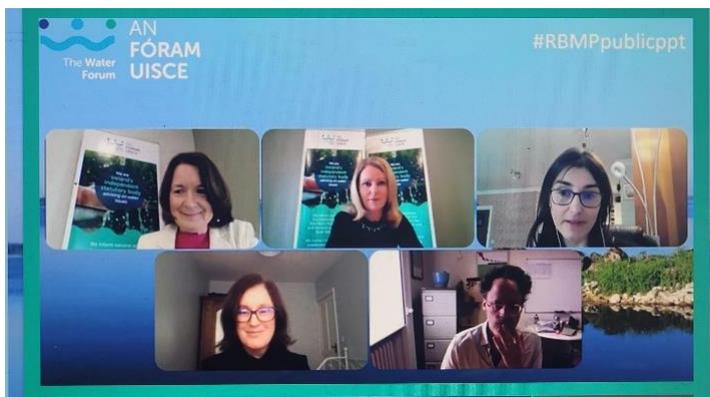


Webinar Report - On 3rd February 2022 the Water Forum hosted a webinar discussion on public participation in water management.

The Water Forum recently completed its Strategic Plan for 2022-2027 and our work programme is set firmly in the context of the current environmental crises. Scientific experts state we have approximately 10 years to prevent catastrophic climate change, where humans are primarily the cause of a mass extinction of species and water resources are under severe stress globally. Essentially, our current lifestyles and consumption patterns are unsustainable.

Significant progress has been made in the 2nd River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) cycle with the implementation of a new governance structure for water management that allows for cross agency collaborations at national, regional and local levels. The local authority shared service provided by LAWRPO coordinated enhanced collaborations and drove new levels of engagement with agencies at regional level and with communities at local level. The webinar, hosted by the Water Forum, explored what further structures, policy and processes are needed to facilitate the transformative action that is needed to address the environmental crises that we currently face for water, biodiversity and climate.

The context for the meeting was set with an introduction to the Water Forum's Framework for Integrated Land and Landscape Management (FILLM) policy which recommends the broadening of the integrated catchment management approach to include outcomes for biodiversity enhancement and climate mitigation. The FILLM approach recommends beginning with a stakeholder 'vision' for the catchment. Session One focused on the latest academic research in public participation and practice for deliberative and participative democracy approaches.



Session 1 presentation was chaired by Dr Suzanne Linnane

Session 1

Reviewed current academic research and best practice in public participation

Dr Patrick Bresnihan defined public participation as engagement that includes communities, citizens, non-citizens and stakeholders, but also operates beyond the local scale. It is not just about 'raising awareness' or encouraging behaviour change but includes a commitment to *social transformation* that carries the potential for dissent and critique of the status quo. It does not invariably lead to better environmental outcomes, but it can facilitate democratic practices by enhancing ownership, equity, and empowerment, and by fostering more sustainable uses of natural resources. He identified three pillars of public participation: equity; expertise and scale/context. Incorporating community knowledge in decision-making through integrative and participatory approaches position local knowledge as an efficient, timely, and sustainable complement to scientific knowledge. Regarding equity, differences in power and capacity needs to be addressed. As everyone does not start from the same place, resources need to be provided so that everyone can make an equal contribution. Water governance is complex and processes that operate at national scale can prescribe local decision making and possibilities for action. Experts, agencies and communities need to build interdisciplinary partnerships to develop and agree solutions.

Dr Clodagh Harris stated that 'wicked problems' such as water and climate needs a multi-sector and representative response to reimagine democratic practice to create a vibrant democratic ecology. This means widening democratic practice with greater inclusion, equity and empowerment. Deliberative democratic practice allows for reasoned discussions, whereby policies and plans are based on considered judgements of facts and a wide range of expert input. Deep public participation includes co-creation, co-design and co-decision making. Such approaches need full participation and representation from all of society, and stakeholder and community mapping is essential to achieve such engagement. During dialogues and participatory events clarity needs to be provided on who the different stakeholders are. Discussions need to remain open and flexible, informed responses must be facilitated. These approaches require holistic collaboration between disciplines, sectors, different actors and methods of engagement. Facilitation needs to be respectful and there needs to be a commitment to respond on how the recommendation will be used. Essentially the recommendations and outcomes of deliberative engagements need to be embedded in the democratic systems for catchment management, within catchment management plans.

Dr Alexandra Revez presented a Deliberative Democracy toolkit developed as part of the Imagining 2050 project funded by the EPA. The toolkit provides practical tools for deliberative and participative processes such as Empathy Mapping, Audience Polls, Community mapping etc. All of the approaches emphasise giving good information and considering the views of others and of future impacts allowing for future scenario planning. The toolkit is available at [Imagining 2050 Toolkit - MaREI](#).



Imagining 2050 toolkit for deliberative and participative democracy dialogues

Session 2

Explored current practice in public participation and learnings that could be applied to the 3rd River Basin Management Plan

Mark Horton is leading the development of Rivers Trusts across Ireland and has many years of experience getting communities involved in catchment management. He has used community engagement activities such as sense of place, exploring how the river is used, river memories and history to build future visions for catchments. He believes top down and bottom-up approaches are needed and partnerships need to be created to facilitate delivery of actions. Empowering communities to change behaviour needs meaningful catchment action planning and community groups need adequate resources for sustained activity.

Micheál O'Cinneide highlighted the community activism that is currently happening in Ireland. The iCatch network of catchment groups includes over 15 rivers trusts. Communities take a holistic view which includes many aspects of a catchment including heritage, education, trails, biodiversity and water quality. A community engagement framework needs to be developed to support community actions; there needs to be an adequate funding model and scientific data needs to be made available to groups.

Sean Corrigan of the National Federation of Group Water Schemes discussed how engaging communities on biodiversity had benefits for water quality. Sean's work has identified the need to build trust with communities and individuals, where trust, honesty and mutual respect are key to achieving outcomes. Farmers are very willing to take action, often at their own expense, for the benefit of the environment and the wider community.

Fran Igoe of the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) has a key role in community engagement and participation in the River Basin Management Plan. LAWPRO have focused on raising awareness, participation and engagement primarily targeted at Priority Areas for Action. The Community Water Development Fund has been a very useful tool in achieving community actions on the ground. A Guide for Community Groups to plan and develop projects has been created, and LAWPRO work with the agricultural sector to gain inroads in improving farming practice. A key learning is that people are interested in water management for different reasons, heritage, drinking water, angling, bathing sites are a few of these. We

find water literacy levels are low and are providing Leader funded training on biodiversity and citizen science programmes to address this deficit. While peoples time is precious there is a big interest in projects at local level. To deliver **meaningfully at local level Governance structures need to be strengthened with the development of a proper framework to get outputs and actions.**



Screenshot of twitter feed of webinar content

Discussion and Q&A

The issue of *'structures needed to support communities'* to participate in water management was an important topic in the discussion and Micheál O'Cinneide made the following recommendations:

- **Policy support & facilitation** needs to be provided possibly by the LAWPRO Community Water Officers
- A **Governance model**, which provides an explicit role for Catchment groups to engage with County Councils & state agencies - there is a clear opportunity in the template for the **46 Integrated Catchment Plans**, combined with components of **FILLM** framework; steps could be laid out in the ICP planning process to invite Stakeholders (Farm groups, angling groups, Community & catchment groups/Trusts) to facilitated sessions with LAWPRO team/Councils re
 - Briefing on the Characterisation study of the Catchment
 - Discuss & prioritize *'Areas for improvement'*
 - Design of the Implementation program
 - Feedback on progress, building public awareness & support.
- **FUNDING model**, building on the success to date of the LAWPRO Community Fund, but expanded to provide for core funding for groups with 2+ years' track record
- **DATA model**, which includes access to the Catchment data, once it is validated.

The Forum would like to take this opportunity to thank the presenters for their time, informative and generous input to the debate.