

An Fóram Uisce response to the EPA Wastewater Treatment Report 2020

The EU Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) sets out mandatory standards for waste water treatment in large urban areas to be achieved across Europe by 2005. The EPA report published today reviews Ireland's progress in meeting the objectives of the UWWTD in 2020. While progress has been made in recent years and 10 upgrades and new treatment plants were completed in 2020, there remains 12 large urban areas not reaching the mandatory wastewater treatment standards required by the Directive. Unfortunately, this represents 54% of all wastewaters treated in Ireland primarily because of inadequacies at Ringsend which treats 43% of Ireland's wastewater. While upgrades are ongoing at Ringsend they are not expected to be completed until 2025. Three further plants (Cobh, Cork City and Shannon) will be completed in 2021.

A billion litres of wastewater is pumped through public sewers to 1,060 wastewater treatment plants for treatment every day in Ireland. When treated, this water is discharged back to rivers, lakes and coastal areas. If the treatment processes are not adequate, harmful bacteria, viruses and nutrients get into our waterways causing pollution and can pose a threat to public health.

There are currently 34 towns and villages (serving approximately 75,000 people) discharging raw sewage into the environment because they do not have wastewater treatment systems. The report states that even when funding is available, Irish Water delays the provision of these treatment systems, for example, Irish Water has *reduced* the number of towns and villages it plans to connect to treatment systems by the end of 2023 from 28 down to 14.

The EPA have also raised significant concerns that Irish Water have *no clear plans or time frames* to improve discharges from 29 of the 42 wastewater treatment plants on the priority action list. These are water bodies where the main pollution threat is from wastewater and urgent improvements to discharge is needed to ensure the waterbody meets Water Framework Directive objectives.

The Water Forum has consistently highlighted the need for more urgent action to provide adequate wastewater treatment services to protect human health and prevent pollution. While significant investment is being made in wastewater infrastructure, €333 million in 2020, progress is not adequate. With increasing demands on the construction sector in Ireland, delivering timely and cost-effective wastewater infrastructure is likely to be an even greater challenge going forward.

It is not acceptable in 2021 that raw sewage is being discharged into the environment; that no plans are in place to address 29 priority areas where wastewater is negatively impacting on water bodies; and 16 years on, Ireland still does not meet mandatory wastewater treatment standards for half the population.

The Water Forum supports the recommendations made by the EPA in its report. Irish Water *must* prioritise action so that Ireland meets its objectives under the UWWTD. The barriers to progress need to be identified and addressed. Irish Water have previously highlighted that planning and land acquisition are a key challenge for delivering new infrastructure. The Forum recommends that Irish Water engage early with local communities where improvements are needed to consider options and lay the groundwork for projects and plans. The priority has to be the protection of human and environmental health which will also have benefits for wider economic development.

End

Notes to Editors

An Fóram Uisce - The Water Forum was established as a statutory body in June 2018 to facilitate stakeholder engagement and debate on issues relating to water as a resource, water quality, rural water concerns, issues affecting customers of Irish Water and issues associated with the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. The Forum consists of 26 representatives from a wide range of organisations with direct connections to issues relating to water quality. These include consumer, community and water sports groups, business and trade unions, environmental sector, Irish Water consumers, the group water scheme sector and a range of other sectors including education, agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

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