

Bathing Water Designation Briefing Note

The problem

Only 14% of the UK's rivers have achieved good ecological status – and not a single one achieved good chemical status. One major source of pollution is from sewage. Over 90% of sewer outflows across the country discharge directly into rivers. In 2024 over 4.7 million hours of sewage discharged directly into rivers and seas across 592,478 recorded instances. And that's just based on the data currently available.

As inland blue spaces like rivers are used more frequently by swimmers, paddlers, kayakers, anglers and other water users, this is a serious public health threat. Consumer polling by Surfers Against Sewage shows people *are* getting sick from sewage. One in six members of the British public have tried wild swimming – and 55% of these have subsequently fallen ill. Furthermore, 52% of those surveyed are scared of swimming outside as they don't know if the water is clean.

The solutions

Inland Bathing Waters

We need to end sewage pollution in rivers. Increasing the number of inland bathing waters will play a crucial part.

In the last 30 years, we've seen how effective official bathing water designation has been in improving coastal water quality. When coastal bathing waters were introduced, only 27% reached minimum bathing water quality standards. Today, 98% do. But while there are 600 coastal bathing waters, we only have 15 on rivers.

Bathing water designation ensures water quality is monitored for harmful bacteria and viruses, with legal obligations placed on industry to reduce pollution near sites. As well as holding polluters to account, this designation enables bathers to make informed decisions regarding their safety when entering the water.

How

Bathing water designation is achieved by applying to a government agency. Historically, local authorities have taken the lead on making coastal applications. However, most of the existing river bathing waters have achieved designation by communities campaigning and applying for designation. There is a growing

community group movement pushing for bathing water designation at inland locations across the UK.

Regulatory reform

While designation is a powerful mechanism for change, the Bathing Water Regulations themselves are outdated. They were designed in 2013 with only coastal summer swimmers in mind. But water use in the UK has evolved. People now use rivers, lakes, and coastal waters year-round and for a huge variety of activities.

Key reforms

To ensure our regulations keep pace with reality — and protect all water users — Surfers Against Sewage is calling for five urgent reforms to the Bathing Water Regulations:

- 1. Extend the bathing season to cover the full year.**

Water use happens year-round, especially with the rise of cold-water swimming and water sports. Monitoring should reflect this reality to ensure public safety in all seasons.

- 2. Overhaul the testing regime to include other pollutants and real-time monitoring.**

Current testing only covers a narrow band of contaminants. Testing should be expanded to include pollutants like microplastics, antimicrobial-resistant bacteria, and supported with real-time data to better inform the public.

- 3. Include all water users when designating a bathing site.**

The current system recognises only swimmers. All water users — including kayakers, paddleboarders, and surfers — should be counted when assessing use and applying for designation.

- 4. Overhaul the approach to de-designation.**

Automatically revoking status after five years of poor results discourages long-term efforts. Sites should remain designated so that pressure and resources can focus on restoring water quality rather than abandoning it.

- 5. End the practice of disregarding samples and Short-Term Pollution (STP) provisions.**

Current rules allow authorities to exclude certain pollution events from results — meaning the public doesn't get a full or fair picture of water quality. All samples must be counted to provide full transparency.

Recent changes and challenges

In November 2024, the Secretary of State put forward reforms to the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. One proposed change is updating the criteria for designating a

body of water as a bathing site, by considering the feasibility of improving a site's water quality in an effort to “avoid poor value for money”.

This reform could result in popular bathing sites, which include rivers, beaches and lakes where people swim and paddle, being left unmonitored. This could significantly risk public health.

Recommendations

There are a number of ways MPs can support the local and national campaign for more inland bathing waters. See below for some ideas of these actions.

Today:

- Look at the [Live Sewage Map](#) to see the number of sewage discharges in your constituency along with a complete history.

In your constituency:

- Meet with a local bathing community about designation.
- Visit a site in your constituency with a community group.
- Write a letter of support for communities currently applying for designation.

In parliament:

- Ask Parliamentary Questions about the regulatory reform:
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, whether information will be released on how Core Reform 2 proposed in the bathing water consultation will be publicly available?
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, when all water users will be considered in the Bathing Water Regulations.
- Ask Parliamentary Questions on inland bathing water targets.
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, whether swimming events will be considered when how do the government plan to fulfil their obligations to improve the water quality at river bathing waters.
 - Does the environment minister plan to set a target number of Inland Bathing Water Sites Designated by 2030?
 - What is the government doing to increase the number of designated inland Bathing Waters?
 - The UK has designated only 15 river bathing water sites, compared to 1273 in France. How does the government plan to join other countries such as France as global leaders in safer inland swimming?

- Contact our Policy Office at wildwaters@sas.org.uk to join the campaign!