



July 2026

Cc: Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Dear Minister for Flooding and Water,

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 Clean 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 While we welcome the personal commitment and interest you have taken to improve the current outdated regulations, we urge you to deliver a bathing water regime that protects all water users – whenever, however and wherever they use the water.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.

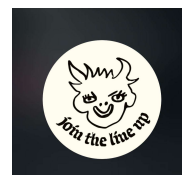
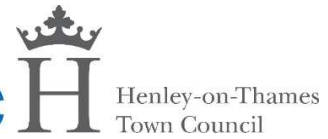
On behalf of the **12.5 million water users** that the signatures of this letter represent – whether they paddle in a river during their summer holiday, surf in the winter swell or row competitively – we urge you, as the Minister for Water, to drive forward the reform of the Bathing Water Regulations 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 during the current 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,







Avon Beach Wingers
Basingstoke Canal Canoe Club
Beach Pads
Berkshire Tri Squad
Borth y Gest mermaids
British Kitesports Association (BKSA)
British Landsailing, the British Federation of Sand & Land Yacht Clubs (BFSLYC)
Caister Beach Sea Dippers
Cawsand Bay Sailing Club
Chester Frosties
Churcher's College
Creature & Co
Creeksea Nutters
Croydon Active Paddlers
Cullercoats Swimmers
Dart Totnes Amateur Rowing Club
East Coast HQ
Eling Sailing Club
Errwood Sailing Club
Falcon Boat Club
Flamborough Flippers
Flow Watersports
Flower Pot Swimming Club
Friends of Mylor Creek
Girling Angling Society
Goodwick Seals
Hayle Canoe Club
Hayle Surf Lifesaving
Hayling Island Sailing Club
Henleaze Swimming Club
High Wycombe Thames Angling Club
Hove Dippers
Hove Lagoon Watersports
Imperial Surf Club
Intrepid Ginger Ninjas
Itchenor Sailing Club
Join the Lineup
Kernow Kitesurfing Club
Lagoon Watersports

London Corinthian Sailing Club (LCSC)
Lyme Regis Gig Club
Lyme Regis Sailing Club Ltd
Madoc Yacht Club
Madoc Yacht Club Rowing
Madres Surf
Manchester Canoe Club
Margate Yacht Club
Medway Yacht Club
Midlands social sup paddle group
Mold Canoe Club
Morecambe and Lancaster and Lakes Open Water Swimming (M.A.L.L.O.W.S)
MYC Porthmadog
Newton Water Babes
Northern Watersports
Northern Watersports/BKSA
Oxford Sailing Club
Oxford University Surf Club
Piddinghoe Plungers
Pirates Canoe Club
Plas Menai
Plastic free Eastbourne
Poole and Bournemouth Bluetits
Poole Harbour canoe club and Poole life savers
Porthmadog rowing club
Prestwick Coastal Rowing Club
RaspberrySky Services Limited
Replenish Events
River Chess Association
River Yealm Regatta
Royal Sutton Coldfield Canoe Club
Royal Sutton Coldfield Canoe Club (RSCCC)
Seaford Sailing Club
Seaford sailing club
Severn Family Surfing
Shaldon Leisure Rowers
She Flies
Skelghyll Estates
Solent Protection Society
Somerset Artifact Seekers
Snowdonia Canoe club
Stoke Gabriel Boating Association
Supermarine Diving Group
Supermarine Diving Group
SurfHouse St Ives
Sutton Bingham Paddlesports Club

Teddington Bluetits
Telford Canoe Club
Topshelf Swimmers
Topshelf Swimmers
Walpole Bay Dippers
Wave Wahines CIC
We Swam Thru
Wells Dippers
Welsh Surfing Federation
West Midlands Surf Club
Wilder Bramley, Basingstoke Conservation Group
Wildlife Wardens
Windsor Boys School Boat Club
Wolverhampton Canoe Club
Wombourne Kayak Club
Worcester Canoe Club
Wyedean Canoe Club
Yarmouth gig rowing club
Yonder
York City Rowing Club