



Living River project review

Difficulties communicating water efficiency messages for conservation

Problem

One of the threats to the natural heritage of River Avon is that some parts of the river are affected by high levels of abstraction.

The Avon catchment supplies water to more than 317,000 households. The bulk of this is drawn from chalk aquifers underlying the catchment; these aquifers also feed the upper parts of the Avon and its tributaries. Some parts of the river are affected by high levels of abstraction and although this is being addressed through a range of measures, peak levels of abstraction for domestic water consumption can still adversely affect the river by reducing flow.

Domestic water usage is rising nationwide. There is evidence that most people whose water is derived from the Avon catchment are both unaware of its source, and of the environmental consequences of high levels of use. We wanted to see if people could be encouraged to reduce their water consumption and the Downton Water Project was set up to raise awareness of this issue by the Living River project, as part of a wider water conservation project with partners Wessex Water, Bournemouth and West Hants Water Companies, and the Environment Agency.

Goals

- To raise awareness of the importance of the River Avon as both a natural asset and the provider of domestic water supply.
- To change people's perception of water use and their water use behaviours.

Results

- Engagement of 250 people in community involvement and active participation in water issues in Downton.
- Wider communication of media messages relating to water use.
- Participation and contribution to Environment Agency pilot study into the social science of water use. Wider understanding of success of interventions on water use



The challenge

Surveys by Wessex Water have shown that people were not making the link between the water in their taps and the rivers in the landscape, and did not realise the potential impact of their water usage. This is one aspect of the lack of engagement issue that the Living River project was trying to address.



The solution

Originally we proposed a conventional awareness raising programme which would have provided all householders in the Avon catchment with information on water conservation and how this was linked to the River Avon system and its wildlife.

However, early on in the Living River project we accepted an invitation to join a project commissioned by the Environment Agency to investigate the social science of water use through different methods of awareness and community engagement. This would not only improve communities' awareness of water conservation issues but also it would show how people respond to different ways of presenting the water conservation message.

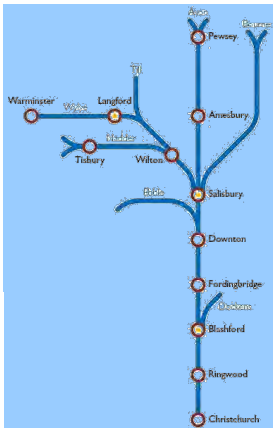
Our contribution was to set up a community engagement project in Downton. This would be recorded for comparison with other parts of the project including a comparison of interventions including door-stepping, distribution of leaflets and fitting of water saving devices.

In Downton we contacted key community groups, organisations or individuals currently active in the area as well as the local Parish Council, both local schools, and the three village churches, informing them of the project and inviting them to take part in a meeting to discuss the project and how they would like to get involved.

A community group formed, known unofficially as the 'water wise' group, and we worked with them to develop the project. They decided that the best way to improve water efficiency in Downton would be to try and change the way in which people used their water supply. We looked at different ways of delivering these behaviour change messages and how to encourage actual changes. The group also brought in their local water company - Bournemouth and West Hants Water.

The group developed two main strands of activity. One was a village event - Downton Aquafest - planned and organised by local people. Aquafest consisted of stalls and displays with water saving messages, interactive activities, a water efficiency slide show, musical performances from local schoolchildren, and an award ceremony and a brief talk by a TV celebrity.

The other strand comprised communication messages about water conservation, which were undertaken both before and after Aquafest. These included talks by a representative of Bournemouth & West Hampshire Water at the primary school; distribution of flyers promoting water saving messages; publicity in local newspapers, church newsletters and on the Downton village website; distribution of the project's water saving leaflet.



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The River Avon is a unique part of the heritage and landscape of England. It is one of a number of Chalk Rivers that follow the band of chalk that sweeps across England from the north east to the south west. They occur nowhere else in the UK and are very rare in the world as a whole.

The importance of the River Avon and its tributaries is recognised by its national, European and international wildlife designations.

The current look and character of the river and river valley has been shaped by a long history of human use and support a unique variety and abundance of wildlife not found in other English rivers.

The Outcome

The overall project clearly showed that people's attitudes and behaviour in relation to water conservation are complex and are affected by complex social factors as well as awareness of and perceptions about the issue.

Both the wider project and the Downton community project were successful at reaching the target audiences and actively engaging them in a programme of awareness raising. The "door-stepping" activity also generated a response, although without active engagement. Just providing a leaflet did not appear to influence people.

Social factors influence people's willingness to engage with messages about water efficiency. In Downton people responded well to the challenge of organising activities that would deliver water efficiency messages to their local community. As well as the water wise group, people willingly participated in the project and used their social networks and skills to get others involved. The degree of social cohesion in this community is likely to have contributed to the responsiveness of people to communications, as evidenced by the very good attendance levels at the Aquafest event in comparison with other similar events.

The key success factors at Downton were:

- involving the schools and youth groups with children focussed activities
- providing and demonstrating get water saving devices
- making water conservation fun (the Aquafest event)
- involvement of the water company
- involvement of Resource Futures as a facilitator (focussed activity)

However, what this project was not able to do was prove conclusively that people's use of water became more efficient as a result of this engagement. Both the wider project and the Downton project found it difficult to measure the actual impact of interventions on water consumption. In Downton it was difficult to obtain sufficiently detailed, reliable and relevant data on the level at which community engagement may be taking place. It is also not known how long lasting the reported behavioural changes will be.

Lesson learnt

- *The people who were most engaged with the project (the water wise group) had the strongest response to the water saving messages*
- *Involving schoolchildren was very important to engage the community*
- *Facilitation helped focus activity (Resource Futures)*
- *Water Company involvement and support helped engage people*
- *The degree of social cohesion in community influences responsiveness*
- *Difficult to measure the actual impact of interventions on water consumption*
- *Social factors and perceptions can influence people's willingness to engage with messages about water efficiency*



More info:
 The Social Science of Encouraging Water efficiency Report:
 SC060040/R1, available from Environment Agency publications catalogue: <http://publications.environmentagency.gov.uk> or National Customer Contact Centre: T: 08708 506506

For more information - www.livingriver.org.uk