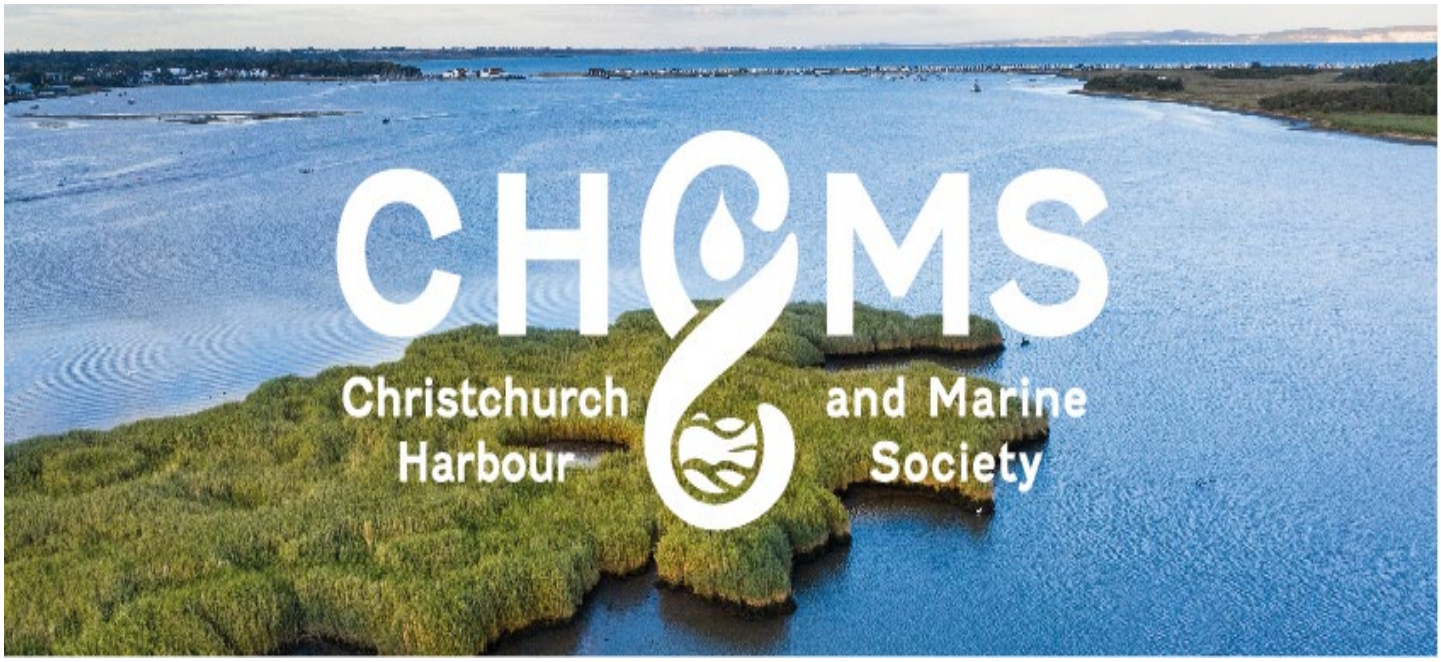

Christchurch Harbour and Marine Society (CH&MS)

Update and Call to Action

February 2026

Dear All,

It has been some time since our last external communication. Our last formal large meeting took place in November 2024, and we organised the protest outside the BCP Civic Centre in March 2025. However, internally, there has been significant activity, particularly in our ongoing efforts to understand and monitor the health of our rivers and harbour. We have been diligently collecting data essential to our understanding of the health of the waters passing through our Town.

1. Water Quality Monitoring

Our core focus has been collecting water data to build a comprehensive understanding of river health. This initiative began in 2018, driven by concerns regarding the condition of our rivers. Initial testing covered around ten aspects of water health, but we have since concentrated primarily on Nitrates and Phosphates. During the summer of 2025, in response to reports of increased illnesses among local water users, we began measuring E-Coli levels.

We discovered that there were no formal, regular, E-Coli measurements being conducted. Our team set about putting this right and now conducts tests most weeks and the results have often been alarming. Our equipment is highly regarded within the industry and we adhere to rigorous standardised procedures. Our findings lead us to believe that neither the Stour nor the Avon are in good condition. Christchurch Harbour, fed by these two substantial rivers, is facing significant environmental pressure as a result.

Key Indicators Monitored

I. **Nitrates:** Likely originating mainly (but not exclusively) from farming, have caused invasive weed growth in the harbour. These cause issues with the feeding of migrating birds.
II. **Phosphates:** Attributed largely (although not exclusively) to excess outflows from sewage works, especially following periods of heavy rainfall. However, we do know there are instances flows from outfalls at other times too.
III. **E-coli:** Since summer 2025, we have gathered high-quality data using advanced equipment. This is at times recording alarmingly high levels.

Due to these concerning E-Coli levels - all of which ultimately flow into the harbour - we have notified BCP Council, the Environment Agency, and numerous local organisations and clubs.

We are now seeking volunteers to help expand our water monitoring efforts, particularly to test further upstream and deeper into the harbour. While we have funded this work ourselves to date, any support – financial, in-person or practical - would be greatly appreciated. Please contact us for details at the end of this newsletter if you are interested in contributing in any way.

2. Response from the Authorities

The *Environment Agency* has responded in a very constructive manner. We are sharing our data with them to ensure that what we collect is accurate, meaningful and useful.

In contrast, while engagement with *BCP Council* has reached cabinet level, we are troubled by the apparent lack of urgency and gravity in their response. We have shared with them the warning issued by Charles Watson of River Action, emphasised in his November 2024 presentation and echoed nationally, that current conditions (mirrored throughout the UK) could result in fatalities.

In our view, BCP Council's reaction and correspondence has been dismissive apart from (it must be acknowledged) Cllr Andy Hadley who has been very constructive. Further, emails between councillors have a flavour of passing the buck, and not what this situation warrants. We have yet to receive any response at all from the Council's political leader, deeply concerning considering the threat to health.

3. Harbour Protection Policy

Our primary aim is to secure the robust protection that Christchurch Harbour deserves and badly needs. Our harbour does not have the high-level legal protection and safeguards that Poole Harbour enjoys. In fact, the protection our rivers do have ceases at the confluence of the Avon and Stour with the harbour. Furthermore, excess sewage is no longer discharged out to the Sea in Poole Bay but is now routed north to treatment plants along the banks of the River Stour, the excess of which ends up in our beloved Christchurch Harbour!

BCP Council has the authority to protect Christchurch Harbour through local planning policies. Given the ruling coalition, the Lib Dems and greens, vocal stance against sewage pollution, we would expect a strong desire to prioritise harbour health.

With legal and professional assistance, CH&MS presented proposed wording for a Harbour Protection Policy at the Full Council Meeting in March 2025, following our record-breaking demonstration outside the Civic Centre. (Described as the largest and most polite demonstration they had ever seen.)
After collecting 4,400 signatures for our petition and staging a significant demonstration, our councillors unanimously backed the Harbour Protection Policy, as shown in the meeting video here (at 30 minutes and 50 seconds)
https://democracy.bcpcouncil.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=284&MId=6075&Ver=4

However, since that unanimous vote, there has been no progress. Despite persistent follow-up, the protection of our harbour appears to have been sidelined. The Environment & Place 'Overview and Scrutiny Working Group', led by Green Party Leader, Councillor Chris Rigby, was assigned to examine our proposed Harbour Protection Policy. Correspondence from Councillor Rigby suggests ongoing work, but in practice, we have seen no tangible advancement (see below).

3.	**Christchurch Harbour** To consider options for a potential Christchurch Harbour Protection Policy and inclusion in the Local Plan.	Needs to be scoped using KLOE Document	PH – Climate Response, Environment and Energy, Cllr Andy Hadley / Leader of the Council	This item was agreed to be added to the work plan at the meeting in May 2025.

We urge the working group to prioritise the harbour in 2026.

This is a serious situation! The Bathing Water Directive stipulates that E-Coli levels in bathing water should not exceed 1,000 CFU (colony forming units) per 100ml. Our measurements have recorded levels above 75,000 CFU in the Stour. This is our River! We wonder how serious the situation needs to be before it is formally acknowledged and taken seriously.

4. Reaching Out to Other Organisations

Discussions with both the Environment Agency and Surfers Against Sewage have highlighted the importance of formal 'Bathing Water Protection' status for Christchurch Harbour, which would require the Environment Agency to test water quality and apply pressure on Wessex Water to improve standards.

We have recently been working with *Surfers Against Sewage* on a legal case to retain Bathing Water Protection status, despite unfathomable central government efforts to make such designations harder to obtain.

We have also been working with Friends of the Earth who, you may have read, have been collecting horrendous E-Coli data from Lymington River. Initially dismissed by Southern Water their data was found to be true, unearthing issues going back decades. We are not alone here.

In light of this, we are encouraging all waterside organisations to record any illnesses that can be closely linked to time in contact with our harbour or river waters.

We also need photographic evidence of intensive leisure use of the harbour for our application, including activities such as:

- Swimming
- Sailing
- Rowing
- Windsurfing
- Paddleboarding
- Kayaking
- Canoeing

Photos should ideally depict busy scenes, not close-ups, and should avoid showing children's faces. The goal is to demonstrate the harbour's intensive and wide-ranging use for leisure activities.

We are aiming to communicate closely with all the groups and organisations based within, or using, the harbour, including:

- Christchurch Rowing Club
- Christchurch Sailing Club
- Highcliffe Sailing Club
- Hengistbury Head Outdoors (formerly Hengistbury Head Activity Centre)

We are aware there are others out there that may like to join us. If you represent a paddleboarding group, private organisation, or any group not listed, please contact us using the details at the end of this newsletter. We will add your contact to our emailing list.

The continued existence of many groups depends on the harbour's health. We don't want to jeopardise businesses or local use. Instead, our aim is to support businesses and encourage young people's involvement with the water, but rapid environmental improvement is essential. Wide-spread participation from individuals and organisations will help us effect the required change.

We are also coordinating with Residents Associations and other key groups, including:

- Hengistbury Residents Association (HENRA)
- Friars Cliff Residents Association (FCRA)
- Christchurch Ornithological Group (CHOG)

If you are part of such a group and wish to contribute or stay informed, please reach out using the details provided at the end.

5. Looking Forward to 2026

We remain committed to our core activities:

a. Continued water quality monitoring
b. Fighting for a Christchurch Harbour Protection Policy
c. Securing 'Bathing Water Protection' status for Christchurch Harbour and the rivers below the first bridges
d. Engaging with and coordinating local groups
e. Holding public meetings and information sessions when appropriate and useful

We are also focused on building our organisation. We are seeking a part-time voluntary business manager. This role is both fascinating and valuable, but as our work grows, so too does the need for additional support. If you are interested, please let us know: see contact details at the end.

6. Christchurch Admiralty Court

The Christchurch Admiralty Court is a unique survivor of formerly widespread local admiralty jurisdictions. The Court is aiming to hold its first sitting since, it would seem, 1937 and is going to start looking for jurors in the near future.

If you want to know more, register your interest with Jade Waterton by email entitled '*Christchurch Admiralty Court: I want to know more*'.

7. One Other Concern on Our Radar: BCP Beach Recharge Project

BCP Council are proposing to take sand dredged from the Dolphin Bank out in the Solent and pump it onto Bournemouth Beach. The Council will require a marine licence from the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), and we understand that there will be a consultation in 2026. Everyone is entitled to make the MMO aware of their views on this matter.

Mudeford fisherman and CH&MS supporter Scott Beuly gave a presentation to CH&MS members about his concerns a few years back. In brief, Scott's concerns were:

- Further extension of Bournemouth beach is unnecessary and disproportionate
- The sand is rapidly washed away
- Scott's fear is that the sand is burying the Christchurch Ledge, an underwater reef full of sea-life.

Scott's slides can be forwarded on request.

With grateful thanks to everyone for their support.

Martin Stewart
11th February 2026
On behalf of everyone at CH&MS

8. Contact details

For any contact, suggestions, volunteers please email: secretary@chams.org.uk