

# Water Quality Factsheet

## for Guides, Leaders and Coaches

### What do we mean by water quality issues?

We've seen the headlines, a 'chemical cocktail' of sewage, agricultural waste and plastic are polluting our rivers and in 2021, records showed raw sewage was discharged into UK Rivers and seas 372,533 times ([Environment Agency](#)); whilst the Environment Agency (EA) and OFWAT announced a [major investigation into sewage treatment works](#) involving more than 2,000 works. And the EA reported that the performance of water companies had fallen to the lowest level seen under the Environmental Performance Assessment (EPA).

We have two systems which treat our water; the older combined sewer system which carries all the waste water (foul sewage) from people's homes and businesses, along with surface water (rainwater from gutters drains and some highways) together in one pipe to the waste water treatment works for processing. This is the system in the majority of our towns and cities today.

In the late 1960's a newer system was introduced which separates waste water and surface water, releasing surface water to the nearest water course whilst waste water flows to the waste water treatment works.

Combined sewer overflows (CSO's) act as release valves for the sewage network and in times of heavy rain (or not in some cases) the system is overwhelmed, so to prevent sewage backing up into people's homes, CSO's discharge directly into our inland and coastal waters.

Given a growing population, climate change and a lack of investment, the system is unable to cope, meaning large amounts of sewage is discharged into the waters we love to paddle.

In 1976 the EU Bathing Water Directive introduced standards to limit the bacteriological loads at designated bathing water sites. However in 2022, England has just 2 inland designated bathing water sites, the remainder are on the coast. These sites are the only locations where the water quality is officially monitored for harmful bacteria which can impact our health.

Water quality is also impacted by farming techniques where human waste is used as fertiliser and spread on fields, unfortunately sometimes during heavy rain, which is then washed into our watercourses. In addition, faeces from livestock including large scale chicken farms as we have seen on the Wye are also creating havoc for our health and that of our waterways, as their waste is also washed into our waters.

The increase in nutrient levels also aids the growth of invasive weeds such as Floating pennywort which can deoxygenate the water killing off fish and impacting other species, as well as physically blocking our waters, preventing navigation.





## What is British Canoeing doing about it?

*Our Ambition: We want coastal and inland waters free from sewage pollution, rich wildlife for all to enjoy the benefits of being connected with nature.*

British Canoeing are working closely with the #EndSewagePollution Coalition to align policy and agree collective actions.

We are working hard to influence future water sector policy by responding to Defra & Ofwat consultations and engaging directly with water companies to influence their priorities.

We are demanding an end to sewage pollution; more designated inland bathing waters and greater transparency of CSO's including real time load, duration and testing for chemicals.

## What does this mean for coaches?

First and foremost enjoy paddling, the last thing we intend to do is turn people off our fantastic sport. However, get informed, stay vigilant and don't get sick doing what you love. If the water looks or smells bad, paddle somewhere else. We also ask you to:

- Keep up to date with real time discharges through the [Surfers Against Sewage Safer seas and rivers app](#) and check last year's performance data for your local CSO, via the [Rivers Trust](#).
- Check our guidance on waterborne diseases and to how to stay safe [online here](#). This includes the need to wash after contact with the water and covering any cuts.
- Report any pollution incidents to the Environment Agency's 24-hour Hotline: 0800 80 70 60
- Share this information with your students.
- Contact your MP and water company demanding an end to untreated sewage discharges.
- We can all play our part by flushing only the 3 P's to avoid blockages.

Keep up to date on the Clear Access Clear Waters campaign by [signing up to our e-newsletter here](#).

The Chief Medical Officer for England Chris Whitty said...

**Raw sewage entering our rivers is becoming a “growing health problem”.**

