# Sewage pollution doubles unsafe bathing waters in Britain putting public health at risk



New data reveals a significant decline in the quality of Britain’s bathing waters, with the number of beaches and bathing spots deemed unsafe for swimming due to sewage pollution having doubled within a year. Figures from the Environment Agency show that out of England’s 451 protected bathing locations, 37 have been rated as poor for water quality in 2024—an increase from 18 in 2023. These spots are contaminated with hazardous bacteria such as E. coli and intestinal enterococci, linked to sewage spills.

Throughout 2024, more than 6,000 sewage discharges were recorded across England, Scotland, and Wales, with pollution alerts issued at 157 beaches according to environmental campaign group Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) through their Safer Seas and Rivers Service app. Wallasey, in Birkenhead, experienced the highest number of pollution incidents, recording 2,201 spills so far this year.

The past year saw water companies in England report 2,487 pollution incidents—the largest number in ten years—and a 30% rise compared with targets set by the Environment Agency aimed at reducing sewage pollution. The Environment Agency has described this situation as “unacceptable.”

Politicians across the political spectrum have voiced deep concern about the escalating levels of sewage contamination. Labour MP Clive Lewis, who has introduced a Private Members’ Bill to address water pollution by proposing nationalisation of persistently polluting water companies, stated, “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.” He added that protecting waterways should be a “shared priority for the health and well-being of everyone,” condemning the water industry for becoming a “get-rich-quick Ponzi scheme.”

Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrats environment spokesperson, also criticised the water industry and the current regulatory framework, saying: “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.” He called for the abolition of the water regulator Ofwat.

Campaign group Surfers Against Sewage reported that it received 1,853 sickness reports related to water pollution over the past year—an average of five people per day—331 of whom sought medical treatment. The illnesses ranged from gastroenteritis to serious bacterial infections, with some cases necessitating hospitalisation. Giles Bristow, CEO of SAS, said, “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.”

Some popular bathing locations have been highlighted for their poor water quality, such as Scarborough South Bay, which caters to families and is famous for its amusement arcades and donkey rides, and Wallingford Beach on the River Thames, a favourite among wild swimmers. Coastal destinations including Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool have also been affected by pollution incidents.

The Environment Agency’s recent figures indicate that sewage from storm overflows has been discharged into England’s waterways for more than 3.61 million hours in 2024, reaching new highs.

An Environment Agency spokesperson acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, saying, “The current levels of pollution are unacceptable and we are taking steps to hold polluting water companies to account. 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. We’re also undertaking the biggest transformation to the way we regulate with new enforcement powers and more regulation and enforcement officers. This will ensure our regulation of water companies better meets the needs of people and the environment.”

A government spokesperson echoed the commitment to tackling sewage pollution, stating, “For too long water companies have pumped record levels of sewage into our waterways. 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 to bring tougher criminal charges if they break the law.”

The Independent will be donating £20,000 to Surfers Against Sewage to support their efforts to combat water pollution and protect public health and the environment.

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> - Supports the claim that in 2024, 37 out of 451 bathing waters in England were rated poor for water quality, an increase from 18 in 2023, and details the classification of bathing water quality including presence of harmful bacteria such as E. coli.
* <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/environment/emma-hardy-england-english-environment-agency-government-b1196307.html> - Corroborates the doubling of bathing spots rated poor for water quality in 2024 compared to 2023 and includes statements from Environment Agency and political figures expressing concern about pollution levels.
* <https://mag.publicsectorexecutive.com/articles/alarming-decline-in-uk-coastal-water-quality> - Provides information on the alarming decline in UK coastal water quality in 2024, supporting the report of increased sewage pollution incidents and contamination by hazardous bacteria in bathing waters.
* <https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2024/11/29/regulatory-edm-2024-bathing-season-storm-overflow-data-analysed/> - Confirms that sewage from storm overflows has been discharged into England’s waterways for over 3.61 million hours in 2024, highlighting a record high in pollution incidents.
* <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2024/10/02/winter-bathing-water-quality/> - Supports information on water pollution incidents and pollution alerts at UK beaches, shedding light on ongoing challenges with bathing water quality and sewage discharges across the UK.