THE CVFC MICROPOLLUTANT REPORT – WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR RIVER USERS AND IS THERE POTENTIAL FOR HARM?

The river Colne is not unique in the chemical loading its water and sediments contain. Studies on other rivers have determined this to be the case and the Environment Agency (EA) acknowledge only 14% of rivers in the country meet good ecological status and none meet good chemical status given the criteria of the water framework directive (WFD).

The Colne and other waters of the catchment, meet neither nor do any designated bathing waters exist.

Our study identifies some of the micropollutants present in the Colne and Ver but we can be assured other tributaries, distributaries and many of the lakes in the catchment will be similarly blighted so the issues are not localised. Without doubt many more pollutants than the 267 already catalogued would be discovered if a wider suite of analysis methods was applied.

We are able to state the classification for each which determines the risk they present individually. What cannot be stated is the detrimental affect any of those will have on the environment or indeed human health given the apparently low concentrations we find – opinion on what should be regarded as 'low' differs widely however with some academics holding the view that some should be considered high.

Given that and, as many of these are not constant, and will vary depending on location any such prediction about impact is difficult. So too is what the combined effect of those chemicals would be – especially where we see evidence of accumulation.

Whilst a more in depth study would provide clarity it could not take account of the infinite variables - concentrations of substances present or condition changes such as more/less water in the river to affect dilution.

The visual state of a river can sometimes be a guide as to the risk it presents (such as when sewage fungus is present) but generally the pollutants are invisible. Even when the EA determine a given water to be of bathing quality standard it does so by testing for only Escherichia coli or E. coli (EC) and Intestinal enterococci (IE). These bacteria can come from many sources including sewage, agricultural livestock, wildlife, birds and road drainage and are likely to have effect quickly on humans.

Such analysis takes no account of the myriads of other potentially damaging pollutants present that may have longer lasting and unknown risks attached.

Whilst we may assume that members of the public will treat river water and riparian environments as a potential health risk the reality is far from that. Children are allowed to play freely in the water in such a way that ingestion is inevitable, pets are allowed to drink, wild swimming is common and all manner of other water related activity is encouraged – often even by the very organisations that should, and now do, know better.

A question facing us is should we issue formal warnings about the potential for harm and risk the back lash from that?

Another though of course is what would be the outcome of a person becoming ill or dying through contact with water and it becoming known that we could, and perhaps should, have issued some warning given the evidence we hold?