

CROWD: Clean Rivers Of West Dorset

CROWD Report on the River Char February 2026

We have published our reports on the activities of the River Char Action Group in 2025, including data on pollution measurement and Riverfly testing. They were launched at a public meeting on 24th February.

See the full reports here: <https://www.riverchar.org/data.html>

10 Key conclusions

- 1. The River Char is heavily polluted with faecal bacteria but retains ecological resilience.**
E. coli levels at many sites, especially the Lagoon, frequently exceed ‘safe to swim’ thresholds and pose a clear risk to **human health**. At the same time, Riverfly surveys show no overall decline in key invertebrate groups between 2024 and 2025, suggesting that the river’s **ecological health** is stable.
- 2. Storms drive the worst bacterial and sediment pollution.**
High river levels are associated with sharp increases in *E. coli* and turbidity, showing that heavy rainfall, farm and road runoff and septic tank overflows probably trigger pollution episodes.
- 3. Phosphate is a pressure in the upper river.**
Phosphate concentrations at Stockham Bridge and Becklands Bridge are typically in the EA’s “Good–Moderate” bands, with occasional “Poor” results, pointing strongly to nutrient inputs from land use upstream. By the time the river reaches the Lagoon most samples are in the “Excellent–Good” bands.
- 4. Ammonia levels are generally low and not a current stressor.**
- 5. Citizen-science monitoring on the Char now produces decision-grade data.**
In 2025, our test results for *E. coli* and orthophosphate were consistently very close to Wessex Water’s. This means that we can now provide robust evidence for trend analysis, site comparisons, public-health messaging and engagement with the EA.
- 6. The Monkton Wyld Stream is consistently healthier than the main river.**
Chemistry and Riverfly data indicate that the Monkton Wyld Stream usually has lower nutrient concentrations and richer invertebrate communities than the main river.
- 7. Collaborative action reduces pollution.**
The 2025 engineering works at Newlands Bridge reduced spills from 20 in 2024 to 5 in 2025, with only one spill after the works were completed.
- 8. Collaborative action reduces flooding.**
Landowner-led Natural Flood Management work, in the form of leaky dams and hedge planting, is continuing. This helps slow the flow of flood waters and reduce the impact of flooding downstream.
- 9. Cultural change is gathering pace, but we need the law to change.**
The River Charter and Declaration of Rights, the Dragon Festival and other initiatives show that many local people see the Char as a living entity, not just as a drain or capital asset. But, in the UK, the law fails to protect the rights of rivers or prevent pollution. Many other countries *do* recognise the rights of nature in law, so we need to build momentum for that to happen here.
- 10. Invasive plant species and plastic pollution remain a big problem along the whole river.**

10 Next Steps

In 2026 we intend to:

1. Protect people at the Lagoon.

- Maintain fortnightly *E. coli* monitoring at the Lagoon through the 2026 bathing season.
- Find funding to buy an *E. coli* monitoring device to allow us to test the water at the Lagoon daily during the summer and make the results public immediately.

2. Investigate pollution at Charmouth's east beach.

- Maintain *E. coli* monitoring at the east beach to identify any risks to the public.

3. Target storm-related faecal pollution.

- Use the demonstrated link between high river level, turbidity and *E. coli* to continue to identify key problem sites and outfalls along the length of the river.

4. Work to reduce faecal pollution.

- Continue to share *E. coli* findings confidentially with farmers, landowners and residents to help clean up pollution hotspots.

5. Plan a Headwaters Project for the River Char.

- Take the first steps towards a coordinated Natural Flood Management programme of leaky dams across the Char Valley.

6. Extend Riverfly surveillance.

- Maintain and, where possible, extend Riverfly sites, especially on tributaries feeding the main river towards Fishpond, Marshwood and Bettiscombe.
- Pair invertebrate data with targeted chemistry at a subset of sites to improve understanding of how pollution and flow changes affect aquatic life.
- Measure and begin to understand the impact of leaky dams.

7. Build on the Newlands Bridge success to reduce other spills and runoff.

- Work with Wessex Water to identify other holiday parks, schools and commercial sites locally where stormwater could be separated out.

8. Strengthen community engagement.

- Plan the next Charmouth Dragon River Festival (2027) and work towards a big 'Rivers of Dorset' Festival thereafter.

9. Tackle the problem of chemical pollution.

- Build public awareness to help reduce the levels of chemical pesticides and herbicides being used by all of us in the Char Valley and entering the river.

10. Strengthen our rights-of-nature advocacy.

- Work with other groups to help build momentum for a Charter for all the Rivers of Dorset.

