

Defra draft guidance on signage at Bathing Waters

Guidance for bathing water controllers (beach or inland water owners and lessees)

From the beginning of the bathing season of 2012 it will be a legal requirement of the revised Bathing Water Directive (2006/7/EC) for beaches and inland waters throughout the European Union that have been identified as bathing waters under the Directive to display signs giving information listed in Article 12 of the Directive.

This guidance has been developed to ensure bathing water controllers understand their statutory obligations in the development of signs. The guidance builds on current best practice and also gives advice to assist you:

- To understand your responsibilities in supplying water quality information to the public so they can make an informed choice about where to bathe
- To get advice on best practice for the development of bathing water signs
- To understand the information collected and supplied to you by the Environment Agency

Background

The revised Bathing Water Directive places a strong emphasis on providing information to the public on the quality of bathing waters to allow them to make an informed choice where to bathe. As part of this, the Bathing Water Regulations 2008 (SI2008/1097), which implement the Directive in England and Wales, require signs giving key information at all bathing waters. These Regulations apply to all beaches and inland waters that have been designated as bathing waters under the Bathing Water Directive (76/160/EEC) and revised Directive. It will be the responsibility of bathing water controllers – that is, local authorities and the owners or lessees of privately operated bathing waters – to provide the signs.

Following the introduction of signs in 2012 there will be a further change in 2015 when the water quality classifications of the revised Directive come into effect. Standard symbols will be added to the signs to display the bathing water classification and any advice against bathing, where appropriate. This will give people the information they need to make informed choices about where and when to bathe, and will safeguard public health by advising against bathing when water quality may be poor.

The requirement for signs will apply in all Member States of the European Union. For the first time, people will have access to similar information when they visit bathing waters in the UK and when in other EU countries. It is hoped that the symbols will become familiar and will be recognised as a source of information that can be found only at beaches and inland waters that have been designated as bathing waters under the Directive.

Signage requirements

The signs must contain the following information:

- Current bathing water classification based on water quality monitoring results and any advice against bathing
- General description of the bathing water, in non-technical language, based on the bathing water profile
- At bathing waters subject to short-term pollution: notification that the bathing water is subject to short-term pollution; an indication of the number of days in the preceding bathing season when bathing was advised against because of such pollution, and a warning whenever such pollution is expected or present

- When bathing is temporarily advised against, a notice should advise the public of the nature and expected duration of the pollution
- When bathing is permanently advised against, a notice should say that the area is no longer a bathing water and explain why
- An indication of where to find more complete information (for example, in the bathing water profile on the Environment Agency website)

Under the Bathing Water Regulations 2008 responsibility for providing signs lies with the bathing water controller. “Control”, in relation to a bathing water, is defined as control of the land immediately adjacent to the bathing water which is normally used to access the bathing water from the landward side and, where the bathing water is tidal, control of such land above the high water mark. Most controllers are local authorities but there are also charities, businesses and private estates that control bathing waters.

All relevant local by-laws, planning permission regulations or guidance on signage in National Parks should be followed.

Information sources

The main information source for the signs will be the bathing water profiles which will be prepared by the Environment Agency during 2010 - 2011. Annual bathing water classifications will also be provided by the Agency. When the profiles have been completed they will be available online and from your local Environment Agency office. The information contained in the profile will include that listed in appendix 1.

The profiles will be reviewed regularly to assess whether any of these aspects of the bathing water have changed and following a review will be updated if necessary. Reviews will take place at the following intervals:

- at bathing waters classified as “poor”, at least every year
- at bathing waters classified as “sufficient”, at least every 3 years
- bathing waters classified as “good”, at least every 4 years.
- In the case of bathing waters classified as “excellent” the profiles need only be reviewed and, if necessary, updated if the classification changes.
- Profiles will also be updated in the event of significant construction works or significant changes in the infrastructure in or in the vicinity of the bathing water.

Sign text

As an example of the information which can go on the Water Quality panel or section of your bathing water sign the following example has been developed for a fictional bathing water. Symbols to show water quality and advice against bathing are being developed by the European Commission and are expected to be completed early in 2010.

The Environment Agency General Description, (this will be supplied by the EA, for example):

“The Sunny Days bathing water is in a relatively small and shallow bay. The largely agricultural catchment has significant areas of pasture land. As such the bathing water could be subject to poorer water quality after periods of rainfall. “

For the bathing season of 2010 water quality at Sunny Days beach was classed as **Good**.

Symbol

map

For further guidance the following templates have been developed to help you develop your sign:

Classifications

Bathing Waters will be given one of four classifications from the 2015 bathing season. These classifications are excellent, good, sufficient and poor. The classifications are based on four years of water quality data measured against the tighter microbial standards in the revised Bathing Waters Directive. Excellent will be approximately twice as stringent as the current Guideline standard; good will be broadly equivalent to the current guideline standard; sufficient will be equivalent to a current mandatory pass and poor will be normally non-compliant waters.

The Environment Agency has been predicting classifications for all English bathing waters and these predictions are on the Defra website -

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/quality/bathing/default.htm#classifications>

Bathing waters classified as “poor” must display signage which advises against bathing and gives a reason based on the water quality.

It is anticipated that bathing waters with sufficient and poor classifications will provide more information on the pollution and associated health risks on their signage. Good and excellent waters may provide less where this has no impact on the information available to the public to make an informed choice.

Standard symbols to represent the classifications are expected to be announced by the EC during 2010 [if these are available before the guidance is issued we will include them]

Updates

The classifications will be recalculated every year after the bathing season and the overall classification of your bathing water may change. Therefore please bear this in mind when designing signage for your beach. Panels which can be changed, rather than replacing a whole sign, may be preferable.

The signs are legally required to be in place by the 2012 bathing season. However the new classifications will not be ready until 2015. Therefore this means that you should plan for this change of classification and yearly changes thereafter and you will need to consider this at the initial planning stage.

Maps and graphics

It is best practice to include a map on signs at bathing waters to show the location of the sampling point. Existing maps or diagrams can be used where they exist.

Sign location and number

The Directive and Regulations require signage to be in the vicinity of the bathing area. The best location will vary from site to site, from the car park to the main entrance onto the beach. But it should be posted in an easily accessed location where the highest percentage of visitors are most likely to pass by.

Local or regular bathers will develop awareness over time of the location of information and its content and will be able to find it easily. It will be strangers to bathing waters who would be most disadvantaged by inappropriately located signs. Controllers should therefore bear the needs of visitors to the area in mind when considering where signage is to be located. More than one sign may be required and this decision is best made at a local level depending on the nature of the bathing water.

Factors that may be considered when deciding on sign location are:

- Size of beach or bathing water
- Number of entry points to the bathing water
- Extent of congregation of bathers in certain areas or using certain entrances
- Wildlife protection policies or management plans discouraging erection of structures at certain locations
- Likelihood of damage by:
 - Rain damage to paper signs
 - Wind blowing poorly secured sheets away
 - Strong sunlight bleaching printing
 - Animals
 - vandalism
- Cost effectiveness

Sign size

We are setting no guidance or restrictions on size or format to allow for the most flexibility for beach operators. However standard guidance on accessibility and minimum letter size should be followed. Guidance from RNLI/RoSPA on sign and text size, colour etc will be included. Should cite ISO standards.....[to be added]

Plain English

Information should be provided in plain English, as the aim of the signage is to provide the public with the information to make an educated decision on where to bathe.

Short term pollution

If your bathing water is prone to short term pollution you must provide information to the public to advise them. A typical example will be where, following heavy rain, a bathing water that has a record of sufficient (or above) quality has bacteriological levels that cause water quality to fall temporarily below the sufficient standard after an event.

If you advise against bathing due to short term pollution (if a prediction system is in place) the sign must indicate the number of days bathing was advised against in the previous bathing season. Please contact the Environment Agency for more information on short term pollution management.

Other events

During pollution events or presence of excessive litter or seaweed, information should be given to advise the public of management measures being taken. Temporary signs can be used during exceptional events which may have an impact on public health.

Timetable

The timeline for implementation is –

- Pre bathing season 2011 – publication of bathing water profiles
- Pre bathing season 2011 – provision of general description text supplied by EA to beach operators
- Pre bathing season 2012 – signs to be in place at all designated bathing waters
- Start of bathing season 2012 – EA to check the presence of signs at all designated bathing waters
- Post bathing season 2015 – classifications issued for all bathing waters
- Pre bathing season 2015 – signs updated with new classification symbols

Monitoring

The Environment Agency (EA) will check the presence of signs during routine pre-season visits. This will then be reported to Defra with power of enforcement residing with the Minister.

Costs

Legislation in the Local Government Act 2003 requires Defra to provide funding to local authorities that are responsible for bathing waters. It is planned that funding will be provided for one sign per local authority controlled bathing water. Final costs will be assessed closer to the date when payments are planned to be made.

No Government funding is available for private beach operators. However, Defra will consider how to minimise the burden of costs on small businesses and charities. We plan to make a printable template available to private controllers which can be filled in and displayed at a suitable location.

Defra plans to work with bathing water operators (controllers) to introduce the signage requirement in the most cost-effective way possible. This guidance sets out the minimum requirements and provides standard text that can be used on your signs to present the necessary information to the public. Provided the legal requirements are met, the format and design of signage is at the discretion of bathing water operators.

Contacts

Bathing Waters Team:

Email: bathingwater@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Tel: 020 7238 5347

Appendix 1:

- 1(a) a description of the physical, geographical and hydrological characteristics of the bathing water, and of other surface waters in the catchment area of the bathing water concerned, that could be a source of pollution, which are relevant to the purpose of this Directive and as provided for in the Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC;
 - (b) an identification and assessment of causes of pollution that might affect bathing waters and impair bathers' health;
 - (c) an assessment of the potential for proliferation of cyanobacteria;
 - (d) an assessment of the potential for proliferation of macro-algae and/or phytoplankton;
 - (e) if the assessment under point (b) shows that there is a risk of short-term pollution, the following information:
 - the anticipated nature, frequency and duration of expected short-term pollution,
 - details of any remaining causes of pollution, including management measures taken and the time schedule for their elimination,
 - management measures taken during short-term pollution and the identity and contact details of bodies responsible for taking such action.
 - (f) the location of the monitoring point.
2. Where practicable, a detailed map showing the information in 1(a) and 1(b).
 3. Other relevant information the competent authority considers appropriate.