

Newsletter



An Fóram Uisce - looking after Ireland's water resources

Issue 16 / Summer 2024



In this issue

- 2 Rural Water Supplies

- 3 Policy Update

- 4 Members fieldtrip to Delour high-status waterbody

- 5 Research Update

- 6 Education and Awareness - Water Forum Conference

Water Forum focuses on rural water services

The Water Forum provides a platform for stakeholder engagement on water policies and the management of Ireland's waters. The 2017 Water Services Act provided the statutory basis for An Fóram Uisce - the Water Forum to advise the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage and the Water Policy Advisory Committee on water policy. The Act provided for the dissolution of the Public Water Forum (whose remit was primarily concerned with issues relating to Uisce Éireann and the Regulation of water utilities) and the National Rural Water Services Committee

(the committee addressing issues relating to rural water services). The functions of both committees were incorporated into the work of the Water Forum.

The Government is currently undertaking a review of the Rural Water Programme and rural water services, so the Forum has taken this is an opportune time to develop a policy position and advice for the Minister on the provision of rural water supplies and wastewater services.

Rural Water Programme

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) is the government department responsible for the delivery of rural water services in Ireland. The DHLGH is responsible for the development of rural water policy and funding for the Group Water Scheme (GWS) sector through the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme (MARWP) including capital funding, investment, operational and management costs.

Under the Drinking Water Regulations, **Local Authorities** are the supervisory authority for private water supplies. They also have a devolved role from the DHLGH to administer funding under the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme.

Uisce Éireann (UÉ) is the national single public utility responsible for the delivery of public water services and do not have a statutory role in relation to rural water services. However, UÉ supply water to publicly sourced GWS and engage with the DHLGH and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) in relation to Taking in Charge of GWS, where required.

A Rural Water Working Group was established in 2018 by the Minister to conduct a review of the wider investment needs relating to rural water services to ensure an equality of outcome between those who receive water services from Uisce Éireann and non-Uisce Éireann customers. In 2021, the DHLGH commissioned Tobin Consultancy to conduct a review of the governance, supervision, funding and wider investment needs relating to the Rural Water Sector, to inform the work of the Rural Water Working Group.

Rural Water Supplies

Currently 83.5% of the population receive water from Uisce Éireann supplies (public water supply) and 10.4% are supplied by private wells. The remainder of the population get their water supply from either private Group Water Schemes (using a privately managed water supply source) 4.4%, or public Group Water Schemes (water is supplied by UÉ), 1.8%.

Group Water Schemes (GWSs) are community owned, community-run organisations which provide potable drinking water to their local members.

- The Group Water Sector represents 6.2% of the population. 4.4% are connected to private Group Water Schemes and 1.8% are connected to public Group Water Schemes.
- Private Group Water Schemes are privately sourced supplies set up by the local community, who manage the abstraction, treatment and distribution of potable water. There are 370 private GWS, serving ~200,000 people.

- For Public Group Water Schemes the supplies are sourced from Uisce Éireann and the local community manages the distribution network to approximately 60,000 users. Uisce Éireann is responsible for the abstraction and treatment of the water.

All private supplies serving over 50 people are regulated by the Local Authority. Local Authorities also manage funding under the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme.

PICTURED: Water Forum members on a field trip to a Group Water Scheme treatment plant, hosted by the National Federation of Group Water Schemes.



The **National Federation of Group Water Schemes** (NFGWS) is the representative organisation for the community-owned group water scheme (GWS) sector. The NFGWS work in partnership with government departments, Local Authorities (LAs) and other state and non-state stakeholders to support drinking water services for its 370 GWS members. The Federation's 14 staff members provide advisory, training and developmental services to GWSs. The DHLGH provide support funding to the National Federation of Group Water Schemes.

Water Forum members visit a Group Water Scheme treatment plant

To inform the members on rural water services, the NFGWS hosted Water Forum members on a fieldtrip to Group Water Schemes in Co Roscommon.

The members received a presentation on the work of the NFGWS. The Forum members visited sites where the GWS worked with local farmers to implement raw water source protection measures including riparian buffer strips and sediment settlement ponds. The members were introduced to the 'Let it Bee' project that promotes biodiversity as a means to reduce pesticide use which provides the added value of protecting water quality and freshwater habitats.

A visit to a water treatment plant illustrated the processes used, as well as the challenges of managing raw water sources in changing weather conditions. The Design Build Operate model of operation was explained. The pressures facing the sector were discussed as well as the steps being taken by the GWS to address, not only, the challenge of supplying good water quality but also protecting biodiversity and adapting to additional complications resulting from climate change.

POLICY UPDATE

Rural Water Submission

The Forum has submitted advice in the form of a position paper to officials in the Water Division of the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage focused on the delivery of drinking water services by the Group Water Scheme sector, an agreed position of all Members of the Forum.

To prepare this policy advice, members of the Forum's Water Services Standing Committee received presentations on rural water services from the Rural Water Section of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS).

Learnings from the fieldtrip organised by the NFGWS and the Tobin Report on the Review of the Rural Water Sector have also contributed to the development of the position.

The policy advice included recommendations on:

Governance

- Local Authority delivery and administration of rural water services needs to be reviewed and defined as quickly as possible and additional resources and training provided to mitigate loss of expertise from the rural water sector to Uisce Éireann.
- Each Local Authority should review and update its Rural Water Strategic Plan in consultation with GWSs, and these should be strategic and costed and inform decision making at local level.
- A shared service governance approach could be considered to reduce inconsistencies in oversight and administration.

- Renewals of Design, Build and Operate contracts should be prioritised and interim reviews of long-term contracts should be undertaken.

Funding

- Funding needs to be provided urgently to address source protection measures, ensure water treatment standards are being met (including for issues like THMs) and to address new Drinking Water and Abstraction legislation requirements. Funding to train personnel to meet these needs is also essential.

Communications

- Members need access to data and information pertaining to the management of their supplies, including water quality, climate impacts and new legislative requirements.
- Landowners and customers need to be aware of source protection measures, their water use and how they can use less.

Water Quality

- GWS need to have emergency response and critical incident plans in place to protect consumers if there is a water quality issue and Local Authorities should assist GWSs in this and communicating with at-risk consumers.

This initial advice will be followed by additional guidance on other aspects of rural water services (including private wells) later in 2024.



[Water Forum Submission on Rural Water Services](#)

Members were hosted by the Local Authority Waters Programme on a fieldtrip to Delour high-status waterbody.

Members gathered in the Portlaoise Midlands Hotel for an introduction to the work of the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) catchment scientists, facilitated by the Local Authority Waters Programme.

Delour_020, a high-status waterbody in the Nore River catchment in County Laois, is one of LAWPRO's priority areas for action. In the second River Basin Management Plan, 191 priority areas for action were identified across the country, in which catchment scientists would carry out desk and field research to identify and address pressures and prioritise action to achieve improvements in water quality and/or status.

In each of these priority areas, LAWPRO catchment scientists use all available data to complete a catchment characterisation desk study to identify what and where the issues are within the catchment. This data is used to identify areas for a follow up field site study, locations where the scientists need to carry out on the ground assessments such as biological sampling (kick sampling identifies pollution tolerant or intolerant bugs) and chemical sampling identifies further pollutants. An analysis of the conditions along the river is also undertaken such as cattle access sites, pollution sources (septic tanks or other effluent sources) or issues such as invasive alien species.



These assessments identify the pressures and potential actions that are needed to protect or restore the water or river habitat quality. Field scale site specific measures to address issues are identified in this way. LAWPRO then work with responsible agencies, the local community, and/or pressure owners to address the issue. The Agricultural Sustainability and Support Advisory Programme (ASSAP) officers work with farmers to identify and implement measures on farms to protect water quality and to ensure good agricultural practice.

LAWPRO presented examples of analysis and data used by

catchment scientists during desk studies. At the riverside, the catchment scientists illustrated how they complete a biological kick sample and identified the invertebrates that are pollution tolerant (can live in polluted waters) and those that need high quality waters to survive such as that in the Delour waterbody. There was also an onsite discussion on some of the pressures that waterbodies experience (cattle access, siltation, barriers, and nutrients washing off the local landscape).

Forum members found the day very informative, and we would like to thank Ruth, Cormac, Eddie and Anna from LAWPRO and Donal Daly for sharing their great knowledge with us. The skills and enthusiasm they apply to their work was evident to all, and we can now appreciate the multitude of pressures there are on water quality at waterbody and catchment scale.



PICTURED: Water Forum members on a catchment management fieldtrip to the Delour River, a high-status waterbody, hosted by the Local Authority Waters Programme.

RESEARCH UPDATE

The Water Forum commissioned research to assess the progress being made on commitments relating to water quality and water services in the Programme for Government 2020.

The research was completed by: Dr Cara Augustenborg, Patricia Lentz & Anne Pender, Environmental Policy Department, University College Dublin and presented to members of An Fóram Uisce in January.

Research findings

Ireland's 2020 Programme for Government (PfG) (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020) set out 297 environmental commitments, 28 of which relate to water quality or water services and 20 of which relate to the marine environment. This research provided an analysis of progress made to-date on implementing the water and marine commitments. The research also identified barriers preventing successful achievement of these commitments along with emerging water and marine issues that should be considered for future Government programmes. Overall, the analysis showed progress varied across commitment categories, with progress on drinking water and wastewater scoring highest, while progress on water quality and conservation has been poor.

Barriers impeding progress across commitment categories included financial and staffing resources, government structure, planning delays, and conflicting sectoral policy priorities. Emerging issues of concern included increasing demand for water and wastewater services and the need for significant investment in digitisation tools to improve services. Climate change is a growing concern for freshwater quality and quantity management. Delays in designating Marine Protection Areas is also an emerging concern.

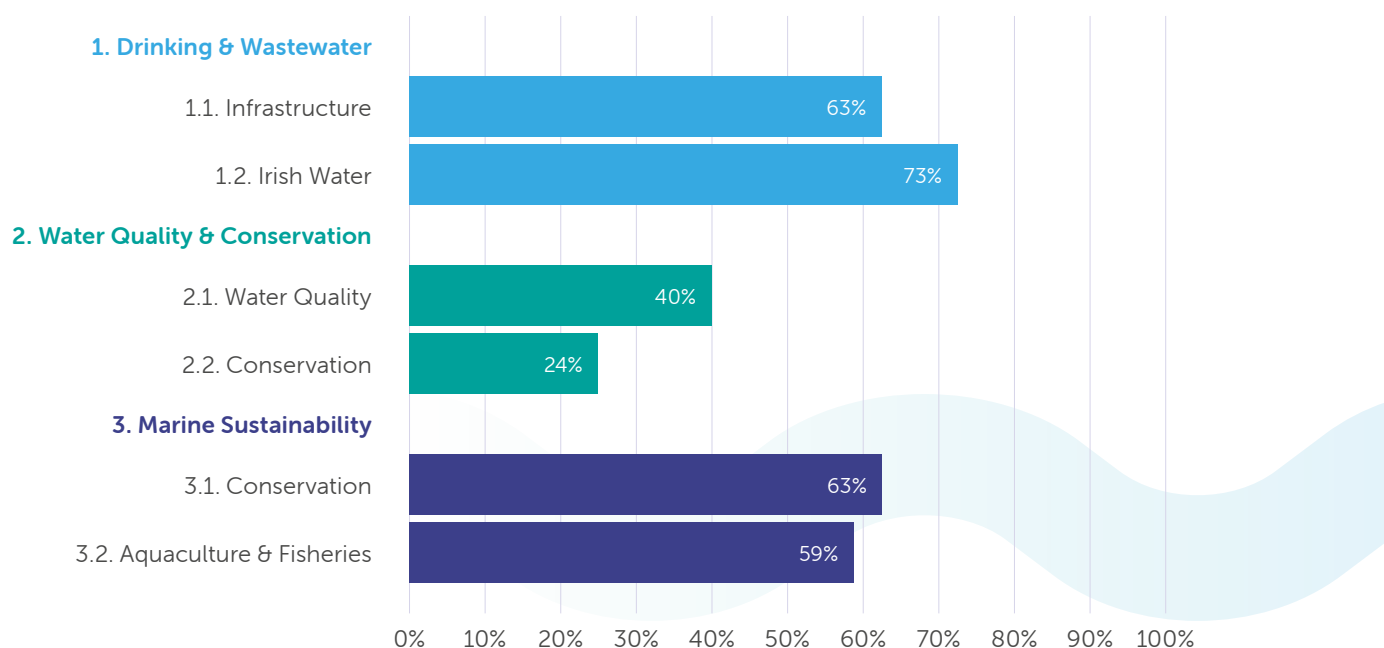
Recommendations

Recommendations to improve progress in Government commitments, to address systemic barriers and provide multiple benefits were presented under the following headings:

- Address constraints in relation to financial and staffing resources
- Support greater cross-sectoral and cross-departmental collaboration on water and marine policy
- Explore the potential for more innovative policy implementation tools
- Identify administrative barriers that are impeding progress on commitments
- Prioritise action on water quality and water conservation commitments

-  [Research Report: A review of progress against water related commitments in the Programme for Government](#)
-  [Research Policy Brief: Progress on Programme for Government water commitments and recommendations for improvement](#)

Fig 1: Assessment of progress in water and marine commitments within the 2020 Programme for Government, as of October 2023.



Education and Awareness

Water Forum Conference
Tullamore Court Hotel, Tullamore,
20th November 2024 - 9:30am to 3:30pm

**PLEASE SAVE
 THE DATE!**

The conference will provide an opportunity to present the latest science on the impacts of climate change on catchments, water quality and quantity, ecosystems and public health. Discussions will cover the challenges and opportunities of taking an integrated catchment management approach to drought and flood management and climate change adaptation. Examples of best practice will be shared and poster sessions will present ongoing research.

TIME	WORKING PROGRAMME
9:30	Registration and Refreshments
9:50	Welcome and Introduction - Dr Matt Crowe, Chair, National Water Forum
Session 1:	Presenting the science - what are the impacts and why should we care?
10:00	Keynote Address - Prof Conor Murphy, Maynooth University Impacts of climate change on water resources (flooding and drought)
10:20	Response panel presentations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Availability/Conservation - Dr Sarah Cotterill, University College Dublin • Water Quality - Dr Michelle McKeown, University College Cork • Public Health - Dr Paul Hynds, Technological University Dublin / Prof. Eoin O’Neil, University College Dublin • Impact on Ecosystems - Dr Ken Whelan, Fisheries Scientist
11:00	Q&A - Chaired by Dr Matt Crowe
11:30	Coffee and poster session
Session 2:	Panel Discussion - management and implementation agency perspectives
12:00	Introduction - Catchment Management and Climate Change Adaptation - Conor Quinlan EPA
12:05	Presentation on Integrated Catchment Management Planning - Bernie White, LAWPRO Response panel discussion Agency perspectives on taking a catchment-based approach to climate change adaptation Office of Public Works (OPW); Climate Action Regional Offices (CARO); Uisce Eireann (UE); Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI).
12:45	Q&A
13:15	Lunch and poster session
Session 3:	Sectoral Perspectives- management for water, nature and climate change adaptation
14:15	Sectoral examples of climate change adaptation in catchments Presentations and chair to be confirmed
14:20	Short presentations: TBC
15:00	Q&A
15:30	Closing address

To Register: A registration page will be set up. Email info@nationalwaterforum to find out more. Please state your name and organisation.





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