



For the future of our environment

Bathing waters FAQ

4 September 2023

Q. Where do you monitor bathing water quality?

We monitor the water quality for bathing at Scotland's designated bathing waters, [Bathing Water locations in Scotland \(sepa.org.uk\)](#). We don't monitor bathing water quality at other coastal or inland areas.

SEPA monitors the water environment across Scotland to assess the condition of water quality. See [Water | Scottish Environment Protection Agency \(SEPA\)](#) for how information from this monitoring informs the river basin management plan which describes work to protect and improve the water environment across Scotland.

Q. When do you monitor bathing water quality?

SEPA regularly monitors water quality throughout the pre-season and bathing season period, from 15 May to 15 September.

Under the Bathing Water (Scotland) Regulations 2008, Scottish Ministers must determine for each bathing water the period during which large numbers of bathers are expected as the bathing season. The period has traditionally been from the 1 June to 15 September with the pre-season beginning from 15 May.

Most bathing waters are sampled 18 times during the season. Some geographically remote sites are sampled 10 times. A few sites with consistently exceptional water quality are sampled

five times due to reduced risk. The minimum number of samples required by the Bathing Water Regulations is four per season.

Q What do you monitor?

Water quality samples are analysed in our accredited laboratories for the faecal indicator organisms *Escherichia coli* and intestinal enterococci. When a water sample is collected, our sampling officers undertake visual observations for cyanobacterial (blue-green algae) blooms, macroalgae (seaweed), marine phytoplankton, sewage solids and other waste.

If we get an elevated *Escherichia coli* and/or intestinal enterococci result through our routine water quality monitoring we can use microbial DNA source tracking analysis (MST) to identify the generic origin of pollution. We can currently determine if human, ruminant, dog or avian (bird) derived faecal indicator organisms are either present or present at a significant level.

Q. How can I find bathing water quality monitoring data?

During the bathing season, the water quality monitoring results are posted on our website within a few days of being analysed, [Bathing Water locations in Scotland \(sepa.org.uk\)](https://www.sepa.org.uk/bathing-water-locations-in-scotland).

Water quality monitoring data from previous seasons is available at [Bathing Waters \(sepa.org.uk\)](https://www.sepa.org.uk/bathing-waters)

The overall water quality condition at a designated bathing water is described by a classification statement of excellent, good, sufficient and poor, based on four years of monitoring data as per the Bathing Waters (Scotland) Regulations 2008. These classifications are calculated at the end of a season for display at the start of the following season [Classifications](#)

Q. Is the water quality safe for swimming?

The Bathing Waters (Scotland) Regulations 2008 implement the Bathing Water Directive in Scotland, which aims to reduce the risk to public health at locations where a large number of people bathe.

At a designated bathing water with a sufficient or better classification:

- across a typical season the water quality will meet bathing water requirements as specified in the Bathing Water Regulations (Scotland)
- generally the risks to human health are minimised in comparison to other surface waters that are managed to protect and improve the environment

However, the advice from the UK Health Security Agency is that anyone can become unwell from swimming in any open water as there will always be micro-organisms present [Swim healthy – UK Government](#).

Public Health Scotland has also published advice on bathing safely [Wild swimming: how to swim safely in Scotland's outdoor water](#).

Our Scottish climate also impacts water quality, due to heavy rain washing contaminants off both rural and urban land, together with overflows from sewage systems in affected areas. As there is a risk that water pollution may occur after heavy rainfall, bathing is not advised during or 1-3 days after heavy rainfall due to the potential risk to bathers' health from water pollution. Generally, risks tend to be higher in urban areas or where livestock farming occurs within the catchment as these are the key sources of bacteria for most bathing waters.

At selected bathing waters, typically those where water quality is most likely to be impacted by rainfall, we make daily bathing water quality [predictions](#) which are accessible from electronic information signs at the beach locations and [online](#). We warn against bathing when poor water

quality is predicted, enabling beach users to make an informed choice about using the water or sticking to shore based activities. If there was a specific pollution incident our electronic signs can be used to post bespoke information messages.

Water Safety Scotland provide specific activity advice at [Water Safety Scotland | Activity Safety – Multiple Topics](#). At the bathing water there may be specific local signage and/or hazard warnings.

Q. How is a bathing water designated?

Bathing Water designation aims to protect human health at locations where large numbers of people bathe during the bathing season.

Under the Bathing Water (Scotland) Regulations 2008, Scottish Ministers designate bathing waters where they expect a large number of people to bathe, having regard to past trends and infrastructure and facilities provided, or other measures taken to promote bathing.

More information and an application form are available at [Bathing Waters: Designation \(sepa.org.uk\)](#)

Q. Where can I find out more information about a bathing water?

Our bathing water profiles provide location-specific information to the public. Each profile includes a description, map and photograph of the bathing water; information on potential pollution sources and risks to water quality, and descriptions of measures being taken to improve water quality. [Bathing Waters: Profiles \(sepa.org.uk\)](#).

Q. What are you doing to improve bathing water quality?

Our current focus is to improve bathing water quality to at least meet the sufficient classification at all our designated bathing waters and to prevent any deterioration.

Bathing waters with, or at risk of, a poor classification have an improvement plan to identify the causes of pollution and then with others agree and implement the improvement requirements within a planned period.

The first step is to identify key pollution sources. As well as our local knowledge, at a bathing water if we get a high result through our water quality monitoring we use microbial DNA source tracking analysis (MST) to identify the generic origin of pollution. We can currently determine if human, ruminant, dog or avian (bird) derived faecal indicator organisms are either present or are present at a significant level.

Once sources have been identified, we work with regulated operators and partners to reduce pollution loads.

SEPA has ensured Scottish Water investment has been targeted at areas where it will have the greatest impact. Major improvements in water quality have been achieved at locations that had long-term issues, such as Irvine and Ayr, following projects to upgrade sewage systems, install new treatment and investigate mis-connections.

In addition, Scottish Water has committed to installing monitors and publishing near real-time data on every combined sewer overflow (CSO) discharging to a Bathing or Shellfish Water by the end of 2024. SEPA will ensure this commitment is delivered.

SEPA is working closely with farmers in Scotland's priority catchments to reduce diffuse pollution run-off from their farms. Many farmers have adopted new practices and spent significant sums of money on additional slurry storage facilities, fencing and installing alternative means of livestock watering to reach compliance. Some have gone further than is legally

required, including planting riparian zones which move their farming activities further away from the water's edge. Past improvements have led to more than 90% of farms being compliant - an increase of 50% in ten years.

The Scottish Government funded "My Beach Your Beach" campaign undertaken by Keep Scotland Beautiful ran at selected bathing waters 2018 to 2022. This campaign supported bathing water quality improvements by urging everyone to take better care of the sand and the sea, including picking up litter, not feeding gulls and bagging dog poo, and provided information encouraging changing habits in relation to what visitors and locals would otherwise flush down the toilet or pour down the drain.

Q. What is being done to reduce CSO spills at bathing waters?

The [Scottish Water Urban Water Routemap](#) describes their commitment to improving understanding of how their sewer network operates and how it impacts on the water environment. The routemap sets out how they will:

- Improve water quality (to support Scotland's River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) objectives).
- Increase monitoring and reporting to cover all CSOs that discharge into the highest priority waters.
- Significantly reduce sewer related debris in the environment, and
- Reduce spills from the sewer network

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