Water Forum Research Strategy 2025-2027

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An Introduction to the Water Forum

The Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) was established on a statutory basis in June 2018, in accordance with the Water Services Act 2017. The Forum has advisory roles in relation to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Irish Water, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and the Water Policy Advisory Committee.

The Forum is the national statutory body representative of stakeholders with an interest in the quality of Ireland's water bodies, to facilitate stakeholder input to water policy development in Ireland. The Forum consists of 27 members from 16 different sectors, including representatives from a wide range of organisations with direct connection to issues relating to water quality and also public water consumers.

The vision of the Water Forum is that *'Ireland's waters are clean, healthy and life enhancing, supporting biodiversity and providing the basis for community wellbeing and economic sustainability'.*

The Water Forum's Role in Research

Scientific research underpins the Forum's five strategic goals and supports the Forum to bring scientific recommendations to policy, through analysis and dialogue with stakeholders. An informed Forum, which is supported by research, ensures that advice provided by the Forum is based on the best available science and knowledge.

In accordance with the provisions of the Water Services Act 2017, the Forum is required to advise the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to water services and the water environment. Article 26 of the Water Services Act 2017 outlines the function of the Forum, including "*(e) to examine such other water-related matters* [concerning the management of the inland aquatic environment and water resources]*, including the carrying out of research concerning those matters, as the Minister requests the Forum to examine and to advise the Minister accordingly."* To this end, the Forum is committed to working with stakeholders to fill water-related knowledge gaps and inform policy to deliver on its five strategic goals.

The Forum will provide a link between the science community, policy stakeholders and the public in advancing communication and understanding between the three.

Research Strategy Objectives

The Water Forum's overarching research objective is:

To ensure all guidance concerning water quality and the management of water resources in Ireland, provided by the Forum is supported by the best available science; and where knowledge gaps exist, to carry out or commission research to support the delivery of the Strategic Plan.

This overarching objective is supported by three sub-objectives:

1. To engage with stakeholders to identify research knowledge gaps and to assist in the delivery of research actions designed to support the Water Forum's Strategic Plan.
2. To develop and implement research actions to advance thinking and policy development related to water quality, water services or the management of water resources.
3. To synthesise knowledge and research to advance communication and understanding between the scientific research community, policy stakeholders and the public.

Key Research Actions

This Research Strategy outlines how the Forum will undertake, deliver and synthesise research. The primary role of the Forum's Research and Policy Staff is to ***guide and advise the Forum on its role in providing a level of thought leadership with regard to high priority issues which impact on water resources, water quality and catchment management.*** This is done through presentations of research to the Water Forum Plenary, the Catchment Management Standing Committee, the Water Services Standing Committee and any specific working groups established, see Figure 1.

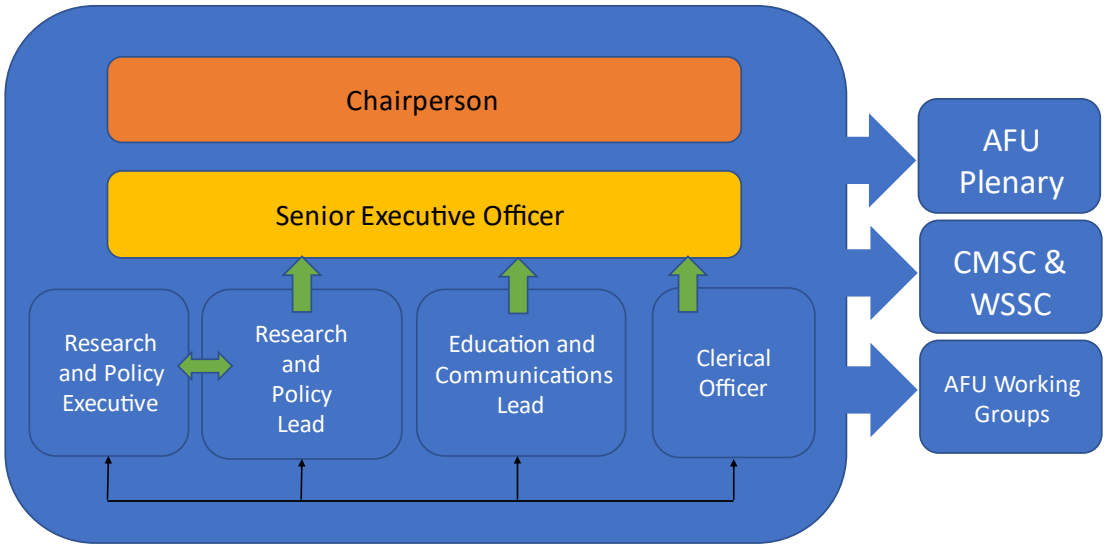

Figure 1: Internal governance structures of the Water Forum relating to the implementation of the Research Strategy. CMSC = Catchment Management Steering Committee. WSSC = Water Services Standing Committee.

Internal Research Actions:

- Synthesise available research knowledge to support the Forum's submissions to public consultations.
- Undertake in-house research into priority topics and prepare research reports or position papers to be presented to the Forum members.
- Engage with third level research institutions to establish and develop relationships with the Forum, to increase awareness of the Forum's role in research, and to strengthen research-policy linkages.

External Research Actions:

- In line with annual budget allowances approved by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Forum can commission research to support the implementation of its Strategic Plan.
- Externally commissioned research can be in the form of research funding for experts to address a knowledge gap in an agreed topic, with considerations of policy recommendations following the research.
- Early-Stage Research (ESR) project bursaries may also be awarded to increase ESR involvement in policy-relevant research.
- Opportunities for co-funding a research project will also be sought if it would support the research thematic areas and the delivery of the Forum's Strategic Plan.
- External research funding (national or European) may also be sought to support ongoing research if relevant to the Forum's Strategic Plan.

Role of Water Forum Members in Forum Research

Every year Forum Members will consider and discuss research topics for the following year. Research to be commissioned by the Forum will be aligned to the Forum's Role and Functions as per the Water Services Act 2017, the Forum's Strategic Plan and the key research thematic areas of the Research Strategy.

With support from the Forum's Executive, Members will identify water-related knowledge gaps in water services and catchment management. Members will consider what policy advice or policy positions may be required over the coming months/years and identify where additional research would be required to support this advice. Topics for commissioned research must be approved by the Plenary.

Members may be asked to support the Forum's Executive in reviewing applications for commissioned research, where the Executive will draw on the range of expertise of Forum Members to support the research procurement process.

Upon completion of research projects, research reports will be circulated to Members in advance of a presentation by the Researchers (either to Plenary or sub-committee). Following this presentation, Forum members will consider and agree a dissemination plan for the research (see Section Publications Policy).

Key Research Thematic Areas

This Research Strategy identifies key thematic areas to which priority research actions will be aligned for 2025-2027. These research thematic areas are in line with the Forum's Strategic Plan 2022-2027;

1. River Basin Management Plan; *Implementation, governance, enforcement, Aarhus convention*
2. Future proofing Ireland's water resources; *water efficiency & conservation, building resilience & climate change adaptation*
3. Water quality for public health; *meeting the requirements of the Recast Drinking Water Directive*
4. Transitional, coastal and marine water policy – *alignment with the Water Framework Directive, climate and nature objectives*
5. Water and wastewater management – *transparency, trust, communications and interests of consumers*

These thematic areas are in line with the Forum's vision for '*water to be clean, healthy and life sustaining'*.

Rationale for Research Thematic Areas:

1. **River Basin Management Plan; *Implementation, governance, enforcement, Aarhus convention***

Research in this thematic area will support the Forum's advisory role to the Minister, the Water Policy Advisory Committee, and the DHLGH Water Advisory Unit in relation to the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and Ireland's River Basin Management Plan. This theme is also aligned with the Forum's Strategic Goals, particularly Goal 2 to "*Be a proactive and authoritative national statutory body, leading on water policy, management and governance*", which includes an objective to "*Review and Advise on the RBMP*". Research projects could include a review of previous

RBMP cycles, including resourcing and governance, and a comparison of implementation with other EU Member States.

2. **Future proofing Ireland's water resources; *water efficiency & conservation, building resilience & climate change adaptation***

Research in this thematic area will support the Forum to develop policy advice in relation to building resilience in our water resources, including water conservation, nature-based solutions and management of our water resources in a changing climate. Research in this theme would support the Forum to develop policy positions and submissions to government departments and key agencies, including the DHLGH, Uisce Eireann, the NFGWS, DECC and Local Authorities. It is aligned with one of the Objectives of Strategic Goal 3, to "*Contribute to the debate on water quality, water conservation and future proofing in collaboration with agencies*".

3. **Water quality for public health; *meeting the requirements of the Recast Drinking Water Directive***

Research in this thematic area will support the Forum's advisory role to the Minister and the Water Advisory Unit of the DHLGH, Uisce Éireann and the Rural Water Sector in relation to the management of our water resources and the resilient supply of safe drinking water. It will support the Forum to develop policy advice in relation to the implementation of the Recast of the Drinking Water Directive and the upcoming Recast of the Urban Wastewater Directive. Research in this area would support the Forum's vision that '*Ireland's water are clean, healthy and life enhancing*'.

4. **Transitional, coastal and marine water policy – *alignment with the Water Framework Directive, climate and nature objectives***

Research in this thematic area will support the Forum to develop policy advice to the Minister and the officials of the DHLGH and DAFM in relation to the governance of freshwater and the marine environments. It would be particularly useful to assess the alignment between the Water Framework Directive and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. The focus on the alignment of water, climate and nature objectives is relevant to Goal 4 of the Strategic Plan, particularly the objective to '*Advocate for a whole of Government approach in water and overall environmental management, which takes on board the outputs of stakeholder engagement*'. A new focus on coastal and marine water policy would allow the Forum to develop advice around the governance of the marine environment, coastal management plans and building coastal resilience.

5. **Water and wastewater management – *transparency, trust, communications and interests of consumers***

Research in this thematic area will support the Forum's advisory role to the Minister and the DHLGH in relation to water and wastewater management, including communications from water service providers and building trust with the public. This research would support the Forum's advisory role to Uisce Éireann around the transparency in their planning and operations, decision making in planning and investment, along with communications with public water consumers. Research in this thematic area will contribute to Goal 2 of the Strategic Plan to "*Be a proactive and authoritative national statutory body, leading on water policy, management and governance*", including the objective to engage with Uisce Eireann, CRU, EPA, DHLGH in the delivery of water and wastewater services.

Water Forum Research Publications Policy

(previously an Appendix to the Strategy)

The aim of this section is to outline the procedures for publications which arise from both commissioned research funded by the Water Forum and internal research carried out by the Executive of the Water Forum. Any research prepared for the Water Forum (commissioned or

internal) is circulated and presented to Forum Members (either Plenary or sub-committee) to allow for engagement and input from Forum Members.

Research reports and their policy recommendations (either from internal or commissioned research) are not a position of the Water Forum. All reports are prepared as a 'Report to the Water Forum', to ensure it is clear that the research findings and any policy recommendations are from independent research and are not a position of Water Forum members. Following presentation of research to either the Plenary or a sub-committee, research reports will be published as a 'Report to the Forum', on the Forum website.

Members must subsequently discuss and agree on a dissemination plan for any piece of research. The Forum may subsequently decide to develop an agreed position or policy advice based on the research findings or policy recommendations. This must be approved by the full Plenary of the Forum.

External / Commissioned Research

All research commissioned by the Water Forum requires that a research report and policy brief are developed as key deliverables of the project. These reports provide a summary of the research, along with policy recommendations which arise from the research. These policy recommendations are the view of the researchers, and not a position of any member of the Water Forum. Draft reports are first reviewed by the Forum's Executive to ensure alignment with the project brief, and final reports are then circulated to Members. Researchers are given the opportunity to present their findings to members of the Water Forum, before it is agreed that the research report and policy brief are published on the Water Forum website.

Key policy for external / commissioned Research

- Research reports and policy briefs developed for commissioned research should be published as a 'Report to the Water Forum', to ensure it is clear that the research findings and any policy recommendations are not a position of the Water Forum members.
- Research reports and policy briefs developed for commissioned research will be uploaded to, and publicly accessible via, An Fóram Uisce's website.
- Any publications arising from commissioned research must acknowledge An Fóram Uisce|The Water Forum as the source of funding.

Internal Research

The Forum's Research and Policy Lead and Research and Policy Executive are often tasked to carry out pieces of research to support a discussion or policy submission on a relevant water topic. A report outlining key research findings is produced, which is then presented to members of the Forum. Depending on the extent of the research, internal research reports may also be published on the Water Forum website or may be considered for peer review publication.

Key policy for internal research

- Research reports and policy briefs developed for internal research should be published as a 'Report to the Water Forum', to ensure it is clear that the research findings and any policy recommendations are not a position of the Water Forum members.
- Research reports and policy briefs developed for internal research may be uploaded to, and publicly accessible via, An Fóram Uisce's website.

- If there is full agreement by all members on any internal research report, it may be published an approved position of the Water Forum. This must be approved by the full Plenary of the Forum.
- Any peer-review publications arising from internal research must include a statement that the research findings are not a position of the Forum members.

Linkages with other Water Forum Strategies

Both this Research Strategy and the Education Strategy are intrinsically linked, with each feeding into each other to achieve the delivery of the Strategic Plan (Figure 2). The Communications Strategy is the vehicle for disseminating the actions and outputs of the Research and Education Strategies and is central to all that the Water Forum was established to do.

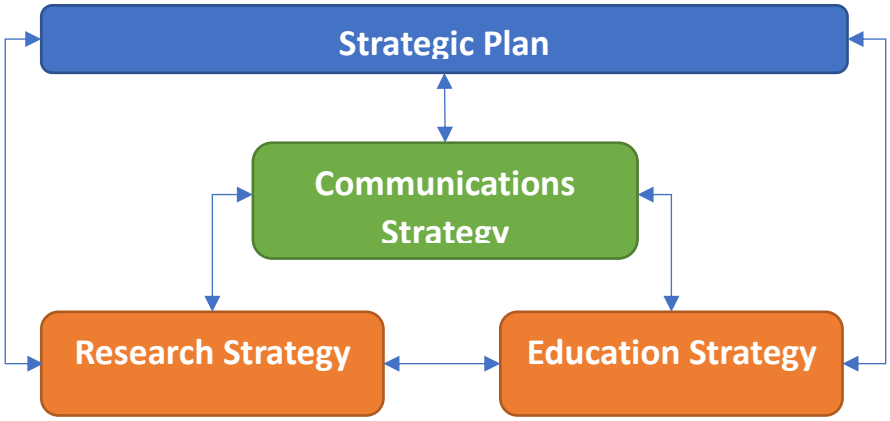

Figure 2: Linkages between the Research Strategy, Strategic Plan, and the Communications and Education Strategies.

The Water Forum Plenary group is positioned at the core of all the Forum's activities (Figure 3). The Catchment Management and Water Services Standing Committees form the underlying structure through which the actions of the Research and Education Strategies are delivered. These actions are disseminated through the Communications Strategy in order to deliver the Strategic Plan. These formal governance structures provide the feedback mechanisms for the adaptive management of the three core strategies and the Strategic Plan.

Figure 3: The Plenary is located at the heart of The Water Forum strategic structure

Research Communication

The synthesis of scientific information to support the guidance provided by the Forum is the key communication goal of this Research Strategy. The communication of research outputs and scientific information will be undertaken through the structures and methodologies identified in the Forum's Communications Strategy. These methodologies will include:

- Formal communications with the Forum Plenary Group and Standing Committees
- Policy briefs
- Stakeholder communications and presentations
- Research reports
- Formal media releases
- Social media communications
- Website communications
- Publications of informal articles
- Publication of scientific papers

Peer-reviewed publications in national or international journals arising from research undertaken by or commissioned by the Forum will, as a minimum, ensure open access via Green methods (depositing the peer-reviewed manuscript in an online repository before, at the same time, or after publication). All reports/publications commissioned by the Forum will be uploaded to, and publicly accessible via the Forum's website. See Appendix 1, the Water Forum's Publications Policy.

Implementation

Year	Action	Estimated Delivery
Pre-Research Strategy Actions		
Research Strategy Actions		
2025	• Research topics discussed and agreed with Members • Research tenders developed and advertised • Award Tenders • Budget for 2026 Research Submitted to Dept. • 2026 Research Topics to be identified and approved by Plenary • Final 2025 Research Reports Due	Oct – Dec 2024 Jan / Feb 2025 Mar/April 2025 July 2025 October 2025 November 2025
2026	• Research topics discussed and agreed with Members • Research tenders developed and advertised • Award Tenders • Budget for 2027 Research Submitted to Dept. • 2027 Research Topics to be identified and approved by Plenary • Final 2026 Research Reports Due	Oct – Dec 2025 Jan / Feb 2026 Mar/April 2026 July 2026 October 2026 November 2026
2027	• Research topics discussed and agreed with Members • Research tenders developed and advertised • Award Tenders • Budget for 2028 Research Submitted to Dept. • 2028 Research Topics to be identified and approved by Plenary • Final 2027 Research Reports Due	Oct – Dec 2026 Jan / Feb 2027 Mar/April 2027 July 2027 October 2027 November 2027

Linkages to other Water-Focussed Research Programmes

An essential component of developing the role of the Forum in water-related research in Ireland is to ensure integration and collaboration with other research bodies and funding programmes already established. Such an integrated approach to the Forum's research programme will assist in avoiding duplication while simultaneously enhancing a shared approach to improving thought leadership and knowledge sharing in water-related research in Ireland.

The Forum's Research Lead sits on a number of research groups both to facilitate integration and collaboration with national research bodies;

- The EPA's National Environmental Research Coordination Group (NERCG), which meet twice a year. Membership of this Coordination Group also provides linkages with other national water research stakeholders.
- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Water Research Programme Steering Group, which was established to gain a better understanding of the potential benefits of implementing behavioural change strategies relevant to protecting and restoring the aquatic environment. The Steering Group provides high-level oversight and determines, in consultation with the Programme Coordinator, the work-plan for a series of research projects centring on the theme of water that will be carried out over a period of time.

Furthermore, the Forum commits to maintaining an active role in raising awareness of and, where appropriate, linkages with other water focussed research programmes, both nationally (e.g. EPA, SFI, IRC) and internationally (e.g. Water JPI, Horizon Europe, BiodivERsA).