South Coast Residents Demand Action Against Sewage Pollution in "largest peaceful protest seen in BCP"

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Local Residents Gather to Demand Action Against Sewage Pollution in Christchurch Harbour

On Tuesday, 25th March, over 150 concerned residents gathered outside Bournemouth, Poole, and Christchurch (BPC) Civic Centre, demanding an end to the devastating sewage pollution choking Christchurch Harbour. The crowd called for the immediate implementation of a new Harbour Protection Policy to safeguard the area's fragile ecosystem

The demonstration followed the submission of a powerful petition signed by over **4,400 Christchurch residents**, which forced BCP Council to debate the proposal. **Councillor Vanessa Ricketts**, also Secretary of the **Christchurch Harbour & Marine Society**, presented the policy at

the council meeting. She stressed the need for robust mitigation measures to prevent pollution from new developments from further harming the harbour's unique species and ecological habitats.

Ricketts highlighted the success of a similar policy in **Poole Harbour**, urging the council to adopt the same protections to **"prevent the demise of this beautiful, natural estuary."** The council responded decisively, **unanimously supporting** the petition—a significant victory for the community.

Ricketts celebrated the result, stating:

> *"It was amazing to have the unanimous support of the council and for them to recognise the urgent need to protect Christchurch Harbour."*

Christchurch Harbour: A Natural Treasure Under Threat

Christchurch Harbour, designated a **Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**, is an essential ecological hotspot. It connects to the **River Avon Special Area of Conservation (SAC)** and plays a vital role in the life cycles of several endangered fish species, including:

- **Sea Lamprey** (critically endangered)
- **Atlantic Salmon**
- **European Eel**

The harbour also serves as a **breeding and nursery ground** for species such as sea bass and mullet and provides key habitats for migratory water birds.

However, despite its environmental significance, the harbour is under relentless assault from **sewage pollution**. In **2023 alone**, Wessex Water discharged:

- **32,577 hours** of untreated sewage into the **River Avon**
- **9,634 hours** into the **River Stour**

These figures **more than doubled** compared to the previous year. The **2024 Environment Agency data**, expected later this month, is likely to reveal even more alarming levels of pollution. Combined with agricultural run-off from the river catchments, the harbour's water quality has rapidly deteriorated, triggering frequent **algal blooms** that deplete oxygen levels and suffocate wildlife.

Ricketts added:

“Thank you to everyone for your support in helping to make our rivers and harbour safe, clean, and thriving spaces for conservation, recreation, and natural beauty.”

Protest with a Splash: Community Creativity and Politeness

The demonstration was described by councillors as the **“politest protest”** they had ever witnessed. Protesters creatively incorporated **“please”** into their chants, while many turned up in **water sports attire**, donning wetsuits, snorkels, and Dry Robes. Residents also brought handmade banners and signs, sending a powerful yet courteous message to the council.

Experts Sound the Alarm

Charles Watson, Founder and Chair of **River Action**, voiced strong concerns over the ongoing sewage crisis:

> *“In recent years, Christchurch Harbour has become the toilet bowl of Bournemouth. Huge quantities of raw sewage are regularly discharged into the River Stour from the wastewater treatment works serving the Bournemouth area. When combined with even greater discharges from the Avon, the harbour at times resembles a literal cesspit. Urgent action is needed to protect this incredibly important area of biodiversity.”*

Martin Stewart, Chair of the **Christchurch Harbour & Marine Society**, echoed these sentiments:

> *“Christchurch Harbour is a vital habitat for endangered species like Atlantic Salmon, Sea Lamprey, and European Eel. It’s also a major hub for leisure activities such as angling, sailing, kayaking, paddleboarding, wild swimming, and birdwatching. The horrendous pollution levels we’re witnessing now pose a massive threat to both nature and human health. BCP Council must urgently step up to protect this long-suffering ecosystem.”*

Community Action: The Time Is Now

The resounding message from the protest is clear: **the community will no longer tolerate**

inaction. With **sewage pollution threatening both nature and public health**, residents have made their voices heard. The unanimous support for the Harbour Protection Policy is a significant step, but the fight is far from over.

The people of Christchurch have spoken—and they demand clean waters, not excuses.