

April 2026

Cc: Secretary of State, Emma Reynolds MP

Dear Minister Hardy,

We are writing to you on behalf of millions of water users across the UK. We are individuals, local water sports clubs, National Governing Bodies for water sports, public health and environmental charities and businesses whose health is put at risk every time we enter our waterways. We urge you to use the upcoming Water Bill to transform the Bathing Water Regulations into the Recreational Water Regulations. Specifically, we ask that you expand the definition of 'bather' to include all recreational water users when designating new waters.

Bathing water designation is the only existing legal mechanism for protecting the public's health when accessing blue spaces. But as you know, only 'bathers' are currently considered. While we welcome the personal commitment and interest you have taken to improve the current outdated regulations, we urge you to deliver a bathing water regime that protects all water users – whenever, however and wherever they use the water.

In 2025, 17 million people participated in water sport activities at our rivers, lakes and beaches. Only 4.1 million of these were open water swimmers. The other 12.9 million people participated in different water sports but are not considered under current legislation; as they are not defined as 'bathers', their health remains unprotected. Yet paddleboarders, kayakers, surfers and other water lovers are just as at risk of contracting sickness from pollution.

In 2025, Surfers Against Sewage received over 1,500 reports of sickness cases from people participating in many types of water sports. These activities included surfing, swimming, sailing, kayaking, paddleboarding, windsurfing, fishing and snorkeling.

Designating recreational waters would better protect all water users from polluted water, while also delivering wider societal and economic benefits. Those who can safely access the water gain mental and physical health benefits – saving millions of GP appointments, offering opportunities for NHS Green Social Prescribing and contributing £2.1 bn annually to the UK economy.

Expanding the definition of a 'bather' to include all water users is not a radical proposal. We welcomed the government's commitment to exploring a broader definition, as set out in 2025 by Defra as a wider reform to the Bathing Water Regulations. However, we have seen little movement to deliver on this commitment. As protecting public health is a central pillar of this government's electoral promise to clean up the UK's rivers, lakes and seas, we urge you to take this vital step to expand the definition of a 'bather'. This will demonstrate to the thousands of water users who use their waterways every day that protecting public health is a key

consideration of the government.

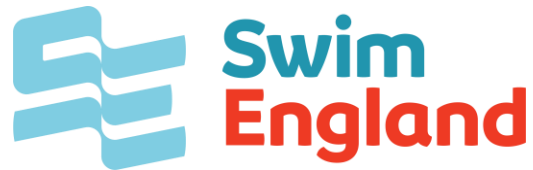
This step would show the public who have become disillusioned about this government's ability to deliver change that they are taking action, which will have a tangible impact on people's day-to-day lives. The change in regulation will allow more places to become designated recreational waters and therefore benefit from legal protection. It would also demonstrate that public action can complement the crucial, complex transformation of the water industry and regulators from a profit driven system to a system that puts public health and the environment first.

On behalf of the [insert final number of] water users that the signatures of this letter represent – whether they paddle in a river during their summer holiday, surf in the winter swell or row competitively – we urge you, as the Minister for Water, to drive forward the reform of the Bathing Water Regulations to reflect the reality of the diversity of water user communities in the UK. Defra must expand the definition of a 'bather' to include all water users represented by signatories of this letter when designating new recreational waters.

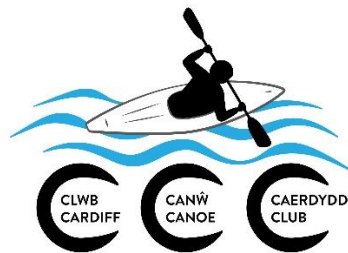
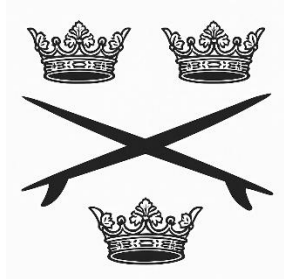
To make the scale and importance of this reform clear to you and your team, we are also inviting you to meet with the signatories to this letter. We invite you to join us on the beach or on the banks of a river at the start of the bathing season, to witness firsthand the diverse ways the public enjoys our blue spaces.

We would appreciate it if you could set out in your reply the accelerated timescale for the expansion of the definition of the bather, and how we as stakeholders can help you succeed in your mission to make the Bathing Water Regulations fit for purpose.

Yours sincerely,









PIRATES CANOE CLUB
Kent based canoe, paddleboard and kayak club



Beach Pads

Lyme Regis Sailing Club Ltd

Prestwick Coastal Rowing Club

Girling Angling Society

Teddington Bluetits

Windsor boys school boat club

Manchester Canoe Club

Supermarine Diving Group

Northern Watersports

Topshelf Swimmers

Margate Yacht Club

Basingstoke Canal Canoe Club

Madres Surf

Hove Dippers

Piddinghoe Plungers

She Flies

Oxford Sailing Club

Telford Canoe Club

Kernow Kitesurfing Club

Hayle Canoe Club

Cullercoats Swimmers

Cawsand Bay Sailing Club

Eling Sailing Club

SurfHouse St Ives

East Coast HQ

Join the Lineup

Henleaze Swimming Club

Poole and Bournemouth Bluetits

Lyme Regis Gig Club

Avon Beach Wingers

Oxford University Surf Club

Wildlife Wardens

Falcon Boat Club

Welsh Surfing Federation

Wolverhampton Canoe Club

Croydon Active Paddlers

Sutton Bingham Paddlesports Club

Wydean Canoe Club

Dart Totnes Amateur Rowing Club

Manchester Canoe Club

Supermarine Diving Group

Severn Family Surfing

Northern Watersports/BKSA

Topshelf Swimmers

Margate Yacht Club

Rockley Watersports LTD

Falmouth SLSC

Ribble canoe club

Marlow Canoe Club

Salisbury Canoe Club

Proteus Canoe Club

8th West Wickham Scouts

Telford canoe club

Seren Dwr Slalom Canoe Club

Holme Pierrepont Canoe Club

Wolverhampton canoe club

Highworth Canoe Club

ATB Paddleboard Club

Middle nene sailing club

WCC