

Media Release



Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Lakes and Rivers

European targets for improving water quality in Northern Ireland's rivers and lakes by 2027 will not be met. That is among the conclusions of a report published today (Monday 25 March 2024) by Northern Ireland's Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Lakes and Rivers notes that the Water Framework Directive, published in 2000, set targets for bodies of water across Europe. It included a target for all rivers and lakes in Northern Ireland to achieve 'good' ecological status by 2027. Despite initiatives to improve water quality, in 2021 less than one third of Northern Ireland's rivers had good ecological status, representing no improvement since 2015. In the case of lakes, only 14 per cent of were classified as having good ecological status in 2021 (down from around 24 per cent in 2015).

By contrast, on average more than twice as many rivers and lakes in the Republic of Ireland achieved good (or better) ecological status than in Northern Ireland.

Alongside testing of ecological status, the chemical status of rivers and lakes is also measured. Since 2015, enhanced monitoring requirements have been introduced, such as the inclusion of new 'priority substances'. As a consequence of this enhanced monitoring, it is now the case that no lakes or rivers in Northern Ireland currently have good chemical status. By extension, none of Northern Ireland's rivers or lakes has good overall status (combining both chemical and ecological status) either.

Water quality issues and the agriculture sector

Today's report notes that the continuing issues around water quality are partly attributable to excess nutrients accumulating in rivers and lakes. Some practices within the agriculture sector are generally accepted as exerting particular pressures on water quality. However, the report observes that current approaches taken by the public sector to manage these practices have not been effective.

For example, between 2017 and 2021, 373 incidents linked to agriculture were reported that were deemed to be of high or medium severity. The report notes that around one per cent of farms in Northern Ireland is inspected each year by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. While in line with regulatory requirements, this one per cent sample size contrasts with the 77 per cent of total land area in NI which is accounted for by the agriculture sector. In 2022, one in four pollution incidents in Northern Ireland was linked to the agriculture sector.

Over half of all water pollution incidents linked to agriculture occurred in the Neagh Bann River Basin District. Within this district, most incidents were in the River Blackwater area, with 'farm effluent mixture', 'silage' and 'cattle waste' the three pollutants most frequently detected.

Water quality issues and NI Water operations

The report also considers water pollution incidents arising as a result of the activities of NI Water. While pollution incidents linked to Northern Ireland Water's operations account for one in eight of all pollution incidents, the total number of incidents declined by 43 per cent between 2017 and 2023.

Almost half (46 per cent) of the 572 recorded pollution incidents between 2017 and 2023 occurred in the Northern Eastern River Basin District (with most of those occurring within the River Lagan area).

The report adds that Northern Ireland remains the only region of the UK where sampling to assess compliance of wastewater treatment continues to be pre-announced. Efforts to reform this were announced by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in 2016, but will not formally take effect until 2027 at the earliest.

Commenting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"There have been long-standing concerns over water quality in Northern Ireland. Further work is required across a number of areas to ensure that these water sources are protected from damage, and that steps are taken to achieve the required regulatory standards."

"Better and sustained engagement with stakeholders including the agriculture sector is needed, and consideration should be given to enhancing the effectiveness of regulatory and inspection work. Better use of data will also help, both in helping target testing at areas most at-risk,

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and to help benchmark Northern Ireland with regions experiencing better outcomes in regards to water quality.”

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Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Monday 25 March 2024.