

# New advisory service

This initiative aims to help farmers improve water quality.

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**W**e are fortunate in Ireland to have good water quality compared with our European neighbours. This holds true for ground water, rivers, lakes and coastal waters. This is thanks to our high annual rainfall and management of our water resources. There has been much investment in infrastructure and environment schemes designed to protect water and society is benefitting from this.

In Ireland, all water policy and management is guided by the Water Framework Directive. Under this directive, Ireland has been set a target of achieving good status for all waters in the country.

However, despite a lot of hard work over the last 20 to 30 years, we are failing to achieve this target and water quality has remained mainly static.

The Government has decided to adopt a new strategy involving a more collaborative approach to facilitate improvements in water quality.

The EPA has identified 192 catchments or areas for action across the country where the status of the water is at risk of regressing.

There are multiple sources of pressure on water quality: industry, waste water treatment plants and septic tanks, forestry, agriculture and urban pressure.

The Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) will focus on agriculture.

The ASSAP is designed to work closely with the farming community in each catchment and is made up of scientists, who will assess the streams, and advisors who will work closely with farmers.

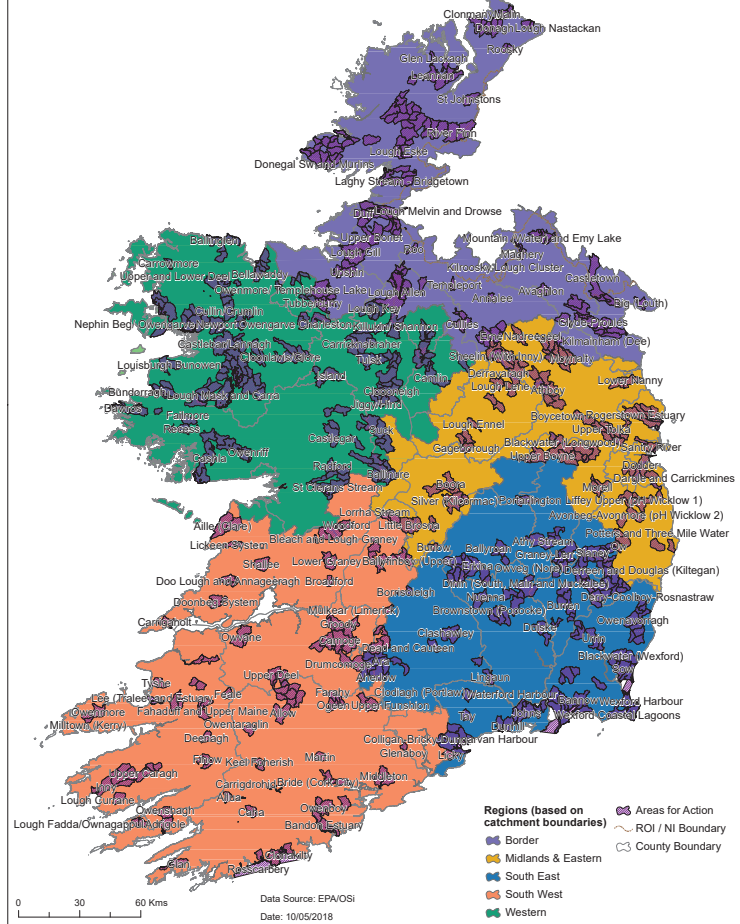
The advisors will provide a free and confidential advisory service. There are 20 advisors from Teagasc and 10 advisors from the dairy industry on the programme. Acceptance of the service is voluntary.

The team of scientists led by Local Authority Water Support and Advice Team (LAWSAT) will assess the pressures on streams.

Where an agricultural pressure is identified, the farmers in the area will receive the offer of a free farm visit from an advisor.

The purpose of the visit is to meet

Areas for Action within regions based on catchment boundaries



with the farmer and assess his farm for any issues that may be having an effect on water quality in the local stream.

In general, the advisor will assess a farmer's farmyard, nutrient management plan and nutrient management practices, use of pesticides and his general farmland management.

At the end of a visit, the advisor and farmer will agree on where the farmer should focus improvements or actions, if required, on his farm.

The practical advice will be designed to break the pathway and prevent nutrients from entering water. There may be a need for more significant actions, eg a TAMS application, and the farmer's existing advisor will complete this work.

A written summary of the advice and actions will be provided and a time frame for completion agreed between them.

The programme is based on col-

laboration, which is seen as crucial to ensuring that the ASSAP can aid in the collective goal of achieving good status for waters in Ireland.

The funding and support received from the DAFM, DHPLG and Dairy Sustainability Ireland has allowed the formation of the LAWSAT and ASSAP teams which will progress the programme on the ground.

Support from the farming organisations for the programme has been very strong and this is vital in communicating and informing farmers about the ASSAP programme and its key messages.

It is in everyone's interest to work together to improve Ireland's overall water quality. This will benefit local communities and help with achieving Ireland's obligations under the Water Framework Directive. It will also help to strengthen agriculture by reinforcing our green image as food producers.