**Outdoor Swimming Society (OSS) response to the consultation on whether Wolvercote Mill Stream in Oxford should be designated as a bathing water.**

The Outdoor Swimming Society, established in 2006, grew from 300 members that year to around 100,000 in December 2019, and has increased even further in the last couple of years. It brings together the swimming community and is a resource to that community. Part of the OSS mission is ‘Access for all’, and its inland access group provides support, resources and a network to those interested in improving swimming access for inland waters.

**The view of OSS:**

OSS supports this proposal and believes that this should be designated as a bathing water. This would benefit swimmers and other water users, giving them information on bathing water quality so that they can make a decision on whether to enter the water and if so what precautions to take.

OSS provides information to swimmers on this and other issues in its Survive section of its website. On this subject it has this post, Is it Clean, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-clean/>, and the related one about pollution and swimming after rain or when river levels are low, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/understanding-rain-windy-weather/>.

**Our reasons and evidence supporting this view:**

The Oxford Rivers Project, bringing together the Rivers Trust, Thames Water, Oxford City Council, and a wide variety of local community and user groups, has carried out professional and community science sampling and testing of the rivers in Oxford, including at the point where they are proposing a bathing water, and the Interim Report (download from here, <https://www.thames21.org.uk/2021/09/sewage-pollution-makes-popular-oxford-bathing-site-unsafe-after-rainfall-study-finds/>) outlines the impact of sewage spills (and to a lesser extent agricultural run-off), finding that although water quality at this point – Point J in the report – was excellent or good in dry months in 2021, it was poor in spring months.

Currently, if designated, bathing water is only monitored between May and September. However swimming and other water use has become much more popular outside of the summer season, and as the results were more likely to be poor in those months it would be valuable to move towards putting into practice the aspiration to monitor throughout the year.

The campaign for designation and the associated campaigning and work to improve river water quality and bathing water quality at this point and elsewhere in Oxford is an exemplar of what can be achieved by water companies, local authorities, local groups and the local community working together. Swimmers and other water users are fully involved in the campaign and its main purpose of ensuring the

river is suitable for their leisure activities. The popularity of outdoor swimming and other water use has seen a dramatic rise in the last couple of years, and this has great benefit to local areas. Tourism and visitors are beneficial to local services, and these activities have great benefits to health and well-being of people, thus giving a wider benefit to society.

Swimmers and other water users who are immersing themselves and involved in the local water are there and they care, and this campaign is increasing knowledge and involvement, meaning that more people are more likely to treasure and look after their local environment.

Improvements in bathing water quality and the measures that will make that come about are also beneficial to water quality for wildlife and the environment and biodiversity, which is clearly of benefit to all. Different aspects of water quality are clearly linked, though it is important to make a distinction between the two measures of water quality.

Support for the proposal is clearly high in the area and in Oxford generally, with the petition of 5000+ people, the response to the local consultation, and the involvement in citizen science and surveying.

This swim spot is clearly well used and popular, by swimmers and other river users, so large numbers would benefit from designation and the information that would as a result be provided, and the longer term improvement which should hopefully follow from the organisations working together.

**Additional points: clarity on purpose and meaning of bathing water designation**

OSS has published information about the bathing water designation procedure, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/designated-bathing-waters-explained/>,

and information for local swimmers considering seeking a bathing water designation, including all the factors involved in the process, the benefits and potential negative consequences which can occur depending on how the campaigning takes place, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/should-swimmers-seek-bathing-water-designation-for-local-swim-spots/> (with a link to an article with some additional points, <https://www.imogensriverswims.co.uk/blog/issues/key-questions-for-seeking-bathing-water-designation/>).

This proposal will have benefits and the campaign is wide-ranging and inclusive of all who would be involved in improving quality and the information available to river users. However it is important to be aware of potential misunderstandings by members of the public and to make sure that information on the purpose and implications of designation is clearly communicated.

Designation of this place as a bathing water does not necessarily mean that other places that are not monitored are unsafe; swimmers will still need to use information such as that in Is it Clean, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/is-it-clean/>, to make their own assessment.

Designation of this place as a bathing water does not mean that it has been assessed in relation to other risks, and the area cannot automatically be assumed to be clean and safe; swimmers and other users still need to assess risks and take appropriate precautions to make sure they are safe.

Designation does not impact upon the legal position on liability of landowners in relation to risks to swimmers. This position is much misunderstood, and that misunderstanding means that places where swimmers can get access are far too few for the high and increasing demand and desire to do so. The legal position is that swimmers choosing to enter the water would be aware of the normal risks of doing so, and landowners only need to warn of unusual risks that cannot be seen, and as long as they assess for such unusual risks they have done all they need to in relation to liability.

Although recognition of a place as a bathing water does not change the legal position or the risk of swimming, it can be an opportunity to provide information to river users, especially those less familiar with potential risks and benefits and on how best to be a responsible swimmer in relation to safety, other users and the environment, as outlined in the OSS Outdoor Swimmers Code, <https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/outdoor-swimmers-code/>. This opportunity could be taken by all with an interest in making sure that everyone enjoys the river safely and responsibly and gains all the benefits.