

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bristol Mayor refuses to support action on river pollution despite full council support

The Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, published his decision on 3rd of November that he will not support the amendment of the [2009 City Docks bye-law](#), which prohibits swimming in the River Avon at Conham River Park, despite a petition by the Conham Bathing campaign group receiving over 5,200 signatures and gaining unanimous cross-party support at the Full Council meeting on 18 October.



The removal, or amendment, of the swimming ban would enable the Conham Bathing group to apply for Designated Bathing Water Status (DBWS) at Conham River Park, a well-loved stretch of the Avon which is very popular with bathers and other river users.

The group began their campaign for DBWS following disturbing reports of swimmers becoming ill from swimming, most likely due to the use of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs), which release untreated sewage directly into the river, and are supposed to only be used by water companies in extreme storm conditions.

Current Environment Agency testing data for this stretch of the Avon is sparse, and tests carried out in 2016 and 2019 have shown that the river has consistently failed to meet Good ecological status. For the last two summers, the Conham Bathing group has undertaken a volunteer-led water quality monitoring

programme which has provided the most regular and up-to-date publicly available data for this site. The results have found the river to be dangerously polluted with harmful bacteria, threatening both human and ecological health.

Currently, DBWS is the **only** mechanism available to hold polluters to account for poor water quality, while ensuring the stretch of river would be regularly monitored by the Environment Agency, meaning swimmers and other river users could make informed decisions about their safety.

As Kirsty Davies, Community Water Quality Officer from [Surfers Against Sewage](#), points out: *“Ensuring that more of our inland waterways receive designated bathing status is crucial. Our rivers are being neglected, with polluters not being held to account. With more and more people using the water for both physical and mental health benefits, designation is vital to ensure water quality is monitored and regulated to protect water users from harmful bacteria”.*

However, the Conham Bathing group has previously struggled to obtain support from the mayor’s office for a DBWS application due to the aforementioned bye-law prohibiting swimming. As landowner of the site, the council would have to approve a DBWS application. Thus, over the summer of 2022, they ran a public petition urging the council to amend the bye-law in order to remove the barriers to a DBWS application.

In his official response to the petition, the mayor seeks to dismiss and delay this crucial action on river pollution, despite citing the Council’s [Ecological Emergency Strategy](#) target of achieving 100% excellent quality waterways by 2030.

Supporter of the campaign, @penny_morgan, writes on Twitter: *“Such a shame that the solution found, evidenced and handed on a plate by a group of volunteers to tackle sewage pollution and health risks has not been supported and shows that wordy ecology city plans mean nothing if you won’t take the decisions and steps needed.”*

Rather than supporting the application for DBWS, which would facilitate greater monitoring and improvement of the water quality, the mayor’s statement raises concerns of liability and costs of improving safe access to the river.

From the [mayor’s statement](#) (page 7): *“To allow swimming in this area, the Harbour Master would have to give his express consent and, without investing in significant safety measures, we would find ourselves liable should anyone come to harm.”*

The mayor continues *“...we have been asked to review and remove the 2009 Byelaws that prohibit swimming. This cannot be done in isolation, however the legislation relating to our harbour estate will be reviewed in the next couple of years and I have asked that this be considered as part of that process. We know that many people want the opportunity to enjoy open water safely. We have therefore listened to people’s requests for a safe swimming space in the harbour, and are actively working to make this request a reality with a view to piloting something next year.”*

While the Conham Bathing group welcomes further opportunities for safe outdoor swimming in Bristol, this response clearly ignores the premise of the petition, and indeed the debate held at Full Council on 18 October. The petition does not request a **new** swimming site in Bristol harbour. Rather, it brings to the attention of relevant authorities that a swimming site **already** exists in the Avon (several miles away from the harbour) and that it deserves to be protected and improved for the health of people who swim there, and for the health of the river itself.

@StirFromBelow on Twitter, writes “...*The mayor needs to realise that ultimately, this is about keeping the Avon clean and free from pollution.*”

Meanwhile, in the time that has elapsed between the debate and the issuing of this statement another **16,901 minutes (11.7 days)** of sewage and road runoff pollution have made their way into the stretch of Avon near Conham River Park.

The team behind Conham Bathing will continue to share CSO alerts through their social media and hope to resume a sampling programme in the 2023 bathing season, if resources allow. The group recognises that this stretch of the River Avon is a beloved, yet sadly threatened, bathing site, with or without the recognition of the Mayor. Campaigning on this issue will continue until the environmental vandalism of releasing sewage and drain water into our precious local freshwater ecosystems is stopped.