water we get dehydrated. Tap water has to be clean and healthy otherwise we will get diseases. We are lucky to have tap water in our houses and not to have to go and collect our water. We also use tap water in lots of different ways. And it

tastes nice. Some said we need to care more about our tap water, and take care not to waste it. We all “need to save water”.

23. Those who chose sea water chose this because of the animals and fish that live in it, which would die if their water wasn't healthy. “It has animals in.” If the sea goes bad, then many creatures would become extinct. As well as not wanting the fish and animals in the sea to die, we also need those fish to eat. The salt water in the sea is important for lots of creatures that need salt water to live in. One pupil chose the sea because we all need salt, for example for cooking, and the sea is one of the places we get salt from. One pupil said the sea is so important to so many things that “without the sea, nothing works”.
24. We use the sea too for travelling on and for boat trips. Seeing the ocean is also seeing something beautiful. One chose sea water as the water they cared most about because it was being affected by global warming melting ice into the seas.
25. Water at the beach was mainly chosen because it is where people go to swim, play water sports and enjoy themselves. As one pupil put it; “no swimming if no beach”. Being by the ocean gives us “water world and leisure”.
26. Pupils who chose river water said that it is important for the fish and plants that live in it, and that we need those fish to feed ourselves. Some also said that rivers are beautiful and give us “amazing sights”. Lots of photos are taken of rivers. Lots of people use rivers for “good times playing”.
27. Canals were chosen too because they can be used for travelling by boat, but also because they can get polluted by oil and rubbish. Like rivers, canals can be used by creatures we like, such as ducks. One pupil chose canals because carrying goods on boats along canals again could be a way of saving on petrol in the future.
28. The main reason for choosing rainwater was that it is needed for plants to grow. It is needed for all sorts of plants, from big crops to things like strawberries. We need those plants as food; “we need plants to eat – without plants, there's starvation”. Rain is also where a lot of the water we need comes from; “without it we would have a drought”. Rainwater can be cleaned and recycled.
29. There were two main reasons for caring about pond water. One was that lots of animals and other creatures live in it. People can enjoy seeing creatures like swans and ducks that live on ponds. The other reason was that ponds are a place lots of people make unhealthy by throwing their rubbish there. Our pets also drink water from ponds, and could die if it is unhealthy. Ponds, and lakes too, are needed as living places for lots of animals and fish: “animals need places to live or numbers go down”.

30. Water for washing in was chosen because it is a main way for us all to keep ourselves healthy, and to avoid us becoming dirty and smelly. Pupils who chose canals said this was because they can be used for activities like canoeing and so keeping people fit and healthy.
31. A few pupils chose groundwater, because it is an important source of fresh, pure and healthy water for us.
32. A few chose sewage water because if people put the wrong things into it (like cooking fat), then we need to think about the other people who have to go down the sewers to clean that stuff out again. It is disgusting that people have to do that because we have put things we shouldn't down sinks and toilets.
33. Those who cared about swimming pools said that swimming was an important leisure activity for many people.
34. One person said they cared most about wells because people still use wells to get water they need.
35. Many pupils were worried about how people make water unhealthy by throwing rubbish into it. Rubbish is bad for creatures that live in any sort of water, and people throw rubbish into even the water used by creatures people like, such as ducks. Rubbish thrown into the sea can kill fish. Canals easily get polluted by people throwing rubbish into them.



Had children thought about the quality of water?

36. The Environment Agency wanted us to find out whether the health of the water they cared about was important to children. We asked the pupils whether they had in fact ever thought about how healthy the water was, before we had started talking about the quality of water for this report. We asked them whether they had ever thought about the quality of the sort of water they had told us they cared about. If they hadn't been able to choose a sort of water they cared about most, we asked them whether they had thought about the quality or health of any of the sorts of water we had been talking about.
37. 39% of the children had thought about water quality before our discussions. 61% hadn't thought about the health or quality of water before now.
38. There was a lot of agreement between the groups from different schools, who we were of course meeting separately. In three school groups, more than half the pupils said they hadn't thought about the quality of water before, and in the other two schools, equal numbers said they had and hadn't thought about it before. In none of the five schools had a majority of the pupils we met thought about the quality of water before now.



39. Those who had thought about the quality of water before said this was because they had been told how lucky we are to have plenty of clean water to drink. They had also seen television programmes about people in places like parts of Africa where there isn't enough clean water. "We take water for granted and its disease free. You see other children in other countries with dirty water. How lucky we are."



Do we think our water is healthy?

40. For another of the Environment Agency's five special questions, we asked the pupils to think about the sort of water they cared about (and if they hadn't chosen one they cared about most, to choose any of the types of water we had talked about), and to tell us whether they thought that sort of water was healthy and good quality at the moment.

41. 61% thought the type of water they had chosen was healthy, of good quality, at the moment. 39% thought it wasn't.

42. In four of the schools, the majority of pupils thought their water was healthy and good quality – but in the fifth school the majority thought the water wasn't healthy in their area.

43. We asked pupils to give us some reasons for their answers. Most said they thought pollution was making water bad. People throw things into rivers; "they were clean – they aren't now". Groundwater was clean, but is now polluted by what people have added into water on the ground. Sewage is not just what it should be, but has got things in it that people shouldn't have put down sinks, drains and toilets. Beaches get littered. There is oil polluting sea water and killing the fish. Ditches are not kept clear to help stop floods. Sometimes tap water becomes bad and you have to boil it before you can drink it.



What more should be done to save the waters you care about?

44. We asked the pupils for ideas about what could be done to save the waters they cared about, or to make that water healthier. Here is a list of the pupils' ideas (these aren't in any special order):

- Keep the environment clean – don't litter
- Ask members of the public to help clear waterways out – even for a few minutes a day
- Have a tax to pay for keeping water clean
- Do all you can to stop bugs getting in to drinking water



- When workmen are repairing pipes, make sure they keep them clean inside and don't let dirt get in (one pupil had experience of dirt getting into a water pipe while it was being worked on)
- Don't store water in tanks in houses (to be used for hot water or bathroom taps) – it started out very clean and just gets dirty that way and can make you ill
- Spend more on clearing things from rivers and ponds, including rubbish people have thrown into them
- More pumps and filters to clean waste out of rivers
- Charge people who pollute water
- Make more use of springs
- Do more to stop people polluting water ways – with more fines and community service (though some thought you can't stop people polluting)
- Use micro-organisms to help keep waterways clean
- Put filters across rivers to catch floating rubbish
- Employ jobless people to help keep waterways clear
- Watch lengths of riverbank by CCTV, alerting patrols to catch people dumping rubbish or oil in the water
- Put CCTV along the coastline to catch people throwing litter or emptying chemicals into the sea, to fine them and get people to clear it up
- Put more litter bins along river banks
- Alongside very busy river banks where lots of people walk, put up glass barriers that people can see through but which will stop them throwing things into the water
- Do an experiment with bins and litter signs – try different ones on different sides of a path to see which work best
- Have more, and more colourful, signs showing where litter bins are
- Empty rubbish bins regularly so they don't overflow and stop being used
- Stop putting oil or chemicals into the sea
- Have more people keeping sewers clear
- Plant the sorts of plants in waterways that help to clean the water
- Find groundwater supplies in countries that are short of water.



Do children want a say in the future of our water?

45. In the last of their five special questions, the Environment Agency wanted to know whether children would like to be more involved in decisions about looking after water in the future.



46. We put this to the pupils in the five schools. Always when we ask this sort of question, we ask pupils to tell us whether this is a subject they would *particularly* choose to be interested and involved in.
47. 56% of the children would be particularly interested in being consulted about looking after water in the future.
48. We went on to ask in what ways pupils would like to be asked or involved. Because “water has a massive effect on people’s lives”, many would like to be able to volunteer to patrol waterways and help clear them of rubbish and plastic bags. If you care about something, you should be prepared to volunteer to do something about it. They would like to see posters put up that said how children could help. Some would like to have more debates about water issues. Many would like more opportunities again in the future to have their say by voting on government decisions about looking after water.



Should the Environment Agency spend more of their money (1) making as many water bodies *good* as they can, or (2) making the very worst ones better?

49. This was the first of our three votes by pupils on which choice the Environment Agency should make about how it should spend its money in the future. These three votes together give children’s say on the policy that should be followed in looking after our water in the future.
50. We had explained that ‘water bodies’ are basically ‘chunks of water’ – like rivers, groundwater, sewers, coastal waters or estuaries. The Environment Agency rates their quality. Then it has to decide whether it is more important to spend more money on improving as many ‘water bodies’ as possible to get them to score as good quality – or whether it should instead pick the very worst ones and try to make them better than they are now. The pupils were clear that there are no right answers to this – it is a real choice and one that the Agency has to make.
51. Children voted for a policy of improving as many water bodies as possible up to good quality, rather than concentrating on making the worst ones better, by 84% to 16%. All five school groups voted the same way on this, so it is a very clear children’s view on what policy the Agency should choose.
52. Pupils gave some of their reasons for voting the way they did. Many said that it was healthier and safer to have lots of good quality water bodies even if there were still a few that were bad, rather than just making the bad ones a bit better so you ended up with all your water bodies being ok but not good. It was better to improve as many of your water bodies as possible, rather than only a few bad ones, even if those stayed bad.
53. Pupils who voted the other way thought that if you ended up with just a few really bad water bodies, even if most of your water was good, that bad water



could get mixed up with good water and turn that bad too, making people ill. If you make the bad ones better, then you would no longer have any poor water bodies. This might be the best thing to do, otherwise “the bad ones can overcome the good ones”. Getting rid of bad water bodies would stop that happening, and leave you less to deal with in the long run. And bad water bodies can get even worse; “worst things get worse, so costing more money , so spend money now”. The Environment Agency could find that even if having a lot of good water was good for its reputation, its “reputation could slip for the bad”.

54. Some pupils thought that it was fine to end up with water bodies that are all generally ok, even if none are especially good. Then it would not matter that you wouldn't know which out of a number of water bodies might be a bad one. Getting everything to an ok standard is more important than getting some up from ok to good. But others argued that having, say, 4 good ones and 1 bad one is better because you then have a better chance of having a good one than a bad one.

55. There were two other points from pupils on this. One was that if bad water supplies can be identified, then it might be better to cut those off and extend the good ones, rather than trying to bring the bad ones up to standard. The other point was that there might be some bugs that need bad water to survive, and those bugs might be needed in nature.

56. Many pupils talked about the problem of the money running out before you were able to do both jobs – the one of making ok water bodies good and the other one of improving the worst water bodies. You could end up with only poor water bodies without having made some of them into good ones, even though really clean water is very important. Or you could deal with poor ones and then have to wait to make ok ones into good another time. Or perhaps the ones you made really good would last longer and when you had more money next time round, you could switch your work onto the bad ones. But many pupils said the choice was a difficult one – as two of the pupils put it; “I very nearly voted the other way”, and “I wanted to vote in the middle”.

57. There was a general agreement, among pupils who voted different ways, that the Environment Agency should aim to level the quality of water out across lots of different water bodies, making them as equal in quality as they could. “Better to do everything ok, rather than have loads of really good and some really bad.”



Is it more important (1) to make *some* of our water bodies better, or (2) to stop *any* of our water bodies actually getting worse?

58. In the second vote, we explained that the Agency doesn't just have to think about making water bodies better, but also to think about whether any of its water bodies are actually getting worse. Again, the pupils were clear that there is no right answer, but they were voting on two possible policies the Environment Agency might follow.



59. Children voted for a policy of spending money on making some water bodies better, rather than on stopping any getting worse, by 85% to 15%. Again this is a very clear children's policy vote.
60. Pupils thought hard about which way of spending time and money was the best way of getting what they all agreed – that “it's better to have things getting better than to have things getting worse”. There was clearly no right answer. And many wanted there to be a back up option in case the way the Agency chose to spend its money didn't turn out to be right after all.
61. One pupil thought that scientists should be working on what exactly makes good water bodies good, to try to develop antidotes to make bad water bodies better and good ones excellent.
62. Giving their reasons for the way they voted, most pupils said that it was better to have a lot of water bodies getting better than to stop a few bad ones getting worse. You could do that by spending time and money on making ok water bodies better – which would of course mean that those were not going bad on their own. Many pointed out that if water bodies could get better or worse on their own, whatever the Environment Agency did, then really bad water bodies could well get a bit better on their own, while the Agency spent its time and money trying to make as many water bodies as possible get better. Some took the view that “all bad things get better”. And if you didn't work on improving as many water bodies as possible, some of those could well get worse on their own. You should focus on levelling all water bodies up.
63. Those who voted the other way thought bad water bodies might not in fact get better on their own. They could get even worse if you left them, and if you spent all your time and money on ok ones, then there wouldn't be any left to deal with bad ones that got worse. Because the worst ones could get worse, you need to stop them going down. And of course, things you had made better could just get worse again afterwards; “things you make better could get worse again”. One pupil summed up the view of those who voted to spend most on stopping any water bodies getting worse: “it's better to have one not slipping any more and staying at that level, than to have loads of higher level ones”. Some felt very strongly that you shouldn't leave any water bodies to get worse, otherwise “all the good ones will be destroyed eventually, with disease and destruction”. If you have the chance, you should make the worst water bodies better, and then help all water bodies more when you had another lot of money later on.
64. One pupil group thought strongly that it mattered if any of the water getting worse was drinking water. “If people using the bad one are ok, it's still important not to let the situation get any worse or people might start dying”; “it's not right that one group can drink clean water while other people can die from dirty water”.

65. Some pupils thought strongly that either making some water bodies better, or stopping any of them getting worse, was a false choice. As one pupil summed it up, the Environment Agency should “spend a bit of money on both, making quality better and some on things not getting worse”.



Should the Agency spend more money (1) on dealing with problems we already have with water, or (2) on getting ready for the problems they can see in the future from climate change?

66. In the third of the three policy votes, we asked children to choose whether they thought the Environment Agency should spend more money on the problems we already have, or instead on preparing to deal with the problems the scientists say will be coming in the future because of climate change – like dealing with droughts and more flooding. As in the other votes, the pupils were clear that there is no right answer to this – it is a choice between two policies, and one that would affect the children’s own futures.
67. Children voted for focusing on dealing with current problems instead of preparing for future problems scientists tell us will come from climate change, by 70% to 30%. As in the other two votes, all five school groups voted the same way, so the children’s choice is clear.
68. Those who voted to focus on the problems we have already, rather than the ones scientists say are on the way, often gave the reason that the scientists may not be right. It is better to spend time and money on problems that are real and need sorting out now, than on problems we haven’t got yet and scientists could have got wrong. It might be a waste to spend money on a future that might not happen. If we don’t sort out the problems we already have, then they will simply still be there in the future (and as one pupil said, “I don’t like problems!”). Future problems may not be as bad as the ones we have already. “If we sort our problems now, it might not be so bad in the future”. The scientists might be right about climate change, but it might not turn out to be as bad as they think it could. If we don’t deal with the problems we have now, past problems may happen again. But if we do deal with the problems we have now, that may prevent some future problems. And there is more time to get ready to deal with future problems than there is to sort out some of the problems we already have. As one pupil summed it up; “the future hasn’t happened yet but we know that things are happening now, so problems should be dealt with now”.
69. Those who voted to focus on getting ready for the problems scientists say are coming from climate change said that we don’t have really bad problems at the moment, but we need to prepare for the really bad ones the scientists warn us are coming our way. And the scientists could well be absolutely right about these. Scientists usually are right, and scientists often do know what the future will be like. Future problems could be very serious, like many parts of many



countries now, such as parts of Africa, where there is not enough water for people to live and grow crops. If you chose to spend all your money now, you could end up with nothing to help with future disaster. “If the storm happens, no shelter or food or water”. On the other hand, “if we prepare for the future, we don’t have to worry about future problems being a surprise”. And if you don’t prevent big future problems, they may destroy the good you have done now. We need to give a priority to resources for the future, as future things that don’t seem so bad now might well be bad when they actually come in the future. One pupil said “problems in future could be much bigger than what we have now – we need to get it right!”

70. One pupil suggested that the Agency should have a careful spending and saving plan to keep a balance between the problems we have now and the problems the scientists say are coming in the future. It should spend most of its money now on solving those problems that will save it money once they are solved. Then it should save that money to build up a fund for dealing with large future problems.



What can YOU do to make water bodies better?

71. Lastly, we asked pupils for any ideas on what they could do themselves to help make water bodies better. Here (in no particular order) are the ideas they gave us:

- Stop wasting water – use it wisely
- Put litter in bins not water
- “Don’t harm the water – you are just harming yourself”
- Children should volunteer to pick up litter in and by the water
- Children should volunteer for litter checking every week
- Don’t flush baby wipes or other wipes down the toilet
- Don’t drop or flush large items down the toilet that aren’t supposed to go down there
- Do a self-check on the quality of your tap water before you drink it
- Don’t throw trash into water – rivers, canals, ponds or the sea
- Don’t throw cans into the water – they can kill fish and cut their fins
- Don’t throw crisp packets into water – they can suffocate animals, ducks and other creatures (one pupil has seen crisp packets harming animals)
- Stop someone else if you see them throwing rubbish into water
- Always “think of the animals underneath the water”
- Always try to make things fair in our own country, and remember that we have lots of food and water but some people in Africa don’t, and that all countries should be fair
- Help people to be more aware of what’s happening with water.



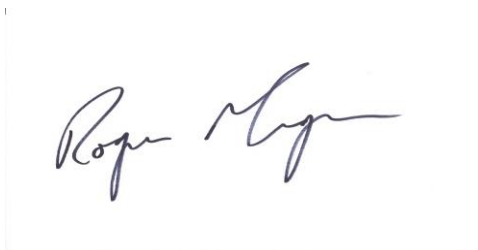
Last word ...

72. The last word goes to the pupil who said:

“Water is the most valuable thing you own”



73. I am grateful to the Head Teachers and staff of each of the five schools for the chance to hold this discussion with their pupils. I am especially grateful to the members of staff who worked very hard taking detailed notes of each of the views given by each of the children. And above all I am very grateful to each of the pupils for their thinking, votes and views.



Dr Roger Morgan OBE

Pupils 2 Parliament

10 April 2015

