from Southern Water

Bathing Water Season Report

November 2025

Contents

Foreword 02

Introduction 03
– What is a designated bathing water? 04
– Quick look - this season's bathing water results 04

What's new this season? 05

Improvement highlights 06

Case study: Deal 07

Working together 08

Pollution risk forecasting 09

Exploring bathing water myths 10

What's next? 11

Changes to regulation 11

Detailed classifications 12

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Foreword

Rob Butson
Bathing Water Lead

“Analysis shows that storm overflow releases do not always cause poor bathing water quality, and that other factors can have a significant impact.”

I’m someone who enjoys swimming in the sea, so I understand how important it is that we keep our bathing waters as clean as possible. That’s why we work closely with local partners to find and resolve any issues that may affect the quality of the water, benefitting the local environment.

This year’s annual bathing water results from the Environment Agency (EA) have confirmed that nine of our 87 bathing waters have improved their classifications, with only three dropping down a category, but all are good classifications. A total of five bathing waters – Ramsgate Western Undercliff, Gurnard, West Beach Whitstable, Rottingdean and Minster Leas – have improved, going from a classification of ‘Good’, to ‘Excellent’. Deal Castle has dramatically improved from ‘Poor’ past ‘Sufficient’ and straight to 'Good' (see case study on page 7). Three bathing waters have improved from ‘Sufficient’ to ‘Good’ – Goring Beach, Worthing and Herne Bay Central. While three have dropped from ‘Excellent’ to ‘Good’ – Hastings Pelham Beach, Margate The Bay and St Mildreds Bay.

This bathing season, there have been more comprehensive pre-season checks and we have increased funding and resources, to focus more on making much-needed improvements, such as sewer repairs. We are committed to ensuring the correct steps are taken, and over the past year, as well as making operational changes, we’ve also rolled out educational awareness campaigns and engaged with local communities, to share updates about the work that we’re doing and increase understanding about how and why bathing water quality can be affected. We have also been contributing to the government’s consultation about possible changes to bathing water legislation.

This collaborative and community-based approach will be essential going forward. We all play a part in protecting and improving bathing waters, and the responsibility sits with us all to take a vested interest in the environment, and to understand what we can do to help.

Small changes make a big difference, and we would like to thank every customer, partner, business and student, for their support this season to improve local bathing waters.

We’re looking forward to building on what we’ve achieved in the 2025 bathing water season, to continue to deliver more improvements to our local bathing waters and coastal areas.

Storm overflows

Analysis shows that storm overflow releases do not always impact bathing water quality. With only 12% of less than satisfactory water quality samples taken this year being within 72 hours of a storm overflow release, it is clear that other factors can have a significant impact. However, we’re still keeping our customers informed about when storm overflows happen and working hard to reduce them. Visit Rivers and Seas Watch to stay up to date when there’s been a storm overflow release, and check out the Investment Plans tab on the same page to see our improvement plans for each storm overflow in our region.

Introduction

Bathing waters are now enjoyed all year round for so much more than swimming and we know that as one of the key custodians, we have a significant part to play in making sure we minimise our impact on water quality.

This season nine bathing waters have improved their classifications, with only three dropping down.

Working with teams across the business, we've completed a robust survey of our wastewater treatment works and wastewater pumping stations, as well as leading a programme of improvements across our sewer network. Whenever we've identified other causes of pollution, coming from outside Southern Water's sites and equipment, we've been addressing these in collaboration with landowners and local authorities, and it's working.

We've also rolled out educational awareness campaigns to change the way we think about water and pollution, so we can all understand our impact and what we can do to protect bathing waters. As part of this work, we delivered our pilot awareness project in Bexhill, to help people understand more about surface water outfalls, highlighting the difference between

- storm overflow outfalls – which release stormwater from our sites during heavy or prolonged rainfall
- and surface water outfalls – which release rainwater run-off from roads and roofs

It's all part of how we're helping people make the most informed decisions when using local beaches.

We've also seen the first community engagement meetings set-up in Folkestone and Hythe, enabling us to share updates with the public on our collaborative efforts to improve bathing water quality, as well as tapping into community knowledge.

Unfortunately, in October a rare incident happened when plastic beads which are used in wastewater treatment, escaped from the Eastbourne Treatment Works. The beads were washed up at Camber Sands, having entered the sea via a long outfall pipe. We sincerely apologise for this and recognise the anxiety caused to communities along the south east coast. We have committed to an independent investigation into the cause, and we are determined to put things right. As part of the clean-up and environmental response, we are working closely with the Environment Agency.

We're expecting proposed changes from the government about how bathing waters are monitored and classified. These changes will help us better manage, monitor and improve water quality, and have been informed by subject matter experts and key stakeholders including water companies, local authorities, and water users within the community.

Introduction continued

What is a designated bathing water?

A designated bathing water is a body of water which has been recognised by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) as being popular for swimming and meeting the Bathing Water Regulations criteria. Our region has 87 designated bathing waters with each classified independently by the regulator – the Environment Agency (EA) – and managed by the relevant local authority, for example, the local council.

How bathing waters are classified:

- There are four classifications, Poor, Sufficient, Good and Excellent.
- Classifications are independently assigned by the EA, not water companies, and are based on calculations from the last four years of their water quality testing results at the site. Classifications are available on the EA's Swimfo website, and on our storm overflow monitoring service, Rivers and Seas Watch.

Visit Swimfo for an in-depth look at the geography of different bathing sites and past sample results.

Find out more about how the Environment Agency monitor bathing water quality here.

Quick look – bathing water results

Key changes for the 2025 season:

Deal Castle
Has improved from 'Poor' to 'Good'.

Goring Beach, Worthing and Herne Bay Central
Have all improved from 'Sufficient' to 'Good'.

Ramsgate Western Undercliff, Gurnard, West Beach Whitstable, Rottingdean and Minster-leas
Have all improved from 'Good' to 'Excellent'.

Hastings Pelham Beach, Margate The Bay and St Mildreds Bay
Have all dropped from 'Excellent' to 'Good'.

Key stats:

35
Illegal connections rectified

250+
Drains marked to stop drain misuse

12
Public engagement events

15
Dedicated bathing water team members

1000
Meters of sewer cleaned

200
Meters of sewer repaired

9
Bathing waters improved

89%
Of bathing waters rated excellent or good

4
Annual pier surveys arranged

4
Cases of sewer misuse identified and escalated

What's new this season?

Bigger team, better improvements

We've recently doubled the size of our illegal connections team.

These specialist technicians seek out illegal and wrongly connected pipework that causes problems in the sewer network, with a focus on areas with low bathing water quality. The team are out in all weathers to carry out surveys of the surface water outfalls and upstream sewers, taking samples, installing cages and tracing evidence back to the source of the issue.

The extra resource is allowing us to be agile in our approach and quickly move to other areas when needed. We've also brought in subject matter experts to ensure the most effective and beneficial improvements are being delivered. These include the following roles:

- Partnership Manager, to identify opportunities to support our partners, and engage with communities and businesses, helping the entire communities protect their local waters.
- Bathing Water Data Analyst, to assess various sources of data and information and identify the most effective improvement opportunities.
- Project Manager, to drive and manage the various programmes of work to ensure targets are met and costs are managed effectively.

Improvement highlights

Lots of factors can affect bathing water, and we're working with partners and communities to tackle as many as possible.

Our assets

Making sure sewers are resilient:
Our contractors, Cappagh Browne and Lanes Group, have been tasked with delivering a programme of CCTV investigations to identify issues, and completing a subsequent £1 million programme of repairs to sewers across the region. Work started in July, improving the resilience of the wastewater sewers serving Worthing, Southsea, Bexhill, Folkestone and Deal. Over 100 meters of sewer repairs have been completed, with more to come.

Pre-season health checks on our sites:
Checks were completed at 254 pumping stations and treatment works ahead of the start of the 2025 season, with any required improvements swiftly actioned. This ensures that our infrastructure is operating safely and effectively, reducing the risk of pollution and keeping our coastal waters clean.

Improving how we treat wastewater:
Our team of Process Scientists and Operational Experts at Dymchurch Wastewater Treatment works were tasked with finding a way to reduce the level of bacteria in the treated wastewater leaving the site. After careful testing, investigation and planning, they have successfully improved the removal of bacteria from the treatment process by an incredible 95%. This has been achieved by putting the wastewater back through the same treatment process, once it has been initially treated, allowing for better removal of solids and bacteria.

Outside sources

Checking drainage on piers: Through their proactive investigation work, our Illegal Connections team identified issues on the plumbing and pipework underneath Southsea Pier, which was causing wastewater to leak onto the beach. We funded a full survey and sewer mapping, and prepared a plan for Portsmouth City Council so they could fix the issue. Similar issues were also identified on Bognor Pier, so we worked with the owner to fix the drainage and set up monitoring to catch future issues before they cause an impact to water quality.

Rectifying illegal connections: We found 37 illegally connected properties this year. This meant waste from toilets, washing machines and other household appliances was flowing directly into local waters, causing water pollution and harm to wildlife. We helped the landowners arrange for the drainage to be re-directed to the correct wastewater sewer to protect the environment from further harm.

Spreading awareness and driving change: Our teams have been meeting with students learning the plumbing trade, to highlight the impact that poorly plumbed drainage can have on the local environment. We've also rolled out our Yellow Fish campaign to help stop surface water drains being misused and polluted, and we've continued our Beauty of the Beach campaign to help reduce litter and pollution on beaches during peak season.

We discovered that the wastewater of a block of 15 properties was connected to a surface water sewer in Portswood!

Case study

Deal Castle

The problem

The bathing water at Deal Castle dropped to a classification of ‘Poor’ last year, following a very high sample collected by the Environment Agency in August 2024, together with results from previous years which caused the four-year average data to show a declining level of water quality.

Bathing water improvement work had already begun in the area when the downward trend started, leading to a plan to target specific issues. It set out steps to investigate the local area for problems, both those linked to our own assets and those caused by third parties.

Our approach

The plan was developed to focus investigations on any of our equipment that has the potential to impact the environment. The Illegal Connections team proactively surveyed the surface water sewers that discharge to the local waters. By lifting sewer manhole covers, the team were able to identify an area showing evidence of household waste, leading us to find three properties with their wastewater illegally connected to the surface water system. All issues were resolved with one requiring support from Dover District Council.

The team looked at historic issues to enable us to identify possible causes of flooding and pollution. This led to finding a foul sewer that needed relining to stop any water escaping from the sewer system.

Working together

Monthly technical steering groups have been set up with local agencies including Dover District Council, the Environment Agency and Southern Water. These meetings allow us to discuss the joined-up approach needed, quickly find and resolve issues and report back successes, and share sample data to identify where to focus our attention.

Our work has included the following:

- Collaborating with Dover District Council to complete smoke/dye testing on Deal Pier to check for possible issues – this work was completed in May 2025 and no issues were identified.
- Conducting joint visits with Dover District council to check public toilets for issues – no issues were identified.
- Working in collaboration with the Environment Agency to identify surface water outfalls showing elevated levels of bacteria – over 1000 meters of sewer will be cleaned out in the coming months.
- Engaging with Deal and Warmer town councils to pass on details of local investigations that can be shared more widely.

We're also setting up a Deal community group to utilise local knowledge and keep the public informed of whats going on in the area, as well as exploring other opportunities to work with partners to spread positive messaging.

Shadow sampling

Throughout 2024—25, we used the expertise of independent environmental specialist Adler & Allan to collect samples across the Deal Castle coastline, to measure bacteria levels using a team of trained water quality technicians. Samples are collected and transported to a Southern Water laboratory and then the national laboratory services, to be analysed for levels of E.coli and Intestinal Enterococci.

In July this year, a very high sample was collected by the Environment Agency. The sample was taken after an abnormal level of rainfall impacted the Deal area. After reviewing the data from the event, the decision was made to discount the high sample. Before the EA's decision, microbial source analysis was carried out to determine the source of the high sample, with the result coming back as 100% bird marker with no human marker present.

We’re thrilled with the outcome of the decision as this has contributed to Deal Castle improving to ‘Good’ bathing water quality for the 2026 season. This outcome means so much to the local community and the passionate water users in the area.

Deal Castle 2025 results

With the elevated sample discounted by the Environment Agency, all of this year's bathing water samples collected achieved 'Excellent' levels of water quality.

Working together

This season we joined the nationwide Yellow Fish Campaign to reduce water pollution, adding eye-catching yellow fish and informational signage to surface water drains in Bognor Aldwick, Goring, Worthing Beach House and Shoreham.

Local volunteers, Environment Agency teams, Southern Water employees, MPs, councillors, and representatives from Arun, Adur, and Worthing Councils, all took part to remind people that surface water drains flow directly to the sea. In total, over 250 surface water drains were marked across the selected areas, which were chosen due to the high chances of surface water pollution impacting bathing water quality.

Surface water sewers are designed to carry rainwater run-off from roads and roofs directly into local watercourses. The water doesn't go through any treatment or filtering, so anything that gets into surface drains – such as petrol, paint, oil or chemicals – goes straight into our local waters. It's critical that these surface drains aren't polluted as this can cause serious damage to rivers, seas, beaches, and the wildlife that inhabits them. It's a simple but powerful way to raise awareness and help protect our coastal waters.

Bexhill surface water outfall awareness

In May, we set out to improve bathing water quality awareness at Bexhill by helping residents and visitors understand how surface water sewers work in the area, and how they differ from storm overflow outfalls.

Surface water outfalls are regularly confused with storm overflow outfalls leading to fears of pollution, impact to tourism and local businesses, and a troubling spreading of misinformation, often picked up by local media.

Working closely with Rother District Council, we chose key locations and installed informational signs to help passers-by learn more about how surface water outfalls work and why they're an important part of the network.

Signs were placed at:

- Glyne Gap outfall (on the beach) ///copy.spare.island
- De La Warr Parade (on the beach by Alderton Court) ///visa.quench.young
- West Parade (on the beach opposite Grenada flats) ///slurs.basin.tour
- West Parade (on the beach opposite Beaulieu) ///fires.tradition.liberty

Outside sources of pollution: Egerton Park Lake

Our tidal modelling shows that storm overflows are highly unlikely to impact bathing water quality in Bexhill, as the outfall is located too far out to sea. So, we've been working hard to identify and resolve any of sources of pollution.

Following proactive investigations in the area, we found that water from Egerton Park Lake was leaking into a surface water sewer chamber through a broken sluice gate. This created a bad smell and grey staining, which suggested a presence of bacteria. As surface water sewers lead directly onto the beach and into the sea, we quickly realised this could be a source of pollution to local bathing waters, so we took swift action alongside Rother District Council to address it.

We started by taking samples of the water in the lake to be sure our assumptions were correct. They revealed higher than normal levels of E. coli, which would have undoubtedly impacted water quality.

The council fixed their sluice gate and sewer chamber, and we're continuing to investigate any other potential sources of pollution to protect local water quality and reduce risks to the environment.

This project is one of many that demonstrates how collaborative working with local authorities and community groups can lead to meaningful improvements in our shared spaces.

Pollution risk forecasting

Finding out about bathing water quality from pollution risk forecasts

Throughout the bathing season, daily pollution risk forecasts are issued by the Environment Agency for specific bathing waters. A pollution risk forecast (PRF) is a prediction of potential reduced water quality due to natural factors like heavy rain.

These risk forecasts are not a confirmation of pollution – they notify the public that there is a chance that water quality may be temporarily reduced. A pollution risk forecast typically lasts 24 hours.

How are they determined?

The Environment Agency looks at all the possible things that could reduce the quality of bathing water, but the biggest factor is heavy rain. Heavy rainfall often washes all types of pollution and bacteria from drains, roads and farms into the sea, as well as causing storm overflows.

Where can I find the forecasts?

If you want to check if there is a pollution risk forecast in place before going to the beach, check out the Swimfo website. You can also check for signage at the beach before deciding whether to go into the water, however this signage is added by the local council and is not mandatory, so it is always best to check Swimfo.

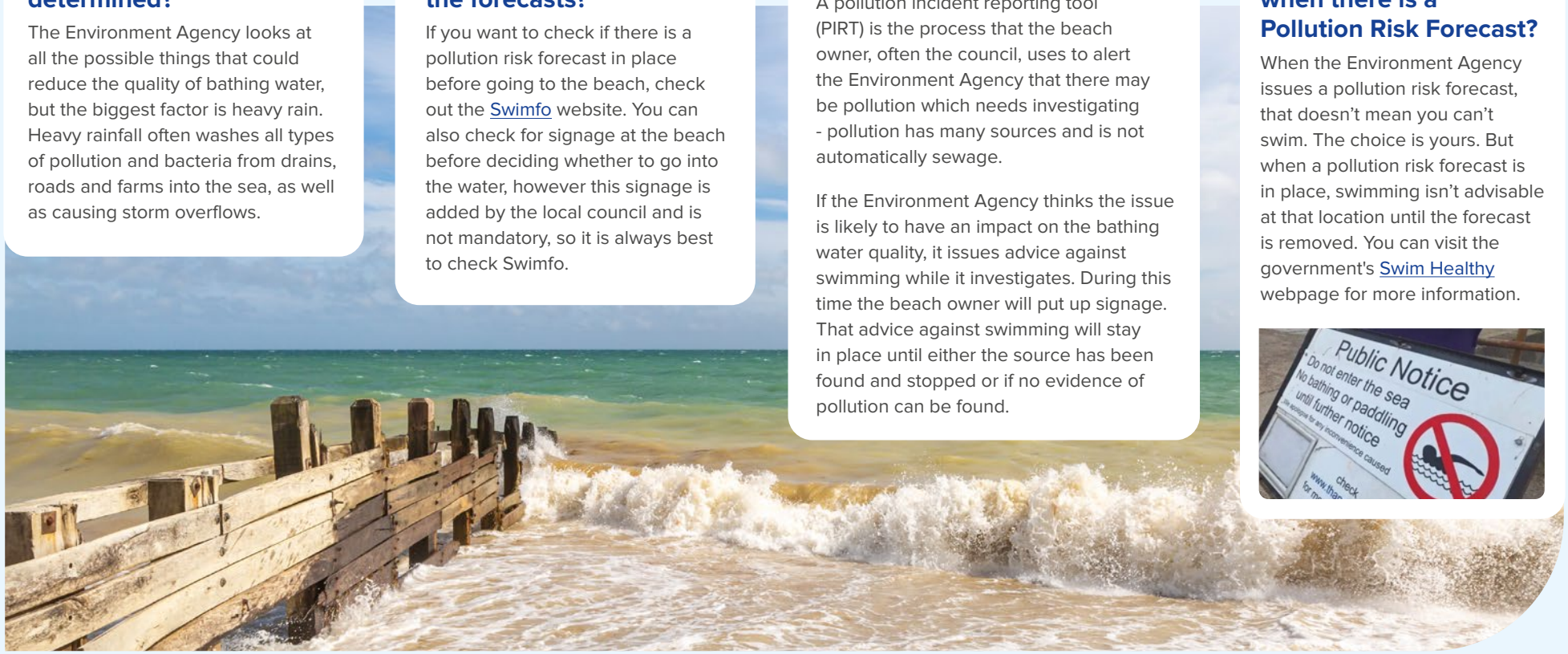
What is a PIRT?

A pollution incident reporting tool (PIRT) is the process that the beach owner, often the council, uses to alert the Environment Agency that there may be pollution which needs investigating - pollution has many sources and is not automatically sewage.

If the Environment Agency thinks the issue is likely to have an impact on the bathing water quality, it issues advice against swimming while it investigates. During this time the beach owner will put up signage. That advice against swimming will stay in place until either the source has been found and stopped or if no evidence of pollution can be found.

Can you swim when there is a Pollution Risk Forecast?

When the Environment Agency issues a pollution risk forecast, that doesn't mean you can't swim. The choice is yours. But when a pollution risk forecast is in place, swimming isn't advisable at that location until the forecast is removed. You can visit the government's Swim Healthy webpage for more information.



Exploring bathing water myths

Myth

Southern Water doesn't invest enough in bathing water quality and stopping storm overflow releases.

Fact

We're spending £1.5 billion to cut storm overflow releases, as well as expanding our team to keep on top of bathing water quality results and quickly plan any necessary improvements, both on our own assets and those owned by third parties. We are prioritising the overflows set by our regulators – shellfish waters, environmentally sensitive sites and bathing water spots.

Myth

Dirty looking water coming out of a pipe onto a beach or into a river is a storm overflow releases.

Fact

Outfalls on beaches and rivers aren't always storm overflow releases. Many are surface water drains that carry rainwater mixed with dirt and debris from roads and pavements. We're currently labelling our surface water outfalls to help the public know which pipes are which.

Myth

If it's smelly, floating in the water and looks like sewage, it's sewage.

Fact

Warm weather and long days encourage algae growth known as 'algal blooms'. It often smells of rotting eggs or vegetables and has a brown, scum-like appearance, so it can easily be confused with sewage.

Read more myths and facts on our Bathing Waters website page

Photo: Environment Agency

What's next?

In April this year, the water industry entered a new five-year investment period for 2025-30. We've built a strategy with a clear focus on ensuring we're making improvements in all the areas where we may be responsible for deteriorating water quality, while collaborating with experts and communities.

We'll continue to support our partners in local councils to drive the delivery of improvements, and funding has already been invested toward these improvements. We're also trialling innovative new ways to monitor the sewer system and catch issues early, before they impact water quality.

We've also set up community engagement meetings in Folkestone and Hythe to collaborate and share knowledge with local experts and residents, so we can make the most effective improvements in the area.

We'll continue our improvement efforts throughout the next year, in preparation for the next bathing season.

This will include work such as:

- continuing our focus on struggling bathing water locations, to help improve their EA classifications and overall water quality
- using our additional resources to track water quality trends to help guide and inform the next series of improvement plans
- scaling up the roll-out of awareness campaigns like Yellow Fish, further across our region to make the biggest difference
- continuing to focus on engagement with the public to share details of efforts in key areas – we're setting up community steering groups in Bexhill, Arun Council and Deal, to facilitate the sharing of information and knowledge and better address local issues
- exploring new and innovative approaches to monitoring water quality – with a focus on real-time monitoring. With a smart approach to monitoring and data collection, we can make more informed decisions and invest more wisely.

Regulatory changes

Currently, bathing water sites are given their water quality classifications based off samples taken from specific sampling points during the bathing season (15 May–30 September), and are subject to de-designation based off results from the sampling during this time frame. Bathing waters are used year-round, and the current sampling regime could benefit from being updated to reflect this.

To bring bathing water quality sampling in line with modern day water use, several regulatory changes are being discussed:

The key proposed changes

- **Removal of the automatic de-designation process:** Currently, bathing waters are automatically de-designated following five consecutive years of 'Poor' classification. It can take a long time to improve bathing water quality, and the removal of this process would allow the time needed for improvements to take effect rather than a bathing water being de-designated just as things are starting to improve.
- **More research for new bathing waters:** Before a new bathing water is designated, studies will be conducted into whether it will be able to achieve a classification of 'Sufficient' or higher. This will reduce instances of bathing waters being designated and immediately assigned a 'Poor' water quality classification, which can be confusing for the public.
- **Removal of the fixed bathing water season dates:** This would eventually allow the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to adapt bathing water season dates to better suit local needs.

We're expecting more information on the changes later this year and will keep our customers up to date via our website and social media.

Detailed classifications

Bathing Water	2024	2025	Change
Beachlands Central	Excellent	Excellent	–
Beachlands West	Excellent	Excellent	–
Bembridge	Good	Good	–
Bexhill	Sufficient	Sufficient	–
Birling Gap	Excellent	Excellent	–
Bognor Regis (Aldwick)	Poor	Poor	–
Bognor Regis East	Sufficient	Sufficient	–
Botany Bay, Broadstairs	Excellent	Excellent	–
Bracklesham Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Brighton Central	Good	Good	–
Brighton Kemptown	Excellent	Excellent	–
Broadstairs, Stone Bay	Good	Good	–
Broadstairs, Viking Bay	Good	Good	–
Calshot	Excellent	Excellent	–
Camber	Good	Good	–
Christchurch Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Colwell Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Compton Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Cowes	Excellent	Excellent	–
Deal Castle	Poor	Good	↑ ↑
Dymchurch	Poor	Poor	–

Bathing Water	2024	2025	Change
East Cowes	Excellent	Excellent	–
Eastbourne	Good	Good	–
Eastney	Good	Good	–
Eastoke	Excellent	Excellent	–
Felpham	Good	Good	–
Folkestone	Sufficient	Sufficient	–
Goring Beach	Sufficient	Good	↑
Gurnard	Good	Excellent	↑
Hastings Pelham Beach	Excellent	Good	↓
Herne Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Herne Bay Central	Sufficient	Good	↑
Highcliffe	Excellent	Excellent	–
Hillhead	Excellent	Excellent	–
Hove	Excellent	Excellent	–
Hythe	Excellent	Excellent	–
Joss Bay, Broadstairs	Excellent	Excellent	–
Lancing, Beach Green	Good	Good	–
Lee-on-Solent	Excellent	Excellent	–
Lepe	Excellent	Excellent	–
Leysdown	Good	Good	–
Littlehampton	Good	Good	–
Littlestone	Poor	Poor	–

Detailed classifications continued

Bathing Water	2024	2025	Change
Margate Fulsam Rock	Excellent	Excellent	–
Margate The Bay	Excellent	Good	↓
Middleton-on-Sea	Excellent	Excellent	–
Milford-on-Sea	Excellent	Excellent	–
Minnis Bay, Birchington	Excellent	Excellent	–
Minster Leas	Good	Excellent	↑
Norman's Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Pagham	Good	Good	–
Pevensey Bay	Good	Good	–
Ramsgate Sands	Excellent	Excellent	–
Ramsgate Western Undercliffe	Good	Excellent	↑
Rottingdean Beach	Good	Excellent	↑
Ryde	Good	Good	–
Saltdean	Excellent	Excellent	–
Sandgate	Excellent	Excellent	–
Sandown	Good	Good	–
Sandwich Bay	Good	Good	–
Seaford	Excellent	Excellent	–
Seagrove	Excellent	Excellent	–
Selsey	Excellent	Excellent	–
Shanklin	Excellent	Excellent	–
Sheerness	Excellent	Excellent	–
Shoreham Beach	Excellent	Excellent	–

Bathing Water	2024	2025	Change
Southsea East	Poor	Poor	–
Southwick	Excellent	Excellent	–
St Helens	Excellent	Excellent	–
St Leonards	Excellent	Excellent	–
St Margaret's Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
St Mary's Bay (Kent)	Sufficient	Sufficient	–
St Mildred's Bay, Westgate	Excellent	Good	↓
Stokes Bay	Good	Good	–
Tankerton	Excellent	Excellent	–
Totland Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Ventnor	Excellent	Excellent	–
Walpole Bay, Margate	Good	Good	–
West Bay, Westgate	Sufficient	Sufficient	–
West Beach, Whitstable	Good	Excellent	↑
West Wittering	Excellent	Excellent	–
Westbrook Bay, Margate	Excellent	Excellent	–
Whitecliff Bay	Excellent	Excellent	–
Winchelsea	Good	Good	–
Worthing	Sufficient	Good	↑
Worthing Beach House	Poor	Poor	–
Yaverland	Excellent	Excellent	–

Detailed classifications continued

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