



## Water Forum Recommendations on water-related actions to be included in the next Programme for Government.

### Introduction to the Water Forum

The Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce)<sup>1</sup> is the national statutory body set up to facilitate stakeholder input to water policy development in Ireland. It was established on a statutory basis in June 2018 in accordance with the Water Services Act 2017. The Forum consists of 27 members from 16 different sectors, representing a wide range of interests and perspectives on the protection and management of Ireland's water resources. The Forum has advisory roles in relation to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Uisce Éireann (Irish Water), the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and the Water Policy Advisory Committee.

The Water Forum provides an opportunity for stakeholders to debate and analyse a range of issues with regard to water quality, rural water concerns, issues affecting customers of Uisce Éireann and the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and Ireland's River Basin Management Plan, the Water Action Plan. As an independent entity, the Forum has discretion to determine its own work programme and means of communicating its views and analysis. The vision of the Water Forum is for clean and healthy waters, supporting biodiversity, community wellbeing and economic sustainability.

### Background

In Ireland's Programme for Government (PfG) (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020) there are 297 environmental commitments by the current Government, 28 of which relate to water quality and water services and 20 of which relate to the marine environment.

In 2023, the Water Forum commissioned research<sup>2</sup> to review progress and barriers to implementation of the 28 water-related and 20 marine-related commitments in the Programme for Government. Following presentation of this research to members of the Water Forum, and along with building on previous Water Forum positions, the Forum

---

<sup>1</sup> [An Fóram Uisce - the Water Forum - An Fóram Uisce](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Policy-Brief\\_Progress-on-PfG-Water-Committments-for-the-Water-Forum.pdf](#)  
[Water-Committments-Progress-Report-for-the-Water-Forum\\_Augustenborg-et.al\\_.pdf](#)

requests that the following high-level recommendations are considered by the new Government when developing the next Programme for Government.

## Policy Recommendations for the next Programme for Government

### *Policy Coherence*

1. The Forum recommends that the next Programme for Government should take account of the cross-departmental nature of water, climate and biodiversity, where there should be better alignment between the actions across all departments to meet the ambitious EU targets for water, climate and biodiversity.
2. The Forum recommends that an inter-departmental policy group for water, climate and biodiversity should be established to facilitate policy coherence and integration across the sectors. This group could also ensure that national policies and plans are more cohesive and aim to find resolutions to conflicting department interests and existing conflicts in national policies. It could identify measures (e.g. nature-based solutions) which have maximum co-benefits for water protection, climate mitigation and biodiversity. Examples of conflicting department interests to address include agriculture, food production and water quality; flood management, drainage and land management; abstraction, drinking water supply and impacts on ecosystems.
3. The Forum recommends that there is a commitment in the next PfG for an interdepartmental financing strategy to meet the ambitious EU targets for water, climate and biodiversity, where the resourcing of actions is planned in a coordinated approach aimed at delivering multiple benefits for climate, biodiversity, water and economic and social development.
4. The Forum recommends that the next government should review the internal and external capacities, which have been found to be a barrier to progressing existing PfG commitments. Staffing resources, both within the government Departments and in relevant implementing bodies including State Agencies should be reviewed to ensure that the increasing environmental ambitions and commitments have the necessary resources and capacity for effective implementation.
5. The Forum recommends that the commitments related to all environmental commitments are more specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). This is particularly relevant to the water quality and water conservation commitments, which are somewhat vague and difficult to monitor progress in the PfG (2020).
6. To support drafting of a new PfG, the shortfalls in the existing PfG should be reviewed and the outstanding commitments should be carried into the next Programme.

### *Drinking water and wastewater*

- The Forum recommends that the next PfG should reflect the need to improve drinking and wastewater infrastructure to meet the demand from the growing population and economic development, along with the additional challenges on water availability and water quality with future climate change. Emphasis should be placed on the need to secure a resilient water supply for Dublin City and the Greater Dublin Area, with timely publication of regulations to support the required infrastructure. The next PfG should also include continued support for the Rural Water Sector.
- There should be a commitment to develop and publish drought management plans for Ireland, which indicate measures (e.g. increased storage to address supply demand deficits) to adapt to the extremes in water availability predicted to occur with future climate change.
- The next PfG should include a commitment to review and improve grant schemes for private wells, along with the piloting of an approach to provide additional supports for testing of private well water.
- The next PfG should include a commitment to review and improve the planning process to prevent an increase in pressure on water quality from domestic wastewater treatment systems (DWWTS) from new dwellings. The grant scheme for DWWTS should also be reviewed, where there should be increased promotion and availability of the grant in areas where septic tanks have been identified as a significant pressure on water quality or a drinking water source.

### *Water Conservation/Efficiency*

A resilient supply of high-quality drinking water is not only essential for every person living in Ireland, but also critical for future economic investment and development. Population growth, climate change and aging infrastructure add additional challenges to securing a resilient supply of drinking water for domestic and non-domestic customers. There is already a high strain on Ireland's water supply infrastructure, with Uisce Éireann reporting that 58% of their water resource zones have a supply demand deficit in normal conditions and 66% are in deficit during drought conditions.

- To align with the DHLGH Water Services, the next PfG should include a commitment to develop a government strategy for water conservation incorporating a program of actions to implement water conservation nationally. This should be developed and supported by a newly established national water conservation team.

The next PfG should identify water conservation as a tool to make more water available for housing and economic growth. The Irish Government's commitment to build 33,000

new homes each year over the next decade provides a golden opportunity to ensure future housing and developments are not only energy efficient, but also water efficient. This will have the *additional* benefit of putting less strain on water infrastructure and water supply zones at risk of supply deficits.

Furthermore, the Government has committed to retrofitting 500,000 homes by 2030 to increase energy efficiency to a B2 BER standard. This could provide another opportunity to improve water efficiency at building scale.

- There should be a commitment included in the next PfG to amend Ireland's Building Regulations to include mandatory water efficiency measures for new buildings, to specify total water use per building and maximum ratings for fittings.
- Furthermore, there should be a commitment to incentivise water efficient technologies to improve energy and water efficiency during retrofitting. The introduction of water saving devices during the building or retrofitting of properties would lead to a reduction in water use of a property, even without a change in user behaviour.

This is in line with recommendations made by the JOC on the Future Funding of Domestic Water in Ireland, who called for an 'ambitious amendment to existing building standards and regulations to ensure maximum level of water conservation'.

- There should be a commitment in the next PfG to provide a new Water Resilience Fund, to address the current funding gap in Research and Development and Innovation in water resilience and water conservation technologies. This could be used to support the piloting of implementation of water efficiency measures, and analysis of the associated costs and water savings.
- The next PfG should include a commitment to implement the excess water usage charge for public consumers, a commitment in the current PfG which has not yet been implemented. This would promote water conservation and personal responsibility for the detection of household leaks.

#### *Water Quality & the Water Framework Directive*

- While the existing PfG includes a commitment to 'ensure that the State complies with the EU Water Framework Directive', the Water Forum recommends that a number of more specific measurable actions are also included which can be monitored and reported over the next Government.
- The next PfG should include a commitment to establish the proposed Programme Delivery Office to support successful implementation and monitoring of Ireland's Water Action Plan under the EU Water Framework Directive. This office would support the required engagement and cooperation between the different tiers of governance, along with regular and pro-active engagement within and between

government departments to help achieve better policy coherence and alignment with national and EU policies.

- The next PfG should include a commitment to effectively implement the 3<sup>rd</sup> River Basin Management Plan – Water Action Plan (2024-2027), committing to the development and implementation of Sectoral Action Plans with a clear focus on removing significant pressures (associated with the sector) at water body level and putting measures in place to protect water quality in areas where the sector is active. An additional specific and measurable action related to the Water Framework Directive should be the development and implementation of the 46 Catchment Management Plans, as proposed in the Water Action Plan 2024-2027.
- There should be a commitment in the next PfG to develop a stronger, more ambitious Water Action Plan (2028-2033), which addresses the shortcomings of the previous cycles. There should be a dedicated team allocated to this task to ensure that the 4<sup>th</sup> plan is published on time, preventing any unforeseen delays as occurred in previous cycles.
- The Forum recommends that there is a commitment included in the next PfG to continue to work with An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum), to facilitate input from national stakeholders into national water policies, strategies and plans.