



# Consultation on the Bathing Waters Policy Review for Northern Ireland



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**  
[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

An Roinn  
**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil  
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'  
**Fairmin, Environment  
an' Kintra Matthers**

This document is also available on the DAERA website at:

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-bathing-waters-policy-review-northern-ireland](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-bathing-waters-policy-review-northern-ireland)

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# 1. Ministerial Foreword

As Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I am pleased to present this consultation on the Bathing Waters Policy Review for Northern Ireland. This review reflects our ongoing commitment to safeguarding public health, enhancing water quality, and protecting our natural environment.

Northern Ireland's bathing waters are among our most precious natural assets. They provide recreational opportunities, support local economies and foster a vital connection between our communities and the environment.

In May 2025, I expanded the bathing water programme from twenty-six to thirty-three identified bathing water sites, adding seven new locations at Brompton Bay; Cushendall; Donaghadee; Drain's Bay; Portmuck; Rea's Wood; and Warrenpoint.

In recent years, we have seen encouraging improvements in bathing water quality, with twenty-four of our thirty-three sites meeting the 'Excellent' standard in 2025. This progress reflects sustained effort and the dedicated collaborative work of my department and partners across sectors, including particularly those councils and the National Trust which act as Bathing Water Operators, often dealing with challenges such as the risks associated with blue-green algae.

This review provides an opportunity to consider how the bathing water programme should continue to evolve. It takes account of evidence, stakeholder engagement, and the findings of the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) 2024 report on the implementation of Bathing Water Regulations and considers whether current policies and regulations remain sufficient. I particularly welcome the OEP's emphasis on a "source to sea" approach and agree that collaborative, catchment-based solutions are essential to sustaining and improving water quality.

The review also fulfils an action within the Environmental Improvement Plan agreed by the Executive in September 2024 and a measure in the third cycle River Basin Management Plan.

The review has been shaped and informed by input from councils, environmental organisations, water sports communities which have proved invaluable in informing the way forward. I am now keen to seek your views so that we can ensure that our final decisions on the way forward are robust and well-informed. I encourage everyone with an interest in bathing waters to respond to this consultation. Your views will help inform future policy and shape the bathing water programme for generations to come.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Muir'. The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

**Andrew Muir, MLA**

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

## 2. Setting the scene

### 2.1 Introduction and Purpose of this Consultation

Protecting and improving the quality of Northern Ireland's bathing waters is fundamental to safeguarding public health, supporting tourism, and preserving the natural environment.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) undertakes a review of bathing water sites at least every three years. The previous bathing waters review (2022–23) resulted in the identification of seven new bathing waters. Under the Environmental Improvement Plan agreed by the Executive in September 2024, the Department has committed to completing the next review by the end of 2026.

This consultation is seeking your views on potential changes to policy and legislation for bathing waters in Northern Ireland that are being considered by DAERA.

#### Why is a Review Needed Now?

Bathing and water based recreational activities are an integral part of life in Northern Ireland, contributing not only to physical wellbeing but also to positive mental health and wider community wellbeing. Since the Bathing Waters Monitoring Programme was introduced in the late 1980s, patterns of recreational use have changed. Northern Ireland's programme has expanded and stakeholder expectations have evolved, including growing interest in inland sites and year-round use. In addition, identified bathing waters and other bathing sites increasingly serve a broad range of recreational users from swimmers and paddleboarders to kayakers and walkers, and there is a need to ensure that our policy, monitoring, and management arrangements remain fit for purpose in a changing environmental and societal context.

This review reflects the need to align the core principles of the Bathing Waters Programme with River Basin Management Planning, while also considering emerging international public health guidance. By also recognising that public health is connected to the health of animals and of our environment, we are seeking to take a more joined-up approach to how we develop and deliver policies and programmes, making better use of the 'One Health' approach.

In 2025, twenty-four of our thirty-three identified bathing waters achieved the 'Excellent' standard. These were all coastal sites that achieved either good or moderate ecological status under the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (NI) 2017 (the Water Framework Regulations). However, Rea's Wood at Lough Neagh was classified as poor status in 2025 meaning that there will be advice against bathing in the 2026 bathing season. Lough Neagh is also classified as poor ecological status under the Water Framework Regulations and it is highly likely that other inland waters that are failing to achieve good ecological status, in particular those classified as poor or bad ecological status, could present health risks to users.

## Scope of the review

This review looks at the existing policy and legislative framework governing bathing waters in Northern Ireland, including how sites are identified, monitored, and managed.

It seeks views on proposals to:

- improve communication with bathing water users,
- consider the length and flexibility of the bathing season,
- adopt a more risk-based monitoring approach,
- refine the criteria for identification,
- strengthen arrangements for candidate sites,
- review the automatic de-identification provision,
- ensure monitoring locations reflect actual use,
- and invite nominations for new sites.

The review also sets out other water quality monitoring carried out by DAERA to meet requirements of the Water Framework Regulations that can be used to inform public health advice.

To inform this consultation, DAERA has worked with the Department of Finance's Innovation & Consultancy Services (ICS) to develop and deliver a collaborative co-design approach for initial stakeholder involvement in this Bathing Waters Policy Review. A one-day workshop took place in November 2025. The primary goal of the workshop was to gather valuable insights from stakeholders on ways to enhance our bathing water programme and generate options. The report on the Co-Design Workshop is published on DAERA's website. This process proved to be invaluable in shaping this consultation document.

## 2.2 Background and Legal Context

Bathing water quality in Northern Ireland is regulated under the Quality of Bathing Water Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 (the Bathing Water Regulations), as amended, which transpose Directive 2006/7/EC concerning the management of bathing water quality. The Regulations set out how bathing waters are identified, monitored, classified and managed to protect and inform public health communications and protect the environment and manage pollution incidents.

The bathing season currently runs annually from 1 June to 15 September. During this period, DAERA carries out approximately weekly water quality monitoring at identified bathing waters and publishes the results to keep the public informed.

The Bathing Water Regulations have a requirement to achieve at least “sufficient” classification status at all bathing waters and, to take realistic and proportionate measures to increase the number of bathing waters meeting the ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ classifications. Where a bathing water is classified as ‘poor’, DAERA and the bathing water operator have a duty to issue advice against bathing.

The Bathing Water Regulations are complementary to The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 which provide a comprehensive framework for the protection, sustainable management, and improvement of rivers, lakes, groundwater and transitional and coastal waters. DAERA is currently consulting on Significant Water Management Issues to inform the development of the fourth cycle River Basin Management Plans. Measures to achieve objectives for bathing water protected areas must be included in River Basin Management Plans.

### Currently Identified Bathing Waters

There are currently 33 identified bathing water sites in Northern Ireland - see [Annex A](#) for Map of Identified Bathing Waters. These include both coastal and one inland location.

## 2.3 Existing Monitoring and Assessment

### Bathing Waters Monitoring and Assessment

DAERA monitors each identified bathing water to check whether it meets the required public health standards. The results help to determine water cleanliness and the public is informed by both annual classification and weekly updates.

DAERA establishes and publishes a bathing water profile for every identified bathing water site in Northern Ireland. This document provides key information about the location, including:

- the physical characteristics of the beach or inland site,
- potential sources of pollution,
- historical water quality results, and
- advice for the public about risks or conditions to be aware of.

These bathing water profiles are available on DAERA’s website ([2025 Bathing Water Profiles](#)).

Together, monitoring and the bathing water profile ensure that accurate, up to date information is available to protect public health and support informed choices by bathing water users.

The bathing water monitoring programme must, as a minimum:

- take and test/analyse at least four water samples from every bathing water during every bathing season;
- take the first such water sample for every bathing season shortly before the start of that season; and
- take water samples from every bathing water throughout the bathing season at regular intervals not exceeding one month.

In practice, the current monitoring programme aims to deliver:

- Weekly water testing for E. coli and intestinal enterococci at every bathing water during the bathing season
- Visual inspections for signs of pollution, including litter, algal blooms, and macroalgae
- Public reporting through the [Bathing Water Quality Dashboard](#), which provides colour-coded results and detailed information for each site

Bathing waters are classified into four categories:

- Excellent
- Good
- Sufficient
- Poor

The current classifications for Northern Ireland's bathing waters can be found on DAERA's website [About Bathing Water Quality | 2025 Classifications](#)

The analysis of bathing water samples is undertaken in accordance with the international standards that are required by the Bathing Water Regulations and the laboratory is accredited by UKAS. This ensures that the sample collection and analysis is robust. However, it is resource-intensive and any proposals to extend the bathing water programme must take into consideration the feasibility and affordability of increased sampling and analysis.

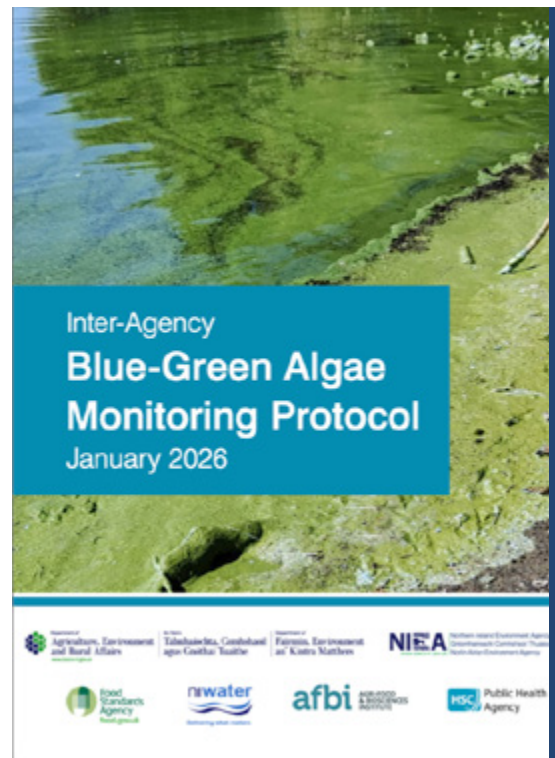
### **Monitoring Blue Green Algae (Cyanobacteria)**

In comparison to the detail provided for monitoring E. coli and intestinal enterococci, The Bathing Water Regulations are not prescriptive about the requirements for monitoring blue green algae. It is for DAERA to determine the monitoring frequency that is necessary to enable the implementation of adequate management measures to prevent exposing bathers to health risks.

While there has regularly been blue-green algae present in Lough Neagh, the algal blooms that were witnessed in 2023 presented a significant risk to public health. This was the same year that monitoring was initiated at Rea’s Wood, Lough Neagh, the first freshwater site monitored as part of the bathing water programme in Northern Ireland. However, for each year from 2023-2025, ‘advice against bathing’ has had to be posted at Rea’s Wood from approximately mid-July through to the autumn, due to a substantial presence of blue-green algae.

The occurrence of blue-green algae has resulted in expanded monitoring arrangements at any identified sites likely to be impacted. This has included Rea’s Wood and the north coast.

DAERA led the development of a multi-agency Protocol for monitoring and decision-making around blue-green algae presence. This has recently been reviewed by the agencies involved and is based on World Health Organisation guidance.



[Inter-agency Blue-Green Algae Monitoring Protocol January 2026](#)

**Other relevant water quality monitoring**

DAERA and NIEA monitor 450 river water bodies, 21 lake water bodies and 25 transitional and coastal water bodies to provide an assessment of the surface water status and identify the pressures on each water body. This monitoring is undertaken to meet the requirements of the Water Framework Regulations, and while it does not include microbiological testing, it includes parameters such as Total Phosphorus, Chlorophyll and Cyanobacteria which the World Health Organisation recommends can be used to screen for potential risks to public health.

**Nominating a New Bathing Water Site**

To support greater transparency and consistency in how new bathing waters are identified in Northern Ireland, we are introducing a formal application process similar to the approach used in England. This includes the provision of a standardised application form, which accompanies this consultation, for proposing new nominated sites.

Applicants will be required to provide key evidence such as patterns of water use, information on local facilities, details of land ownership or permissions, and any relevant environmental considerations. This structured process will help ensure that proposals are assessed fairly, based on clear criteria, and that new designations are supported by robust and transparent information.

## Pollution Reporting

**Urgent or ongoing water pollution incidents** should be reported to the water pollution hotline immediately any time, day or night on **0800 80 70 60**.

Non urgent water pollution issues can be reported to the following email address:

**[emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk)**

**Suspected Blue Green Algae** can be reported using the Bloomin' Algae App

You can download the app directly on **[Google Play](#)** or on the **[App Store](#)**.



For further  
information and  
guidance on the  
Bloomin' Algae App  
scan the QR code



### 3. Consultation - Policy Proposals

To achieve the aims of the Bathing Waters Policy Review, your views on the following areas are sought through this consultation:

<b>1. How information is communicated to bathing water users.</b>
<b>2. Length of the bathing season.</b>
<b>3. A risk-based approach to bathing water monitoring.</b>
<b>4. Criteria for identification of bathing waters.</b>
<b>5. Monitoring of candidate sites.</b>
<b>6. Removal of automatic de-identification.</b>
<b>7. Ensuring monitored locations match usage.</b>
<b>8. Other stakeholder recommendations.</b>

## 1: How information is communicated to bathing water users

We want your views on whether the current communication of bathing water quality information is sufficient and accessible for bathing water users.

### Current position

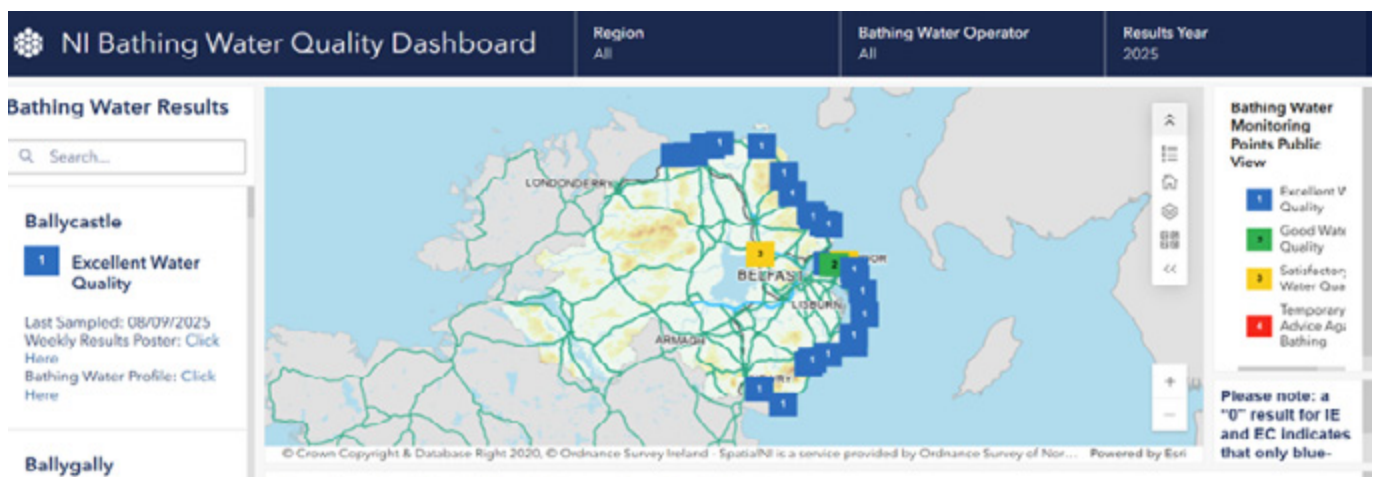
Bathing water operators are required to display public information during the bathing season in an easily accessible location near identified bathing waters. This is typically provided through a bathing water poster displayed on a site information board.

DAERA is also required to disseminate bathing water information actively and promptly using appropriate media and technologies. In July 2025, DAERA launched an interactive Bathing Water Quality Dashboard, bringing together information for all 33 identified bathing waters in Northern Ireland on a single online platform.

The dashboard provides weekly bathing water quality results, with updates issued as soon as possible and typically within 24 hours where a poor result or pollution incident occurs. It includes an interactive map, search and filter functions, and clear presentation of sampling results, with links to detailed Bathing Water Profiles. Temporary Advice Against Bathing notices are published as soon as information is available.

To support transparency, the dashboard includes clear information explaining that results are not provided in real time. Overall, the dashboard represents an important step in improving public access to bathing water information and supporting informed decision-making.

[\(NI Bathing Water Quality Dashboard\)](#)



## Proposal

DAERA and bathing water operators are exploring options to improve how information is made available. It has been proposed that new signage could include a Quick Response (QR) code linking users directly to online water quality information, consistent with approaches used elsewhere in the UK. Where a bathing water is classified as 'poor', a clear symbol would be displayed advising against bathing, along with information on sources of pollution and actions being taken to address this.

Risk forecasting is currently available for six 'at-risk' bathing waters via the SWIM NI app. Forecasting is precautionary in nature, and results broadly align with advice to avoid bathing for 48 hours after rainfall and at sites not classified as 'Excellent'. DAERA is continuing to improve its risk forecasting and is working with NI Water on a trial using Event and Duration Monitors at two vulnerable bathing water sites.



**Consultation Questions:**

**Q1. Have you used the DAERA Bathing Water Quality Dashboard to make informed decisions about where and when to swim at identified bathing waters?**

- Yes
- No
- Not aware of dashboard.

**Q2. If yes, did you find the dashboard easy to use and understand?**

- Yes
- No

**Please include any suggestions for how this could be further improved.**

**Q3. When do you usually check the water quality information for your preferred identified bathing water site? (Select all that apply)**

- I check the information displayed at the site (e.g., notice boards, signage).
- I check the DAERA Bathing Water Quality Dashboard before deciding which bathing site to visit.
- I do not usually check water quality information.
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q4. How would you prefer bathing water quality information to be communicated at an identified bathing water? (Select one option)**

- Scan a QR code to obtain up to date information.
- I would prefer the notice board to be updated regularly with a poster as it is now.
- I would accept the notice board only being updated when a pollution incident or public health concern is identified, with a QR displayed to obtain the most recent results.
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer.**

**Q5. Do you have any suggestions on how risk forecasting could be improved?**

**Please explain your answer.**

## 2: Length of the bathing season

DAERA is seeking views on whether the current bathing season, which runs from 1 June to 15 September, should be changed. The bathing season determines when bathing water monitoring and associated public health protections are put in place.

### Current position

Northern Ireland's current bathing season aligns with that currently operating in Ireland and Scotland. England and Wales have a longer bathing season running from 15 May to 30 September.

There is evidence that bathing activity increasingly takes place outside the current season, particularly in late spring and early autumn. Extending the bathing season could therefore better reflect current patterns of use and provide more comprehensive protection for public health during periods when bathing activity remains high.

Since the completion of the 2022-23 Bathing Water Review in 2024, DAERA has been monitoring outside of the bathing season on a monthly basis. This is to inform the discussion on lengthening the season. To date, the data gathered has been displayed on the web but has not been used for classification purposes. A move to year-round monitoring may have implications for classification as wetter weather conditions and less sunlight may increase bacterial counts.

### Proposal

The options being considered for extending the bathing season are:

- No change - keep as 1 June to 15 September.
- All year round.
- 1 April to 31 October.
- 1 November to 31 March (winter season only, ie, potentially at a selection of sites that are vulnerable to blue-green algae blooms during the period 1 April to 31 October).

DAERA is also exploring the potential for a more flexible approach to bathing season length, whereby different sites could have different season durations. This approach would allow bathing seasons to be tailored to local circumstances, taking account of site-specific usage patterns, environmental conditions, and risk factors. The proposal for bathing waters that are only monitored in the winter season is to explore whether waters that have algal blooms in warmer weather could still be safe for bathing during the winter season. We welcome your feedback to the questions below.

## Consultation Questions:

**Q6. Of the following options please indicate your preference for the bathing water season. (Select one option)**

- No change - keep as 1 June to 15 September.
- All year round/no set dates for bathing season.
- 1 April to 31 October.

**Q7. Do you think it would be useful to incorporate a winter-season only, i.e. from 1 November to 31 March, at a selection of sites that are vulnerable to blue-green algae blooms in the spring / summer / autumn?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer.**

**Q8. If you selected, all year round as your response to Question 6, i.e. there will be no set dates for the bathing season. Are you content with DAERA adopting a more flexible, site-specific monitoring timetable based on usage and risk throughout the year?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer.**

### 3: Bathing Water Monitoring

The Department is seeking your views on the potential to move towards a risk-based approach to bathing water monitoring.

#### Current approach

At present, DAERA monitors all identified bathing waters on twenty occasions during each bathing season. This approach ensures a robust dataset for classification purposes and public health protection.

#### Proposed approach

Evidence indicates that the current level of sampling may not be necessary to adequately assess water quality at all sites, particularly those that have demonstrated long-term stability and consistently high-quality classification results.

The Department is therefore seeking your views on whether monitoring could move towards a risk-based sampling model, whereby stable, consistently 'Excellent' bathing waters are monitored less frequently, but no less than the minimum legal requirement of one sample per month. While sites that are more variable or higher risk receive greater monitoring focus. Sampling effort would continue to be linked to bathing water classifications and risk profiles, ensuring that public health protection remains central to the approach.

Adopting this proposed risk-based approach could enable more strategic use of resources across both existing and potential new bathing water sites, while maintaining confidence in the monitoring programme and the information provided to the public. It could also support the proposed extension of the bathing season, as a risk-based approach would permit monitoring effort to be adjusted in a way that ensures resources are focused where they are most needed to protect public health, while maintaining appropriate coverage across the bathing water network.

#### Consultation Questions:

**Q9. Do you agree with the proposal set out above to introduce a risk-based sampling approach?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer, including any risks or benefits you wish to highlight.**

## 4: Criteria for identification of Bathing Waters

DAERA is seeking your views on whether the criteria used to determine if a site qualifies for identification as a bathing water should be reviewed, to ensure these remain appropriate and reflect current patterns of recreational water use.

### How bathing waters are currently identified

Sites nominated for consideration as bathing waters are assessed through a staged evaluation process. Progression through this process depends on a number of factors, including whether there is a Bathing Water Operator willing to manage the site, whether the location is safe and accessible for monitoring, and whether there is sufficient evidence the site is used by a large number of bathers. The guide value used in Northern Ireland to define a “large” number of bathers at a site is 45 bathers on at least one occasion or 100 site users on at least two occasions.

Where nominated sites meet these criteria, these have been identified under the Bathing Water Regulations. Sites that do not fully meet the criteria, or which are assessed as lower priority at a particular point in time, may be retained for future consideration, allowing the Department to take account of changes in usage, management arrangements, or other relevant factors over time.

### Proposed approach

The Department is seeking views on whether the existing criteria and assessment process remain fit for purpose, or whether changes could improve transparency, consistency, or the ability to reflect evolving recreational use of waters, while continuing to ensure effective public health protection.

Currently, sites are formally identified by an amendment to Schedule 1 of The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008. An alternative approach used in the rest of the UK is to publish a list of sites to be monitored each year. This would allow for a more flexible approach to identification and de-identification of Northern Ireland bathing waters.

Under this proposal, DAERA would continue to seek applications for new bathing waters, but the identification would only require an updated publication and no longer require legislative amendments to Schedule 1.

DAERA is also considering whether the scope of the Bathing Waters programme should be expanded to reflect the wide variety of people who spend time on or near the water, including paddleboarders, kayakers, and others engaged in recreational activities.

This was discussed specifically at the stakeholder workshop in November 2025, along with the concept of risk and targeting resources towards the highest risk activities.

The World Health Organisation recognises that risks to health will depend on the degree of water contact and these may be classified as follows:

- No contact
- Incidental contact - recreational activity in which only the limbs are regularly wetted and greater contact (including swallowing water) is unusual (e.g. boating, fishing, wading).
- Whole-body contact - recreational activity in which the whole body or the face and trunk are frequently immersed, or the face is frequently wetted by spray, and where it is likely that some water will be swallowed (e.g. swimming, diving, surfing, sailboarding, kiteboarding, whitewater canoeing).

The Bathing Water Directive was introduced to manage public health risks associated with bathing and this has been the focus of the Bathing Waters programme to date. However, there are other recreational activities that take place at existing bathing waters which benefit indirectly from the water quality monitoring and public information that is provided for bathers e.g. our most popular surf beaches on the North Antrim coast are also monitored as bathing waters and all 33 sites have had year-round monitoring since 2024.

DAERA has very limited information on other recreational activities that take place in waters that are not currently identified as bathing waters. DAERA is requesting information to understand the scale of the activities and whether they are taking place in waters where there may be a risk to public health.

### Consultation Questions:

**Q10. Do you think the current criteria used to determine whether a site qualifies for identification as a bathing water remains appropriate? (Criteria include evidence of high numbers of bathers, site safety and accessibility, and the presence of an operator.)**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain the reasons for your answer.**

**Q11. Should Northern Ireland adopt an approach similar to other UK regions where the list of bathing waters is published annually rather than amended through legislation?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer.**

**Q12. Should the bathing water programme be extended to include other recreational activities that involve whole-body contact such as diving, surfing, sailboarding, kiteboarding, whitewater canoeing?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Please explain your answer.**

**Q13. Are you aware of any locations where recreational whole-body water contact activities occur that are not currently identified bathing waters?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**If yes, please list these locations and describe the activities taking place.**

## 5: Monitoring of Candidate Sites

DAERA is seeking your views on whether the introduction of a more structured 'pre-identification' or 'candidate site' stage would be a useful approach for managing the identification of new bathing waters in the future.

### How candidate sites have been monitored

Historically, bathing waters were formally identified before routine monitoring was initiated. However, during the 2022–23 Bathing Waters Review, a different approach was taken, whereby a number of sites were monitored in advance of formal identification. This provided additional evidence on water quality and site characteristics helping to inform subsequent decisions on identification.

### Proposed approach

Building on this experience, DAERA is interested in views on whether the introduction of a more structured 'pre-application' or 'candidate site' stage would be a useful approach for managing bathing waters in the future. Under such an approach, selected sites could be monitored for a defined period before any decision is taken on formal identification.

This proposal would enable DAERA to take an evidence-based decision on whether it is feasible and affordable to achieve at least "sufficient" bathing water quality. If DAERA assessed that it would be infeasible or disproportionately expensive, permanent advice against bathing would be provided rather than identifying the site as a bathing water.

It is important to emphasise that, where permanent advice against bathing is applied, the requirements of the Water Framework Regulations would continue to apply to the water body. In such cases, River Basin Management Plans must still include appropriate measures aimed at achieving at least good surface water status in line with statutory objectives.

The potential benefits of this approach could include:

- ensures that public health information is available at popular sites that may meet the criteria for identification as bathing waters;
- avoids identifying sites where water quality presents a persistent or unacceptable risk, ensuring that public health messaging is accurate, proportionate and evidence-based;
- targets formal identification on sites where improvement is feasible and helps ensure that monitoring, regulatory and investment resources are focused where they can deliver the greatest public health and environmental benefit.
- provides evidence to support river basin management planning, including the identification of measures that may be needed to support the achievement of Good or Excellent water quality status at a site.

The Department is seeking views on whether this approach would improve transparency, support evidence-based decision-making and strengthen public health protection, as well as any challenges or risks that should be considered in adopting such a model. Your views are also sought on whether water quality testing should take place at sites that are being considered as candidate bathing waters, prior to any formal identification decision.



## Consultation Questions:

**Q14. Do you think DAERA should introduce a more structured 'pre application' or 'candidate site' stage for sites being considered as bathing waters? (This would allow selected sites to be monitored for a defined period before decisions on formal identification.)**

Yes

No

Not sure.

**Please explain the reasons for your answer.**

**Q15. Do you agree that monitoring candidate sites in advance of formal identification would improve transparency and public confidence in the decision making process?**

Yes

No

Not sure.

## 6: Removal of automatic de-identification

The Department is seeking your views on whether poor-performing identified bathing water sites should be reviewed on an individual basis rather than being automatically de-identified after five years.

### Current Position

The Bathing Water Regulations provide that if an identified bathing water site is assessed as one for which it would be infeasible or disproportionately expensive to achieve at least “sufficient” bathing water status, a decision could be taken before the end of the 5-year period to de-identify the site and issue permanent advice against bathing.

In 2024, Defra and the Welsh Government consulted on reforms to the Bathing Water Regulations 2013 covering England and Wales, including proposals to remove the provision for automatic de-designation of bathing waters following five consecutive years of ‘poor’ classification. The consultation recognised that improvements in bathing water quality often depend on complex environmental factors and infrastructure investment, which may require longer timeframes to deliver measurable outcomes.

As a result of that consultation, the Bathing Water (Amendment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2025 came into force in November 2025. These reforms replaced automatic de-designation with a case-by-case assessment by the relevant regulators, with decisions informed by evidence on whether it is feasible and proportionate to improve water quality at a site. This approach allows continued focus on improvement measures where there is a reasonable prospect of achieving better outcomes, rather than automatically removing identification status after a fixed period of poor classification.

### Proposal

The automatic de-identification provision for an identified bathing water site has never been used in Northern Ireland, as no identified bathing water site has been classified as ‘poor’ for five consecutive years. The Department is however considering whether a similar case by case approach as set out above should be adopted in Northern Ireland. This would require the removal of the automatic de-identification following five consecutive years of ‘poor’ classification and potentially replacing this with an option to extend the bathing water identification for a specified period to allow a bathing water to achieve at least “sufficient” classification.

This proposal recognises that the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) and NI Water investment planning operate in 6-year cycles, with the 3rd cycle RBMP covering 2021-27 and NI Water’s PC21 covering up to March 2028. The Department and NI Water are already preparing for the fourth Cycle RBMP and PC28 respectively.

It would be highly unlikely for the necessary RBMP measures, including wastewater treatment infrastructure improvements, to be identified, developed and delivered for newly identified

bathing waters within the period 2028–2033. In such circumstances, it may be preferable to allow additional time for the development and implementation of improvement measures through the next RBMP and price control cycles, rather than requiring automatic de-identification of the bathing water after five years.

This proposal would introduce greater flexibility and enable better alignment with RBMP and PC cycles. It would allow a bathing water site to remain identified beyond five years where an evidence-based assessment shows that it is feasible and affordable to implement appropriate measures to achieve effective improvements in bathing water quality.

Your views are sought on whether a more flexible, evidence-based decision-making process would better support long-term water quality improvements and public health protection, while maintaining transparency and confidence in the bathing waters programme.

### Consultation Questions:

**Q16. Do you agree that the automatic de identification of bathing waters after five consecutive years of ‘poor’ classification should be changed?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Q17. Do you agree that poor performing bathing waters should instead be reviewed on a case by case basis rather than automatically de identified after five years?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Q18. Do you think a more flexible, evidence based decision making process would better support long term water quality improvements?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**Q19. Do you think this approach would strengthen or maintain public health protection at poor performing sites?**

Yes

No

Not sure.

**Additional comments.**

## 7: Ensuring monitored locations match actual usage

DAERA is seeking your views on whether the current bathing water monitoring locations accurately reflect where people are swimming at each identified bathing water site.

### Current Position

The Department currently monitors 33 identified bathing water sites across Northern Ireland. Details of these sites and their monitoring locations are available at: [see Annex A for Map of Identified Bathing Waters](#).

The Department recognises that the popularity and use of bathing waters can change over time. Changes in access arrangements, the provision of new facilities, local coastal processes, or evolving recreational trends may result in bathers using different parts of a beach, river or shoreline than those originally identified for monitoring.

### Proposal

We are therefore inviting respondents to review their local identified bathing water site and consider whether the current monitoring location reflects where most people now enter the water and swim. The information you provide will help ensure that monitoring remains representative, robust, and continues to provide accurate public health advice.

Further information on current monitoring locations can be found at: [2025 Bathing Water Profiles](#).

### Consultation Questions:

**Q20. Are the current monitoring locations for the 33 identified bathing waters appropriate?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure.

**If not, please tell us the swimming location for your identified bathing water site.**

## 8: Other stakeholder recommendations

The Department welcomes any additional stakeholder recommendations that could help to improve the effectiveness, transparency and long term sustainability of the bathing water programme.

You are invited to provide any additional recommendations you believe could support improvements to bathing water management, public health protection, environmental outcomes or user engagement. These may relate to operational practices, communication and information provision, monitoring approaches, partnership working, or any other relevant aspect of the bathing waters programme.

All responses will be considered as part of the overall review, alongside evidence gathered through earlier engagement and policy development work.

### Consultation Questions:

**Q21. Do you have any other recommendations for improving the bathing water programme that have not been raised in this consultation?**

## 4. How to Respond

Responses to this consultation are invited via Citizen Space at: [Consultation on the Bathing Waters Policy Review for Northern Ireland - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#)

The online survey is quick and simple to complete. Please supplement your response with any relevant supporting information, evidence and/or analysis.

If you are unable to complete the survey online, please contact the team by email: [waterpolicy@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:waterpolicy@daera-ni.gov.uk)

**We would encourage an online response in order to limit any environmental impact**

**Those affected:** This is a public consultation, open to all who may have an interest and who wish to be part of improving the Bathing Waters Policy for Northern Ireland. It is hoped that many will take an interest in this consultation and provide feedback. All views are welcomed by the Department.

**Duration:** This consultation will run for a **period of 12 weeks**.

It will open at **12 noon on Friday 29 May 2026** and closes at **5pm on Friday 21 August 2026**.

### 4.1. Publication of Responses

#### Confidentiality of Consultations

The Department may publish a summary of responses following completion of the consultation process. Your response, and all other responses to the consultation, may be disclosed on request. The Department can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. Before you submit your response, please read the paragraphs below on the confidentiality of consultations as these provide guidance on the legal position about any information given by you in response to this consultation. Any confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system in e-mail responses will not be treated as such a request.

#### Data Protection

Section 8(e) of the Data Protection Act 2018 permits processing of personal data when necessary for an activity that supports or promotes democratic engagement. Information provided by respondents to this consultation exercise will be held and used for the purposes of the administration of this current exercise and subsequently disposed of in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK General Data Protection Regulation.

## Freedom of Information

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority (the Department in this case). This right of access to information includes information provided in response to a consultation. The Department cannot automatically consider as confidential information supplied to it in response to a consultation. However, it does have the responsibility to decide whether any information provided by you in response to this consultation, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. This means that information provided by you in response to the consultation is unlikely to be treated as confidential, except in very particular circumstances.

The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the Freedom of Information Act provides that:

- the Department should only accept information from third parties in confidence if it is necessary to obtain that information in connection with the exercise of any of the Department's functions and it would not otherwise be provided;
- the Department should not agree to hold information received from third parties 'in confidence' which is not confidential in nature;
- acceptance by the Department of confidentiality provisions must be for good reasons, capable of being justified to the Information Commissioner.

For further information about confidentiality of responses, please contact the Information Commissioner's Office:

Tel: 0303 123 1113

Email: [ni@ico.org.uk](mailto:ni@ico.org.uk) Website: <https://ico.org.uk>

## 5. Next Steps

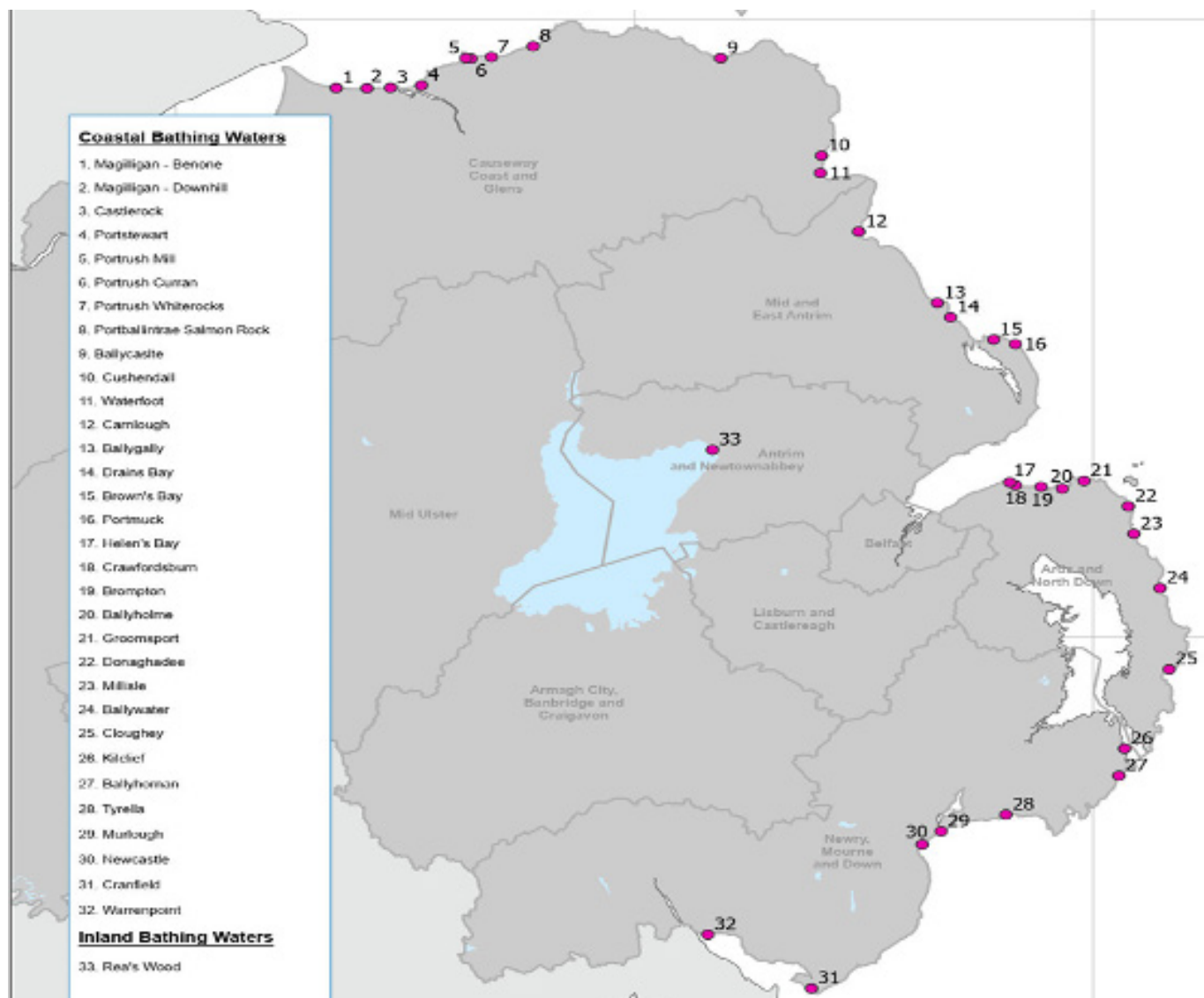
After the consultation closes, all responses will be carefully reviewed and analysed. Your feedback will help shape the Bathing Water Policy Review for Northern Ireland. The Department will use the evidence gathered to update the Review and develop a set of options for the Minister to consider.

We encourage everyone with an interest in bathing waters to participate in this important consultation and share their views. Your contribution is important in helping to inform future policy decisions.



# Annex A

## Map of Identified Bathing Waters in Northern Ireland Bathing Water Areas | DAERA Open Data



## Annex B

### Summary of Bathing Water Operator Responsibilities

The responsibilities placed on a Bathing Water Operator by the Quality of Bathing Water Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 are summarised below:

- Bathing Water Operators must ensure that signage at a bathing water includes the information set out in the guidance for Bathing Water Operators

When Bathing Water Operators become aware of pollution incidents/ abnormal situations/ exceptional weather events that could be considered a risk to human health they should:

- consult DAERA (Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs).
- inform DAERA's pollution hotline on 0800 807 060.
- take appropriate management measures to protect bathers' health.
- provide information to the public.
- where necessary, remove any waste.
- and, if necessary, issue temporary advice against bathing.

Where DAERA (the Department) has issued a notice requiring Bathing Water Operators to comply with the Bathing Water Regulations:

- comply with and implement the measures which are specified in the notice;
- provide the Department with any information it requires in carrying out its functions under the Bathing Water Regulations.
- display the current classification of the bathing water provided by DAERA and where appropriate, any advice against bathing.

Where a bathing water receives a poor classification:

- in the following bathing season, signs must display the appropriate classification and the symbol advising the public against bathing. Information must also be provided about why the site is not recommended for bathing.

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**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil  
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

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**Fairmin, Environment  
an' Kintra Matthers**

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