Complying with the WFD Regulations 2017: screening

Guidance note

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What is this document about?

This guidance note provides information on how to screen projects, plans and activities for compliance with the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017 (henceforth WFD Regulations).

Who is this document for?

This guidance is for anyone designing projects and activities that may impact on the water environment.

You must provide WFD Regulations compliance information to support any application for activities that may cause deterioration to a water body or prevent it (or protected areas) from achieving the objectives set out in the River Basin Management Plan.

Be aware that you are likely to need to employ a suitably experienced and qualified consultant to do a WFD Regulations compliance assessment. You may also need specialist technical input depending on the activity and potential impacts.

Contact for queries and feedback

Integrated Water Planning Team, Evidence, Policy and Permitting Directorate

WFDWales@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Version history

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1.0	26/06/24	Document published
2.0	05/06/2026	Minor text changes

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To report issues or problems with this guidance contact:
guidance.development@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Screening for compliance with the WFD Regulations 2017

You must consider the potential effects of your proposal on the water environment. The water environment includes all rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal waters and groundwater.

Early consideration of potential risks and associated impacts enables them to be 'designed out' by avoiding them. This is likely to save you time and money.

If your proposal has the potential to cause deterioration or prevent a water body, or a protected area, achieving its objectives then it can **only be allowed to proceed** if it meets the requirements of Regulation 19 of the WFD Regulations 2017.

Assessment stages

A compliance assessment can have up to 3 stages:

- **Stage 1: Screening**

  This stage identifies the receptors that could be impacted by your proposal. Any activities that do not need further assessment can be screened out at this stage. Any activities with the potential for impact to the water environment will be screened in for further assessment.

- **Stage 2: Scoping**

  The receptors that are potentially at risk from your proposal will be identified and carried forward for further detailed assessment in stage 3. If you haven't identified any receptors at risk, your WFD Regulations compliance assessment is complete.

- **Stage 3: Detailed assessment**

  Consider the potential impacts (for example, extent and severity) of your activity on the receptors identified in Stage 2, and identify ways to avoid, minimise or mitigate these impacts. Conclude whether the activity may prevent the water body and any protected areas from achieving their objectives, or cause deterioration in water body status.

What you need to do

You will need to provide enough information to demonstrate that your proposal does not have the potential to cause deterioration to a WFD Regulations water body, or prevent it from achieving the objectives as set out in the River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs).

You can find these on our website: Natural Resources Wales / River basin management plans.

A proposal may contain many different activities. You should include anything with the potential to have a positive or negative impact on the water environment, both directly and indirectly.

Your proposal may have a positive impact for one quality element, such as physicochemistry (an indicator of water quality), but you still need to assess whether there is any impact on other quality elements, such as hydromorphology. Your proposal may impact more than one water body.

Each activity must be assessed for each water body potentially impacted by the proposal.

Be aware that proposals which are screened out at Stage 1 may still require other assessment to ensure they comply with other legislative requirements, for example Habitats Regulations Assessment (Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site [HTML] | GOV.WALES).

How to find information about water bodies

A water body is part, or the whole, of a river, lake, groundwater, estuary or coastal water. For surface water bodies, overall status is classified using chemical and ecological status. Ecological status includes physicochemistry, biology, and hydromorphology quality elements. Groundwater status is classified using qualitative (e.g. chemical) and quantitative (e.g. water balance) elements.

Each water body has an objective of 'good' status or potential, unless an alternative is set. Further explanation on the objective setting process is available in the most recent RBMPs. Some water bodies are designated as Artificial or Heavily Modified in the RBMPs. These are set the objective of good potential rather than good status. Water body data, including objectives, are available on Water Watch Wales.

A significant number of the water bodies in Wales are designated as WFD protected areas. These areas are important for wildlife conservation, drinking water supply, shellfish harvesting and bathing. You can find a map of protect areas on Water Watch Wales and can be seen by selecting the right layer. Or you can find the full list on the protected area Register: Natural Resources Wales / River basin management plans 2021-2027: protected area register

Other permits and permissions

You might need other permits and permissions for your proposal.

You can find advice about the NRW permits you might need and how to apply on our website: Natural Resources Wales.

Your proposal may also require other authorisations and permissions from other determining bodies such as Ordinary Watercourse Consents or planning permission.

When NRW makes decisions, such as issuing permissions, permits and licences, we must ensure that the activity complies with the The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017 (legislation.gov.uk). Other public bodies such as local authorities also have specific duties under the WFD Regulations 2017.

Stage 1: WFD Regulations Risk Screening

Could your proposal affect the water environment?

The purpose of 'Stage 1 Screening' is to identify if your proposal has the potential to impact on the water environment. This stage will identify any risks to receptors that are associated with the proposed activities. You should aim to avoid and prevent potential impacts, where this is not possible you should reduce or mitigate impact through careful design. Appropriate mitigation should be included at the earliest opportunity whilst developing your proposal, this should be proportionate to the scale of impact.

You can use a template to help you complete screening. You can request a copy of the template from: WFDWales@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Step 1: Provide information on the whole proposal

Include:

- **each individual activity proposed**
- **all phases** of the proposed activities, including temporary, intermittent and permanent phases. For example, construction, operation, maintenance and planned decommissioning.

Screening must be undertaken on proposed works that are as close to 'as-built' designs as practicable. You may need to carry out Stage 1 again if your proposal changes.

Step 2: Identify relevant water bodies to include in risk screening

You can use Water Watch Wales to identify relevant water bodies by navigating to your proposal area and using the most up to date maps: river water bodies or river water body catchments, lake, groundwater, transitional or coastal waters.

Water bodies that should be included in stage 1 screening will depend on the type of activity proposed, and the scale and extent of potential impacts. For example, the construction of a barrage in the mouth of the river might have a localised footprint but can have much wider impacts on habitats and migratory routes of fish and other species throughout the transitional (estuary) and upstream river water bodies. For this reason, you should consider:

- all water bodies directly impacted by the proposal (e.g., the water bodies in which the activity is proposed, including groundwater bodies that underlie the proposed project area).
- any water bodies that are hydrologically connected that could be indirectly impacted by the proposal for example by causing a barrier to fish migration.
- the scale of impact - for larger developments in transitional and coastal water bodies; the zone of influence needs to be defined by hydrodynamic modelling.
- you must also consider bodies of water that are not listed as water bodies on Water Watch Wales. Some stretches of water are too small to be identified as a formal water body such as some reens, ditches, streams, or brackish lagoons. These are still legally protected from pollution, modification and abstraction and can indirectly impact on water bodies.

How to find water body information

- go to Water Watch Wales
- select most up to date WFD Regulations Cycle map
- select data layers and water bodies that are relevant to your proposal
- check for the overall status (OverallWB) and status for hydro/morphology (Hydro and Morph)
- check if the water body is designated as Heavily Modified (HM_Desig).

You should always use the most up to date WFD Regulations classification data.

Record the date of the WFD Regulations water body classification information you have used as well as the status of the water body and/or water body catchment.

For bodies of water not listed on Water Watch Wales as a water body you should assume that they are at 'good' status and any deterioration from 'good status' be assessed as a result of a new activity.

Use the relevant water body information that you have gathered to proceed to the step 3 risk screening assessment.

Step 3: Risk screening assessment

Work through the following questions to complete the WFD Regulations risk screening:

Q1. Is the proposal in, or could it impact on, a water body at high overall status or high status for morphology (or hydromorphology for Transitional and Coastal water bodies)?

Any proposal (including those listed as low risk – see list below) within a water body at high overall status or high status morphology will require a detailed assessment and you should contact NRW for fluvial or coastal geomorphological expert advice on the scope of the detailed assessment.

Yes – Go to Stage 2 Scoping.

No – go to Q2

Q2. Are the proposed activities listed below as low risk?

Yes – go to Q3

No – Go to Stage 2 and complete scoping assessment for each relevant / screened in water body.

Low risk activities:

- In relation to discharges to water, any Environmental Permitting Regulations (EPR) registered exemption or standard rules permit. Find out if you need a permit for discharges to surface water and groundwater
- Main river activities that are exempt or excluded from NRW Flood Risk Activity Permits
- Marine licensing Band 1 activities.

You can find more information on our website: Natural Resources Wales / Permits and permissions.

Please note this list only relates to NRW authorisations, you will also need to consider WFD Regulations risk for other authorisations such as Ordinary Watercourse Consents.

Q3. Are there any potential in combination and/or cumulative impacts?

Check if there will be any in combination and/or cumulative impacts of the new proposal with existing pressures and other new activities occurring at the same time.

The activities listed as low risk above can be screened out as not requiring further assessment in the majority of cases. However, there may be instances where activities may act together in a water body to make the effects worse or more likely to occur - for example: a water abstraction reducing dilution capacity and exacerbating effects of a water discharge. You can check for other NRW permits on our website: Natural Resources Wales / Check for a permit, licence or exemption (Public Register), and other useful information on Data catalogue | DataMapWales (gov.wales).

Yes – Go to Stage 2 and complete scoping assessment for each relevant/screened in water body

No – Record all the information you have gathered and submit it along with your application.

Next steps

If anything screens in, then complete a Stage 2 scoping assessment.

If everything screens out, then document your findings.

NRW contact details

Natural Resources Wales / Our service to developers

Natural Resources Wales / Request environmental data

Natural Resources Wales / Pre application advice for environmental permits

Call us on 0300 065 3000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm). We welcome calls in Welsh or English.

Send us a message on enquiries@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk.

Or complete the contact us form.