

# Is The River Axe Dying?

If it isn't dying it is certainly very sick. The water quality and ecology of the River Axe has deteriorated significantly within a generation. People used to swim and build rafts to float down the river. People don't do that any more. Salmon and sea trout were prolific in the river. They are not any more. The brown, foamy water and sludgy brown algae on the river bed no longer invite you in for a dip.



Agricultural pollution has loaded the river with chemicals and sediment, and waste water companies drain raw sewage into the river, prioritising shareholder profits over environmental protection. There are 34 places where sewage enters the Axe or its tributaries. One of them, at Tatworth Waste Water Treatment Works, spilled untreated sewage into Forton Brook for 4137 hours in 2024 and nobody was held to account. 2024 was a very wet year but that is the equivalent of nearly 6 months, non-stop sewage! Even the treated effluent, which flows into the river 24 hours a day, contains pathogenic bacteria like E-Coli, and high levels of phosphates, which are killing the life in the river. We should not have to accept polluted rivers and beaches as the price of modern living, so what is being done about it?

Despite recent changes to legislation, and well publicised promises of record levels of investment, of the 34 sewerage assets in the Axe catchment, only 5 will attract any South West Water investment before 2030, and very little of that investment is likely to reduce the amount of sewage entering the river. In January 2026 the Office for Environmental Protection made the following statement:

“Government remains largely off track to meet its environmental targets and obligations, including legally binding biodiversity targets set under the Environment Act and the UK’s twin 30 by 30 commitments both for protected areas and for restoring degraded ecosystems.”

Against this backdrop of corporate and regulatory inertia, Friends of the River Axe have launched the SPEAR campaign (Sewage Pollution Elimination in the Axe Rivers). The group is gathering evidence to illustrate the scale of the problem, and the lack of remedial action, and will then call on South West Water, elected representatives, and industry regulators to take urgent, measurable action, including to:

- Re-prioritise the River Axe catchment for investment, to rapidly end the routine discharge of raw sewage from storm overflows.
- Strengthen environmental permits for harmful treated effluent, and enforce compliance.



FORA will work constructively with all those willing to act, while holding to account those who fail to do so. The campaign will be built on evidence and will amplify the voices of local people who care deeply about the river. If you care deeply and want to get involved please contact [friendsoftheriveraxe@gmail.com](mailto:friendsoftheriveraxe@gmail.com) or visit our Facebook page.