

# Bathing water in the South East

Working with you to protect our coastline



**This leaflet explains how bathing water quality is measured and reported and the role water companies and you play in helping protect water quality around the UK.**

Our region includes 700 miles of coastline which plays an important part in the local economy. There are 83 designated bathing waters around our coast, where water quality is tested and reported by the Environment Agency during the bathing water season which runs from May 15 – September 30.

Water companies are not solely responsible for the quality of bathing water but they play a key role in helping protect it. In recent years, we have invested many millions of pounds to ensure our coastal waters are of the highest quality.

As a result, the vast majority of bathing waters in our region have never been cleaner. Before privatisation of water companies in 1989, only 41 per cent of bathing waters in our region reached the required standards. Last year, despite new legislation making the standards twice as tough, 99 per cent passed.

However – our customers told us they wanted us to do more, so we are working with local authorities, landowners and others to bring all 83 bathing waters in our region up to “excellent” standard by 2040.

**For more information visit**  
➤ [southernwater.co.uk/bathingwater](https://southernwater.co.uk/bathingwater)

Under our Bathing Water Enhancement Programme, we are investigating a variety of sources and pathways of pollution which are preventing bathing waters from achieving “excellent” status. The first stage of the work will bring a further seven beaches up to the top standard by 2020.

## Water quality influencers

Coastal water quality can be affected by factors outside water companies’ control. These include rainwater running off roads and industrial or agricultural land, wastewater from privately-owned treatment works, boats or even animals, such as dogs or seabirds, on the beach. This can be made worse by heavy rain.

## Water companies and bathing water

Some water company operations can directly affect bathing waters. These include:

- **Wastewater treatment works** – these treat wastewater from homes and businesses to strict standards before releasing the treated water out to sea, or other watercourses, through outfall pipes.
- **Combined sewer overflows (CSOs)** – during intense rainfall, if the amount of water in the sewer network is greater than it was designed to manage, a CSO will release stormwater into the sea to prevent flooding inland. The use of CSOs is licensed by the Environment Agency and they should only operate during or following heavy rainfall.
- **Misconnections** – these are illegal connections of wastewater pipes from homes into surface water pipes which were built to only carry rainwater to sea. This can affect bathing water quality. A national campaign – [www.connectright.org.uk](http://www.connectright.org.uk) – raises awareness of the issue. Although these are not our responsibility, we are working with some local authorities to identify private misconnections. When any are found, the local authority will work with the property owner to resolve the issue. This approach has already proven successful in Hastings and helped boost bathing water quality in the town from predicted “poor” to “good” in 2015.

We continue to invest millions of pounds in wastewater treatment, helping improve the quality of the bathing waters along the South East coastline.

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## Bathing Water Directive

In 2015, new legislation was introduced which set more stringent standards for bathing water quality, replacing the old Bathing Water Directive that came into force in 1976.

Its main objective is to further protect public health and increase the information available about bathing water quality so people can make informed decisions about where and when to bathe.

It is an EU directive, implemented and managed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Environment Agency.



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## Bathing water monitoring

The Environment Agency (EA) takes weekly samples at all designated bathing waters during the bathing water season on behalf of Defra. The 83 in our region are all beaches but elsewhere in the country some lakes and ponds are also sampled.

Under the new directive, the samples are tested for two types of bacteria (e. coli and intestinal enterococci).

The number of bacteria found in the samples over four years determines the classification of the bathing water.

The overall classification for each bathing water is published by Defra shortly after the bathing season ends, usually in November.

## Bathing water quality classifications

The new regime has four classifications - "excellent", "good", "sufficient" and "poor".

"Excellent" is the standard required to apply for a Blue Flag. The statutory minimum is "sufficient".

If a bathing water is deemed "poor", the local authority must put permanent signage on the beach for the duration of the bathing water season to let bathers know.

## Online bathing water profiles

These were created by the EA for each of the UK's designated bathing waters and can be viewed on the agency's website environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/explorer/index.html

Each profile includes:

- A description, map and photograph of the bathing water
- The bathing water quality classification
- Potential pollution sources and risks to bathing water quality
- Measures being taken to improve water quality.

## Information on beaches for bathing water users

Signage at all designated bathing waters display its classification as well as information about water quality and potential sources of pollution.

The signs are the responsibility of the beach manager (usually the local authority).

Even where the water meets the standards, some bacteria will always be present in the environment which means there is a small chance of becoming ill at the beach.

To reduce this risk from bathing waters, Public Health England advises:

- don't swallow water from the sea, beach streams, lakes or ponds
- avoid splashing water into your mouth
- before eating, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitiser
- always follow safety advice and take notice of signs on the beach.

## Pollution risk forecasting

The EA alerts the public when certain bathing waters may be affected by predicted rainfall that day. The aim is to allow people to make an informed decision over whether or not to bathe.

When the EA makes its forecast, the beach manager must put up a sign (before 10am) to advise the public about the predicted dip in water quality.

The EA also posts predictions on its website <http://environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/explorer/stp.html>

Heavy rain can affect bathing water quality in a number of ways, including run-off from agricultural or industrial land.

Predictions do not necessarily mean a release from a water company CSO has happened or will happen. In fact, the water quality may not be affected at all - the signs simply warn against a potential impact when rain is forecast.

Not all bathing waters are eligible for this initiative - only those affected by rainfall.



## Blue Flags

The Blue Flag scheme is operated by Keep Britain Tidy. The awards are announced in May. A local authority must apply for a Blue Flag and to gain one the beach must meet a number of criteria, one of which is "excellent" water quality. Keep Britain Tidy uses the sample results taken by the EA during the previous year's bathing water season.

The other criteria include:

- Environmental education and information (such as displays of maps)
- Environmental management (adequate waste bins)
- Safety and services (lifeguards and life rings) toilets.



## How you can help

Two-thirds of sewer blockages are caused by things that should not be flushed down toilets, such as wet wipes and sanitary items.

Blockages can cause sewers to back up and overflow, potentially harming streams, rivers and beaches.

Cooking fat, oil and grease, which hardens over time, can also play havoc with drains and should always be put in the bin.

This advice has reached thousands of customers, thanks to our Keep It Clear campaign.

At the beach, please bag and bin your litter and dog's mess and don't feed the birds.

At home, check your drains aren't sending dirty water from toilets, showers and dishwashers into the wrong pipes and to rivers and the sea by visiting [www.connectright.org.uk](http://www.connectright.org.uk).



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