

Abstraction Plan priority catchment update

Coronavirus outbreak

November 2020

For the duration of the pandemic the Environment Agency's 3 strategic priorities remain in place:

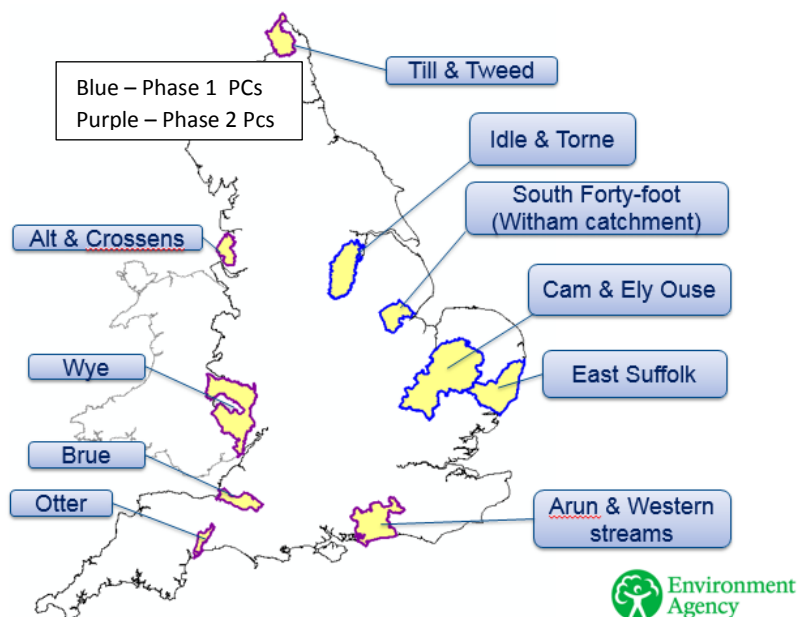
- protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of all our people
- protecting lives
- preventing serious harm to the environment

We remain committed to the Abstraction Plan objective of developing a stronger catchment focus and modernising abstraction management through working with partners.

We are continuing priority catchment (PC) work where it is safe to do so under government guidelines (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>). We have resumed engagement activities in several catchments and are pleased to report on progress in several areas.

Funding

Good news! We have secured funding for all ten PCs until March 2021. We have already filled the vacancy in the Wye and are working on finding a lead for the Otter PC. We continue to explore ways to secure on-going funding and look at different ways to continue the work for future years including finding partners who want to take over the running of their PCs.



Abstraction Licensing Strategy (ALS) updates

The Abstraction Plan sets out how PC progress will be presented in updated ALS documents, starting with the phase 1 PCs (see map) which are due by end of this year. Over the summer we have been preparing a new and more user-friendly version of the ALS document. This will include a greater focus on local water resources challenges in the catchment as well as updates on the PC work and what it means for local abstractors and other catchment stakeholders. A GIS story map version will also be trialled in some PCs as a first step towards development of an interactive ALS. The ALS will also link to an action plan for future work in the catchment.

PC trials

Below are some of the trials that we will be reporting on progress within the ALS updates.

Idle & Torne: Findings from the high flow study and what it means for abstractors.

East Suffolk: How the Felixstowe peninsula project has helped abstractors to make better use of available water and what are the opportunities for other catchments.

Cam and Ely Ouse: Water abstraction alerts. How a trial using mobile phone text messaging has helped abstractors to improve the efficiency of how they take water and the opportunities for other abstractors.

South Forty Foot: Progress on all-year high-flow abstraction and making permitting simpler.

Working with natural processes study in all PCs. We are exploring with catchment stakeholders how land and river management practices can help to store water in the ground and slow down the rate at which it enters river systems. Evidence shows that taking action to restore such natural processes can help to

make some catchments more resilient to flood events. We have completed a multi-catchment study to provide evidence for the benefits of working with natural processes to improve resilience to drought.

Second Phase PCs: As well as some of the approaches identified above we are also seeking to work with farmers who would like to demonstrate new and more efficient irrigation practices.

For more information you can contact your Environment Agency PC lead via Abstraction_Reform@environment-agency.gov.uk. Or see our [PC Citizen space page](#) for further information and links to PC leads.

Update on the move to environmental permitting

Since 2017 Defra and the Environment Agency have been working towards moving abstraction and impounding licensing into the Environmental Permitting Regulations (EPR). The year 2020 has seen us enter an unprecedented and challenging time as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), the effects of which we continue to respond to. In order to allow businesses, stakeholders and environmental bodies to focus on following government guidelines, the Minister made the decision to delay the consultation and implementation of moving into EPR. We still believe that the move to the EPR is needed to modernise the regulation of abstraction and impounding and to align it with other EPR regimes to create a single regulatory framework. It is the right thing to do in order to secure sustainable water resources for the environment, business and society now and into the future. Defra will consult when it is appropriate to do so and currently plan to do this in spring 2021 with a view to implement the EPR in 2023.

<https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/environment-and-business/moving-abstraction-impoundment-licensing-to-epr/>

Update on the Digital Service

Licence Holders have been able to continue managing their abstraction licences online, for example accessing a summary of their licence conditions, past water usage (returns) and submitting this year's usage. Nearly 50% of the returns due in March were submitted online to the Environment Agency before being formally invited to do so this September after a delay due to Covid-19. This is critical data to help us manage the water environment.

We continue to investigate the digital improvements to the service, exploring the use of email as a much quicker means of communicating to licence holders, particularly regarding water abstraction management alerts.

To create an account and submit your returns online, visit www.gov.uk/manage-water-abstraction. For queries or more information about the service, contact water_abstractiondigital@environment-agency.gov.uk.