

99% of English bathing sites meet required water quality standards

99% of bathing waters in England have passed water quality standards following testing at over 400 designated sites carried out by the Environment Agency (EA).

The results, released today, show that for the 2021 bathing season 94.7% of beaches and inland waters gained an 'Excellent' or 'Good' rating while 4.3% achieved the minimum 'Sufficient' rating. This compares with 98.3% passing the required standards in 2019, and is the highest number since new standards were introduced in 2015.

Bathing waters are monitored for sources of pollution known to be a risk to bathers' health, with up to 20 samples taken from each site during the bathing season. Each sample is tested for bacteria, specifically E coli and intestinal enterococci.

The EA has been monitoring bathing water sites since the 1990s, and in this time there have been significant improvements. In the early 1990s, for example, just 28% of bathing waters met the highest standards in force at that time. Based on today's data, 99% of bathing waters meet the minimum standard, with 70.7% reaching the highest standards. While progress has been made, there is still much more to be done to ensure cleaner and healthier waters for people to enjoy. We are clear that more needs to be done on the part of water companies, and we are taking robust action to support regulators, businesses, farmers and councils to help clean up our waters.

Since 2015 the EA has required water companies to install Event Duration Monitors at bathing water sites. This captures data on the frequency and duration of storm overflow discharges, with all the data published [online](#) so the public can see what is happening in their local area. More than 12,000 of England's 15,000 storm overflows now have these monitors, and the remaining 3,000 will have them by end of next year.

Knowing more about water quality helps people make informed decisions on when and where to swim. The EA's Swimfo [website](#) provides detailed information on each of the 400+ bathing waters in England, and notifies bathers when Pollution Risk Warnings have been issued.

Environment Agency Chair Emma Howard Boyd said:

"With billions spent on seaside visits every year, we know good water quality helps coastal towns prosper. Twenty years of improvements in bathing water took targeted regulation and significant investment. While this is reflected in today's results we must continue to work together to maintain this trend.

"We cannot afford to be complacent. Public confidence in water quality has faltered in recent years with new evidence of pollution incidents getting

much needed attention as a result of some excellent campaigning. The polluter must pay. To restore trust, water companies, industry and farmers need to get the basics right or face legal action.

“The prize is multiple benefits to people and nature. The Environment Agency is working to ensure £120 million is invested in coastal habitats like England’s saltmarshes, which protect against coastal erosion and also store carbon equivalent to nearly 40 million people’s annual domestic emissions.”

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

“Water quality is an absolute priority. We are the first Government to direct Ofwat to prioritise action by water companies to protect the environment and deliver the improvements that we all want to see.

“But we must go further to protect and enhance water quality. Our Environment Act puts in place more protections against water pollution than ever before, we are investing in programmes to support farmers to tackle water quality issues, and we are clear that where water companies do not step up we will take robust action.”

This is the first year that part of the River Wharfe in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, has been given an official classification after being added to the list of bathing waters in 2021.

It comes as Yorkshire Water announced new investment of up to £13 million to improve water quality in the area. This will include extra disinfection measures and a new scheme to reroute the sewage network in areas upstream of the bathing water site.

While a designation is an important first step towards longer-term water quality improvement, it will take time to identify how to meet the required bathing water standard alongside the financial investment and co-operation needed to make it happen.