

BRIEFING NOTE: BATHING WATER DESIGNATION FOR RIVERS

Key Message:

Official Bathing Water designation has been instrumental in improving coastal water quality over the last 3 decades. Bathing Water designation can do the same for rivers by exposing dangerous levels of pollution and placing legal requirements on polluters to clean up their act.

We are calling for the designation of 200 official river bathing waters by 2030 to protect ecosystems and ensure the safety of water-users.

THE ISSUE

Every fortnight, over 4.3 million people visit the UK's rivers and lakes to improve their mental and physical well-being.¹ However, recent analysis by Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) has shown that 75% rivers tested pose a serious risk to human health.² The European Centre for Environment and Human Health have found that those interesting with water are at an increased risk of harmful viruses, and three time more likely to have antibiotic resistant bacteria in their gut than the background population.³

The Environment Audit Committee recently labelled our rivers and inland waters as dangerous 'chemical cocktails' of sewage and agricultural pollution.⁴ Only 14% of rivers meet good ecological status and none pass chemical status. The state of our rivers is also inherently linked to the health of the ocean, with pollutants eventually finding their way to the coast and into the ocean.

The current state of affairs is unacceptable, everybody should have the right to access clean and safe water.

¹ Canal and River Trust *Waterways and Wellbeing, Building the Evidence Base, First Outcomes Report*, <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/refresh/media/thumbnail/33802-canal-and-river-trust-outcomes-report-waterways-and-wellbeing-full-report.pdf>

² Slack, A., Tagholm, H., and Taylor, D. (2021) *2021 Water Quality Report*, 2021, <https://www.sas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SAS-WaterQualityReport2021-DIGITAL.pdf>

³ Leonard, A.F.C., Zhang, L., Balfour, A.J., et al. (2018) Exposure to and colonisation by antibiotic-resistant E. coli in UK coastal water users: Environmental surveillance, exposure assessment, and epidemiological study (Beach Bum Survey), *Environment International*, Vol.114, pp.326–333

⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/62/environmental-audit-committee/news/160246/chemical-cocktail-of-sewage-slurry-and-plastic-polluting-english-rivers-puts-public-health-and-nature-at-risk/>

THE CAUSE

90% of Sewer Overflows in England and Wales discharge directly into rivers. In 2019, this meant untreated sewage was released into rivers and streams for 1.5 million hours.⁵ Huge volumes of agricultural runoff also enter inland waters releasing toxic fertilizers and pesticides. In addition, 1 million highway drains discharge contaminated water into water courses.⁶

Yet, since only 3% of Bathing Waters in the UK are inland and only one Bathing Water is located on a river, there is no way of knowing the true effect this pollution is having on people's health.⁷

THE SOLUTION

The first step to improving the state of our rivers, is to make sure the legal obligations are in place to improve water quality. Officially designated Bathing Waters protect people's health at popular swimming spots by requiring water quality to be regularly monitored for threats to human health and forcing improvements to be made by polluters if waters don't meet the required standard.

The creation of over 600 coastal bathing waters around the UK has led to 99% of these sites meeting minimum standards, up from just 27% in the 1990's. Now, the same action must happen for rivers.

THE ASK

We are calling for the designation of 200 Official River Bathing Waters by 2030 to protect ecosystems and ensure the safety of water-users.

In September the UK Government will publish its plan to tackle sewage pollution in England and we are calling for the plan to include legally binding target to increase the number of bathing rivers in England. To also ensure the quality of rivers improves across the UK the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland must also set equally ambitious legally binding targets.

WHAT CAN POLITICIANS DO?

1. Ask parliamentary questions and call for a debate.
e.g. What action is government taking to support and encourage the designation of river bathing waters?
2. Find and support local community groups campaigning for bathing designation.
3. Learn more about sewage pollution: [SAS Water Quality Briefing Note](#)

⁵ Laville, S. (2012) Water Firms Discharged Raw Sewage into Rivers 200 Times. Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/01/water-firms-raw-sewage-england-rivers>

⁶ Environmental Audit Committee Water quality in rivers - Session 3 - Committees - UK Parliament, accessed 25 October 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/4556/formal-meeting-oral-evidencesession/>

⁷ Surfers Against Sewage (2021) *2021 Water Quality Report*. <https://www.sas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SAS-WaterQualityReport2021-DIGITAL.pdf>

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a designated Bathing Water?

Official Bathing Waters undergo regular testing of water quality by regulators to determine if it is safe to enter and a full investigation will take place of the sources of pollution impacting the Bathing Water. Bathing Waters are categorised as 'excellent', 'good', 'sufficient' or 'poor' on the basis of bacteria levels. For locations rated as 'poor' solutions have to be put in place to clean up the Bathing Water.⁸

How do designated River Bathing Waters improve water quality?

Bathing status does not mean the water quality will automatically improve or be safe to swim in. This is simply the starting point that will provide the evidence and pressure to force polluting industries such as water companies to reduce and eventually stop sewer discharges.

Over the last 50 years, the designation of over 600 coastal Bathing Waters has increased awareness of the shocking state of the coastal water quality. This has driven political change and business and action and lead to drastically improved water quality.

It should also be noted that in order to make bathing waters more effective in improving water quality there must be an overhaul of the current testing regime. Recent evidence has shown the existing regime is best with flaws, most notably the current regime allows the worst pollution events recorded in bathing season to be discarded. Thus, giving a skewed view of water quality.⁹

Why do we want 200 River Bathing Waters?

In 2021, SAS supported Phillip Dunne MP in drafting the Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill which was backed by over 130 MPs. This Bill provided 'gold standard' legislation to address the issue of sewage pollution in rivers. Many of the principles in this bill have since been adopted through the Environment Act in England. However, one of the main clauses was to place a legal target of designating at least 2 'bathing rivers' in each water company boundary per year. This was seen as an ambitious and achievable target. With 10 water company boundaries in England alone, this would result in at least 200 'river bathing waters' designated by 2030. That would mean at least 25% of Bathing Waters in England would be located inland by the end of the decade putting the UK on par with our European neighbours.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/bathing-waters>

⁹ Gowen, P., Eades, S. (2020). Sand, Sea and Sewage Analysis. Marinet Limited, pp. 21-22. [online] Available at: <http://www.marinet.org.uk/campaign-article/sand-sea-and-sewage>