



Public Health Water Taskforce terms of reference

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Background

Following Sir Jon Cunliffe's [independent review of the water sector](#), the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) accepted the recommendation for the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of England to establish a taskforce to review how public health can be better integrated into water legislation.

Purpose

The Public Health Water Taskforce ('the taskforce') will be a scientific and technical advisory group, bringing together senior leaders with expertise in public health and water. Its role is to independently advise government on public health risks associated with poor drinking and recreational water quality and opportunities for mitigations.

Objectives

The taskforce will identify research and other existing evidence to:

- improve understanding of known and emerging public health risks in drinking and recreational water
- identify opportunities to enhance water quality standards, with the aim of informing policy and practice in England

Scope of the taskforce

The taskforce's remit is England, with Wales taking note of advice, and is focused on the direct human health risks associated with microbial and chemical exposures from water. All pollutant sources are within scope of this review.

Health outcomes considered include both acute and chronic impacts of pathogen-related infections (gastrointestinal, skin and respiratory illnesses), antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and chemical exposure (both directly, and indirectly through the consumption of contaminated fish, shellfish and other foodstuffs derived from environmental waters).

Broader health and safety risks unrelated to water quality, for example, but not limited to, radiation risks, physical hazards and animal health considerations are outside of this remit.

For definitions and a list of out-of-scope items, please refer to the annex. The taskforce will apply the following definitions to its considerations:

- 'recreational waters' - natural water bodies including rivers, coastal waters, reservoirs, and passing lakes accessed for recreational activity. Managed waters, including swimming pools, lidos, splash parks and city fountains, are out of scope
- 'drinking water' - mains water supply. Private water supplies are in scope to the extent that any specific public health risks to private supplies can be fully understood and to

guide future policy improvements. Other sources or supplies, such as springs and wells, are out of scope

Outputs

The taskforce aims to take a holistic approach, developing evidence-based options to embed public health protection within wider water planning strategies, and build resilience to known and emerging risks. The taskforce will provide recommendations to DHSC and Defra ministers and identify opportunities for cross-government intervention to deliver shared health outcomes.

The taskforce will not directly commission primary research but will identify priority evidence gaps and will provide advice on areas where further research may be required.

To deliver its remit, the taskforce will review evidence and provide technical advice on:

- the assessment of microbial risks in both recreational and drinking water
- the assessment of chemical risks in both recreational and drinking water
- feasible and proportionate mitigation measures to reduce identified risks, including relevant treatment interventions

Recommendations will initially be structured around 2 core phases. These will be reviewed and refined iteratively as the work progresses and new evidence emerges.

Phase 1: understanding known and emerging health risks

Phase1 outputs may include:

- identifying current and emerging public health threats from recreational and drinking waters
- reviewing feasibility of establishing microbial and chemical target levels from a public health perspective within [Water Framework Directive regulations](#)
- improving monitoring and surveillance requirements, supported by:
 - UK-specific public health pathogen watch list
 - a list of surveillance priorities for AMR

- exploring opportunities for innovation, including remote-sensing, expanded sampling and climate impact assessments
- identifying research gaps on public health risks and relative risks to recreational and drinking water users
- advising on opportunities for better data sharing, relating to the monitoring and assessment of public health risks in recreational and drinking waters, between organisations

Phase 2: treating water

Phase 2 outputs may include:

- identifying opportunities to reduce untreated pollution from entering the water system
- assessing effectiveness of treatment methods for effluent and pollutants, including new options for AMR and pathogens of human importance
- reviewing treatment options for drinking water to remove heavy metals, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), microplastics, and other harmful chemicals
- reviewing viable and scalable interventions for both business-as-usual and emergency responses

Attendance and membership

The taskforce will be chaired by Professor Chris Whitty (CMO for England).

Meetings will have a focused core group of attendees, supported by sub-groups as required. The CMO for England will have ultimate responsibility for agreeing membership. Representatives from the Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland governments will be invited as speaking observers to support UK-wide advice technical alignment.

Each organisation will designate one representative and one alternate. The notification of the designated representatives and their alternates shall be made to the secretariat.

Representatives, or their alternates, can resign from the taskforce at any time with any changes reported to the secretariat.

The taskforce will be supported by a secretariat drawn from the Water Policy team (publichealthwatertaskforce@dhsc.gov.uk) at DHSC (England). The secretariat will have

responsibility for maintaining a pipeline of key considerations to be discussed at future meetings, following up on actions and wider government engagement.

To allow the taskforce to operate most effectively, the taskforce can draw upon observers, experts and third parties to participate in the meetings of the taskforce on an ad hoc basis. Any permanent member of the taskforce can propose additional participants, subject to approval by the CMO for England.

Sub-groups

The core taskforce may create ad hoc or permanent working groups to discuss specific topics and or provide technical or operational advice. The CMO for England will have responsibility for determining the nature of subgroups.

Core members shall designate representatives for the working groups and notify the secretariat. The working groups shall be chaired by an individual nominated by the taskforce.

Operations

The core taskforce will meet bi-monthly, or as needed, through hybrid in-person and online meeting arrangements, to review progress to date.

It is anticipated that work will be undertaken and decisions made on matters arising between meetings by email correspondence.

The agenda will be developed in partnership between the CMO for England and the secretariat, with relevant input from the CMO for Wales.

Declarations of interest and a statement of confidentiality will be signed by all members of the taskforce and sub-groups.

A minute of the meeting will be drafted by the secretariat and shared with attendees 5 working days following the meeting. Actions will be recorded and tracked in an actions log.

The taskforce will submit its recommendations to government through formal reports and papers, which will be published in the public domain. Minutes and declarations of interest will also be made publicly available.

Annex: taskforce definitions and terms

This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Term	In scope	Out of scope
Chemical risks	Chemical exposures affecting human health (long-term and acute), including heavy metals (for example, lead), per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), microplastics, and other harmful chemicals. Exposures in scope include direct exposure in water and indirectly through the consumption of shellfish and other foodstuffs derived from environmental waters.	Broader environmental chemical policy unless directly related to public health risk appraisal.
Drinking water	Mains water supply intended for human consumption.	Other sources and supplies such as springs and wells, household pipes. The fluoridation of water is not considered within the scope of this taskforce.
Geography	England, with awareness of UK-wide interfaces and international evidence where relevant.	Water systems that exist wholly within Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland and have no connection with England are out of scope.
Microbial risks	Human public health risks from microorganisms, including bacteria, viruses, parasites (including protozoa), fungi, algae and cyanobacteria (blue-green algae).	Pathogens solely impacting animal health, rather than human health.
Pollutants	All pollutant sources are within scope of this review.	The scope is limited to risk identification and appraisal, not environmental regulation or catchment management policy.

Term	In scope	Out of scope
Public health risks	Limited to the direct human health risks associated with pathogen and chemical exposures from water. Considered outcomes include but are not limited to both the acute and chronic effects of gastrointestinal, skin, and respiratory infections, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), acute and long-term effects of chemical exposure.	Broader health and safety risks unrelated to water quality (for example, radiation, physical hazards such as the risk of drowning and injury, animal health).
Recreational water	Natural water environments where incidental ingestion, inhalation or skin contact may occur, including coastal and inland bathing waters, rivers, canals, passing lakes and reservoirs. The taskforce approach is risk-based, focusing on potential exposure pathways rather than the legal classification of the water body.	Managed waters such as: swimming pools, lidos, splash parks and city fountains.
Wastewater treatment	This includes, but is not limited to, sewage treatment works, sewage sludge, and storm overflows. Private industry discharges and private systems that affect public water supplies.	Private-to-private water systems.

The following are out of scope of the taskforce:

- budget allocation and funding decisions - resource implications may be highlighted, but funding decisions rest with the appropriate authorities
- media, public campaigns, and risk communication - advice may be given on risk communication principles, but responsibility for leading communications sits with relevant government departments and agencies
- operational regulation or enforcement - the taskforce will not direct regulators, make compliance decisions, or manage incidents; its role is advisory only

- organisation-specific performance reviews - it will not assess the performance of individual water companies, regulators, or laboratories, nor adjudicate in disputes
- setting statutory standards or rewriting legislation - advice may be provided on implications of existing or potential standards. The creation of policy, drafting of statutory instruments or setting of regulatory limits are not within scope of this independent taskforce