

Better Beaches Report 2020



Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

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Better Beaches Report 2020

1. Introduction

DAERA's vision of 'sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone', encompasses regulatory responsibilities for air, land and water. It includes an advocacy role in promoting understanding of and access to the marine environment.

DAERA works in partnership with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB), NI Water, community groups, local councils and other land-owners like the National Trust to manage our bathing waters and beaches through the annual Better Beaches Forum.

Many aspects of how we manage bathing waters in Northern Ireland have changed since monitoring began over 25 years ago. Not least of these changes was the introduction of more stringent bathing water quality standards in 2015. Since then we have faced and continue to work through many uncertainties and challenges but despite this, our existing 26 "identified" bathing waters continue to perform well when compared with other parts of the UK, Ireland and further afield.

In consultation with the Northern Ireland Better Beaches Forum partners, DAERA first produced the Better Beaches Report in 2015 and then again in 2018. We continue to further improve our beaches as an important natural asset, both recreationally and to underpin coastal economies.

Due to the COVID19 pandemic, DAERA Marine & Fisheries Division were unable to carry out the usual monitoring programme in 2020, but were able to put in place a reduced bathing water programme. This covered sampling occasions in June, July, August and September, was subject to continuous review and was dependent on the ongoing current Government COVID 19 advice, satisfying issues such as social distancing and hygiene.



Figure 1.1 Northern Ireland Identified Bathing Waters

The management of our beaches and bathing waters links to a number of the outcomes for Northern Ireland under the draft Programme for Government (PfG);

Outcome 2 – We live and work sustainably, protecting the environment

Outcome 4 – We enjoy long, healthy, active lives

Outcome 10 – We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.

Bathing water quality links closely to the PfG general water quality indicator, which measures progress in reducing our main pollution pressures from both agriculture and Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTWs).

Every 2 years the UK holds a Bathing Waters Conference to discuss the challenges in preserving clean, safe and attractive beaches and bathing waters. This is managed and overseen by the UK Bathing Water Group which has representation from all devolved administrations and their associated environment agencies. The latest conference was

hosted by DAERA and was held in Belfast at 'The Assembly Buildings', Fisherwick Place on 19-21 November 2019. Most presentations from the conference are available at the links below.

[UK bathing water conference presentations](#)

[UK bathing water 2017 conference presentations](#)

One of the highlights of the conference was the subject of tackling marine litter. Here in Northern Ireland, work has been ongoing with over 45 tonnes of rubbish having been removed from the sea by fishermen taking part in the Fishing for Litter scheme. The scheme is now operating in our three Fishery Harbours of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie with 135 boats participating. In August 2017 Warrenpoint joined the scheme and at least ten vessels have signed up to take part.

Whilst overall, bathing water quality is improving, there is no room for complacency. At Ballyholme, we saw the bathing water fail to meet the minimum standards of the revised Bathing Water Directive in both 2016 and 2017. However the classification at Ballyholme has improved to Sufficient in both 2018 and 2019 and water quality continues to be actively addressed through sewerage infrastructure improvements, catchment investigations and remedial actions.

Between 2011 and 2015, the then Minister hosted a number of Good Beach Summits, bringing together key stakeholders who developed an action plan. In 2016, the Good Beach Summits evolved into the Better Beaches Forum and the action plan was consolidated into three strands focusing on;

- Improving water quality;
- Improving beach cleanliness, facilities management and signage; and
- Keeping the public and media better informed.

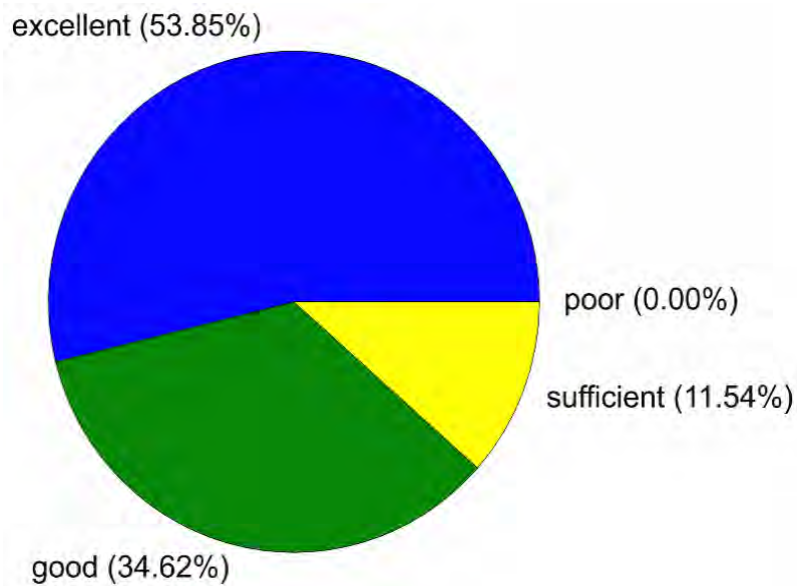
These actions will underpin the improvement of the coastal and tourist economy.

2. Improving Water Quality

2.1 Overall Compliance and Trends 2019

All 26 monitored coastal bathing waters were classified overall as reaching minimum standards. 14 locations were classified as "Excellent", 9 "Good" and 3 "Sufficient".

Figure 2.1 shows the overall annual classification for 2019.



In 2019 all of Northern Ireland's identified bathing waters met the Bathing Water Directive 2006/7/EC minimum standards.

The percentage of bathing waters at excellent water quality status has changed from 58% in 2018 to 54% in 2019. This represents fourteen beaches around Northern Ireland's coast meeting the stringent water quality criteria in 2019 enabling them to apply for Blue Flag status. Cloughy beach improved from Good to Excellent, whilst Ballycastle and Millisle beaches dropped from Excellent to Good.

Table 2.1 demonstrates the changes at specific beaches in annual classification since 2016. Consistent Excellent bathing water quality performers include; Magilligan (Benone), Magilligan (Downhill), Portstewart, Portrush (Mill) West, Portrush (Whiterocks), Portballintrae, Helen’s Bay, Tyrella, Murlough Co Down and Cranfield (Cranfield Bay).

BATHING WATER	2016	2017	2018	2019
Magilligan (Benone)				
Magilligan (Downhill)				
Castlerock				
Portstewart				
Portrush (Mill) West				
Portrush (Curran) East				
Portrush (Whiterocks)				
Portballintrae				
Ballycastle				
Waterfoot				
Carnlough				
Ballygally				
Brown’s Bay				
Helen’s Bay				
Crawfordsburn				
Ballyholme				
Groomspoint				
Millisle				
Ballywalter				
Cloughey	Not identified	Not identified		
Tyrella				
Murlough Co Down				
Newcastle				
Cranfield (Cranfield Bay)				
Kilclief	Not identified	Not identified		
Ballyhorman	Not identified	Not identified		

Northern Ireland’s beaches have again performed well in comparison with the rest of the UK. Here all 26 (100%) of our beaches met at least the minimum standards of the Bathing Water Directive in 2019. Wales had 100%, England 98% and Scotland 92% meeting the minimum standards for bathing water quality.

Northern Ireland had 54% of its identified bathing waters achieve “Excellent” bathing water classification in 2019. In comparison, Wales had 79%, England 71% and Scotland, 34% achieving “Excellent”. These are encouraging results when factors such as wet weather events and location are taken into account. Northern Ireland continues to have

high numbers of identified bathing waters meeting minimum water quality standards and over half of our bathing waters meeting “Excellent” bathing water classification.

2.2 Source apportionment studies

Bathing waters are prioritised for catchment-based pollution source apportionment studies on an annual basis. These studies are carried out by DAERA staff and target potential pollution sources within the bathing water catchments of those sites that are failing, or where there is a risk of deterioration. The studies conclude in a report for each bathing water and make specific recommendations for improving water quality.

Since 2016 a number of bathing waters have been prioritised for targeted investigations through source apportionment studies. Of recent note are Ballyholme and Portrush (Curran) East bathing waters, which have both seen improvements to their water quality resulting in improved classifications.

Ballyholme

In both 2016 and 2017, Ballyholme bathing water failed to meet the minimum water quality standards and was classified as “Poor”. In 2017 Ballyholme bathing water was prioritised for investigation by DAERA staff to determine outstanding sources of pollution. A protracted and intensive investigation determined that the catchment draining down into Ballyholme bathing water was complex, vulnerable to pressures from agricultural runoff and impacted by overflows from the urban wastewater network. A number of possible remedial and improvement measures were identified and discussed with Northern Ireland Water and NIEA colleagues.

Northern Ireland Water has carried out an extensive programme of upgrades to the wastewater network in the Bangor area with an estimated £13 million investment to date. Upgrades to the sewerage infrastructure, combined sewer overflows (CSO’s), Wastewater Pumping Stations (WwPS’s) and the removal of unsatisfactory intermittent discharges have already been successfully undertaken.

A further programme of works is ongoing in 2020 in the Bangor/Ballyholme area with the aim of providing better protection of the water quality at Ballyholme.

NIEA inspectors carried out many farm inspections and pollution investigations to identify and rectify agricultural issues affecting the catchment.

In 2018 the classification at Ballyholme improved to “Sufficient” and remains at “Sufficient” in 2019, meaning that it is meeting the minimum water quality standards of the Bathing Water Directive. This improvement in water quality can be directly attributed to the considerable amount of remedial action that was carried out in the area by Northern Ireland Water and the thorough investigations by NIEA inspectors.

Portrush (Curran) East

In 2016 and 2017 Portrush (Curran) East saw a decline from “Good” to “Sufficient” water quality, and was seen to be at risk of a further deterioration. A source apportionment study was commenced in 2015 in an attempt to identify and rectify possible issues in the catchment which might be impacting on water quality. This study is still ongoing and has focussed on both rural and urban points of interest within the catchment. In 2017 a Microbial Source Tracking (MST) sampling and analysis programme was initiated to add to the study being undertaken in the area. Despite extensive sampling and investigation over the past number of years, results have proven to be inconclusive. Through the intensive inspections and investigation regime however a number of small problems have been rectified in relation to the NI Water sewerage network and the water quality at Portrush (Curran) East has improved to “Good”. The catchment has emerged as a complex mixture of both agricultural and sewage related inputs and further studies are needed to fully understand these issues.

Further Studies

Other investigations carried out so far have identified various problems within catchments ranging from agricultural pollution to sewerage misconnections; leachate from business premises and poorly functioning septic tanks. These findings are passed to the DAERA regulatory and advisory teams and NI Water to be addressed.

In general bathing waters appear to be particularly vulnerable to heavy rainfall events, which can flush pollution into the bathing water. Pollution normally disperses quickly, returning bathing water quality to safe levels (within 24 hours). It remains the case that general advice is to refrain from bathing for up to 48 hours after heavy rainfall.

2.3 Prediction and Discounting

Currently, it takes 24 hours from collecting a water sample at a beach to obtaining a result. Members of the public are therefore informed within 24 hours of a pollution event. DAERA recognises the need for a proactive approach to bathing water monitoring. In line with the rest of the UK and Ireland, a modelling system is currently under development to predict when bathing waters are likely to experience short term pollution events, this is being funded under INTERREG VA, with the three lead partners being University College Dublin, Agri Food and Biosciences Institute and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful. When operational, members of the public will be warned of poor water quality via electronic signage in advance of short-term pollution events, which should result in better public health protection measures. The project is cross-border and is supported by coastal councils and DAERA. The scheme has recently been extended and it is hoped that it will be completed in 2021.

2.4 Water and Sewerage Improvements

Department for Infrastructure and NI Water continue to invest in improving water quality through the Price Control (PC) process and through joint working with both DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division and NIEA Water Regulation. Significant investment was made under PC13 in improvements to wastewater treatment works (WWTW) and networks including major upgrades at Newcastle, Magilligan (Benone) and Bangor (Ballyholme). Further significant investment has been committed under PC15 which runs until 2021 for capital works which includes improvements at Ballycastle, Bangor and Millisle. Funding was secured for the installation of event and duration monitors (EDMs) at NI Water network assets within 2km of bathing waters and a prioritised number of these were installed in 2019 and 2020. The way in which information will be forwarded from these monitors to DAERA is being agreed between NIEA and NI Water.

2.5 Improving the Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) “Spill” policy

The more stringent requirements of the revised Bathing Water Directive has implications for Member States in terms of discharge consenting and CSO spills policy. The policy for intermittent discharges from sewer networks sets a maximum number of spills permitted per bathing season for CSOs which have the potential to impact on a bathing water. The spills policy sets the maximum permitted number of spills from CSOs within a range of 3km of Bathing Waters to 3 per bathing season, an alternative approach is to

demonstrate no deterioration in water quality via modelling. EDMs are being installed under the PC15 programme to improve our collective understanding of this area.

2.6 Misconnections to NIW Storm Drainage Systems

All new houses and businesses should have two separate sewers, separating foul water to the sewer and storm water to discharge to local watercourses. When pipes are incorrectly connected, misconnections occur resulting in direct discharge of sewage to watercourses. This tends to be either in older properties or where new appliances are connected incorrectly.

Misconnections can pollute local streams, rivers and beaches, damage wildlife and put health at risk. DfI, DAERA, NIW, District Councils and NIEA are working together to tackle the issue of misconnections focusing on preventative measures. **ConnectRight campaign** is a partnership of organisations who are working to reduce water pollution from drains and sewers.

2.7 Septic tank consenting policy

In 2012 Northern Ireland Environment Agency developed a new application process for discharges from domestic wastewater treatment systems (septic tanks) which continues to operate to date. Domestic discharges are required to have a consent to discharge to the aquatic environment from NIEA. The application process assesses the suitability of the systems proposed or existing, carrying out site inspections for all existing to ensure the systems are operating as they should. If a septic tank is found to be having a detrimental impact on the receiving environment, remedial work is required to ensure that adequate treatment is provided, before consent is issued. This has an overall positive impact upon water quality in rural catchments which drain into bathing waters.

2.8 Working with the Agriculture sector

Agriculture accounts for approximately 70 % of the total Northern Ireland land area of 1.4 million hectares. The most significant pressures on water quality are from the release of the nutrients phosphorus and nitrogen from agricultural sources. Agriculture can also give rise to sediment entering waters due to damage caused to river banks and lake shores by livestock trampling and from other types of land disturbance e.g. ploughing and overgrazing. Agricultural activities are also a source of certain microbial vectors causing

human illnesses including cryptosporidium and *E. coli* bacteria which can be an issue in bathing water areas.

Increasing agricultural production within the context of the overall objective of protecting and improving water quality is challenging. Society needs to work together to develop innovative approaches to manage nutrients sustainably and reduce pressure on the water environment.

What are we currently doing to control pollution from agriculture?

There have been a number of new regulations, projects and research introduced since 2015 to help better address the pressures from farming and this research should yield practical measures for farmers and for catchment management in order to provide sustainable long term solutions.

- The Nitrates Action Programme and the Phosphorus Regulations have been revised and combined into the **Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2019-2022**. The Nutrient Action Programme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 came into operation on 15 October 2019. The revised NAP has new measures to promote more efficient nutrient management and best practice.
- **The Knowledge Advisory Service (KAS)** was set up in April 2018 as a single Advisory service aimed at supporting Northern Ireland's farm and food businesses.
- The **Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS)** is DAERA's agri-environment scheme under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. EFS has been designed to address specific environmental needs, primarily relating to biodiversity and water.
- The **Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy** for Northern Ireland was published in 2016 and contains further recommendations aimed at reducing phosphorus levels and managing agricultural land more effectively.
- The **Water Catchment Partnership (WCP)** is a working partnership established with representatives from NIEA, Ulster Farmers Union (UFU), NIW, DAERA and the Voluntary Initiative to help address significant water quality issues caused by pesticides in Northern Ireland.
- **Sustainable Catchment Area Management Programme Northern Ireland (SCaMP NI)** aims to improve the quality and reliability of the water received at

NIW's raw water abstraction points through sustainable catchment based solutions that focus on protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

- **INTERREG VA** funded projects
 - **Source to Tap** aims to improve water quality in the cross border Erne and Derg catchments.
 - **CatchmentCare** aims to improve the water quality across 3 cross border catchments; the Finn, the Blackwater and the Arney.

2.9 Source Apportionment of Pollution by microbial source tracking (MST)

MST is a method of molecular DNA analysis being utilised by the Department, to apportion pollution to either human (sewage) or agricultural sources. This is a significant step forward in helping to understand potential pollution sources in bathing water catchments and finding solutions to help continue to improve bathing water quality.

The Department is working with NI Water and AFBI to prioritise and analyse samples to help provide solutions and improve bathing water quality.

3. Improve Beach Cleanliness, Facilities Management & Signage

3.1 Improve Beach Cleanliness

Tackling Marine Litter through the Northern Ireland Marine Litter Strategy.

Marine litter pollution is a serious pressure on the marine environment and is a pressing twenty first century environmental problem. We are all aware that the problem exists and during 2019/20 DAERA has worked with its partners through the Northern Ireland Marine Litter Strategy to gather data to quantify the extent of the pollution on our coast. Gathering data and getting to know the extent and source of a problem is an important aspect in resolving the issue.

A small flavour of some of the work being undertaken is set out below and this year the focus is on the data collection strand of the Marine Litter Strategy. Further details of some of projects to address the problem of marine litter are available from Marine Litter Watch, the newsletter of the Strategy, and also our webpage <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-litter>.

Since 2012 Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful has been surveying the levels of litter on a number of beaches around our coast. Each beach is cleaned within a two-week period

after the survey by a range of volunteers including; families, local groups, schools and businesses. In 2019 nearly 600 volunteers helped clean up these beaches, collecting over 540 bags of litter. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful regularly publishes the litter reports on its website. <https://www.keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.org/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=50>

The data recorded on our beaches is similar to that recorded on our streets. In 2019 Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful published a Litter Composition Analysis Report which reported on a study which took place between January and March 2019 by RPS Consulting Engineers. The Report states that nearly 1.3 million litter items are on our streets at any one time which costs the public purse an estimated £45 million annually.

The Report highlights that a significant amount of the litter found contained plastic with 71% comprising of cigarette butts, confectionary, crisp wrappers and plastic bottles. The second most common category was metals at 14.5%, this mostly consisted of non-alcoholic drinks packaging (drinks cans). Paper was the third most common category at 9.7%, with cigarette packaging, scratch cards, till receipts and bank statements most prominent. 47.8% of all items found were packaging related and 52.2% non-packaging items.

We are becoming more aware of the impacts on the marine environment of pieces of plastics which are too small for us to see, known as microplastics. These are pieces of plastic which are less than 5mm in diameter. Microplastics can derive from primary sources, manufactured to be small in size such as pre-production pellets (nurdles) and microbeads which used to be used in rinse-off cosmetic products, or secondary sources where they have broken down from larger plastic items such as bottles, packaging or even tyres.

The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) Regulations (NI) 2019 banned the manufacture and sale of rinse off cosmetic products containing plastic microbeads in Northern Ireland and mirrored similar legislation introduced across the UK. Recent

research¹ undertaken on behalf of Defra on other sources of microplastic pollution, vehicle tyre wear and synthetic fibre contamination indicates that storm water discharges, which pass directly from roads to aquatic environments, probably represent the most important pathway for tyre particles, whereas deposition from the atmosphere is likely to be the key pathway for fibres. The study further notes that inadequate sampling of tyre particles in previous microplastic sampling is likely to have resulted in a considerable underestimate of the total microplastic burden that has accumulated in the environment.

A further form of microplastic pollution is from pre-production plastic pellets also known as nurdles. Scottish charity, Fidra, is working with other NGOs, industry and governments to develop a framework to prevent the loss of nurdles at source. The initiative is a call for the whole plastics supply chain to handle pellets responsibly. Fidra is also responsible for an initiative called the Great Nurdle Hunt which takes place each spring. Volunteers search for pellets and record them on an interactive map. So far, pellet pollution along the Northern Ireland coastline is relatively unknown, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council has led the hunt in Northern Ireland and are supporting those keen to get involved along their coastlines. If you notice any of these pellets please record them on the map on the Fidra website <https://www.fidra.org.uk/>

Improvements at Crawfordsburn and Helens Bay

NIEA manages the beaches at Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay, which are situated within Crawfordsburn Country Park. Bins have been installed which have bespoke metal tops to protect lids from disposable BBQ damage. Improved waste management signage is being designed to advise the public of the quantity of waste collected from the site and how they can help to reduce this.

Live Here Love Here Campaign

Live Here Love Here is a positive partnership campaign inspiring and empowering people to create more resilient and healthier communities through practical environmental action in their local area. Through partnership working and 'one voice' messaging across a strong variety of channels such as TV and digital, a Small Grants Scheme and support

¹<http://scienceresearch.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=20110>

for local volunteering activities, the campaign raises awareness and builds strong relationships with the public to drive behaviour change. The partnership includes nine of the eleven Northern Ireland councils, DAERA, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful.

Since the launch of the scheme in 2014, Live Here Love Here has provided over £1,000,000 to 821 Small Grants community projects, enabling volunteers to come together and enhance their local communities through practical environmental activities. Live Here Love Here supports a range of volunteer activities including Adopt A Spot, Clean Coasts Programme and Northern Ireland's largest clean-up campaign, the BIG Spring Clean, collecting 253 tonnes of litter in 2019 alone. Every year hundreds of groups, schools and businesses carry out clean ups in their local areas supported by Live Here Love Here. Activities are promoted on the Live Here Love Here website www.liveherelovehere.org and Facebook page www.facebook.com/liveherelovehere/ and through the quarterly newsletter <https://liveherelovehere.etinu.net/cgi-bin/lhlh> Live Here Love Here has successfully entered into its sixth year as it continues to grow and as more people come together to create climate action, biodiversity recovery and pollution solutions.

Through Live Here Love Here we can all do one small thing to help make a big difference in our communities.

3.2 Facilities' management and signage.

Improved Accessibility

Over the last number of years, access and facilities at our local beaches have undergone dramatic improvements. Local Councils have improved beach accessibility through working with the Mae Murray Foundation www.maemurrayfoundation.org/

The Mae Murray Foundation was set up to allow people of all ages and abilities to take part in activities, experience the world and enjoy friendship together in an inclusive environment. One of a number of projects the Foundation has addressed is 'Hands Up for the beach', a project started in Summer 2016 to find out why families in Northern Ireland are excluded from beach environments and to establish a plan to improve access for all.

After receiving funding from Wooden Spoon – the children's rugby charity, and in partnership with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, the Mae Murray Foundation have provided a wide selection of mobility and personal care equipment

based at Benone Beach, making it the first 'Inclusive' Beach in Northern Ireland. It was launched in August 2017 with a range of equipment including beach and floating chairs, beach walker, beach crutches, hoist and shower trolley. The foundation is focused on making similar facilities available across the province, working alongside beach operators.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council have been working with Mae Murray Foundation and community representatives to create the borough's first inclusive beach. The foundation successfully secured funding to commence but due to operational reasons, council was unable to proceed. Funding secured was transferred to a different council area. Mid & East Antrim Borough Council together with Mae Murray Foundation, hope to revisit the development of one of their beaches at a later stage.

Newry, Mourne & Down District Council have worked in partnership with Mae Murray Foundation and launched the councils first inclusive beach at Cranfield in 2019 – thanks to funding from Sport NI and DAERA. Again, a full range of beach chairs, walkers, floating chairs, hoist and shower trolley, enables participation and dignified toileting for all ages and abilities.

Ards & North Down Borough Council collaborated with Mae Murray Foundation and with funding support from Sport NI and DfC, have created an inclusive beach at Groomsport. Equipment includes beach chairs, beach walkers and a new infant beach buggy. Floating chairs are not available on this site as there is no lifeguard presence. Council were able to reconfigure the existing toilet block to offer toileting facilities which now includes a full Changing Places toilet – a disabled toilet which includes hoisting, changing bench and shower facilities. The beach upgrades narrowly missed being launched in 2019 and sadly, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the beach upgraded facilities will not launch this year.

National Trust together with Mae Murray Foundation have secured funding to create an 'inclusive' beach at Portstewart, again including a Changing Places toilet. A full range of beach and floating equipment will be available once launched – which will also be delayed due to Coronavirus.

Prior to the pandemic outbreak, Mae Murray Foundation were in discussion with two Councils about further possible beach development.

4. Keep Public and Media Better Informed

4.1 Bathing Water Profiles

The Department prepared the first bathing water profiles in March 2011. These profiles are updated annually and published on the DAERA website². The profiles contain lots of useful information including the potential pollution sources at each beach.

Collectively, the approach that has been taken is helping to create more awareness of the sensitivity of our coastal waters to heavy rainfall events and the potential sources of pollution.

4.2 Coastal Award Schemes

The Blue Flag Award is the definitive international beach award recognised in 46 countries and is an assurance of beach cleanliness and safety. Other national awards include Seaside and Green Coast Awards which similarly ensure minimum standards of beach management and water quality. In Northern Ireland, many of our beaches have good coverage of these marks of quality assurance.

Due to the unprecedented circumstances in 2020, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful who administer all the coastal awards schemes, announced that a number of beaches will be unable to receive their awards due to the lack of available lifeguard cover. Additional awards may be issued later in the season as the COVID-19 situation develops and more lifeguard cover becomes available.

At the time of issue there were 2 Blue Flag Beach Awards, 5 Blue Flag Marina Awards, 8 Seaside Awards and 1 Green Coast Award presented to the managing organisations (councils, National Trust, NIEA, marina operators).

4.3 Getting the message across – to bathe or not to bathe?

² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/water/bathing-water-quality>

The spirit of the revised Bathing Water Directive is to ensure better communication with the public on water quality. In conjunction with models which predict pollution incidents at bathing waters, other countries have been developing and installing electronic signage which can be remotely updated with bathing water quality and other information. In 2017, University College Dublin, in partnership with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, Agri Food & Biosciences Institute, and a number of local councils successfully secured a bid under INTERREG VA to develop a prediction model for bathing waters in Northern Ireland, Co Louth, Co Donegal and Co Sligo. An extension to the project has been secured and the prediction and discounting model is expected to be operational during the 2021 bathing season.

Until then, the Department and bathing water operators will continue to work closely to inform the public when water quality has deteriorated, and will continue to provide information via its website and with posters at bathing waters.

Conclusions

2020 has been a particularly challenging year, with a great deal of uncertainty due to the UK's exit from the European Union and the unprecedented world pandemic from COVID-19. However, DAERA has continued its commitment to delivering its vision of 'sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone'. It is recognised that delivering the draft Programme for Government outcomes requires collaboration and partnerships. Many of the improvements outlined in this report have only been made possible through this approach which is fostering a better understanding on how to improve water quality, beach facilities, management and communication.

Despite the challenges, DAERA will continue to utilise resources such as the Better Beaches Forum and the UK Bathing Water Conference to raise the profile of issues around managing our beaches. Progressively, the impact of agricultural practices on bathing waters is an area which DAERA is actively addressing through a range of activities such as the Environmental Farming Scheme. The new combined sewer overflow monitoring systems will improve our understanding of the pressures that sewerage systems place on our coastlines. The development of water quality prediction

and discounting systems through the INTERREG VA SWIM project, will enable better information for bathers on the risks of sea bathing. Beach operators are working in partnerships to reduce litter through innovative approaches with volunteers. The work on improving beach access for all through the Mae Murray Foundation, a Northern Ireland-based charity, is an exemplar and has attracted media attention from across the UK.

The passion and commitment of the Better Beaches Forum representatives is best demonstrated through the outcomes being achieved. DAERA staff would like to thank all our partners for their active participation in all of the range of initiatives and schemes to

- protect our environment;
- ensure we are creating a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest; and
- ensure we enjoy long, healthy, active lives.

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