# Sewage pollution in UK waters hits decade high, report reveals



In a concerning development for public health and environmental safety, a recent report by the campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) has revealed that incidents of sewage pollution in UK waters reached a decade high in the past year. The report indicates a staggering 592,478 sewage spills occurred, lasting for a total of 4.7 million hours throughout 2024. These discharges were reported despite significant financial payouts totalling £1.2 billion to the shareholders of private water companies.

SAS recorded 1,853 cases of swimming-related illness through its service app in 2024, which resulted in 331 individuals seeking medical treatment. Among those affected, 79 per cent of cases were attributed by medical professionals to sewage pollution. A significant number of individuals were diagnosed with ailments such as gastroenteritis and serious bacterial infections, leading to some requiring hospitalisation. The overall economic impact of these illnesses has been estimated at £493,200, relating to sick days taken by those affected.

One notable case involves 42-year-old Suzi Finlayson from Bognor Regis, who was left in dire health after swimming in contaminated waters. Finlayson developed a life-threatening blood infection, known as infective endocarditis, which required open-heart surgery and a six-week hospital stay. She commented, “This experience has completely changed my life. I’ve faced a long recovery, ongoing health challenges. This has impacted my family, and the financial strain of closing my business and being unable to fully return to work.” She further detailed the circumstances surrounding her infection, highlighting a sewage overflow that lasted an alarming 343 hours from three outfalls along Aldwick Beach and questioned the water industry's transparency and accountability regarding public health.

Additionally, 28-year-old Charlie Clarke experienced severe health complications after swimming at Clevedon Marine Lake while training for an Ironman race in September 2023. Following his swim, Clarke collapsed and underwent four months of tests, ultimately discovering that he had contracted a virus from the water, which negatively affected his blood pressure and heart function.

SAS’s report highlights that these sickness reports rely solely on data collected through the Safer Seas and River Service app, suggesting that the true prevalence of waterborne illnesses may be significantly higher.

The report found that some of the most affected bathing locations in England included Wallasey in Wirral, which recorded 2,201 sewage discharge incidents, followed by the Dart Estuary with 1,553 discharges and Plymouth Hoe East with 1,511 discharges.

A survey of 2,000 adults revealed that 27 per cent of the respondents in England considered withholding their water bill payments due to dissatisfaction with their water supplier's handling of sewage spills. A mere one-third expressed confidence that necessary actions would be taken by suppliers to tackle sewage pollution.

As water charges are anticipated to rise by as much as 47 per cent across England and Wales this month, with additional costs projected for future years, scrutiny of the water sector’s management is intensifying. The current government and the Independent Water Commission are reviewing the privatised water industry, and a public request for evidence related to this management is set to close on 23 April.

Giles Bristow, CEO of SAS, emphasised the need for urgent reform within the industry, stating, “The water industry fails, fails and fails again and yet is permitted to come up smelling of roses, while our coastlines, rivers and lakes suffer the stench of sewage pollution.” He called for a shift from the current private ownership model to a system prioritising public health and environmental integrity.

In response, a spokesperson for Water UK acknowledged the existing challenges within the system and voiced support for the Independent Water Commission's comprehensive review. They reassured that no sewage discharge is acceptable and mentioned ongoing investments of £12 billion towards reducing the frequency of overflows from storm systems by 2030, marking a significant commitment to improving environmental conditions and safeguarding public health.

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