Information displayed on Council Web site for consultation

Your views are wanted on a proposal to remove water sampling tests at Walpole Bay in Cliftonville.

The council has a difficult choice to make. With stricter water regulations set to take effect in 2015, despite meeting current standards, the council would be required to display signage advising visitors not to swim at Walpole Bay.

The council is concerned about the impact this could have on Thanet's visitor economy and confidence in general about visiting Thanet's beaches.

The options the council has to consider are detailed below.

Option 1. Retain the status quo and continue to take water sample tests at Walpole Bay.

Impact

Walpole Bay is unlikely to meet new stricter European water quality standards that come into force in 2015 – despite meeting the current required standard.

The new rules, which are up to twice as strict, will consider water samples taken over the past four years.

As a result, the council would be required to display signage advising visitors not to swim.

This would apply, despite Walpole Bay meeting the current required water quality standards in 2012 and 2013.

Of 20 water sample tests taken by the Environment Agency in 2012, 16 were 'excellent' and 4 were 'satisfactory', meeting the current required standard.

In 2013, 15 were 'excellent' and 5 were 'satisfactory' meeting the current required standard.

The council is concerned that despite there being no change in the quality of the water, under new regulations, visitors would be advised not to swim.

The potential impact on the reputation and confidence of visitors could be seriously harmed.

Thanet is renowned for its world class beaches and sandy bays with more Blue Flag awards than any other local authority area.

The council is concerned that by retaining the status quo, visitors could be unnecessarily alarmed about swimming in the sea and visiting Thanet's beaches – despite water quality consistently retaining excellent standards under current regulations.

Thanet is not alone with this issue. Reports from EA last year identified 55 beaches around England likely to be at risk – despite two-thirds deemed safe under current rules.

Option 2. Apply to Defra to remove water sample tests at Walpole Bay.

Impact

Walpole Bay would no longer be designated as a ‘bathing beach’.

Removing water sample tests would mean no change to the beach and visitors could still swim in the sea and the tidal pool.

Water samples would still be taken by the Environment Agency at Margate Main Sands and Botany Bay. This is close enough proximity to alert the council of any issues with the water.

Exactly the same precautions would be taken to advise members of the public of any issue if it was deemed not safe to swim.

The council would still continue to clean and maintain the foreshore and beach at Walpole Bay.

The council would actively seek to promote the beach to encourage more people to visit as a year-round attraction for those looking to explore the marine wildlife and to enjoy the bay’s natural chalk foreshore area.

The evidence

Water sampling is carried out as part of the national bathing waters directive. Walpole Bay is currently included as it was historically a popular bathing beach.

A recent review undertaken by the council and the Environment Agency identified that visitors now predominantly use Walpole Bay for walking, sunbathing and to enjoy the excellent rock pooling habitats.

Activity at the beach was monitored by the Environment Agency.

The Environment Agency results identified that at the water sampling point, there were 58 visitors to the beach and of those, five swam in the sea.

The decision

The council would like to know what the local community think before making a final decision.

Is there an alternative? The council would like to know what you think…

To comment please e-mail consultation@thanet.gov.uk or write to Walpole Bay review, TDC, PO Box 9, Margate CT9 1XZ

Please ensure all comments are submitted by **Sunday 16 February 2014.**

More information

Read our Frequently Asked Questions

View the Environment Agency's survey

Q1. Is the council required to take water samples on all of Thanet's beaches?

A. No. The council is only required to take water samples on beaches that are designated (and promoted) as bathing beaches. As the evidence has shown, Walpole Bay is no longer predominantly used for bathing as visitors and residents tend to swim at beaches where there are facilities such as lifeguards, toilets and concessions. On these beaches water samples are taken regularly during the bathing water season and the results are posted online.

Thanet has a number of beaches and bays which are not classified as bathing beaches but are still popular for many recreational activities. This includes:

Kingsgate Bay

Dumpton Gap

Louisa Bay

Palm Bay

Foreness

Grenham Bay

Epple Bay

Western Undercliffe

Q2. Why is the council considering this?

A.The council has a difficult choice to make. With stricter water regulations set to take effect in 2015, despite meeting current standards, the council would be required to display signage advising visitors not to swim at Walpole Bay.

The council is concerned about the impact this could have on Thanet's visitor economy and confidence in general about visiting Thanet's beaches.

If there was evidence of visitor activity changing in the future at Walpole Bay then the council could re-apply to Defra to re-designate the beach.

Q3. If Walpole Bay is de-designated as a bathing beach what impact will this have?

A. Visitors and residents would notice no change when they visit the beach at Walpole Bay.

The only difference to the area would be that as a non-designated bathing beach, regular water sample tests would no longer be taken. This is the same as Kingsgate Bay, Dumpton Gap, Louisa Bay, Palm Bay, Foreness, Grenham, Epple and the Western Undercliffe in Ramsgate.

The council would still ensure that the area was maintained and kept clean and visitors would still be able to continue enjoying this fantastic beach in the same way.

In line with the council's Destination Management Plan the council would also seek to undertake additional promotion of the beach as a year-round attraction for those looking to explore the marine wildlife and to enjoy the bay's natural chalk foreshore area.

Q4.Has the council already made a decision?

A. No. The council is asking for members of the public to comment on the proposal before making a final decision

Q5. If Walpole Bay is de-designated as a bathing beach (and water sample tests are removed) how will the public know if it is safe to swim?

A. The council would still erect signs and make sure that members of the public were aware if there was an incident which meant that the water was unsafe to swim in, as we have done with previous incidents.

We would take this kind of action across all of our beaches whether they are designated as bathing beaches or not. We would also be alerted to any incidents through taking samples at the adjacent beaches which are in close proximity.

Q6. Can the public still swim at a beach which is not designated as a bathing beach?

A. There are a number of beaches and bays which are not classified as bathing beaches across Thanet (and the country) which are still used for swimming.

The only difference is that the Environment Agency undertakes water sample tests at beaches which are specifically designated for bathing. These beaches are those that are more popular for this activity and tend to be those with more facilities such as lifeguards, toilets and other concessions.

Q7. How is water quality monitored?

A. Seawater at Thanet's bathing beaches is tested independently on a weekly basis by the Environment Agency. Sampling takes place at each of the designated bathing waters for 20 weeks from May to September each year. Water quality results are compared with standards laid down by the European union (EU).

Read more about water quality

Q8. What are the recent water quality results for Walpole Bay?

A. Overall water quality for 2012 and 2013 for Walpole Bay was 'satisfactory', although the majority of the 20 readings taken in 2012 and 2013 were 'excellent'.

Water quality in 2011 was 'poor' due to two failed readings that year. Again, the majority of the readings taken were ‘excellent’.

Q9. What caused the two failed readings in 2011?

A. We don’t know the specific reason as to why water quality failed in 2011. Water samples are taken on a particular day and the results then take a few days to come through. We work with the Environment Agency to understand the reasons for any anomalies but this could be a diverse range of factors from large downpours of rain, to gullies overflowing or even litter (e.g. cigarette ends) etc. Find out more about what causes poor water quality.

Q10. What causes poor water quality in general?

The council works very closely with the Environment Agency to understand what can impact on the quality of the seawater, however it is difficult to attribute this to one specific factor.

Water quality can be affected by the following:

- Surface Water
- Highway Gulley Pots
- Seagull Droppings
- Dog Faeces
- Cigarette Butts
- Seaweed
- Possible Boat/Tanker Discharge
- Dumpted Rubbish/Food Waste
- Sewage outfalls

Q11. What will happen if the council decides not to de-designate the beach?

A. If the council does not de-designate Walpole Bay as a bathing beach then water sample tests would continue at Walpole Bay.

As water quality guidance is set to change, new stricter regulations will mean that water sample tests from the previous four years will be considered. Despite satisfactory water quality at Walpole Bay in recent years, due to two lower readings in 2011, the council would be required to display signage on the beach to this effect which could impact on confidence of all visitors using the bay as well as local residents and businesses.

Q12. Will there be signage at the beach if Walpole Bay is de-designated?

De-designating Walpole Bay will mean no change to the beach. Visitors will still be able to participate in the same recreational activities they do currently and will still be able to swim in the sea and the tidal pool.

On this basis the council would not display a sign if de-designated.

The water quality at Walpole Bay has met current required standards for the past two years. Water sample tests will still be taken at Margate Main Sands and at Botany Bay which are in close enough proximity to alert the council if there were any issues.

If an issue was detected, the council would display temporary signage advising members of the public not to swim at Walpole Bay - as it would across all of its beaches whether they are designated bathing beaches or not.

There are eight beaches across Thanet which have never had water sampling carried out and do not have signage to this effect. Members of the public are still able to swim at these beaches. This includes:

- Kingsgate Bay
- Dumpton Gap
- Louisa Bay
- Palm Bay
- Foreness
- Grenham Bay
- Epple Bay
- Western Undercliffe

Information on where water sampling is carried out is available to view on the council and Environment Agency website if required.

There are signs on display at Walpole Bay at the moment to advise members of the public of this proposal and to encourage participation in the consultation.