

Priority Catchments

Improving the way we manage water

September 2019

This note explains what a Priority Catchment is, how it affects you and how you can get involved.

What is the Abstraction Plan?

The [Abstraction Plan](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/water-abstraction-plan-2017)¹ was published in December 2017. It sets how we will reform abstraction by:

- making full use of existing regulatory powers and approaches to address unsustainable abstraction
- developing a stronger catchment focus – bringing together the Environment Agency, abstractors and catchment groups to develop local solutions to existing pressures and to prepare for the future. These local solutions will:
 - protect the environment by changing licences to better reflect water availability in catchments and reduce the impact of abstraction
 - improve access to water by introducing more flexible conditions that support water storage, water trading and efficient use
- supporting these reforms by modernising the abstraction service, making sure all significant abstraction is regulated and bringing regulations in line with other environmental permitting regimes

We submitted a [Report to Parliament](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/abstraction-reform-report-2019)² on the progress of the Abstraction Plan in May 2019.

What is a Priority Catchment?

Priority Catchments (PCs) are for developing and testing innovative solutions to achieve greater access to water and address unsustainable abstraction. We have chosen catchments where:

- there is unmet demand for water and/or there are concerns that abstraction is damaging the ecology
- there is potential for water to be shared amongst abstractors
- there are a number of abstractors who we can work with to trial new and innovative ways of managing water abstraction.

In these Priority Catchments (PCs) we intend to promote a catchment based approach. The direction and output of each PC will be overseen by a catchment group including abstractors and other partners. Collaborative working across a range of stakeholders should mean that solutions deliver multiple benefits.

Who will be involved?

If you currently abstract within a Priority Catchment or have an interest in the way water resources are managed there, then you have the opportunity to join a catchment group and use your experience and knowledge to develop solutions to unsustainable abstraction and limited access to water and get involved in trials.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/water-abstraction-plan-2017>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/abstraction-reform-report-2019>

Environment Agency Area teams have direct involvement in each PC project through project management and technical input. National specialists offer guidance on policy and designing trials, take on board and implement policy changes where needed and ensure that best practice is shared between PCs. Maintaining a wider network of partners involved is critical to share learning and provide support.

What happens in a Priority Catchment?

We work with existing local groups to identify the catchment partners and abstractors who will form the catchment groups, charged with overseeing the PC work. Where there are already successful partnerships and groups in the catchment, we encourage new and existing to work closely together.

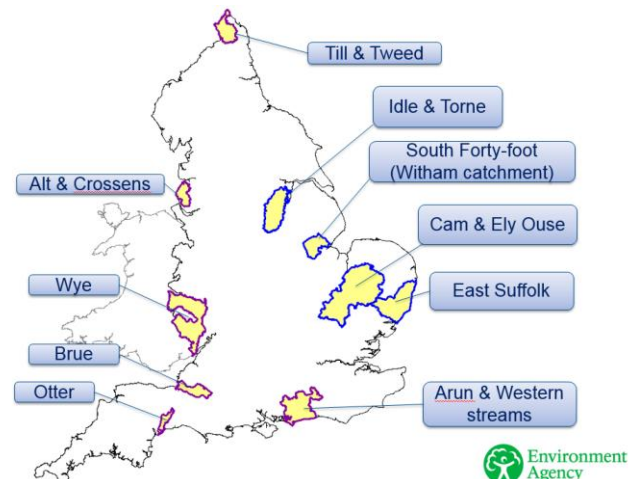
Each PC catchment group first defines the challenges in the catchment and then works collaboratively to develop solutions to trial. For example, we are looking into encouraging more efficient and flexible sharing of resources by trialling a faster water trading service, aggregating licences or giving abstractors access to on-line river flow so they can plan their water use more effectively. We are also looking into catchment focussed solutions such as working with natural processes to improve groundwater recharge. We are aiming to have a range of trials underway in each PC led by different partners and also join up with other local initiatives where appropriate.

We will link in with Catchment Partnerships, who are supported by a national group. We have set up a dedicated independent water resources sub-group to support PCs and help share best practice.

We will learn from the successes and failures of solutions and approaches trialled in PCs, capturing policies and actions in updated Abstraction Licensing Strategies (ALS) for each catchment during 2020 (first four PCs) and 2021 (further six PCs). These documents provide information to abstractors on water availability in a catchment and provide guidance on how to apply for an abstraction licence. The Abstraction Plan aims to roll out successful ideas and proposals to all catchments from 2021

Where are the Priority Catchments?

The first four PCs announced in May 2018 are: East Suffolk, Cam & Ely Ouse, South Forty Foot and Idle & Torne. We are now establishing six additional catchments in the Arun & Western Rother, Otter, Brue, Wye, Alt & Crossens and Till & Tweed. Partners in areas where PCs are not located may still get involved with forming closer links to the existing catchment partnership and setting up water resource focussed catchment groups.



Priority Catchments and recent dry weather

We have been proactive in developing flexible solutions to enable abstractors to access more water during the current period of prolonged dry weather and this is informing our evolving approach.

How can I get involved or find out further information?

Get in touch with us at: abstraction_reform@environment-agency.gov.uk

customer service line
03708 506 506

incident hotline
0800 80 70 60

floodline
03459 88 11 88