Motion to: Council

24 June 2025

Subject: Support for Designated Bathing Water Status at Cow Tower

Proposer: Councillor Champion

Seconder: Councillor Lubbock

This Council recognises the growing interest and participation in natural swimming as a safe and health-promoting activity. It is a practice that not only encourages physical and mental well-being but also reflects a deep and longstanding tradition in our city. Historically, the rivers of Norwich have played a vital role in the community's relationship with water. Generations have learned to swim in our rivers and it's lidos, making open-water access a cherished and historically significant part of life in the city.

The Cow Tower Dippers, a dedicated local swimming group, have been swimming regularly at Cow Tower since January 2022. They are part of a broader and longstanding tradition of open-water swimming, a wider wild swimming community, that due to its informal nature are frequently overlooked as stakeholders of the Wensum River. Many other community groups — including canoe clubs, scout groups, and schools — also make use of this stretch of the River Wensum.

The Cow Tower Dippers are now applying to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for this location to be formally recognised as a **designated bathing water site**. This designation would ensure that water quality in this stretch of the river is regularly monitored for pollutants, allowing for public transparency and helping residents make informed decisions about when it is safe to enter the water.

By supporting this application, Norwich City Council has the opportunity to promote healthy, outdoor lifestyles, while also actively working to protect the wellbeing of those who use our rivers. Conversely, to ignore the importance of monitoring water quality at this well-used site may result in residents unknowingly swimming in unsafe conditions — an outcome we should strive to avoid.

This motion therefore seeks the Council's support for The Cow Tower Dippers' application to DEFRA, and affirms our commitment to ensuring the health and safety of those who enjoy the River Wensum for recreation.

This Council **RECOGNISES** that:

1) In 2023 Norwich City Councillors unanimously agreed to pass The Motion for the Ocean, resolution 1 G) of which stated that the council would "support any

viable applications for areas popularly used by river swimmers to be designated bathing waters".

2) This Motion is being brought forward one year after the Cow Tower Dippers initially applied to Norwich City Council for a letter of support.

3) The Cow Tower Dippers have been actively encouraging water safety, which has included carrying out risk assessments.

4) In 2024 Defra designated 27 new bathing waters, including 12 rivers, across England, none of these were in Norfolk.

5) The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) updated its guidance in 2024, streamlining the process for applying for designated bathing water status and clarifying that applications can be made by individuals or informal community groups, provided they demonstrate public usage and include a letter of support from the relevant local authority.

6) Applications to DEFRA for designated bathing water status benefit from a formal letter of support from the local authority; such letters are instrumental for progressing.

7) Visit Norwich, the official tourism body for the city, and Visit Norfolk, the official tourism body for the county, actively promotes river swimming as a recreational activity in Norwich, including imagery and references to swimming along the River Wensum, contributing to increased public interest and visitor participation.

8) The River Wensum Strategy Stakeholder Database currently omits river swimmers and swimming groups from its list of stakeholders, despite their increasing and sustained presence at popular river access points, including Cow Tower.

This council **RESOLVES** to:

1) Support the Cow Tower Dipper's application for the designation of a bathing water in the River Wensum around Cow Tower, subject to the health and safety of participants being risk assessed and appropriately mitigated before any authorised swimming takes place.

2) Host the required public consultation on Get Talking Norwich on behalf of the Cow Tower Dippers.

3) Ask that the Cabinet agrees a policy position on the designation of bathing waters within the Norwich city boundary before the close of the 2025 application window (31 October 2025).

4) Include regular river swimmers and informal swimming groups as recognised stakeholders in the River Wensum Strategy, and update the stakeholder database accordingly.