# Concerns mount over government reforms risking swimmer safety as England’s bathing season begins



As England's bathing season officially begins, spanning from May 15 to September 30, the atmosphere is charged with anticipation among swimming enthusiasts. However, this excitement is tempered by rising apprehensions regarding proposed reforms to bathing water regulations. With an increasing number of individuals participating in water-related activities, the call for safeguarding water quality has never been more pressing.

The Environment Agency has launched its seasonal water quality testing at designated bathing sites, planning to conduct over 7,000 samples at 451 locations. Results will be categorised as "excellent," "good," "sufficient," or "poor," providing swimmers with crucial information about safety. Despite this commitment to monitoring, campaigners are concerned that the new regulatory framework, introduced by the government, could inadvertently lead to decreased safety for swimmers.

Notably, the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) has raised alarms over the potential for these reforms to dilute the effectiveness of the legislation. The changes, which include altering the criteria for establishing new bathing sites, extending the legal definition of "bather" to include water sports participants, and introducing flexibility around the bathing season, could yield unintended consequences. Critics argue that instead of expanding safety, these alterations might reduce the number of designated bathing areas and limit monitoring frequencies, thereby increasing health risks.

Rachel Wyatt, policy and advocacy manager for the MCS, highlighted the importance of rigorous monitoring practices in safeguarding public health. She pointed out that the exclusion of 103 samples from water quality assessments during the previous season indicates a troubling trend. "We're concerned that if these reforms go ahead as planned, they will undermine the spirit of the bathing water regulations," she stated.

The government maintains that these reforms are essential in modernising the existing framework to reflect the UK’s growing appetite for open-water activities. Proposals include allowing for year-round testing, an approach that could provide a clearer understanding of long-term water quality trends, thereby enhancing public confidence in water safety.

Moreover, the ongoing debate surrounding these reforms comes amidst public protests against sewage pollution, with coordinated events planned across the UK. Activists from groups like Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) are rallying for comprehensive industry reform and better monitoring practices to address the sewage crisis affecting waterways. Giles Bristow, the chief executive of SAS, asserted, "We will not accept another year of risking our health to swim in the sea," underscoring the urgent public demand for accountability and transparency in water quality management.

Water minister Emma Hardy has echoed the sentiment of priority for clean bathing waters, announcing, "Our bathing waters... are a great source of pride. This Government is committed to protecting them." The administration cites a significant £104 billion investment aimed at reducing sewage discharges and upgrading their infrastructure. However, whether these ambitious financial commitments will translate into improved water quality remains a crucial question for campaigners and health advocates alike.

At the heart of this discussion lies a crucial challenge: balancing the enjoyment of the UK’s natural waters with the imperative of maintaining ecological integrity and public health. As reforms develop, the collective voice of stakeholders—from environmental groups to local communities—will play a critical role in shaping a future that prioritises both recreational enjoyment and safety in our waters.

Ultimately, the unfolding situation demands careful consideration and vigilance. With the promise of modernisation on one side and tangible risks on the other, the coming months will be pivotal for the nation's bathing water policies and their impact on public health and environmental protection.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 1, 4
3. Paragraph 4
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 4
6. Paragraph 3
7. Paragraph 6

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-water-quality-bathing-health-pollution-b2751164.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bathing-water-reforms-keep-pace-with-britains-love-of-swimming> - The UK government is modernising bathing water regulations to accommodate the growing popularity of swimming and other water sports. Proposed reforms include removing fixed bathing season dates, expanding the definition of 'bathers' to include participants in water sports like paddle boarding and surfing, and introducing multiple monitoring points at each bathing water location. These changes aim to ensure cleaner and safer waters for all users. Applications for new bathing sites in England will reopen in May 2025, with assessments based on the reformed standards. The reforms are part of a broader effort to improve water quality and infrastructure.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/12/government-proposes-testing-bathing-waters-in-england-and-wales-all-year-round> - The UK government has proposed extending the bathing season to year-round testing of bathing waters in England and Wales. This initiative aims to provide a more accurate assessment of water quality by monitoring throughout the year, rather than the traditional May to September period. The proposal also includes expanding the legal definition of 'bathers' to encompass participants in water sports other than swimming, such as paddle boarders and surfers. Additionally, the government plans to end the automatic de-designation of bathing water status after five consecutive years of a site being rated 'poor', opting instead for individual reviews of underperforming sites.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bathing-water-reforms-to-consider-water-sports-and-water-quality> - The UK government is consulting on reforms to modernise bathing water regulations, marking the first significant update since 2013. Proposed changes include removing fixed bathing season dates to allow for a more flexible approach to monitoring, expanding the definition of 'bathers' to include participants in water sports like paddle boarding and surfing, and introducing multiple testing points at bathing water sites. The consultation invites input from the public, community and environmental groups, farmers, businesses, and local authorities to ensure the reforms effectively address water quality and public safety.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/12/changes-to-bathing-water-status-test-will-deny-rivers-protection-say-critics> - Critics argue that proposed changes to the bathing water status test could exclude river sites from receiving protection. The new 'feasibility test' may deem some areas too polluted to improve to at least 'sufficient' water quality, potentially denying them bathing water status. Environmental groups express concern that this approach could divert monitoring and investments away from rivers that need improvement, thereby preventing essential upgrades to make these waterways safe for recreational use. The government maintains that the changes aim to protect public health by ensuring that only sites where improvement is feasible are designated as bathing waters.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-office-for-environmental-protections-review-of-implementation-of-the-bathing-water-regulations-in-england> - The UK government has responded to the Office for Environmental Protection's review of the implementation of the Bathing Water Regulations in England. The response acknowledges the need to update and improve the regulations to reflect changes in public recreational use of water and expectations of water quality. The government commits to working collaboratively with stakeholders and experts to improve waterways, emphasizing the importance of cleaning up the water environment to protect both human health and wildlife. The response outlines proposed reforms and technical amendments to the regulations, aligning with recommendations from the Office for Environmental Protection.
7. <https://www.mcsuk.org/news/bathing-water-quality/> - The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is advocating for changes to the Bathing Water Regulations in England to improve water quality and public safety. Proposed actions include increasing the frequency of water quality sampling, extending the sampling period at beaches used outside the traditional bathing season, and ensuring that all samples taken during pollution events are included in assessments. The MCS also calls for expanding the definition of 'bathers' to include all people using the water and the immediate beach vicinity, not just swimmers. These reforms aim to provide a more accurate picture of water quality and better protect public health.