



Photo by Kathy Seymour

Friends of the Dart ~ River Use Survey 2023

Survey findings report

September 2023

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On behalf of Friends of the Dart

September 2023

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Photo by Emma Stoner

Foreword

About Friends of the Dart

Friends of the Dart exists as an advocate for the River Dart in Devon. As a grass roots community group, we are working to improve water quality and protect the Dart through effective collaboration and partnership. We inform and inspire our community in relationship with the river. We engage positive action that benefits both our river health and ecology and the health of our community.

About the River Use Survey

In order to evidence community interaction with, use of the river and add leverage to our campaign for CSO (combined sewer overflows¹) spill resolution, we are undertaking a comprehensive study. This will inform us about the interconnection between water quality, river health and ecology in relationship with the physical and mental health of our local communities.

Acknowledgements

Friends of the Dart would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone who completed the survey and provided valuable information about the use and importance of the River Dart to those in local communities and beyond. We are also extremely grateful to the many individual volunteers and local businesses, organisations, schools and groups who helped to make the survey a success by helping with the design, promotion, analysis and reporting on the survey.

Friends of the Dart contact details:

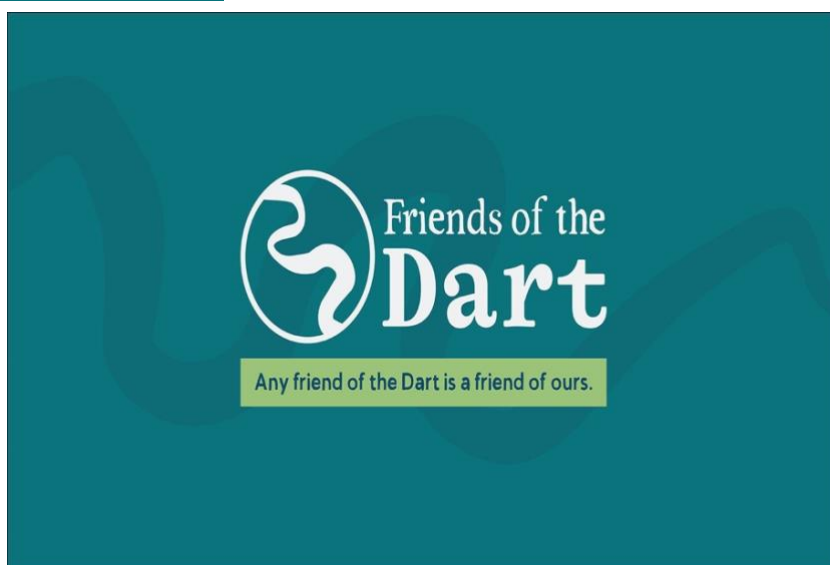
Please contact us if you would like to know more about us and what we do or if you would like to become a Friend of the Dart.

Email: hello@friendsofthedart.org

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For enquiries about the survey, please contact the Friends of Dart lead on the survey, Ana Simons:

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Design by Ailie Farrell

¹ For more information on CSOs see:

<https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/02/combined-sewer-overflows-explained/>

Introduction

This report presents a summary of the findings from a survey of River Dart users conducted during 2023. The survey was designed by a group of volunteers from Friends of the Dart and aimed to gather information on who uses the river and its surrounding areas, for what purposes, how often, with what impacts, and what their opinions were on issues of the river water quality, the environment and ecology. The survey questions are presented in Appendix 1.

The survey was available for completion online on the Friends of the Dart website. The survey was promoted via a range of methods including social media posts, leaflets and posters in local shops, cafes and restaurants, via the schools' forum, business network meetings and at various events such as the Devon County Show, the Dartmouth Regatta, the Riverford Festival, local village fairs, and at sports and community events such as the Aquathon.



Photo by Kathy Seymour

The survey completion period ran from **29 May 2023** to **15 September 2023** and there were **1,121 responses** in total. Appendix 2 shows the profile of respondents in terms of where they live, and background characteristics such as age and employment status. The survey will be run again in 2025, at which stage it will be possible to compare the results of the two surveys to see whether there have been any changes in river use and perceptions of the river over the two-year period.

This report presents the analysis of the findings which was conducted by Kathy Seymour and Mark Wills (both Friends of the Dart volunteers and owners of local research and data analysis businesses) with support & coordination from Ana Simons for Friends of the Dart.

The report presents a summary of the key findings from the survey, followed by themed sections providing more detailed findings along with relevant tables and charts. Note that where respondents were able to provide free text responses, the analysis process involved identifying the key themes and topics arising and then categorising each comment into the relevant topic(s). The topics identified among responses to each of the free text questions are presented in tables throughout this report alongside the number and percentage of respondents mentioning each. Tick box responses are presented in the form of charts or tables. Throughout the report the percentages are based on the number of people who answered that question, this information is provided within the tables, or as notes beneath the relevant charts.

Key findings

The survey provided a wealth of information about how the River Dart is used and what it means to those who use it. The key findings from the survey were:

- Many respondents undertake activities in or on the River Dart: 83% of respondents have swum / paddled, and over half (54%) have undertaken canoeing / kayaking / rowing / paddle boarding in the River Dart in the last year
- 70% visit the River Dart weekly or more frequently
- Of those who visit the river less often now than they did a year ago, 60% said this was because of concerns about water quality
- Most respondents reported positive impacts of the use of the River Dart: 92% reported a positive impact on their physical health / fitness, 91% reported a positive impact on their mental health / wellbeing, and 88% indicated that it had a positive impact on their social life / sense of community
- Other impacts of the use of the River Dart were noted including the benefits of being among nature (31% mentioned this), spending time with family or friends (12%), relaxing and de-stressing (12%), and enhancing their spiritual wellbeing (12%)
- 43% described the water quality in the River Dart as poor or very poor; 18% said it was good or very good
- 52% said they relied on the presence or absence of visible evidence of pollution to form their judgements on water quality, 25% said they based their assessment of water quality on whether or not people had fallen ill after being in the river and 18% used news reports as the basis of their opinions on the river water quality
- 71% thought sewage was the main cause of poor water quality, and 44% cited farming / agricultural runoff as a cause of poor water quality
- 66% have seen or smelled pollution in the River Dart at some point
- 68% have fallen ill themselves and / or know someone who has been ill after spending time in the River Dart
- The majority of respondents were satisfied with elements of the environment and ecology around the River Dart, although 14% were dissatisfied with the diversity of wildlife and 12% were dissatisfied with the diversity of plant life
- The main facilitators of respondents' use and enjoyment of the River Dart were the ease of access (44% mentioned this) and the location / proximity to home (26%)
- The main barriers to respondents' use and enjoyment of the River Dart were poor water quality (61% cited this) and limited access in some areas (14%)
- 100% of respondents supported the official applications for Bathing Water Designation at four sites on the River Dart.



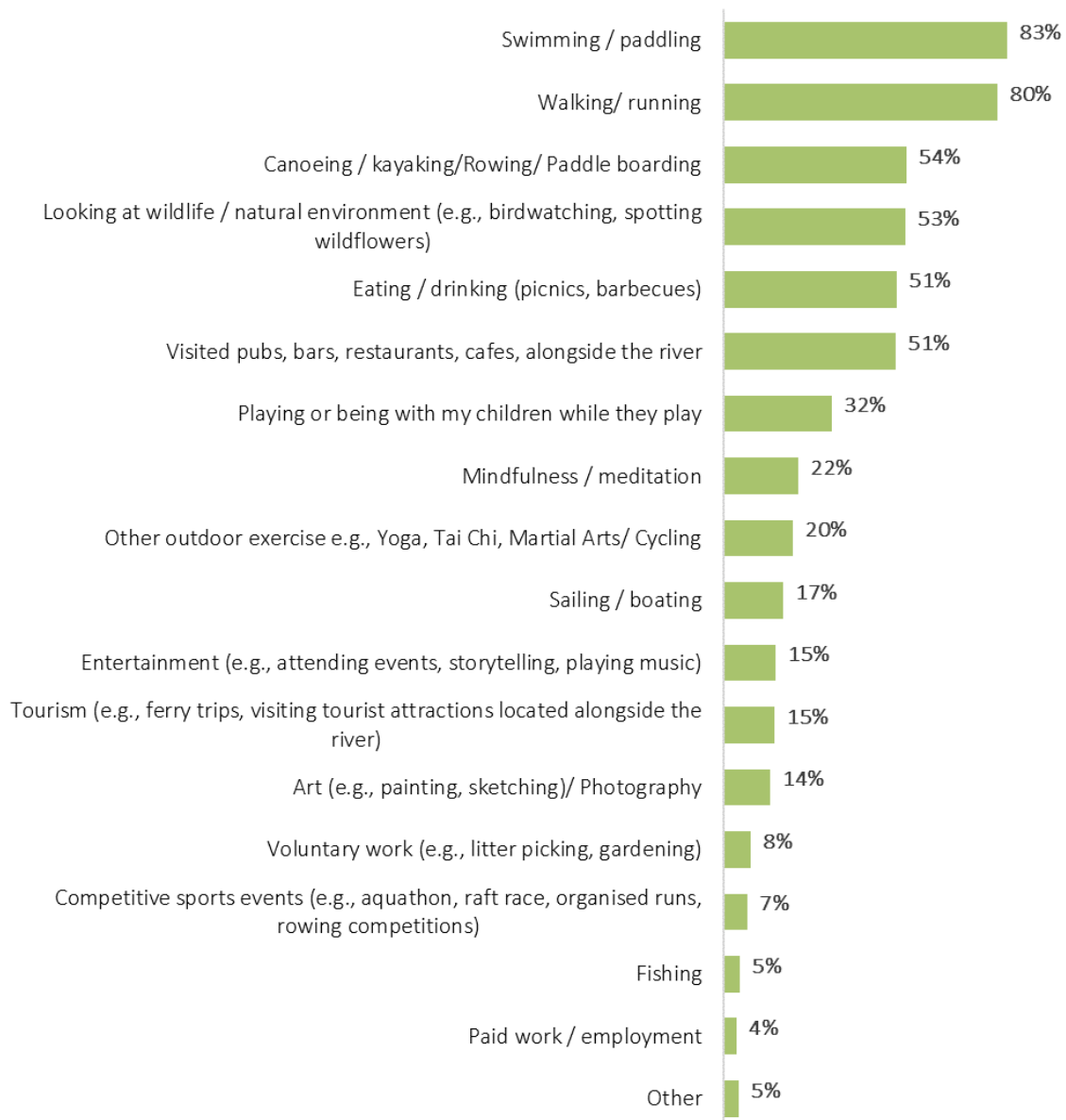
Photo by Chris Dance

1. Activities at and around the River Dart

Which of the following activities have you undertaken at the River Dart in the last year?

A list of river-based activities was presented and respondents were asked to indicate any they had undertaken in the last year. Figure 1 shows that respondents undertake a very broad range of activities and that swimming or paddling was the most frequently cited activity (83%), closely followed by walking or running (80%). Just over half of respondents took part in activities on the river on self-propelled watercraft such as canoes, kayaks, paddle boards and rowing boats.

Figure 1: Percent of respondents who had undertaken each of the river-based activities in the last year



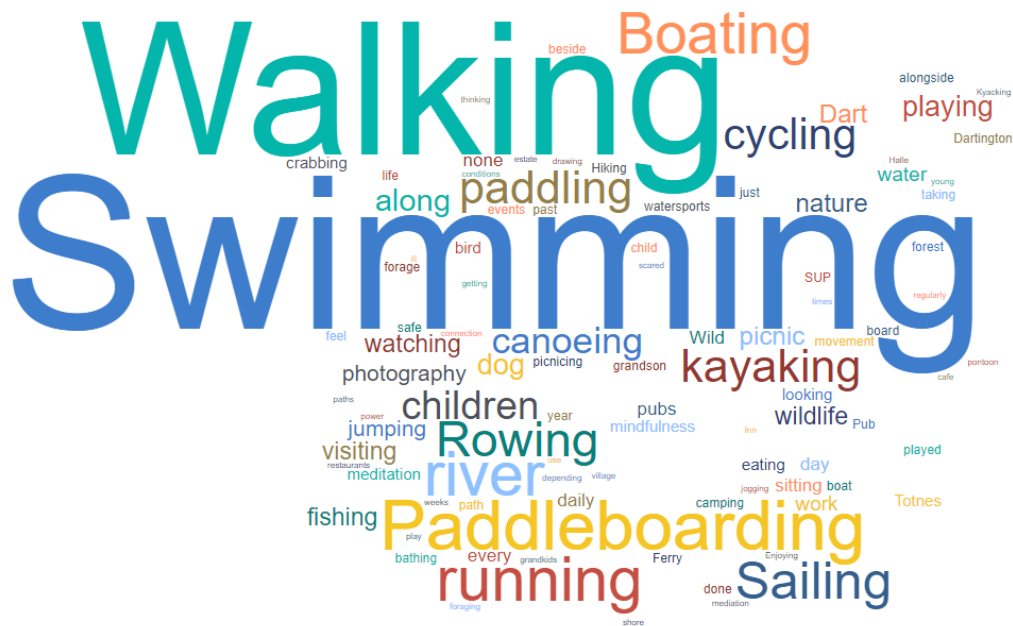
Notes on Figure 1: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,121. Percentages do not total 100% because respondents could tick more than one response.

Among the ‘other’ activities specified, the most frequently mentioned were dog walking/swimming, spiritual or religious activities and camping.

Which one of these riverside activities have you done most often in the last 12 months?

Respondents were asked which of the activities they have done the most often in the last 12 months. This was a free text response question and the word cloud (Figure 2) shows the activities stated and gives an indication of how frequently they were cited: the larger the word appears in the cloud, the more frequently it was cited. We can see that swimming and walking were highly prevalent and using various watercraft (e.g. boating, paddleboarding, sailing, kayaking, etc.) were also relatively frequently mentioned.

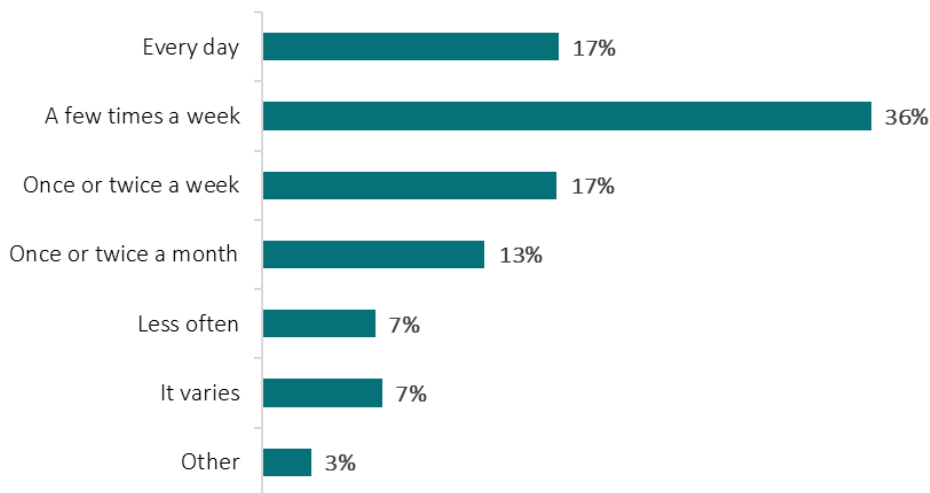
Figure 2: Word cloud representing the activities respondents reported doing the most often over the last year



How often do you visit the River Dart (for any purpose)?

Figure 3 presents how often respondents visit the River Dart and shows relatively high frequency of visits with just over half (53%) saying they visited every day or a few times a week.

Figure 3: How often respondents visit the River Dart for any purpose

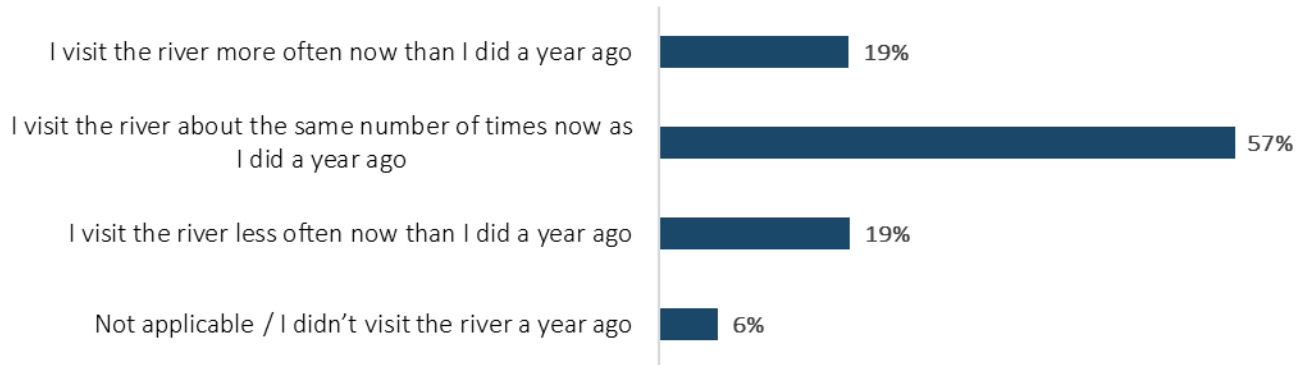


Note on Figure 3: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,111.

Compared to a year ago, how often do you visit the River Dart?

Just over half (57%) of respondents reported that they visit the river with about the same frequency as they did a year ago, and about a fifth (19%) said they visited more often and the same proportion said they visited less often now than a year ago (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Frequency with which respondents visit the River Dart this year compared to last year



Note on Figure 5: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,121.

Why do you visit the river more / less often than you did a year ago?



Photo by Emma Stoner

Those who indicated that they visited the river more or less often than they had a year ago were asked to describe why this was the case. Their responses are summarised in Figure 6.

The most frequently cited reason respondents gave for visiting the river *less often* than they had done a year ago was **concerns about the water quality** (60% mentioned this) and in many instances, they referred to the effect this might have on their health if they go in the river. Some of the 21 respondents who said they had **stopped or reduced the amount of swimming** they do in the river also cited concerns over water quality as a reason for reducing their swimming. Nearly one in five respondents who stated why they visit the river less often indicated that they were **too busy or had other priorities** now.

Among those who visit the river *more often now* than they did a year ago, the most prevalent reasons for this were that they had **moved into the area or nearer to the river** (20% cited this), that they had

taken up or increased the amount of river swimming they do (19%), and 15% said it was because they wanted to be in nature and enjoy the river environment more.

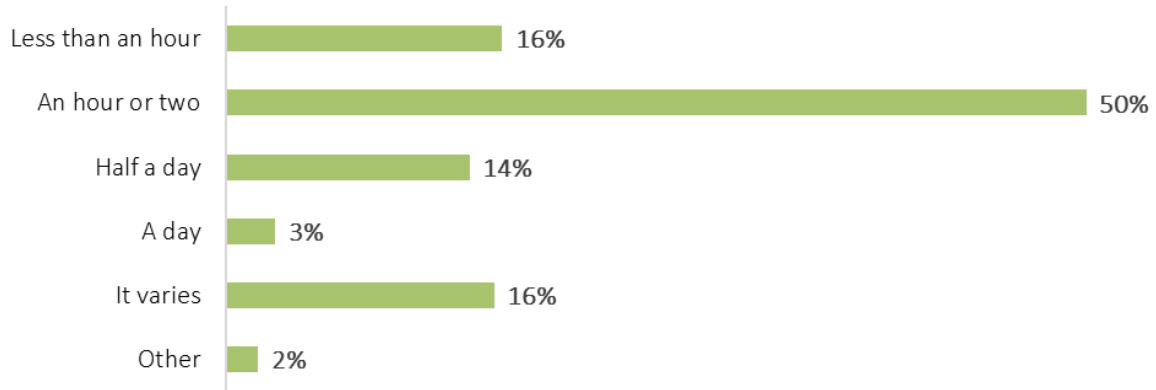
Figure 6: Summary of reasons for visiting the River Dart more or less often than a year ago

Reasons for visiting the river more or less often	I visit the river <i>less</i> often now than I did a year ago (n=182)		I visit the river <i>more</i> often now than I did a year ago (n=190)		Total (n=372)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Worried about water quality / effect on health	109	60%	0	0%	109	29%
Moved house (into or out of the area)	9	5%	38	20%	47	13%
Taken up or increased amount of swimming	0	0%	36	19%	36	10%
Too busy / other priorities	32	18%	0	0%	33	9%
Wanting to be in nature more / enjoy the environment	0	0%	28	15%	28	8%
Other life changes (e.g. pregnancy, having children, getting a dog, etc.)	7	4%	16	8%	23	6%
Stopped or reduced amount of swimming	21	12%	0	0%	21	6%
Weather conditions / temperature this year compared to last year	11	6%	8	4%	19	5%
Work commitments / changes	10	5%	9	5%	19	5%
Taken up or increased amount of rowing, boating, paddle-boarding, sailing, etc.	0	0%	17	9%	17	5%
Ill health or injury	9	5%	4	2%	13	3%
Go to the river with friends more often	0	0%	12	6%	12	3%
To improve / maintain mental health	0	0%	12	6%	12	3%
Taken up or increased other river-based activities (not swimming or forms of boating)	0	0%	11	6%	11	3%
Access has got better or worse	5	3%	4	2%	9	2%
Less busy / more time to visit the river	0	0%	7	4%	7	2%
To improve / maintain physical health or fitness	0	0%	7	4%	7	2%
Training for or participating in events / competitions / organised activities	0	0%	7	4%	7	2%
Changes to commute to work or school	1	1%	3	2%	4	1%
Lifting of Covid restrictions / no lock downs this year	2	1%	1	1%	3	1%
Water quality has improved / cleaner than last year	0	0%	2	1%	3	1%
Stopped or reduced the amount of other activities (e.g. running, cycling, etc.)	2	1%	0	0%	2	1%
Using the car less / saving money	0	0%	2	1%	2	1%
Visiting the area more often (e.g. for shopping, leisure, etc.)	0	0%	1	1%	1	0%

How long to you usually stay at the river?

Half of respondents indicated that their visits to the river usually lasted an hour or two, 16% spent less than an hour there in a usual visit and the same proportion reported that the length of visit varies. Some respondents would typically spend a lot more time at the river: 14% would spend about half a day and 3% usually spent the whole day there (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Length of time respondents usually stay at the river in any visit



Note on Figure 7: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,121.



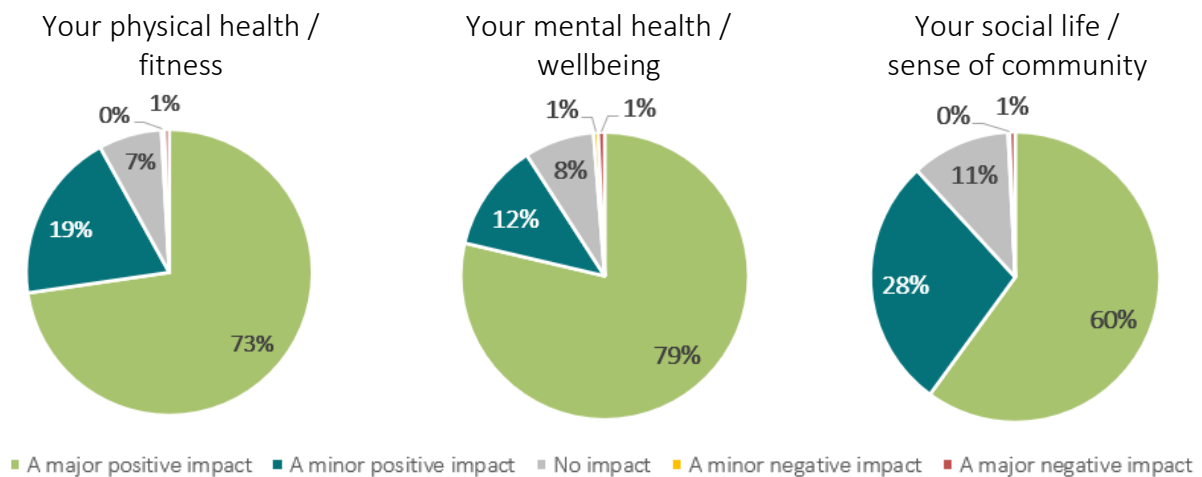
Photo by Emma Stoner

2. The impact of the River Dart on users

What impact does your use of the River Dart have on you?

Respondents rated the impact of their use of the River Dart on three different aspects of their lives: their physical health / fitness, their mental health / wellbeing and their social life / sense of community. As Figure 8 shows, the majority of respondents reported a major positive impact across these three areas and the highest proportion of major positive impact responses was recorded against their mental health / wellbeing (79%).

Figure 8: Impact of the use of the River Dart on different aspects of respondents' lives



Note on Figure 8: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,121.

What (if any) other impacts does your use of the River Dart have on you?

Figure 9 below shows a summary of the 'other' impacts specified by respondents. Their comments were categorised into the main topics referred to, some respondents listed more than one other impact and therefore their responses were coded into more than one topic. Some of the topics identified overlap with those included in the tick box question on impacts (e.g., 'mental health / wellbeing general'), therefore the percentages mentioning these should be interpreted with it in mind that other respondents will have also ticked the relevant option in the closed question.



Photo by WildRunning

The most prevalent other impact described was the benefits of **being among nature and valuing the natural environment, or simply enjoying the beauty of the environment** around the river. Nearly a third of respondents who specified other impacts mentioned this. Other frequently mentioned impacts including the benefits of **spending time with family and friends**, the **sense of calm, peace or relaxation and opportunities to de-stress** being at the river brings, and the extent to which the river **enhances spiritual wellbeing and is inspiring** – all were mentioned by approximately one in eight who made a comment.

For many people (7% of those who specified other impacts) the river was considered to be a **central aspect of their lives and formed part of their daily routines**, and some indicated that **the area around the river is (or feels like) their home**, with a few people saying that the river was the reason they live where they do.

There were 38 comments indicating that **the river brings them happiness or joy** and a further 21 respondents indicated it was a **source of fun or adventure**.



Photo by Stoke Gabriel Sailing Club

Some of the other impacts specified were of a negative nature. This included the **worry, stress, sadness or anger that the condition of the river causes** people (specifically in relation to the poor water quality) which was cited by 14 respondents, eight people described the river **causing sickness** among those who swim in it as a negative impact, and there were two mentions of **anti-social behaviour and noise from river users** as a negative impact on those living nearby or on other river users.

Figure 9: Other impacts use of the River Dart has on respondents

Other impacts specified	n	%
Being among nature / valuing the natural environment / enjoying the beauty	181	31%
Spending time with family / friends	69	12%
Brings calm / peace / relaxation / de-stresses	68	12%
Enhances spiritual wellbeing / inspiring	68	12%
Physical wellbeing / exercise / fitness / enables them to compete in events	49	8%
Central to their daily lives / routines / is their home / reason for living here	41	7%
Brings happiness / joy / pleasure	38	7%
Mental health / wellbeing (general)	27	5%

Community connection / sense of community	23	4%
Source of fun / adventure	21	4%
Enables / inspires creativity	17	3%
Getting outside / fresh air / being on or in the river	17	3%
Causes worry / sadness / stress / anger over the condition of the river	14	2%
Work / employment / livelihood	13	2%
Educates children / teaches children to respect / appreciate / care for the environment	11	2%
Cooling down / cold water immersion benefits	10	2%
Causes illness / sickness after being in the river	8	1%
Foraging / source of food	8	1%
Provides access to / route to various destinations	8	1%
Dog walking / dogs' enjoyment of the river	7	1%
Learning new skills / learning about the river or nature (not children)	6	1%
Memories (creates or brings back)	6	1%
Helps the environment (e.g. litter-picking, avoids car trips, caring for wildlife, etc.)	5	1%
Anti-social behaviour, disrespect, noise, etc., has negative impact	2	0%
Improves quality of life generally	2	0%
Saves money / cost-free activity	2	0%
Volunteering activities / events	2	0%
Tourism / attracts visitors	1	0%

Note on Figure 8: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 582.



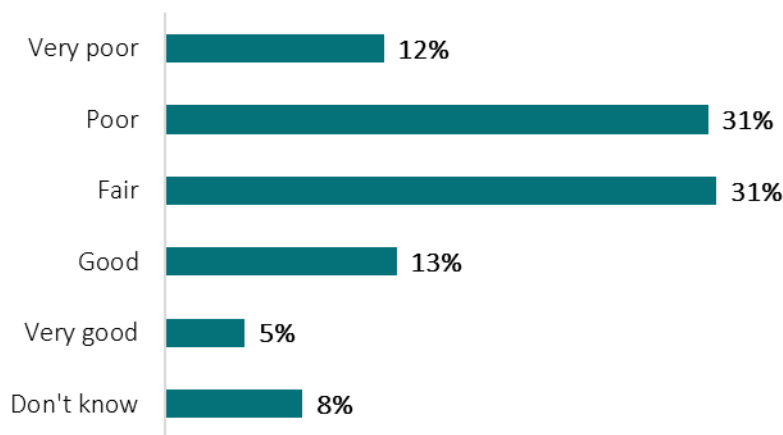
Photo by Emma Stoner

3. Water quality in the River Dart

How would you describe the water quality along this stretch of the River Dart at the moment?

One in eight respondents (12%) described the water quality along the stretch of the River Dart they use as ‘very poor’, nearly a third (31%) said it was ‘poor’ and the same percentage answered ‘fair’. Just 5% described the water quality as ‘very good’ and 13% thought it was ‘good’, 8% of respondents answered ‘don’t know’ (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Respondents’ descriptions of the water quality along the stretch of the river they use



Note on Figure 10: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,103.

What makes you think the water quality is good / poor?

As a follow-up to the question on their perceptions of the water quality, respondents were asked to describe what makes them think the river water quality is good or poor. This question aimed to assess the different sources of information on and therefore the bases for judgements about how good or poor the water quality is. Figure 11 summarises the responses and shows that the most frequently cited means of assessing water quality was the **visible evidence** of this.



Just over half of respondents mentioned this and they indicated that the clarity of the water and the presence or absence of visible pollution such and floating debris, scum, oily sheens, etc. on the water was the key indicator of water quality. Similarly, nearly one in ten respondents reported that the **smell of the water** was a key indicator of water quality.

A quarter of respondents who answered this question suggested that whether **being in the river had made them ill or whether they had heard about people being ill** after being in the river was a way in which they formed judgements on water quality. While the majority of the comments about the river

causing illness were indications that knowing of people who had been ill after swimming had confirmed for them that the water quality was poor, others said that knowing people who swim or go in the river for other activities who have *not* been ill, suggests to them that the water quality is good.

Many of the responses to this question suggested that **recent national news and media coverage of pollution** (particularly sewer overflows) in rivers, seas and waterways had been influential in their judgements of water quality: 18% of respondents said that **news reports** had contributed to their opinions on water quality in the river, and 2% mentioned each of reports of **data from other sources** (such as South West Water’s data), and **specific mobile apps or websites** dedicated to alerting the public to sewer overflows, such as the Surfers Against Sewage ‘Safer Seas’ app.

The **abundance and variety of wildlife** (animals, fish, birds, plants, etc.) seen in and around the river was also said to be an indicator of water quality. This was mentioned by 9% of respondents and while some indicated that the amount and variety of wildlife they see was good, suggesting that water quality was also good, many others commented that there was an absence of wildlife and/or a lack diversity which they often attributed to poor water quality; some who commented on this mentioned that diversity had declined in recent years.

Five percent of comments referred to people **‘knowing’ that certain stretches of the Dart had better water quality than others**. For example, many people stated that they wouldn’t swim below the weir at Totnes due to the deterioration in water quality beyond that point, others indicated awareness of specific points where sewer overflows occurred and would therefore only swim or go in the river well away from (usually ‘above’, as in nearer to the source) these points.

Some respondents (3% who made a comment) stated that they had **access to the results of testing of water quality**, for example, that undertaken by the Friends of the Dart, and used this as their reference point on the quality of water.

The strength of the river user community was also evident among these comments with 14% of respondents stating that they often **heard from others** (e.g., other swimmers, rowers, people they know in the local area who use the river) about water quality.

Figure 11: Sources used by respondents on which to base their judgements of the water quality in the River Dart

Source of information / base for judgements on water quality	n	%
Visible evidence (water murky / not clear, floating debris, scum, oily sheen, etc.)	502	52%
They or others have or haven't been ill after swimming	245	25%
News reports	178	18%
Hearing about it from others	139	14%
Smell	88	9%
Amount or diversity of wildlife, plants, etc.	84	9%
Knowing the certain areas or stretches are better or worse than others	48	5%
Results of testing	32	3%
Using or seeing others using the river (swimmers, rowers, etc.)	27	3%
Reports or data from other sources	24	2%
Mobile apps, websites, etc. notifying of sewer overflows (CSOs)	17	2%

Note on Figure 11: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 969.

What do you think are the main sources of / reasons for poor water quality in the River Dart?

Respondents were asked what they thought were the main sources of or reasons for poor water quality in the River Dart, Figure 12 summarises their responses. The vast majority of respondents (71% of those who answered this question) suggested that **sewage** was a main source of pollution in the River Dart. Related to this, 9% of comments indicated that **water company mismanagement, under-investment in the infrastructure and/or the perceived lack of regulation of the water companies** was a cause of poor water quality. Note that comments that mentioned both sewer overflows *and* water company mismanagement were coded under both topics.

The second most frequently cited source of pollution was **farming / agricultural run-off** (44% mentioned this) and 3% of comments referred to **waste from industries other than farming**.

The misuse of the river by river users was a concern for some: 9% of comments referred to issues with **litter and non-natural debris** (other than sewage) being in the river, 5% referred more generally to **people being disrespectful of the river** and/or the way they use the river being a contributor to poor water quality, and 14 respondents (1% of comments) felt that **boats and ferries** caused pollution from fuel and waste.

The 20 comments referring to **natural sources / local ecology** as a factor affecting water quality referred to a range of elements of the natural environment that can be a source of or contributor to poor water quality. These included fallen leaves, dead animals, algae, seaweed, and the nature of the surrounding landscapes such as the presence of peat in some areas. A further 27 comments referred to issues relating to the **weather or climate** as contributors to poor water quality, such as heavy rain, extreme heat, and some respondents referred to the general impact of climate change on water quality.

There were also 14 comments expressing concern at the impact on water quality of **over development (especially new housing developments) and population expansion** in the towns and villages surrounding the River Dart.

Government policies or political decisions were cited as contributors to poor water quality by 18 respondents with some comments generally directing blame at government policies but others referring to specific decisions or actions having an impact, such as Brexit.

Figure 12: Sources of or reasons for poor water quality in the River Dart

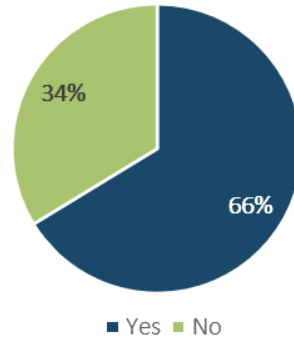
Sources or / reasons for poor water quality	n	%
Sewage	702	71%
Farming / agricultural run-off	435	44%
Water company (mismanagement, under-investment, unregulated, etc.)	86	9%
Litter / general debris	85	9%
People being disrespectful / the way people use the river	46	5%
Pollution (type or source not specified)	43	4%
Weather conditions / climate	27	3%
Industrial waste / pollution (not agriculture)	26	3%
Natural sources / local ecology	20	2%
Government policies / political decisions	18	2%
Boats / ferries	14	1%
Over-development of surrounding areas / population expansion	14	1%

Note on Figure 12: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 993.

Have you ever seen or smelled pollution in the river?

Two-thirds of respondents reported that they had seen or smelled pollution in the River Dart (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Whether respondents has seen or smelled pollution in the River Dart

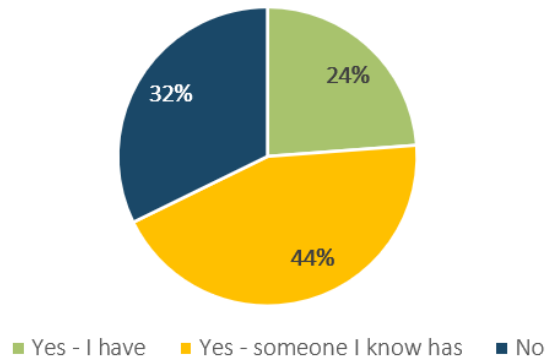


Note on Figure 13: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,085.

Have you or anyone you know fallen ill after spending time in the water?

Just over two-thirds (68%) of respondents indicated that they and/or someone they know had fallen ill after spending time in the water at the River Dart (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Whether respondents or someone they know had fallen ill after spending time in the River Dart



Note on Figure 14: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,088.

4. Environment and ecology around the River Dart

How satisfied are you with aspects of the environment and ecology in and around the River Dart?

Figure 15 shows respondents' levels of satisfaction with four different elements of the River Dart environment and ecology and indicates that they were slightly more likely to express satisfaction with the access points to the river and condition of riverside paths than they were with the diversity of wildlife or plant life in and around the river.

Figure 15: Satisfaction with elements of the environment and ecology around the River Dart

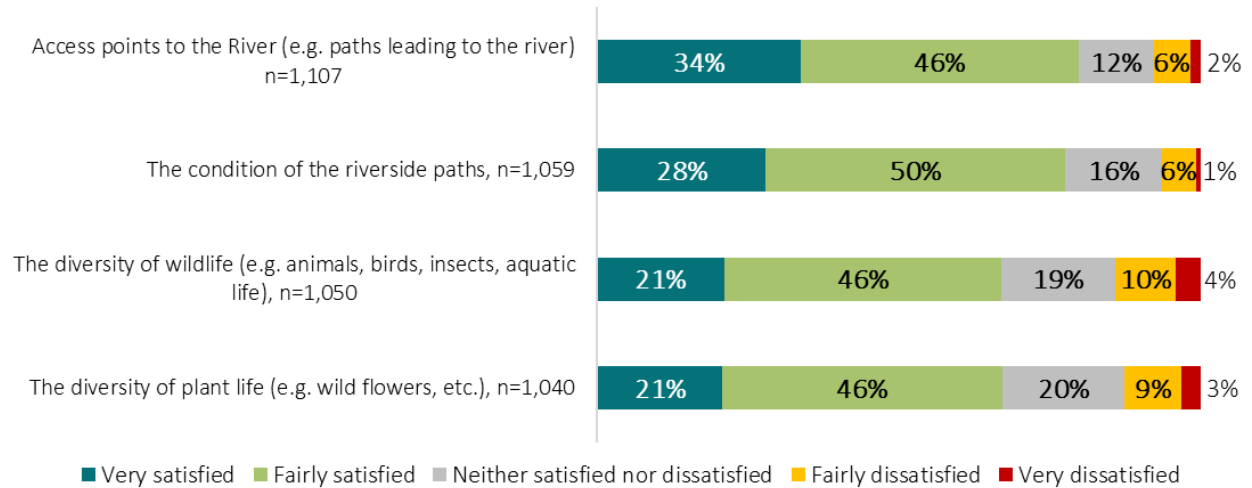


Photo by Emma Stoner

5. Enjoyment of the River Dart

What makes your use of the River Dart enjoyable or easy?

To explore what facilitated use of the river, the survey included a free text response question on what made use of the River Dart enjoyable or easier. Figure 16 summarises the topics mentioned. The most prevalent facilitators related to **ease of access** (including plentiful and accessible pathways, car parking, etc.) which was mentioned by 44% of respondents and the **location or proximity to their home** which was cited by 26% of those who commented. The **natural beauty of the area and the opportunity to be in and around nature** featured in 26% of comments.



Photo by Emma Stoner

Just over one in ten mentioned **water quality**, and while some of these comments were indications that they felt the water was always or usually of a good enough quality for them to be in, others stated that water quality was only a facilitator of their use of the river when it was good.

Figure 16: Factors that facilitate use or enjoyment of the River Dart

Facilitators to the use of the River Dart	n	%
Ease of access	419	44%
Location / local / close to home	250	26%
Being in and around nature / natural beauty of the area	243	26%
Water is clean and safe / times when or areas where the water is clean	102	11%
Community feel / social side of using the river (e.g., rowing club, seeing friends, etc.)	81	9%
Peaceful / tranquil atmosphere	78	8%
Entry points for swimmers	69	7%
Not too busy / areas with fewer people or other users	39	4%
Seeing / hearing wildlife	31	3%
Being able to exercise / improve health and fitness	27	3%
Suitable for a range of activities / users	25	3%
Ease of access to / for boats, etc.	22	2%
It's fun / fun activities	16	2%
Weather conditions (when good)	14	1%
It's free	13	1%
Depth of water	12	1%
Litter-free environment	9	1%

Other river users being respectful of the environment	8	1%
Benches / places to sit	8	1%
Water temperature	8	1%
Riverside cafes / restaurants	4	0%

Note on Figure 16: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 951.

What makes your use of the River Dart less enjoyable or more difficult?



Photo by Emma Stoner

A follow-up question sought information on what factors might cause barriers to using and enjoying the River Dart and asked: ‘What makes your use of the River Dart less enjoyable or more difficult?’. Figure 17 summarises the topics mentioned.

Concerns about the **quality of the water**, including the risk of going in the water making them ill, was the most frequently cited barrier to enjoying the river; 61% who gave a response mentioned this.

The next most frequently mentioned barrier was the **limited access** to the river and the difficulties of getting to certain areas. This was mentioned by 14% of respondents, and some commented that restrictions to access were a cause of frustration, particularly where private landowners refused to permit access, or closed off access that was once freely available. Many people suggested that uninterrupted walkways along the length of the Dart from source to the sea would be very welcome and others described specific sections where access was limited as a cause of frustration, for example, from Buckfastleigh to Staverton, Littlehempston to Totnes, and from Longmarsh (in Totnes) to Stoke Gabriel.

Litter (including dog poo and bagged dog poo) was the third most frequently mentioned factor that spoilt enjoyment of the river and riverside: 11% of comments referred to this.

One in ten respondents who answered this question reported that areas of the river being **too busy and feeling overcrowded**, particularly during peak times such as during hot weather, made their use of the river less enjoyable, and some felt that mitigating actions such as providing more swimming platforms or opening up access to other stretches of the riverside might help to reduce overcrowding in these ‘hotspots’. Specific areas mentioned as being particularly prone to overcrowding were Spitchwick and the swimming platform in Totnes near the KEVICC playing field. **Car parking** was also an issue for 5% of those who commented, again, this was often a problem during busy periods when car parking spaces were inadequate to meet demand (and some commented that the amount of spaces in areas around Spitchwick and Poundsgate had apparently been reduced), but others complained about the high cost of parking rather than the availability of spaces.

There were comments about the **lack of or poor condition of existing swimming platforms / entry points** (mentioned by 25 respondents), and a further three respondents suggested there was a **lack facilities for boats and other watercraft** such as moorings and launches.

The behaviour and attitudes of other river users featured in some comments: 26 respondents complained about **anti-social behaviour** (e.g. noise, vandalism, loud late night gatherings, etc.), 16 comments referred to **other users’ lack of respect for or mistreatment of the river** and its surroundings as a factor preventing others from enjoying the river, and 11 respondents referred specifically to watercraft users **not following navigational rules** such as speed limits.

Figure 17: Factors that form barriers to the use or enjoyment of the River Dart

Barriers to the use of the River Dart	n	%
Poor water quality	532	61%
Limited access / some areas difficult to get to	122	14%
Litter	93	11%
Too many people / too busy	89	10%
Lack of / cost of parking	42	5%
Anti-social behaviour, noise, etc.	26	3%
Not enough swimming entry points / information on where is safe to swim	25	3%
Overgrown / muddy / poorly maintained pathways	25	3%
Bad weather, tides, flooding, etc.	23	3%
Personal circumstances (e.g., ill health, too busy to enjoy the rivers, inconvenient location. etc.)	21	2%
Other users not respecting / mistreating the river environment	16	2%
Dogs off leads, in water, etc.	14	2%
Water users not knowing / following navigational rules, speed limits, etc.	11	1%
Natural debris in and around the river	9	1%
Worsening biodiversity / reduced wildlife	9	1%
Too many boats or other watercraft	7	1%
Access points dangerous / slippery	5	1%
Cyclists spoiling enjoyment for others	3	0%
Lack of facilities for boats or other watercraft, e.g., moorings, launches, etc.	3	0%
Lack of public toilets	3	0%

Note on Figure 17: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 868.



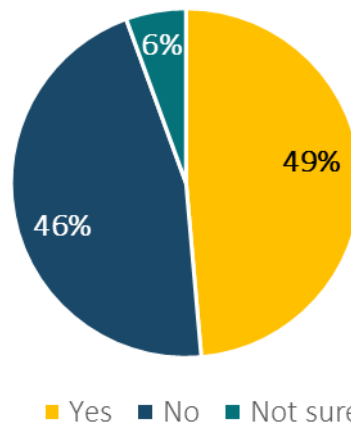
Photo by Emma Stoner

6. The role of Friends of the Dart

Before completing this survey, had you heard of Friends of the Dart?

Approximately half of respondents had heard of Friends of the Dart before completing the survey (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Whether respondents had heard of Friends of the Dart before completing the survey



Note on Figure 14: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,078.

If there is anything you think Friends of the Dart can do to help enhance your enjoyment of the River Dart, please describe below

Respondents described various ways in which they felt Friends of the Dart could help to enhance their enjoyment of the River Dart. Although not systematically analysed because they serve more as a reference for Friends of the Dart than a key output from the survey, these comments tended to fall into the following categories / topics:

- Keep doing what they are doing now
- Work towards getting a cleaner / healthier river
- Campaigns / lobbying relevant parties (e.g. water company, politicians, etc.)
- Regular testing of the river water quality and communication of this information
- Improvements / maintaining / opening up new access points to the riverside and the river itself
- Promote the work of Friends of the Dart and maximise on community willingness to engage / help / volunteer



Photo by Hannah Pearson

Would you be interested in helping with this research and with the work of Friends of the Dart?

When asked whether they would be willing to help with this research and the work of Friends of the Dart in a range of ways, 79% indicated that they would be willing to undertake the survey again in 2025 and between 28% and 34% were willing to undertake other activities such as being interviewed or helping with community engagement. Just 16% of respondents said they were not willing to help with any of the listed activities.



Do you support Friends of the Dart in its applications for Bathing Water Status at Steamer Quay, Totnes, Stoke Gabriel, Dittisham, Dartmouth?

- Friends of the Dart are making official applications for bathing water designation² in four sites on the river. It is seeking to prove that these need to be cleaned as a matter of priority due to there being a high level of human activity during which people 'get wet'. This is a tool for evidencing the need for change to sewage being released into the river. Friends of the Dart has chosen sites where the human activity does not impact bank erosion or the locality and is already used by local people. The survey asked whether respondents supported these applications (although this question was added to the survey after it had been running for a few weeks), **all 165 respondents who answered the question indicated that they support these applications**. This question was added part-way through the survey supplementing a 'sign to support' and 'letters of support' campaign.

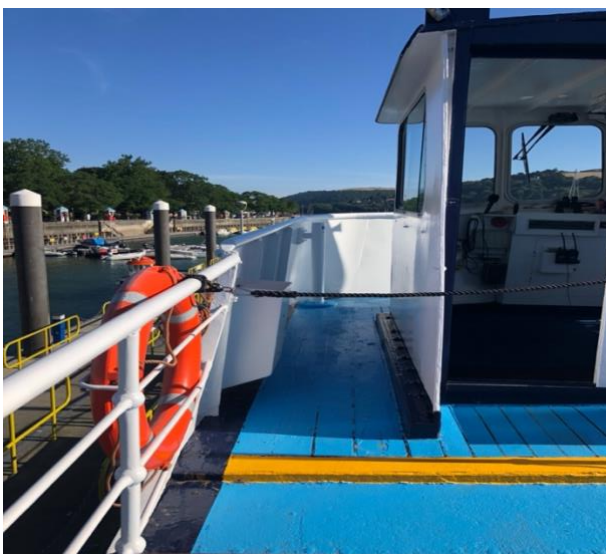


Photo by Kathy Seymour

² For more information on designated bathing waters see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/bathing-waters>

7. Friends of the Dart comments and response

This section presents comments and responses from Friends of the Dart to aspects of the survey findings and adds further context and updates to help in the interpretation and understanding of the survey findings. It also outlines the next steps following completion of the survey.

Friends of the Dart is keen to understand & respond to all the findings of the survey. We are reassured that so many people have shown their connection with the river in so many ways, and how important the river is to our community. We are also concerned to see the results showing the issues, for example, illness perceived as resulting from river usage and observations about pollution.

Friends of the Dart response

Representation of different users in the survey responses

While we are pleased that a variety of river-based activities is represented among survey respondents (as shown in Figure 1), we would have liked to have achieved more responses from certain user types including anglers, farmers and those whose businesses are based on and around the Dart.

Friends of the Dart is a relatively newly formed group and we have developed our membership in tranches, for example, at the time of writing we have started to engage with the farming community and other groups our Autumn programme begins.

We have also been run a 'sign to support' and 'letters of support' campaign alongside the survey and, as a result of this, have received 7,030 signatures of support; including 136 letters of support from businesses, clubs, schools which all represent their numerous staff, members & pupils; 16 letters of support from Councillors who represent their parishes, towns & Districts; 2 letters of support from politicians which somewhat counters the low engagement from businesses and commerce with the survey.

Additional developments include contact with ecology groups including projects around natural methods of flood & pollution control, a migratory fish and eels project and others.

The proportion of respondents involved in competitive sports was also lower than it might have been, however, this doesn't include the 10K swim in September because at the time of this event we were focusing our efforts on support for the Bathing Water Status application rather than the survey. We gathered 750 signatures of support for our Bathing Water Status applications at the 10k swim event, and undertook similar activities at the Dartmouth Regatta which, had we been promoting the survey rather than the Bathing Water application, would have increased the representation of sailors and boaters among survey responses.

Despite low numbers of respondents stating they came from the arts sector, FoD is conscious that there is good engagement from this sector insofar as arts, history and culture have gradually been integrating into a whole host of FoD community activities. The Lost Sound Choir performed traditional folk songs at the mouth of the Dart to a packed audience early in the Summer, at which an environmental documentary film was made by Seadog Productions, a month-long August exhibition of art, sculpture and photography was hosted by one of our business 'friends' to celebrate the beauty and fragility of the Dart, a sound track has been composed by a local singer for a film shortly to be made about FoD, FoD is the community partner in a research project to identify whether children's connection to nature and environmental awareness is enhanced by storytelling, a podcast platform is being established for stories, songs and poetry to be uploaded to serve as a community resource, an event, "Our River- a celebration of the Dart", is planned for December when sound artists, storytellers, singers and poets will join the community to express the joy and worries about the Dart

in their various ways. Recently, South Devon History Hunters have joined and regularly post updates about the fascinating history of the Dart, explaining ways of life from historic archives, maps, drawings and photos, and artifacts they find. An oral history research project will gather old stories of stewardship of the dart, this is pending approval.



Photo by Mark Burley



Design by Alfie Farrell

Tourism also represents a relatively small proportion of respondents; the tourism department comes under the remit of the Town Council, which sent us a letter of support. Friends of the Dart has been invited to attend a consortium of tourist businesses so this will be a new development and will increase the representation of tourism interests as part of our activities.

As is shown in Table A2 in Appendix 2, 41% of respondents are Totnes-based. We acknowledge that this is not representative of the river populations. FoD has been working closely with groups in Stoke Gabriel, Dittisham, Kingswear and Dartmouth to consult, raise awareness and gather evidence for bathing water applications so that downstream friends have become much more actively involved. Further, downstream hubs have committed funds to support the FoD testing programme and Dart Harbour Authority has agreed to work in partnership with FoD to gather water quality samples to support the FoD testing programme in phase 2. Our upstream friends in Buckfastleigh, Ashburton and Holne have also begun to galvanise support locally and are consulting on key campaigns that will form the next phases of testing above the weir and Dartmoor, and engagement with ecology projects eg promoting the 'upstream thinking' project using natural methods of flood management and pollution control with farmers, Westcountry Rivers Trust and Southwest Water (SWW).

Perceptions of water quality in the River Dart

When we asked survey respondents what sources of information they use to form their judgements on river water quality, only 3% mentioned results of formal testing (see Figure 11). FoD has introduced a data presentation project in October '23, we will be putting signs up at the test sites this Autumn which will raise awareness and direct people to the web site, a sample sign is presented on the right.

FoD takes very seriously the response from the survey that 24% of respondents stated they had been ill, or 44% knew someone



Design by Alfie Farrell

who had been ill which they believed was connected to contact with the river (see Figure 14). FoD is hoping to establish a public health working group which will include representatives from GP surgeries, mental health services, wellness practitioners, vets, and blue prescribing³ experts in response to these survey findings.

Awareness of Friends of the Dart

As reported in Figure 18, 49% of respondents had heard of FoD before completing the survey. The growth of membership in six months from a small Facebook group to nearly 6,000 members following and participating in FoD campaigns on Facebook, Instagram and via the FoD website shows that the presence of FoD within our communities is ever-growing, with businesses promoting FoD (from vets to gift shops, cafes to factories); artists exhibiting, musicians performing, choirs singing; schools involving pupils; groups from the WI to churches; many parish councils along the Dart, etc.

Next steps

We plan to re-run the survey in 2025 which will allow us to monitor whether and how river users' perceptions and/or behaviours have changed.

We are also following up with people who volunteered to be involved in other capacities as part of the survey and holding a range of community engagement events.

FoD is currently responding to some of the findings of this survey, notably:

- Continuing to work with SWW to establish a contract to hold SWW to account to a timeline to resolve sewage spills.
- Raising awareness of its water quality testing programme and the sites where tests are being undertaken.
- Displaying water quality data in a format regularly that is easily understood and accessible.
- Communicating more effectively with members through an increased social media presence and newsletters to a mailing list.
- Establishing links with public health organisations to identify correlations in water quality data and human and animal ill-health and a working group of experts to consider actions to be taken.
- Raising the profile of the ecology of the river through promoting rewilding and re-introduction projects, events to inform the public and sharing educational resources for schools to use.
- Widening the voices of the Dart through story, poetry, song, arts, photography & sculpture.



Photo by Chris Dance

³ For more on blue prescribing, see: <https://www.wwt.org.uk/our-work/projects/blue-prescribing/>

Appendix 1: The survey questions

The survey questions are presented below. The survey was an online form, what follows presents the wording and order of the questions but not the formatting and presentation of the online form.

Introduction

Please help to support river and community health by completing this survey.

Your connection with the area

1. What is your connection with the area of the river you visited today?

- I'm a local resident **[Go to Q1a]**
- I work here but don't live locally **[Go to Q1b]**
- I'm visiting the area (e.g. on holiday or on a business trip) **[Go to Q1b]**
- Other, please specify: _____ **[Go to Q1b]**

1a. Where do you live?

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Totnes | <input type="radio"/> Berry Pomeroy |
| <input type="radio"/> Dartington | <input type="radio"/> Littlehempston |
| <input type="radio"/> Staverton | <input type="radio"/> Tuckenhay |
| <input type="radio"/> Stoke Gabriel | <input type="radio"/> Cornworthy |
| <input type="radio"/> Ashprington | <input type="radio"/> Other, please specify:
_____ |

1b. Where do you live (if not local)?

(Please provide the name of the town / city, or the first part of your postcode)

Your activities at and around the River Dart

2. Which of the following activities have you undertaken at the River Dart in the last year? *(Tick all that apply)*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Walking | <input type="checkbox"/> Looking at wildlife / natural environment (e.g., birdwatching, spotting wildflowers) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Running | <input type="checkbox"/> Foraging / collecting food from the wild |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Swimming / paddling | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment (e.g., attending events, storytelling, playing music) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cycling | <input type="checkbox"/> Competitive sports events (e.g., aquathlon, raft race, organised runs, rowing competitions) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other outdoor exercise e.g., Yoga, Tai Chi, Martial Arts | <input type="checkbox"/> Voluntary work (e.g., litter picking, gardening) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Canoeing / kayaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Paid work / employment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rowing | <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism (e.g., ferry trips, visiting tourist attractions located alongside the river) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paddle boarding | <input type="checkbox"/> Visited pubs, bars, restaurants, cafes, alongside the river |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sailing / boating | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify:
_____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playing or being with my children while they play | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mindfulness / meditation | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art (e.g., painting, sketching) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Photography | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eating / drinking (picnics, barbecues) | |

3. Which one of the above riverside activities have you done most often in the last 12 months?

4. How often do you visit this stretch of the River Dart (for any purpose)?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- Once or twice a week
- Once or twice a month
- Less often
- It varies
- Other, please specify: _____

5. Compared to a year ago, how often do you visit the River Dart?

- I visit the river **about the same number of times** now as I did a year ago **[Go to Q7]**
- I visit the river **less often** now than I did a year ago **[Go to Q6]**
- I visit the river **more often** now than I did a year ago **[Go to Q6]**
- Not applicable / I didn't visit the river a year ago **[Go to Q7]**

6. Why do you visit the river more / less often than you did a year ago?

7. How long to you usually stay at the river?

- Less than an hour
- An hour or two
- Half a day
- A day
- It varies
- Other, please specify: _____

The impact of the river on you

8. What impact does your use of the River Dart have on the following:

	A major positive impact	A minor positive impact	No impact	A minor negative impact	A major negative impact
Your physical health / fitness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your mental health / wellbeing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your social life / sense of community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. What (if any) other impacts does your use of the River Dart have on you?

Your views on water quality in the River Dart

10. How would you describe the water quality along this stretch of the River Dart at the moment? (This refers to how clean the water is and how safe you feel it is for people and wildlife)Very good

- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Very poor
- Don't know

11. What makes you think the water quality is good / poor? (E.g., from seeing how clear the water is, news items about the water quality, hearing about it from other river users, etc.)

12. What do you think are the main sources of / reasons for poor water quality in the River Dart?

13. Have you ever seen or smelled pollution in the river?

- Yes
- No

14. Have you or anyone you know fallen ill after spending time in the water?

- Yes – I have
- Yes – someone I know has
- No

Your views on the environment and ecology around the River Dart

15. How satisfied are you with following aspects of the environment and ecology in and around the River Dart?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Access points to the river (e.g., paths leading to the river)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The condition of the riverside paths	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The diversity of wildlife (e.g., animals, birds, insects and aquatic life)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The diversity of plant life (e.g., wild flowers, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Your enjoyment of the River Dart

16. What makes your use of the River Dart enjoyable or easy?

17. What makes your use of the River Dart less enjoyable or more difficult?

18. Before completing this survey, had you heard of Friends of the River Dart?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

19. If there is anything you think Friends of the River Dart can do to help enhance your enjoyment of the River Dart, please describe below:

Bathing Water Designation

Friends of the Dart are making official applications for bathing water designation in four sites on the river. It is seeking to prove that these need to be cleaned as a matter of priority due to there being a high level of human activity during which people 'get wet'. This is a tool for evidencing the need for change to sewage being released into the river. Friends of the Dart has chosen sites where the human activity does not impact bank erosion or the locality and is already used by local people.

20. Do you support Friends of the Dart in its applications for Bathing Water Status at Steamer Quay, Totnes, Stoke Gabriel, Dittisham, Dartmouth?

- Yes
- No

Further participation

21. Would you be interested in helping with this research and with the work of Friends of the River Dart in any of the following ways:

- I would be willing to take this survey again in June 2025
- I would be willing to be interviewed about my use of the River Dart
- I would be willing to be photographed while using the River Dart
- I would be willing to volunteer for other activities to help Friends of the Dart to engage with the community
- I would be willing to help in another way, please detail: _____
- None of the above

22. If you have ticked any of the above, please provide your contact details so that if/when an opportunity arises, one of the Friends of the Dart team will get in touch:

First name: _____

Surname: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

I consent to my name and contact details being passed to Friends of the River Dart.

About you

So that we can assess the representativeness of survey respondents and ensure that we have gathered information from a cross-section of river users, please provide the following information:

23. Your age

- Under 18
- 18-25
- 26-40
- 41-55
- 56-70
- 71+

24. Are you...? (If more than one applies, please tick that one that you feel represents your main role)

- Employed (full or part time, including self-employed)
- Retired
- Carer
- Student
- Volunteer
- Other, please specify: _____

25. Are you a parent or carer of children under the age of 18?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for completing this survey

Appendix 2: Respondent profile

The survey included some questions about respondents to provide an indication of the spread of different respondent characteristics, Tables A1 – A5 present these characteristics.

Table A1: What is your connection with the area of the River you visited today?

What is your connection with the area of the River you visited today?	n	%
I'm a local resident	995	89%
I'm visiting the area (e.g., on holiday or on a business trip)	51	5%
I work here but don't live locally	18	2%
Other	57	5%
Total	1121	100%

Table A2: Where do you live?

Where do you live?	n	%
Totnes	403	41%
Stoke Gabriel	110	11%
Dartington	107	11%
Dartmouth	43	4%
Staverton	24	2%
Dittisham	16	2%
Other*	292	29%
Total	995	100%

* Most of the 'other' areas cited were towns and villages in South Devon and Dartmoor, e.g. Ashburton, Buckfastleigh, Littlehempston, Harbertonford, etc. Some respondents were from nearby cities (Exeter or Plymouth), others were from other parts of the UK and a couple of respondents were from overseas.

Table A3: Age of respondents

Age	n	%
Under 18	203	19%
18-25	19	2%
26-40	177	17%
41-55	351	33%
56-70	242	23%
71+	79	7%
Total	1071	100%

Table A4: Employment status of respondents

Employment status	n	%
Employed (full or part time, including self-employed)	623	58%
Student	244	23%
Retired	188	18%
Volunteer	48	4%
Carer	25	2%
Other	40	4%

Note on Figure 14: The total number of respondents and base for percentages is 1,069. Percentages total more than 100% because respondents could tick any that applied.

Table A5: Are you the parent or carer of a child under the age of 18?

Are you the parent/carer of a child under the age of 18?	n	%
Yes	362	34%
No	710	66%
Total	1072	100%