



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 While we welcome the personal commitment and interest you have taken to improve the current outdated regulations, we urge you to deliver a bathing water regime that protects all water users – whenever, however and wherever they use the water.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

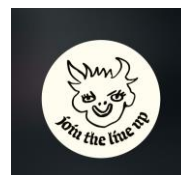
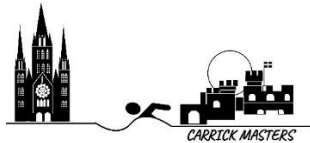
On behalf of the **12.5 million water users** that the signatures of this letter represent – whether they paddle in a river during their summer holiday, surf in the winter swell or row competitively – we urge you, as the Minister for Water, to drive forward the reform of the Bathing Water Regulations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





**PIRATES CANOE CLUB**  
Kent based canoe, paddleboard and kayak club





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  
Eco Action Families  
Eling Sailing Club  
Errwood Sailing Club  
Falcon Boat Club  
Flamborough Flippers  
Flow Watersports  
Flower Pot Swimming Club  
Friends of Mylor Creek  
Fylde coast against sewage  
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  
Teddington Masters' Swimming Club  
Telford Canoe Club  
Thames & Kennet Marina  
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