

The jury's out on River Ouseburn future

An innovative project to involve communities in decisions about the future of their local river has taken place in the North East.

The first of its kind in the country, Ouseburn Citizens' Jury is made up of members of the public and looked at what a 'thoroughly modern river' should be.

The jury, which took place at the end of January and was run by an independent facilitator on behalf of the Environment Agency, debated local issues, shared ideas and questioned environmental experts on all aspects of the water environment.

The findings from the jury will help inform the Environment Agency's future water management plans. And as a direct result of the project, the Environment Agency and Northumbrian Water are developing a potential bid to Ofwat's Innovation Fund to help finance an innovative partnership led through education in the local area.

The River Ouseburn

Clean and plentiful water

Catherine Saxon, Area Director of the Environment Agency in the North East, said:

Protecting and improving England's rivers, lakes and streams is essential to ensuring we have clean and plentiful water now and in the future.

We are facing some tough challenges, particularly from climate change and population growth. We need to work with everyone who uses, and is responsible for, water, across all sectors of society, to ensure the needs of all are reflected in our future plans.

Citizens' juries are an excellent way of gaining views from the wider public and we greatly value the input of everyone who has taken part.

The Ouseburn jury listened to evidence from a broad range of environmental experts, including Northumbrian Water, Woolsington Parish Council, the National Farmers' Union, Newcastle City Council and the Tyne Rivers' Trust.

The final six recommendations from the Ouseburn Citizens' Jury include better

education, appropriate and fair legislation and incentives for behaviour change, improved funding for improvements, more action to manage pollution, a co-ordinated partnership approach to changes, and a better balance between development and wildlife.

Rob Carr, from the Environment Agency in the North East, attended the jury. He said:

This was a great way to connect with the Ouseburn community and seek their recommendations, which we hope to turn in to actions, improving the environment for people and nature.

Mike Madine, Head of Wastewater Service Planning, Quality and Performance at Northumbrian Water, added:

The citizens' jury was a fantastic event and it gave us the opportunity to see how our communities feel about our ambitious plans to improve the water environment.

During the discussions, it became clear that our communities have clear support for many of our current initiatives, including projects such as Bin The Wipe, our pollution reduction plans and our Water Environment Improvement Programme.

Already 33 of our 34 bathing waters have been highly rated as "excellent" or "good", but our ambition is to have the best beaches and rivers in the country. Through events such as this we can engage with our communities to help meet our goals.

We are grateful for the Environment Agency for allowing us to be a part of this country-first experience.

Jury member Emily said she learned a lot during the experience, adding that she enjoyed 'potentially making a difference to the local area' and learning that 'water is so much more than just for cleaning and drinking – there are many aspects of water that are overlooked'.

Further citizens' juries will take place elsewhere in the country up until the end of March.