



Listening Learning Leading

Defra Bathing Water Team

Via email:

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Thames Champion

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Dear Madam/Sir,

On behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council, I write to express our support for the Oxford Rivers Project's application for Bathing Water Status for Wolvercote Mill Stream at Port Meadow, in Oxford.

As a regular year-round river swimmer and the River Thames Champion for South Oxfordshire (immediately downstream from Oxford), I have seen first-hand the dramatic increase in the numbers of people bathing, paddling and swimming in the River Thames. I have also become acutely aware of the grave state of our rivers as a result of sewage pollution.

During the bathing season (May-September), I am frequently contacted by residents asking about water quality. "Is it safe for my children to swim in the river?" is a common question. Unfortunately, there is no answer because at present, we don't have accurate, publicly available information on sewage discharges, and we don't have public information on levels of harmful bacteria in the river Thames. Every regular river swimmer (me included) has, at one time or another, become sick from swimming in the Thames. I know of children who have had tummy upsets as a result of paddling in the river.

As our summers become ever warmer, we can expect the numbers of people seeking the refuge of our rivers to increase.

Bathing Water designation gives the public clear and accurate information about sewage discharges and water quality, ensuring they can make informed choices about whether to swim or not. And it gives communities greater power to pressure water companies to upgrade sewage treatment works to end sewage discharges.

A key recommendation of the Environmental Audit Committee Report, released earlier this year, is that at least one bathing water be designated for each water company area. France has more than 550 rivers with bathing water designation. So far, the UK has only one.

Wolvercote Mill Stream, at Port Meadow in the centre of Oxford, is a hugely popular swimming spot year-round. In the summer months, hundreds of people can be seen paddling, splashing and bathing. It is enjoyed by residents and visitors alike, by families with small children and the elderly. Winter swimming has become increasingly popular, and Port Meadow is a well-known spot for those who, like me, enjoy the mental and physical health benefits of “dipping” in cold water.

Bathing water designation would give the public - including vulnerable groups - accurate information on water quality at this location. Bathing Water Status could also strengthen efforts to achieve upgrades to the sewage treatment works upstream, at Cassington, which spilled untreated sewage for 230 hours in 2020. Given the growing popularity of cold-water swimming, and the problems with winter sewage discharges at Cassington, I believe the monitoring should take place year-round.

Along the 220-mile length of the Thames, there are many places where people paddle and swim. I would like to see many more areas of bathing water designated along this iconic river, including in South Oxfordshire, and an eventual end to the practice of sewage dumping.

We all deserve rivers clean enough to swim in.

I hope you will grant the application for Bathing Water Status at Port Meadow in Oxford. South Oxfordshire District Council aims to bring forward an application for Wallingford Beach this year and we hope these are the first of many along the River Thames.

Your sincerely,



Cllr Jo Robb
Thames Champion
Woodcote & Rotherfield Ward
South Oxfordshire District Council