

# A Southampton River Rights Public Meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2025

Explored the question: When you think about the River Itchen, what do you feel, and what makes you feel that way?

**Place:** St Denys Church Hall, Southampton

**Format:** World Cafe (6 hosted table groups reformed after each of 3 rounds)

**Participants:** 38 community members

**Context:** The River Itchen in Southampton

**'Post it note' and other written question responses:** from table discussions were grouped under: *Love, Anger, Sadness, Other*

**The meeting sampled the wide range and richness of feelings and concerns about the Itchen in a wide range of community responses.**

## Love

There were many expressions of deep affection, reverence, and personal connection to the River Itchen.

Themes included:

- **Beauty and biodiversity:** swans, otters, kingfishers, “wildlife corridor,” “peace, sunsets”
- **Recreation and joy:** swimming, kayaking, walking, cycling, rowing
- **Heritage and identity:** industrial history, Mesolithic remains, “my family have lived by it for generations”, “my identity,” “art & history revealing themselves”
- **Spiritual and emotional grounding:** “nourishes soul,” “life flowing in water,” “sunlight on living water”
- **Community and belonging:** “bringing people together,” “feels at home,”

## Anger

Strong frustration and indignation were voiced, especially toward corporate and institutional neglect and environmental harm.

Key concerns:

- **Southern Water:** repeated mentions of pollution, commodification, “total lack of trust”, and “fake concern”
- **Privatisation and corporate control:** “we pay, they bend rules,” “industry profits & does not safeguard”
- **Policy failures:** “lack of action” from Itchen scrutiny panel, “lack of action from authorities”
- **Access restrictions:** “confined, separation, concrete,” “disheartened at private signs,” “turned our back on river”
- **Pollution sources:** including sewage works, road runoff, pesticides, plastic, chicken farms

## Sadness

Grief, nostalgia, and a sense of loss permeated this category.

Recurring themes:

- **Ecological degradation:** species loss, poor water quality, loss of biodiversity
- **Disconnection:** “loss of connection,” “trauma,” “I am missing myself,” “solastalgia”
- **Childhood memories and generational change:** “children not playing like we used to,” “memories of my childhood in Mexico”
- **Inaccessibility and neglect:** “poo, pesticides, herbicides,” “lack of waterfront access,” “not able to swim below Woodmill”
- **Powerlessness:** “feeling powerless about corporate control,” “hopelessness,” “fear for future”

## Other

This heading captured a wide spectrum of emotions and reflections.

Highlights include:

- **Wonder and awe:** “mysterious reverence,” “sublime beauty,” “instinctive connection with water”
- **Hope and potential:** “what it could be like,” “needs protection,” “connect to one river & care about them all,” “pride in living by the Itchen”
- **Tension and debate:** “fighting for what usage comes first,” “concern re anglers v swimmers,” “debate on usage”
- **Sensory and poetic reflections:** “space, skyline & vistas,” “smell, sight and sound,” “sunsets, swans”
- **Creative and cultural engagement:** river art and music events, radio discussions, community cleanup efforts

## Overall Themes

The River Itchen is experienced not just as a physical space, but as a **living presence, a repository of memory, part of personal identity** and a **site of contested futures**.

- **Emotional depth and breadth:** from serenity to heartbreak, from pride to despair
- **Calls to action, for change and for vision:** protect, reconnect, restore, reimagine
- **Sense of shared stewardship:** the river as a space in common, not a commodity