

Policy Brief

# Charting a new approach to Public Participation in water management: Lessons from research and practice.

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Looking after Ireland's  
water resources

# Recommendations for Effective Public Participation in the Republic of Ireland

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## Integration and Governance

A shift from siloed processes and tools to a more integrated and streamlined cross-sectoral approach with good participation practices embedded.

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## Communication

Improve communication with the incorporation of tools such as social media, mobile applications, and virtual realities to enhance participation. Establish a centralised single entry point for transparent public engagement and information in relation to water management across the sector.

3

## Training and Professional Development

Facilitate growth and build capacity through increased training for both staff, facilitators, volunteers and community members. Incorporate peer-to-peer learning, sharing of best practice, case studies, strategic approaches and collaborative opportunities across the sector.

4

## Assessment and Evaluation

Strengthen feedback mechanisms and public participation monitoring. Implement a self-assessment matrix to evaluate and reflect on public participation practices.

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## Funding

Increase funding for actionable plans that prioritise Participatory Processes. Increase the human and financial resources of organisations in the environmental sector to include public participation (PP) in plans of actions.

6

## Diversity and Inclusion

Actively involve identified vulnerable, marginalised and historically underserved communities. Continue to harness and expand the mobilisation of youth in PP to build future capacity and encourage active citizenship.

7

## Research and Development

Complete social science research to complement scientific evidence gathered across catchment levels and address knowledge gaps. Further develop opportunities for Citizen Science to enhance science research and monitoring programmes.

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## Community Catchment Fora

Draw inspiration from exemplars such as the Dutch Water Board approach to electing members to the proposed Community Catchment Fora and from the Environmental Water Advisory Groups of New South Wales, Australia on how to utilise different expertise on the Fora.

# Introduction & Rationale

The Republic of Ireland (RoI), like many other countries, is dealing with urgent environmental issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and water quality concerns, all of which are interrelated. Underscored by various international agreements, including the European Union (EU) Water Framework Directive and the Aarhus Convention, Public Participation (PP) as a comprehensive and inclusive strategy that actively engages the public in decision-making is required to address these interrelated challenges. Defined by the European Commission as involving the public in decision-making and fostering an understanding of environmental problems, PP promotes acceptance of, and commitment to, proposed plans<sup>1</sup>. Like many, if not all other countries, the RoI encounters challenges that impede effective PP. Policy incoherence, inadequate resources, and a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities are among factors that hinder PP progress. Given that, the implementation of the 3rd River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) and the establishment of Catchment Community Fora (CCF)<sup>2</sup> by the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO), requires effective PP for success, this study employs a qualitative approach to draw valuable insights from research and practice on how to implement effective PP in RoI.

The qualitative approach incorporates stakeholder interviews and case study reviews, with the primary goal of drawing valuable insights from a variety of national and international case studies on PP in environmental management. The stakeholder interview process involved 20 stakeholders from within the RoI (referred to as national stakeholders) and 10 international participants from Europe, Australia, and Africa (referred to as International stakeholders) who knew about, participated in, managed,

and made decisions relating to PP, water resources and the environment. The case study review focused on two themes of the Aarhus Convention: access to environmental information and PP in environmental decision-making. Case studies were drawn from up-to-date research publications, government policies and institutional reports, and information from various environmental organisations. Consideration was also given to international regulations and directives, like the 2022 Environmental Performance Index<sup>3</sup>, the Water Framework Directive (200/60/EU), and EU Environmental Implementation Reports.

The findings highlight a need for regular training and professional development, and a need to embrace modern communication tools. Increasing human and financial resources for Environmental organisations, and the implementation of mandatory assessment and feedback mechanisms are among several policy recommendations made in this study. The study also recommends diversity and inclusion in environmental decision-making. Lessons from the Water Board of Netherlands<sup>1</sup> and Environmental Water Advisory Group in New South Wales<sup>2</sup> on how to utilise local expertise to drive actions towards resolving environmental challenges at catchment levels while contributing to broader water policy at the national level are also suggested as policy considerations for the upcoming CCF. By considering the various recommendations in this study, the RoI has the potential to create an environment that encourages meaningful PP and engagement, strengthens collaboration among stakeholders, and promotes informed decision-making and implementation practices in environmental matters.

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- 1 Dutch Water Authorities comprise 21 regional water authorities in the Netherlands, each with an elected General Board. Board members, elected every four years, include residents and representatives from sectors like business and agriculture. Originating for flood protection, these autonomous bodies oversee water management independently, financed by taxes. The executive board, elected by the general assembly, manages strategic and operational aspects, divided into sectoral departments. With fixed taxes, they cover organizational costs, while the executive body handles administrative and technical tasks, emphasizing flood control, quantitative and qualitative water management (refer to page 23 of report).
  - 2 The Environmental Water Advisory Groups leverage community members expertise, comprising water managers, fishers, landholders, Aboriginal groups, scientists, and government representatives. They meet regularly to discuss water events and opportunities, aiming to provide advice on environmental water initiatives. Annually, they offer guidance on water plans, considering environmental forecasts and scientific evidence. These outputs assist the Australian Government in implementing the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, safeguarding the environment and promoting regional, social, and economic outcomes through strategic water recovery and efficiency measures. (refer to page 25 of report).



## Existing Structures that support PP in water management

Seminal contributions underscore that PP in RoI has, for the most part, fallen short of anticipated outcomes due to an excessive focus on policy formulation over implementation<sup>4-7</sup>. Concerted efforts in recent times are being made to enhance PP in environmental decision-making, spanning from local to national levels. The 2nd River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) introduced various structures to enhance PP, such as the creation of the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) tasked with spearheading public engagement and consultation on draft RBMPs. LAWPRO works with rivers trusts across Ireland to support the development of river trusts and catchment groups. The creation of the Catchments Unit within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and its online portal, [catchments.ie](http://catchments.ie), also provides the public with access to water quality data, maps, and catchment stories on water resources.

In addition, the establishment of An Fóram Uisce as a statutory body with the mandate of informing national policy development and implementation based on stakeholders perspectives is another example of improving decision-making processes.

A guide on planning, implementation, and review of engagement processes has also been launched recently through a joint collaboration between the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), Community Work Ireland, and Pobal<sup>5</sup> with the support of the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN) along with Local Authorities and Public Participation Networks (PPNs) to enhance the capacity of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs)<sup>8</sup>. These organisations and bodies work across different scales with their roles and responsibilities aimed at improving PP in water and environmental decision-making in RoI (See Table 1 in report).

Stakeholders learn about water quality and freshwater biodiversity.



## Stakeholder perspectives

The stakeholders interviewed in this study shared several perspectives on what constitutes PP and its challenges and prospects for promoting environmental decision-making. They shared similar perspectives on the key benefits of PP (Fig. 1) but differed largely on key barriers and

challenges to effective PP. The differences in perspective reinforce assertions made in various studies, revealing that the diverse interactions between public bodies, citizens, communities, and stakeholder groups impact the precise definition, manifestation, and outcomes of PP within policy frameworks<sup>4,9</sup>.

**Fig 1:** Stakeholder perspectives on the benefits of PP. Authors construct 2024





Based on assertions and perspectives shared by national stakeholders, a Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats (SCOT) analysis was completed. The analysis assessed international best practices for opportunities that can serve as a pathway to leverage existing strengths in RoI to enhance effective PP. It was evident under the lens of two Aarhus Convention objectives: access to environmental information and public participation in environmental decision-making, that positive progress was being made in the RoI<sup>10</sup>. This includes efforts by the Environmental Education Unit of An Taisce in promoting environmental awareness among students<sup>11,12</sup> and the Heritage Council-founded national Biodiversity Data Centre, which supports several citizen science initiatives<sup>13</sup>. The Open Government National Action Plan 2023 – 2025 also offers insights on improving processes and barriers to PP and governance processes<sup>14</sup>.

Additionally, the Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and the Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership further outline consultation, collaboration, and partnership principles for enhanced PP<sup>8,15</sup>. Using the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum as a PP guide in decision-making to assess stakeholder interview responses, it however becomes evident that the RoI has not facilitated a high degree of PP in decision-making<sup>16</sup>.

Rather, it has often facilitated a more informing and consulting approach, which primarily solicits and provides information to the public.

The methods deployed in consulting and informing are based on consultative meetings, campaigns, website stories, and focus group meetings. While these methods promote participation, they fall short of fully realising the potential of PP in improving environmental outcomes.

## From the interviews, what constitutes successful PP in water resources governance and management is not evenly understood.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum provides a standardised framework for public participation. The spectrum recognises increasing degrees of participation from informing and consulting to involving, collaborating and empowering. Increased levels of participation results in conflict resolution, innovation and better decision making (IAPP, 2018).

The full integration of the IAP2 spectrum into the fabric of meaningful participation remains a work in progress. This is, however, not unique to the RoI alone. The review of international case studies reveals similar challenges. In Australia, challenges persist across communities and environmental organisations due to inconsistent and uneven application of environmental community rights in decision-making processes. Frequently, environmental decision-making tilts in favour of groups with vested interests or who carry more political sway. Trust and limited transparency across various regions in the country also impede efforts towards achieving PP<sup>17</sup>.

Although, the stakeholder interviews and case studies revealed that no one country delivers fully effective PP in environmental management. Nonetheless, learnings can be taken from a number of different international approaches, for example, how the Netherlands, France, and Australia have improved access to environmental information through a single entry point for citizens to engage with the government on environmental matters.

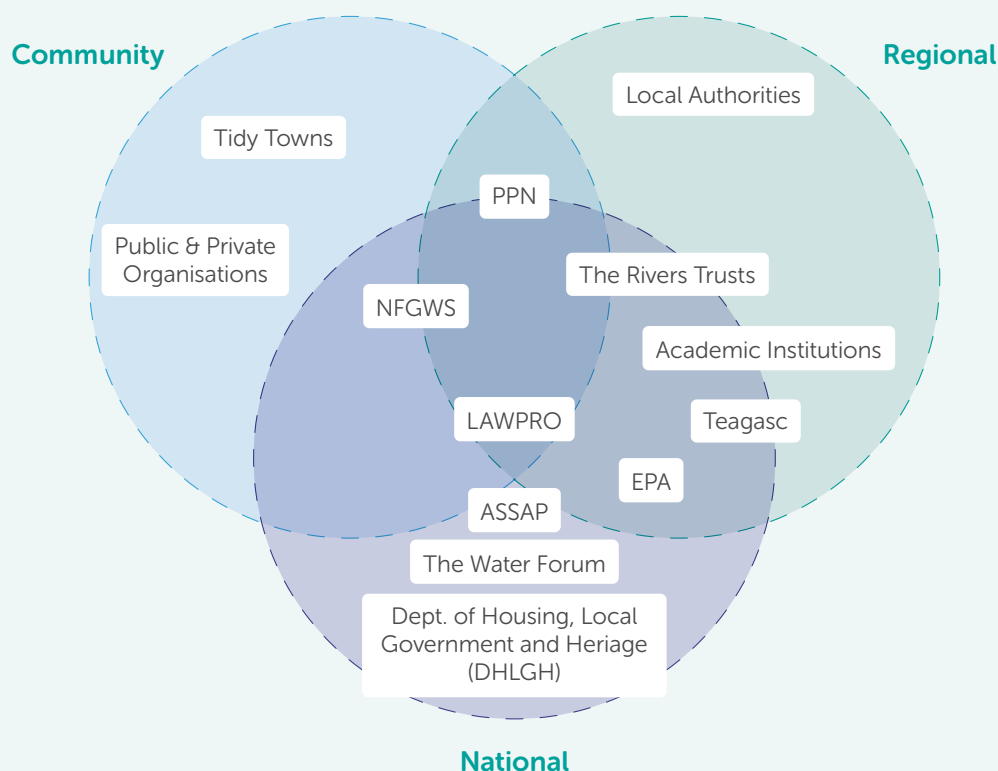
In France, the user friendly River Quality App enables access to information on water quality across catchments. Taking learnings from the international cases could strengthen the efforts towards piloting CCF and overall improvement in PP in RoI.

4 <https://www.lesagencesdeleau.fr/ressources/application-qualite-riviere>

5 Building Institutional Capacity in Public Policy Development in the Field - A Decision Maker's Toolkit of AI. <https://en.unesco.org/artificial-intelligence/decision-makers-toolkit>

**Fig 2:** Integrated Participatory Model (IPM). Authors construct, 2024

The broken lines illustrate how these organisations can collaborate to promote effective public engagement to improve water quality and management at the catchment level.



### Streamlining participation through an Integrated Participatory Model

The Integrated Participatory Model (Fig 2) is proposed as an approach to streamlining coherence in the delivery of PP considering the roles and responsibilities of various institutions and how they can collaborate to achieve the overarching objective of mainstreaming PP into water governance and management. This model draws inspiration from the Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum, and emphasises:

- 1) institutional coherence in delivering effective PP in environmental management,
- 2) effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure consistent PP, and
- 3) a bridge between bottom-up and top-down approaches to PP, ensuring that all institutions collaborate towards achieving common environmental objectives.

The model identifies avenues for:

- **engagement** (purposeful action),
- **representation** (knowledge and resource sharing), and
- **action** (strategic plans, results, and feedback),

where various organisations can either work directly or indirectly towards policy decision-making and enhanced PP action (Refer to page 31 of the main report). Should each of the identified organisations undertake a self-assessment on who they engage with to streamline their activities, institutional coherence and collaboration could considerably increase PP effectiveness. These synergies may further result in better-informed decision-making processes, improved access to data and research, and comprehensive outcomes for water-related concerns. This Integrated Participatory Model can create trust among stakeholders, including the public and private sectors; when the institutions collaborate transparently and harmoniously.

## Recommendations for improving PP in water management and environmental decision-making

Drawing from stakeholder perspectives and the review of case studies on best practices, several actionable recommendations are put forth beyond those recommended under the Integrated Participatory Model to address the critical question on how RoI can improve PP in water management and environmental decision-making. These recommendations also aim to advise on establishing the Catchment Community Fora by LAWPRO and to improve effective PP in environmental decision-making processes.

### 1. Integration and Governance

- 1.1 Organisations working within the water and environmental sector should embed best practice and follow clear communication protocols as outlined in the recent Guide for Inclusive Community Engagement in Local Planning and Decision and Values and Principles for Collaboration and Partnership<sup>14,15</sup>. This should specify the channels, frequency, and modes of communication to ensure that information is shared effectively among different departments and with the public. Organisations should undertake a self-assessment on who they engage with to better streamline their activities.
- 1.2 There should be bi-annual inter-organisational meetings between different stakeholder bodies and/or institutions involved in environmental/PP initiatives. These meetings could provide a platform for sharing updates, discussing ongoing projects, and identifying potential overlaps.
- 1.3 Existing structures including LAWPRO and the PPN network require adequate financing to properly support their individual remits. This could facilitate the formulation of a coordinated strategy to improve PP which could include a platform for sharing updates, discussing ongoing projects, and identifying potential overlaps.

- 1.4 Using the Environmental Water Advisory Groups of New South Wales approach, public groups working within the environmental and water sector and private firms could partner with LAWPRO towards effective PP initiatives. Such private-public collaboration can provide technical assistance and tools for community water management, awareness, policies and geographic information systems for water resource mapping and sampling analysis.

### 2. Communication

- 2.1 Following the Danish model, campaigns to enhance public knowledge on water and environmental concerns should be rolled out, to foster PP in environmental affairs water management.
- 2.2 By collaborating with appropriate technological companies and leveraging their corporate social responsibilities, a Nitrate App. similar to that of the Netherlands<sup>18</sup> could be developed to allow farmers to measure nitrate, assess water quality on their farms and for the public to be aware of the status of their local rivers and water bodies.
- 2.3 A user-friendly App. similar to the River Quality App. in France<sup>4</sup> should be developed to allow interested citizens, Rivers Trusts, Community Catchment Fora members and other relevant stakeholders to access data in relation to their catchment and its water resources in an easily accessible way.
- 2.4 Consideration should be given to developing a centralised online platform similar to South Australia's "yoursay.sa.gov.au", "WaterConnect" and the "Scottish Environment web" which serves as a single entry point for citizens to engage with the government on environmental matters and as a centralised repository for environmental information and data, facilitating easy search, discovery, analysis and interpretation.
- 2.5 Technology inclusivity and accessibility for users with varying abilities is essential, especially across different age groups, towards ensuring that participation is achieved virtually where physically may not be possible.



2.6 A blend of traditional media and social media platforms should be utilised to provide far-reaching content that can encourage the interest of younger people in environmental issues. Available AI feedback tools could be used to improve participation.

### 3. Training and Professional Development

3.1 Skilled facilitators are required to support public meetings and engagement events to ensure effective discussions and meeting outcomes.

3.2 Upskilling should include peer-to-peer learning, sharing of best practices, case studies, strategic approaches, and collaborative opportunities at all levels including community. This could be similar to the approach taken by the iCatch Network for training and shared learning on catchment management. In addition, the Hague Academy for Local Governance on citizen participation and environmental sustainability is a useful model.

3.3 Grant writing training and support for community groups applying for various funds (e.g. LAWPROs Community Water Development Fund or EU Horizon Fund) is essential and was raised by many of the national stakeholders interviewed.

### 4. Assessment and Evaluation

4.1 The feedback matrix presented in the Research Report Appendix 3, could be used to measure the level of participation and offer insights into how well PP is embedded in various environmental actions and to track PP in environmental decision-making.

4.2 An annual report and a 4-year key learning follow up report should be developed - as is the practice in Sweden - on PP activities undertaken by various organisations under the auspices of DHLGH and verified under a PP matrix.

4.3 The DHLGH could demonstrate a commitment and political will by embedding PP assessment into all funded actions to encourage effective PP. It could also promote collaboration among local authorities and organisations like LAWPRO to guarantee effective public involvement at the catchment level.

4.4 Local authorities and PPNs can ensure that all environmental concerns are addressed in a participatory approach by reviewing and monitoring engagement processes to ensure they follow the principles of PP.

4.5 A centralised database of all environmental concerns should be created. Public Participation data, information and references to future activities should be provided to enable the Community Catchment Fora access to a valuable one-stop knowledge hub to support their work.

### 5. Funding

5.1 To enhance catchment activities, an increase in funding support across the Community Water Development Fund (CWDF) should be considered.

5.2 LAWPRO should promote equitable distribution in funding processes considering factors such as regional distribution, population, and community size. This approach recognises diverse needs and priorities across regions and communities, preventing disparities and fostering inclusive development. It will also enable larger communities and catchment areas to access the much-needed funds based on their specific needs.

5.3 Funding should be extended to have more officers attached to the Local Authorities to encourage greater environmental representation within the PPNs structure. Skilled staff with knowledge of environmental issues, particularly climate change, water and biodiversity are needed to ensure that PP in catchment activities is facilitated and monitored.

4 <https://www.lesagencesdeleau.fr/ressources/application-qualite-riviere>

5 Building Institutional Capacity in Public Policy Development in the Field - A Decision Maker's Toolkit of AI. <https://en.unesco.org/artificial-intelligence/decision-makers-toolkit>

- 5.4 Funding for individual/community initiatives that delivers environmental outcomes should be encouraged similar to that initiated by Amsterdam City to encourage PP and locally-led solutions to identified environmental challenges<sup>19</sup>.

## 6. Diversity and Inclusion

- 6.1 Deliberate involvement of identified vulnerable, marginalised and/or historically underserved communities and persons such as the Irish Traveller communities, migrants and settlers is important. Including these diverse groups will enhance public dialogue, representation, participation and understanding of environmental issues.
- 6.2 Early engagement of young people in PP activities will improve their understanding and encourage active participation in environmental issues potentially leading to leadership roles and responsibilities in the future. For instance, Transition year students can be encouraged to volunteer with local community organisations to develop an interest in community service and participation.

## 7. Research and Development

- 7.1 Learnings from social/behavioural science research can play a pivotal role in the context of catchment actions for water quality and PP by providing deeper insights into human behaviour and decision-making resulting in more effective PP strategies.
- 7.2 There should be integration and prioritisation of environmental education into the core curriculum of Irish schools, providing students with essential skills and knowledge for environmental sustainability.
- 7.3 A centralised, open-access repository for data gathered through citizen science is required to easily access catchment data and inputs for modelling long-term trends and analysis on water quality and changes over time.

## 8. Community Catchment Fora

- 8.1 The proposed Community Catchment Fora to be piloted by LAWPRO for the 3rd RBMP should draw inspiration from exemplars such as the Dutch Water Board approach to electing members to the Fora and from the Environmental Water Advisory Groups of New South Wales, Australia, on how to utilise different expertise on the Fora.
- 8.2 To promote diversity and inclusion in the Fora, conscious efforts should be made to ensure the representation of underrepresented groups, such as marginalised communities and ethnic minorities.
- 8.3 The governance structure of the Catchment Community Fora should be transparent, inclusive, and adaptable. Its objectives should also address water quality, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable land use. How communications from the Fora is disseminated into the broader community should be a critical consideration to ensure collective understanding by both Fora members and the community.
- 8.4 The Fora should meet at least twice a year to set objectives, review progress, agree communications and engage with each other to maintain momentum. Some of these meetings, where possible, should be done online to strike a balance in accommodating members availability.

This policy brief is from a report submitted to An Fóram Uisce | The Water Forum on "A Review Of Best Practices (National And International) In Public Participation In Environmental Management, With Policy Recommendations For The Protection And Restoration Of Water Bodies"

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