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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

MINISTERIAL ADVICE -

For decision by: Huw Irranca-Davies, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs

Subject	Enhancing Bathing Water Quality in Wales, Strategic and Local Initiatives
100 word summary	Welsh beaches have performed well under the Bathing Water programme, but public interest in water quality has grown. The Welsh Government's Programme for Government aims to designate more inland waters and strengthen monitoring. As more inland waters are designated, the number of sites with poor water quality is expected to rise. NRW has provided a business case which proposes two mitigation projects: the Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project to improve water quality at Watch House Bay and Ogmore-by-Sea, and a Strategic Bathing Water post to manage poor bathing waters and strengthen regulation.
Timing	Routine
Recommendation	The Minister is recommended to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Agree to NRW to undertake the Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project and Strategic Bathing Water Programme post at a revenue cost of up to £300k for FY 2025-26 and £252k for FY 2026-27.
Decision report	This decision does require a Decision Report, which may be published at any point.

ADVICE

Background

1. *[information redacted]*
2. A business case has been received from NRW, attachment 1, and water branch officials have worked carefully to ensure that the proposed actions are both practical and aligned with our long-term environmental goals.
3. The primary issues being addressed by the proposed projects include NRW's limitations to methodically review and manage these waters beyond their statutory obligations, and the need for strategic forward looking oversight to address specific water quality issues.

The proposal consists of two interconnected projects:

4. Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project: This is in effect a pilot or proof of concept project focused on improving water quality at Watch House Bay and Ogmore-by-Sea, both of which were classified as poor in 2023 and Ogmore again in 2024. The project aims to develop a local plan to improve water quality at these sites, deliver wider benefits for local communities and tourism, and create a framework that can be applied across Wales. The project will serve as a demonstrator to develop a collaborative catchment approach, gather evidence, and implement nature-based solutions.
5. Strategic Bathing Water Post: This post aims to develop a prioritised approach to managing poor bathing waters, strengthening regulation and monitoring, implementing future reforms of the regulations, and addressing emerging issues related to bathing waters. The programme will build on work initiated through the Inland Bathing Waters project and prepare for further inland and coastal designations in Wales.
6. The proposed projects in the Ogmore catchment closely align with the Welsh Government's existing programmes and priorities. They support the Programme for Government (PfG) commitment to enhance inland water designations for recreation and strengthen water quality monitoring.
7. The projects are in line with the principles of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, focusing on collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and enhancing ecological resilience. By improving regulatory frameworks and supporting targeted interventions such as misconnections, the work in the Ogmore catchment will help address local environmental challenges, build community engagement, and contribute to the sustainable management of natural resources.

Proposed Actions

8. The proposed projects have been designed to deliver enhanced capacity, enabling more effective stakeholder engagement, evidence gathering, and the implementation of long-term solutions to improve water quality. The Vale of Glamorgan Project, in particular, is a response to the £5 million budget

enhancement, which presents a key opportunity to accelerate delivery and strengthen capacity in critical areas of regulation and enforcement.

9. NRW have identified that currently all measures are already being taken through GiA and in line with their statutory obligations; however, if we want to drive change and improvement, additional funding is required. These projects go beyond those obligations by establishing a structured, catchment-based model with dedicated project officers to drive focused long-term engagement, coordination, and targeted interventions. While existing measures provide a foundation, current funding and resources prevent the additional work needed to achieve the improvements be sought.
10. This project fills that gap, ensuring dedicated resources and greater detail to deliver meaningful, long-term change. The additional funding within the budget settlement allows for targeted investment, ensuring a more proactive and impactful approach to water quality improvements. Specifically, £225k has been allocated for FY2025/26 to fund this project, aligning with the additional enforcement funding, with a clear focus on bathing waters.

Vale of Glamorgan Project:

11. The proposed Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project aims to enhance water quality and promote sustainable catchment management through a series of targeted actions. Central to the project is the recruitment of two dedicated project officers for 24 months, who will lead the development of a collaborative, catchment-based approach. A catchment steering group will be established at each site to foster stakeholder engagement and guide project delivery. Baseline studies will be conducted to identify pollution sources and evidence gaps, supporting the implementation of nature-based solutions. Regular stakeholder meetings will ensure ongoing collaboration and shared understanding of progress.
12. A key element of this approach will involve identifying and addressing misconnections, a major contributor to water pollution. Enhanced regulation will focus on improving the detection and management of these issues, enabling more targeted and informed enforcement actions.
13. The project will also involve developing detailed project and catchment plans, complete with clear success criteria and integrated actions. Investigations will address key evidence gaps through water quality sampling, modelling, and drainage surveys. A comprehensive communications plan will be established to ensure clear and consistent messaging, aligned with Welsh Government objectives. Finally, a further business case will be developed to support the delivery phase of the project, ensuring long-term sustainability and continued improvement in water quality outcomes.

Strategic Bathing Water post:

14. The Strategic Bathing Water post is designed to enhance the management and regulation of bathing waters in Wales through a structured, long-term approach. A strategic policy post will be recruited for 24 months to lead the development and delivery of a prioritised programme. The initial focus will be on reviewing existing guidance, identifying gaps, and exploring new opportunities to strengthen water quality outcomes. A dedicated working

group, comprising Welsh Government representatives and key partners, will be established to guide and oversee the programme's progress.

15. A key element of the programme will be the development and maintenance of a priority list of emerging issues, supported by an associated work programme to address them. Efforts will also focus on strengthening monitoring processes and preparing for anticipated future regulatory changes to ensure continued compliance and resilience.

Budget

16. The Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project will require a budget of £225,000 in Year 1 (2025/26) and £177,000 in Year 2 (2026/27), covering staff costs and essential project activities, including stakeholder engagement, assessments, misconnection work and nature-based solutions.
17. The Strategic Bathing Water post will require £75,000 per year over two years, 2025/26 and 2026/27, to support a dedicated policy post and the development of a prioritised programme.
18. All project costs, including resources, staffing, and recruitment expenses associated with the project's delivery, will be fully delivered by NRW. Staff required for the project will be recruited by NRW and employed under their terms, with all associated costs funded directly by NRW.

Recommendation

19. **The Minister is recommended to agree to NRW to undertake the Vale of Glamorgan Bathing Waters Project and Strategic Bathing Water Programme post at a cost of up to £300k for FY 2025/26 and £252k for FY 2026/27.**
20. Approval of the proposed projects is recommended to enhance bathing water management in Wales and address the growing environmental challenges. While Welsh beaches have historically performed well, the increasing number of inland water designations and the rising public interest in water quality necessitate the need for improved management and innovative solutions. These projects are designed to address current challenges while identifying long-term solutions that can be applied in other areas, ensuring we are not revisiting the same issues in the future.
21. Both projects are designed to identify long-term solutions that can be applied in other areas to address similar challenges in the future. The goal is to ensure that, in a few years' time, we are not revisiting the same issues but are instead proactively implementing sustainable practices that prevent recurring problems. These projects align with the PfG commitment, Well Being and Future Generations Act principles, Government's priorities and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and their approval will strengthen regulatory frameworks, support community engagement, and contribute to sustainable water management across Wales.

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Legal issues, powers, & statutory duties

22. Officials consider there to be no considerations for Legal Services

Communications

23. Officials will collaborate with our WG communications colleagues and NRW to determine the optimal timing for publicising and promoting the work through various communication channels.

24. At this stage, no initial communications are being prepared due to the project's setup phase, which includes the recruitment of key personnel. Given that the recruitment process can take time, it is prudent to avoid overly publicising the project prematurely, where there is considerable stakeholder engagement in issues already. Once the necessary staff are in place, we will be better positioned to effectively communicate the project's progress and objectives to the public. This approach ensures that our communications are timely and impactful.

Programme for Government

25. The proposed projects align with the Welsh Government's Programme for Government commitment to enhance inland water designations and improve water quality monitoring. By doing so, they contribute directly to achieving the goals of 'A Resilient Wales' and 'A Healthier Wales' within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. These projects also support 'A Wales of Cohesive Communities' by fostering community engagement and collaboration. Furthermore, they adhere to the principles of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, including collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and the building of ecological resilience. Through these efforts, the projects will help address local environmental challenges and ensure the sustainable management of natural resources for both current and future generations.

Novel or contentious issues

26. Officials have assessed this advice to not contain novel or contentious issues.

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