# Sewage pollution doubles in Britain’s bathing waters putting swimmers at risk



New data has revealed a significant decline in the quality of Britain’s bathing waters, with the number of designated beauty spots deemed unfit for swimming due to sewage contamination doubling within a year. According to figures published by the Environment Agency, 37 out of England’s 451 protected bathing locations are currently classified in the poorest category, meaning they contain unsafe levels of harmful bacteria such as E. coli and intestinal enterococci. This number marks a sharp increase from 18 sites recorded as poor in 2023.

The troubling statistics come amid ongoing widespread pollution incidents, with over 6,000 sewage discharges reported so far this year across England, Scotland, and Wales. These incidents have prompted alerts at 157 beaches, according to campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) through their Safer Seas and Rivers Service app. One hotspot, Wallasey in Birkenhead, accounted for a staggering 2,201 pollution spills in 2024 alone.

Water companies in England reported 2,487 pollution incidents last year, the highest tally seen in a decade and representing a 30 per cent increase compared with the Environment Agency’s pollution reduction targets. The agency has labelled such levels of pollution “unacceptable,” while politicians from multiple parties have expressed deep concern, describing the situation as “deeply troubling” and “absolutely shocking.”

The rise in pollution has also been linked to increased health risks for recreational water users. SAS revealed it received 1,853 reports of illness attributed to sewage pollution over the past twelve months—an average of five people affected each day. Of these, 331 cases were serious enough to require medical attention. Recorded health problems include gastroenteritis, chest infections, and severe bacterial infections, with some swimmers requiring hospitalisation. SAS CEO Giles Bristow told The Independent, “It's the Easter Holidays and thousands of people are flocking to the UK's blue spaces only to confront 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.”

Many of the bathing locations rated poor in the 2024 assessment are popular leisure spots. These include Scarborough South Bay, known for its family-friendly amusement arcades and donkey rides, which has maintained a poor rating for two consecutive years. Wallingford Beach, a 35-metre stretch along the River Thames frequented by wild swimmers and sunbathers, was also listed as poor. Coastal areas such as Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool, favoured by families, are among other sites suffering from water quality issues.

The Environment Agency’s figures detail a new high of more than 3.61 million hours of sewage discharge into England’s rivers, lakes, and coastal waters in 2024. In response, the agency highlighted statutory changes requiring water companies to submit annual plans aimed at cutting pollution incidents by forty per cent. It is also undertaking reforms to strengthen regulation and enforcement, including new powers and more inspectors to hold polluting water companies accountable.

In the political arena, Labour MP Clive Lewis—who has introduced a Private Members’ Bill proposing the nationalisation of water companies that repeatedly pollute—condemned the worsening state of the country’s waterways. “The shocking deterioration of Britain's waterways is deeply troubling and can no longer be ignored,” Lewis said. “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.” He further called for greater transparency, accountability, and consideration of public ownership to safeguard the environment and public health.

Tim Farron MP, Liberal Democrats environment spokesperson, called for the abolition of the water regulator Ofwat, criticising water companies for continuing to discharge sewage into water bodies while their executives receive substantial bonuses. “It is absolutely shocking to see just how many swimming spots are plagued with disgusting pollution,” he said. “For swimmers, and for animals and wildlife, bathing sites should be at the very least clean and safe.”

A Government spokesperson acknowledged the severity of the problem, stating that water companies have long been responsible for record levels of sewage pollution. The government affirmed its commitment to holding them accountable through special measures introduced under the Water Act, which included banning bonuses for polluting executives and enabling tougher criminal charges for breaches of environmental laws.

As public concern mounts over the safety and cleanliness of Britain's beaches and waterways, organisations such as Surfers Against Sewage continue their campaigning efforts. To mark Earth Day 2025, The Independent has pledged a £20,000 donation to support the charity’s work in protecting and improving the nation’s water quality, aiming to preserve access to safe and enjoyable aquatic environments for all.

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> - This official government source confirms that in 2024, 37 out of 451 protected bathing waters in England were classified in the poorest category, marking an increase from 18 sites recorded as poor in 2023.
* <https://www.shropshirestar.com/uk-news/2024/11/26/number-of-swimming-spots-failing-on-water-quality-doubles-in-2024/> - This news article reports the doubling of swimming spots failing on water quality in 2024 and highlights sites such as Blackpool and Weston-super-Mare as examples of poor ratings.
* <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2024/10/02/winter-bathing-water-quality/> - This Greenpeace article discusses bathing water quality issues in England, including pollution incidents and seasonal declines in water quality, supporting the general trend of pollution affecting bathing waters.
* <https://mag.publicsectorexecutive.com/articles/alarming-decline-in-uk-coastal-water-quality> - This article from Public Sector Executive highlights the significant decline in UK coastal water quality, aligning with the reported worsening state and increase in pollution incidents noted in the article.
* <https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2024/11/29/regulatory-edm-2024-bathing-season-storm-overflow-data-analysed/> - This Environment Agency blog post details heavy rainfall in 2024 leading to increased sewage discharges and storm overflow events, supporting the article's claim about widespread pollution incidents this year.