

The background is a solid blue color with a repeating pattern of light blue silhouettes of swimmers in various strokes, water droplets, and green reeds with brown heads. The text is centered in the middle of the page.

Bathing water TOOLKIT

Bathing water toolkit

With the bathing season fast approaching, we are encouraging CEN councillors to lead or participate in local campaigns to achieve bathing water status for rivers in their ward. CEN has put together this guide to help councillors with making their application to Defra for bathing water status.

What are bathing waters

Bathing waters are sites that are popular for recreation, i.e. swimming and paddling, and have been officially designated by Defra under the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. The UK already has over 400 designated bathing waters. But with the exception of one river and a handful of lakes, almost all of the sites are located on the coast.

Bathing waters are the only bodies of water in the UK where bacteria levels are consistently monitored and the data about the water quality published. Among other things, this information is useful to help swimmers avoid pollution and make informed choices about where and when to swim.

Why apply

Only 14% of English rivers are in good ecological condition and none have achieved good chemical status. Qualifying for bathing water status is a hugely important step in helping to clean up these bodies of water because, if your application is successful, the Environment Agency must then work to improve the quality of the bathing water, by engaging with relevant stakeholders and regularly testing the water.

This model has been proven in the context of English coasts, which have seen significant improvements to water quality since the mass approval of bathing water status applications. In the early 1990s just 28% of bathing waters met the highest standards in force at that time but based on today's data, 99% of bathing waters now meet the minimum standard, with 70.7% reaching the highest standards. As such, we hope that by increasing the amount of applications made specifically for rivers, these local, councillor-driven campaigns for bathing water status can help to improve the quality of rivers across the country.

Who can apply

Local authorities usually apply for designation, but anyone can technically apply. However, local authorities **must** support all applications. Landowners must support applications for privately owned sites. As a member of your local authority, you are therefore a key stakeholder in such an application. This could be a popular campaign for you to lead locally that has a direct impact on the health of your local river.

How to apply

There is no specific form to fill out in order to apply for bathing water status, but each application must include evidence for the following: a user survey, available facilities, and a local consultation. Please read below for more information on each of these three components.

Once you have collected the relevant evidence, submit your application for bathing water status via email to bathingwater@defra.gov.uk by 31 October.

1. User survey

User surveys are a simple data gathering exercise to help demonstrate demand for your chosen bathing location. Only when sufficient demand is demonstrated can an application be approved. Your user surveys need not be any more than a simple tally chart but must show a breakdown of the number of swimmers, children that are either swimming or paddling, and other beach/water users.

Having picked your chosen bathing water location to monitor, throughout the course of a single bathing season, you must survey users of the space. The user surveys must:

- All take place within bathing season (15 May to 30 September)
- Cover a minimum of 20 days, including weekend or bank holidays. Half of all survey days must be during school holiday periods.

There's no set limit for how many bathers are needed for a site to be identified as a bathing water because this is relative to the size of the local population, for example, as well as the availability of facilities. In order to best prove demand for bathing water status, you should carry out your survey when you expect a high number of users, this will likely be during the warmest part of the day and on especially warm days.

2. Highlighting facilities

Your bathing water must have some relevant infrastructure nearby that supports and promotes bathing. Include details about these facilities within your application, including photographs. Facilities may include:

- Making access to the site easier
- Changing facilities
- Public toilets
- Parking or public transport
- Lifeguards
- First aid service
- Cafes, shops, or kiosks

3. Local consultation

The final element of your application should provide evidence of a consultation you have carried out during the bathing season. You should consult with groups that may be affected by the designation, such as:

- Bathers and other water users
- Owners of waterside facilities
- Owners and operators of waterside businesses
- Residents of the closest town or village
- Local environmental and civic groups, and the chamber of commerce
- Neighbourhood and community representative groups
- Parish and town councils (where they are not the landowner)
- Local tourist office, or other local tourism body
- Local regeneration office, or other local regeneration body
- County, borough, district or unitary authority (where they are not the landowner)

There are many different ways to consult these groups, with examples including comments on a community Facebook/social media post, visiting local businesses to engage them in a conversation, a physical survey, interviews at the bathing water site, and email outreach. Regardless of your chosen methods of data collection, be sure that the answers are documented.

Defra notes that any consultation must make clear that if the bathing water designation is withdrawn then:

- The bathing water quality would no longer be monitored
- The bathing water may lose existing high levels of protection
- No future improvements aimed at meeting bathing water standards would be made

Something to note

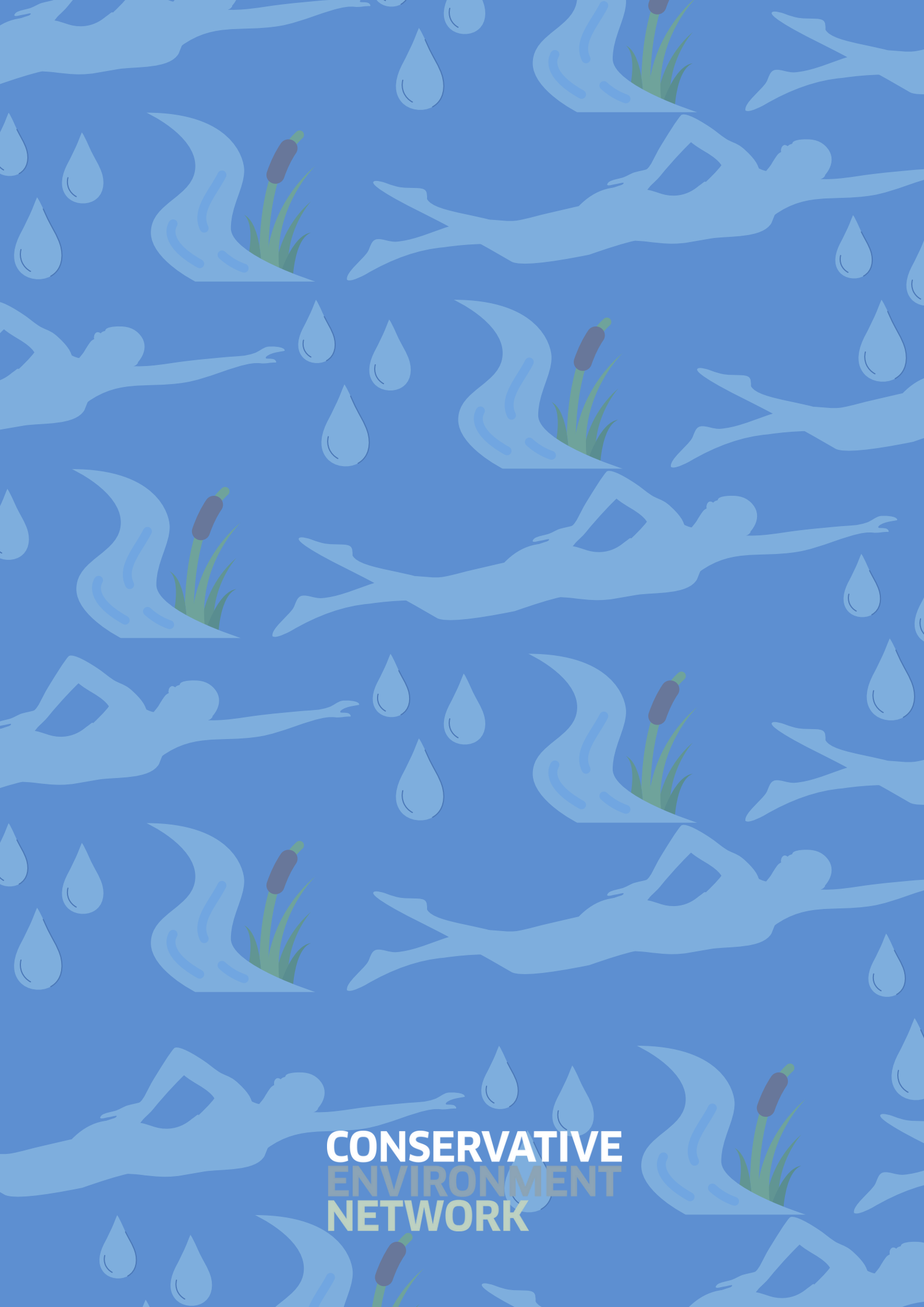
The quality of the water does not play a role in determining whether a site is designated or not. Achieving bathing water status is the first step in a process of improving water quality, not the end point. As such, it is important to be transparent about what achieving bathing water status means and the process it is helping to trigger.

An approved site's water will be categorised as 'excellent', 'good', 'sufficient' or 'poor' on the basis of bacteria levels with signage to display this categorisation at the site. Sites will be rated annually, and on a short term basis in response to temporary pollution. Even when a site is designated but the water quality is classified as 'poor' meaning there might be an increased risk of illness, the site remains open.

Bathing water designations improve monitoring and reporting of water quality and pollution. This makes it easier to hold polluters to account and identify the actions required to reduce pollution. It also informs residents about when and where it is safe to swim. But the designation does stop pollution from occurring.

Additional resources

- [View a map of all current bathing waters in England](#)
- [Find out what happens when Defra receives your application](#)
- [Read the case study of Ilkley, the first river in the UK to receive bathing water status](#)
- [See what signs will need to be displayed at your bathing water if you application is approved](#)
- [The GOV.UK guidance on applying for bathing water status](#)
- [The Outdoor Swimming Society's list of pros and cons for applying](#)
- Have any further questions? Call Defra's bathing water team at **074432 6527** or email bathingwater@defra.gov.uk



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