# Bathing water quality in Britain worsens as sewage pollution doubles in a year



New figures reveal a significant deterioration in the quality of Britain’s bathing waters, with the number of designated beauty spots deemed unsafe for swimming due to sewage pollution having doubled within a year. The Environment Agency’s 2024 data shows that of England’s 451 protected bathing locations, 37 are now rated as poor—the lowest classification—due to the presence of dangerous bacteria such as E. coli and intestinal enterococci from sewage spills. This figure has risen sharply from 18 in 2023.

Across England, Scotland, and Wales, over 6,000 sewage discharges have been recorded this month alone, according to campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS). The group’s Safer Seas and Rivers Service app has issued alerts for 157 beaches affected by pollution incidents, with Wallasey in Birkenhead experiencing the highest number of spills at 2,201 so far in 2024.

The situation follows a record high in 2023, where water companies in England reported 2,487 pollution incidents—the highest in a decade and a 30 per cent increase relative to the Environment Agency’s reduction targets. The Environment Agency has described this level of pollution as “unacceptable”, while politicians from across the political spectrum have characterised the sewage contamination as “deeply troubling” and “absolutely shocking”.

SAS revealed in a new report that it received 1,853 sickness reports over the past year linked to sewage-contaminated waters—averaging five individuals falling ill each day. Of those, 331 people required medical attention, with 79 per cent attributing their illness to sewage pollution. Reported health issues range from gastroenteritis and chest infections to severe bacterial ailments, with some swimmers necessitating hospitalisation.

Giles Bristow, CEO of SAS, commented to The Independent: “It’s the Easter Holidays and thousands of people are flocking to the UK’s blue spaces only to be confronted by the threat of sewage pollution. This is shocking, unacceptable and the system is nothing but a farce. We are demanding radical reform of this utterly broken sector, so that we can all enjoy the very basic right to swim, surf and paddle without risking becoming unwell.”

The 451 bathing spots granted official water status undergo testing during the summer season for harmful bacteria. Among the locations rated poor are popular destinations such as Scarborough South Bay, which has maintained poor ratings for two consecutive years. Known for its family-friendly amusements, ice cream parlours, and beachside donkey rides, the bay attracts many visitors despite its water quality. Wallingford Beach, a small sandy stretch along the River Thames favoured by wild swimmers and sunbathers, has also been rated poor.

Furthermore, coastal areas like Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool face similar issues with widely used family beaches affected by pollution.

The Environment Agency’s latest figures from March highlight that in 2024, storm overflows released sewage into English rivers, lakes, and coastal waters for a record total exceeding 3.61 million hours.

Labour MP Clive Lewis, who recently introduced a Private Members’ Bill proposing the nationalisation of water companies responsible for recurring pollution, expressed grave concern over the state of the nation’s waterways. Speaking to The Independent, he said: “The shocking deterioration of Britain’s waterways is deeply troubling and can no longer be ignored. While water companies continue to hand billions to shareholders, our rivers, seas, and lakes are suffering severe pollution, causing illness among the public and harming wildlife.” Mr Lewis urged greater transparency and accountability and suggested that public ownership of water companies should be on the agenda.

Liberal Democrats environment spokesperson Tim Farron also criticised the current regulatory regime, calling for the abolition of water regulator Ofwat. He stated: “It is absolutely shocking to see just how many swimming spots are plagued with disgusting pollution. For swimmers, and for animals and wildlife, bathing sites should be at the very least clean and safe. Rightly so, people are furious at water companies who continue to pump outrageous amounts of sewage into our rivers and seas whilst executives pocket eye-watering bonuses.”

An Environment Agency spokesperson affirmed that the ongoing pollution levels are “unacceptable” and said the agency is taking action by enforcing statutory requirements on water companies. “It is now a statutory requirement for water companies to produce annual plans showing how they will meet our expectation of reducing pollution incidents by 40 per cent,” the spokesperson said. They added that a significant transformation in regulation is underway, involving enhanced enforcement powers and an increase in regulatory officers to better serve both people and the environment.

A Government spokesperson acknowledged the longstanding issue of sewage pollution by water companies and reiterated the commitment to hold polluters accountable. The spokesperson said: “We have delivered on our promise to put water companies under tough special measures through our landmark Water Act, introducing new powers to ban the payment of bonuses to polluting water bosses and bring tougher criminal charges against them if they break the law.”

In support of efforts to address this public health and environmental concern, The Independent has pledged a £20,000 donation to Surfers Against Sewage in recognition of the group’s work ahead of Earth Day 2025.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/bathing-water-quality-statistics/2024-statistics-on-english-coastal-and-inland-bathing-waters-a-summary-of-compliance-with-the-2013-bathing-water-regulations> - Confirms the 2024 Environment Agency data showing that out of 451 bathing waters in England, 37 were rated poor due to unsafe bacteria levels, up from 18 in 2023.
* <https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/home-news/sewage-spills-water-pollution-e-coli-sas-b2735149.html> - Supports multiple claims including the doubling of bathing waters rated poor, over 6,000 sewage discharges across England, Scotland, and Wales in April 2025, and 2,201 spills recorded at Wallasey.
* <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/environment/emma-hardy-england-english-environment-agency-government-b1196307.html> - Confirms that around one in 12 official swimming spots in England fail water quality standards, with 37 sites rated poor in 2024 and highlights comments from officials calling pollution 'unacceptable.'
* <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2024/10/02/winter-bathing-water-quality/> - Provides context on bathing water quality fluctuations, supporting information about the ongoing challenges in maintaining safe conditions throughout the year.
* <https://mag.publicsectorexecutive.com/articles/alarming-decline-in-uk-coastal-water-quality> - Documents the alarming decline in UK coastal water quality, corroborating the increased sewage pollution incidents and consequential health risks highlighted in the article.