

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release date: 29 June 2022

Bristol City Council has confirmed that it will not be supporting an application for 'Designated Bathing Water Status' at Conham River Park, despite considerable public demand.

The council cites a [2009 bye-law](#), which prohibits swimming between the city harbour and Hanham lock, as the reason it is unable to cooperate.

The application is being prepared by [Conham Bathing](#), a group of wild swimmers who are concerned about the level of sewage pollution in the Avon catchment. According to the [Environment Agency](#), last year, Wessex Water discharged raw sewage directly into the river 23,524 times for a total duration of 151,258 hours.

Popular outdoor swimming sites that are officially designated as bathing waters are monitored by the Environment Agency (EA) for harmful bacteria, so the public know whether it's safe to swim or not. If the bacteria levels are consistently high, the EA is responsible for investigating the sources of pollution. For community groups, this is a crucial measure for holding polluters to account and improving water quality. Two river swimming sites, the [River Wharfe in Yorkshire](#), and the [River Thames in Oxford](#), have now received this special bathing status following community-driven campaigns.

Evidence-gathering by the Conham Bathing group in Bristol has involved a citizen science water sampling programme, which has revealed that the bathing quality of the water can vary from excellent to very poor. One sample last summer revealed a concentration of *E.coli* that was [20 times the safe limit for bathing](#). Around the same time, some locals reported [becoming ill from swimming at the site](#).

The group has also conducted a public survey, which received over 900 responses. 98.1% of respondents said they support regular water quality monitoring at the site. The group is now trialling an alert system with Wessex Water when one of their storm overflow pipes discharges untreated sewage into the river near Conham River Park.

However, in order to submit the official bathing water application to Defra, the group requires landowner support, which in this case is the Council. Until the bye-laws are changed, this won't be possible.

The Council's decision came the same day that the newly-formed Office for Environmental Protection announced [its investigation](#) into whether the appropriate authorities—Defra, the EA, and Ofwat—have failed to manage the issue of sewage pollution.

While the Council's decision is a major disappointment for the group, they will continue their efforts without official support. Conham Bathing's active monitoring programme, which is continuing this summer, not only shares the bacteriological information that the EA would provide, but it goes beyond this to look at other indicators of river health, including nitrates and phosphates, which can threaten wildlife. Furthermore, the near real-time sewage alerts represent an important breakthrough, and would not necessarily have been achieved with official bathing water status.

The members of Conham Bathing hope that their efforts to protect this historic bathing site, which has been enjoyed by locals for generations, demonstrates the impact that community-driven initiatives can have, even if they do not receive official support. Besides seeking water quality enhancement for this particular stretch of the River Avon, they are keen to support and advise other community groups who are hoping to do the same for their local rivers.

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