

Draft Minutes of the Plenary Meeting
Tuesday 4th November 2025
Ashling Hotel

Attendees: Matt Crowe, Dominic Cronin, Marie Doyle, Michael Kenny, Connie Rochford, Charles Stanley-Smith, Mark Farrelly, Steve Conlon, Brendan O’Brien, Suzanne Linnane, Neil Walker, Eamon Carroll, Eimear Manning, Jean Rosney, Ciarán Maguire, Maria O’Gorman, Maria Snell

Apologies: Karin Dubsy, Sinead O’Brien, Tadhg Buckley, Martin McEnroe, Keith Hyland, Elaine McGoff, David Wright, Constanze O’Toole, Fintan Kelly and Aisling Corkery

In Attendance: Donal Purcell, Triona McGrath, Divya Flynn

No.	Item	Details
1	Apologies & Minutes	<p>Welcome Chair welcomed members to the meeting and noted that this may be Neil Walker’s final plenary meeting. The Chair, on behalf of the Forum, expressed thanks to Neil for his contribution and service.</p> <p>Declaration of Conflicts of Interest There were no conflicts of interest declared.</p> <p>Consideration of draft minutes of Meeting no. 69 held on 9th September 2025 The minutes were approved by the members.</p> <p>Action: The approved minutes to be published on the Forum website</p> <p>Matters arising: None</p>
2.	Corporate issues	<p>To receive update on Forum expenditure to 30th September (<i>document to follow</i>) Expenditure as of the end of September was €457,560.22 out of a budget of €732,000.</p> <p>Membership: David Downes, representative of the fisheries sector, has stepped down from the Regional Inland Fisheries Forum and has also resigned from the Water Forum.</p> <p>Correspondence: Periodic Critical Review of the Forum as a State Body, mandated every five years, is scheduled to commence shortly. The review will be conducted by the Governance Unit within the Department of Housing Local Government & Heritage.</p> <p>The Memorandum of Funding is nearing finalisation and will be signed by the Forum, the DHLGH and Tipperary County Council (which employs the staff & administers the funding).</p> <p>Action: SEO to keep members informed of progress and developments over the coming months.</p>

		<p>Nitrates Action Plan (NAP) briefing A briefing on the Nitrates Action Programme will take place on 6th November Thursday at 2:30 PM online. Public consultation for the Nitrates Action Programme is open until December 1st. Members are encouraged to attend and participate in discussions.</p> <p>Action: SEO to circulate the briefing invitation to interested members.</p> <p>Draft schedule of meetings for 2026 The proposed schedule of plenary meeting dates for 2026 was circulated. It follows a similar pattern to this year, with adjustments to accommodate Easter and avoid clashes with other major events. The schedule was agreed by members with the meeting venues to be confirmed.</p>
3.	Research & Policy update	<p>To receive update on the SWMI workshop and proposed draft submission. (document to follow)</p> <p>The research Lead (RL) gave an update on the SWMI workshop and proposed draft submission.</p> <p>Summary: The development of the Fourth Water Action Plan (WAP) is underway following delays in the Third Plan, with a continued focus on river basin management principles. A public consultation on Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI) will open in December 2026. The DHLGH held a workshop in October to discuss key focus areas for the SWMI consultation document. The CMSC developed a background paper on the Forum’s Vision for the 4th Cycle, which was presented by the Forum’s Chair at the workshop. Now proposing developing an AFU position (based on this background paper and the presentation) as a pre-consultation submission.</p> <p>SWMI Draft <u>Stakeholder Engagement:</u> The draft acknowledges the extensive stakeholder engagement in the Third Plan; 106 recommendations were developed by the Forum in their submission. Following the consultation, the Forum engaged with the Dept., key sectors and agencies. AFU focused on 20-specific recommendations, which were integrated into the final plan and. The Forum recommends that a similar level of engagement should be maintained for the Fourth Cycle.</p> <p><u>Implementation:</u> The Forum called for a relentless focus on implementation into the 4th Plan. The Forum emphasised the importance of timely publication of the Fourth Plan while ensuring ongoing implementation of the Third, supporting a twin-track approach to manage both concurrently. Transparent tracking of actions and accountability for delivery were highlighted as priorities.</p> <p><u>Policy Coherence:</u> The Water Forum highlighted the need for policy coherence across departments and agencies, suggesting stronger use of the WPAC to address policy conflicts and improve collaboration. The Forum highlighted the need for greater policy coherence between national policies and the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The Chair noted the shift towards an implementation-focused mindset, stressing adherence to timelines and accountability for delays.</p>

A potential research project was suggested to examine how Ireland resources the WFD compared with other EU Member States.

Comments and Suggestions from Members and Chair

- Member suggested the need to extend LAWPRO staff contracts beyond 2027 to ensure continuity of expertise and delivery.
- Members agreed that WPAC should be more actively used to identify and resolve policy conflicts.
- Chair noted the importance of strengthening accountability for delays and shifting towards an implementation-focused mindset.
- Chair reminded members to continue pushing for delivery and adherence to agreed timelines.
- Member proposed introducing a statutory review mechanism for multiannual funding programmes.
- Member queried The Forum’s position on an interdepartmental financing strategy for water, climate, and nature, asking how responsibilities would be allocated.
 - Chair responded that each interdepartmental unit retains its own responsibility; the focus should be on effective collaboration.
- Member asked whether there are too many operational silos.
 - Chair responded that significant work has gone into establishing departmental structures such as SAWP and CMWP, and that coordination should be driven through the WPAC rather than restructuring.
- Member queried whether excessive funding is directed towards state agencies and consultation rather than on-the-ground implementation.
- Member proposed inserting the word “*relevant*” when referencing national policies, to ensure clarity.
- Member recommended improving communication and collaboration among implementing bodies.
- Member suggested the Forum should consider both delivery coherence and policy coherence, ensuring agencies work jointly on implementation.
- Chair suggested circulating the discussion summary to WPAC, rather than escalating to the Minister at this stage.

Action: AFU to prepare pre-consultation submission and continue engagement with WPAC on coordination and policy coherence.

Research & Policy Update

Public water consumers

RL gave update on recent research survey completed on public water consumers.

Summary:

The Public Water Consumer Survey was undertaken to explore consumer interests, with the aim of advising the Minister and Uisce Eireann on issues of concern to water consumers.

The study included a national online survey of 1,000 participants, complemented by 250 face-to-face interviews in areas recently affected by water outages or quality issues. The objective was to capture both customer service experiences and consumer perceptions of water services.

Initial findings have been received, and the final report from consultancy Interactions is awaited for review. Results will also be compared with previous surveys undertaken by the now-defunct Water Advisory Board to track trends in public perception and service experience.

Comments and Suggestions from Members and Chair

- Members agreed on the importance of ensuring a constructive discussion, avoiding any perception of blame of UE staff, particularly in light of recent organisational transitions within UE.
- The Chair emphasised the need to use the findings to support UE in strengthening its public reputation, especially around problem response and communication.
- The Chair proposed presenting findings to the Plenary first, followed by the development of a formal recommendation to UE.

Actions:

- Team to review final drafts of survey report and circulate final report to members.
- AFU to schedule a presentation of survey findings for the Plenary.
- AFU to develop formal recommendations to Uisce Éireann based on survey outcomes

Transitional and Coastal Water

A separate research project on the Water Quality of Transitional and Coastal Waters is underway.

The Chair suggested that this project be presented to the Plenary or CMSC in due course.

Action: The Forum to schedule a presentation on the Transitional and Coastal Waters research when final reports have been reviewed.

2026 Research topics/ proposal

RL presented possible research ideas for 2026.

Proposed Research Areas

- Implementation of the WFD internationally – governance structures, resourcing models, and examples of targeted action.
- Enforcement and compliance within the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) – assessing Ireland’s performance.
- Communications strategy – shifting from general awareness-raising to identifying pathways that lead to action among key stakeholder groups.
- Risk of blue-green algal blooms – understanding drivers and mitigation strategies in the Irish context.
- Drinking water and public health – emerging contaminants including PFAS and microplastics.

Discussion and Member Comments

- The Chair emphasised that AFU should only undertake research with a clear understanding of its intended use and policy relevance.
- The Chair suggested examining the blockages to implementation of the WFD – identifying barriers specific to Ireland and factors contributing to delays in meeting deadlines.
- Member supported the idea of maintaining the family farm model within research on agriculture and water quality.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member highlighted the issue of planning for wastewater and septic systems in developments of more than 20 houses. • Member noted that the communications research should move beyond awareness to focus on pathways to action, identifying how different stakeholders (e.g. farmers, young people) engage and respond. • Member proposed examining how other EU countries allocate and spend resources on WFD implementation to identify transferable lessons. • Member raised the issue of legacy infrastructure problems, such as lead leaching from old pipes, often concentrated in disadvantaged areas. • Member suggested exploring nature-based solutions to improve climate resilience in water management. • The Chair advised that the Forum identify key drivers for research to ensure strategic alignment with national policy priorities. <p>Action: The Forum to refine and prioritise research topics for discussion and approval at the December meeting.</p> <p>Update on Catchment Community Fora SEO provided an update on progress on the development of the five Catchment Community Fora (CCF) pilots, which have recently commenced. The business case for the initiative is expected to be completed by 2026, allowing for potential expansion in 2027.</p> <p>AFU reiterated its commitment to supporting the pilot phase and contributing to lessons learned to inform the design of a future national rollout.</p> <p>The SEO invited members to nominate suitable volunteers from their respective sectors to participate in the pilots and to share the call for nominations through personal and professional networks, including social media.</p> <p>Participation involves a commitment of at least four meetings per year, with LAWPRO providing administrative and financial support.</p> <p>Discussion and Member Comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member proposed establishing multiannual funding for the Catchment Support Fund to ensure continuity and stability beyond the pilot phase. • Member questioned how success will be measured, observing that some pilot meetings have as few as 18 participants and asking whether this represents effective engagement. • The Chair reminded members that the initiative is a pilot, and encouraged flexibility, openness to learning, and readiness for outcomes that may differ from expectations. • Member noted that the self-nomination process could be improved, suggesting that participants should also be able to nominate others to ensure broader representation.
4.	Agriculture & Water Policy update	<p>Update on development of a wider AFU position on Agriculture and Water and proposed next steps.</p> <p>Update on public consultation on the 6th Nitrates Action Plan (NAP). The research Lead provided members with an update on the development of a wider AFU position on Agriculture and Water, and on the public consultation for the Sixth Nitrates Action Plan (NAP).</p>

The Research Lead reminded members that the NAP briefing will take place on Thursday, encouraging attendance given its broad relevance.

The first sections of a draft position could include education, knowledge transfer and farm advisors. We can then consider broadening to include other areas like targeting catchments and the family farm model.

RL outlined AFU's intention to develop a balanced position on agriculture and water, with an emphasis on practical recommendations that can support both policy and implementation.

Key Focus Areas

- Education, awareness, and communications – improving understanding of water quality challenges and practical measures.
- Farm-specific advice – AFU recommends that farmers receive tailored advice, including maps highlighting catchment pressures and targeted measures to address them. RL proposed that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) take the lead on this initiative.
- Integration of catchment and behavioural science – recognising that technical knowledge and human behaviour both influence outcomes.
- Support for Teagasc initiatives – particularly in priority catchments, through targeted communication and collaboration.

Discussion and Member Comments

- Member noted that a top-down communications approach can be ineffective, suggesting a horizontal, farmer-led model to encourage ownership and peer engagement.
- Member proposed introducing education modules for children on agriculture and water quality, building awareness from an early age.
- Member referenced the EIP Burren and BRIDE projects, noting the value of peer-to-peer learning and the potential to leverage existing resources.
- Member cautioned that the concept of “diversification” should be used carefully to avoid misinterpretation in policy discussions.
- Member suggested involving farmers directly in the mapping process, ensuring maps reflect their local knowledge and experience — a co-creation approach rather than reliance solely on external platforms such as Catchments.ie.
- Member noted an increasing trend of farmland conversion to solar energy, raising considerations for land use balance.
- RL suggested referencing how media coverage can at times amplifying conflicting views between sectors, influencing public perception. Members supported the inclusion of this point in AFU's draft position.
- Member observed that younger farmers seek practical examples and working models, highlighting a need for knowledge-sharing initiatives.
- Member proposed continued advocacy for the family farm model, noting its importance in Ireland's agricultural identity and potential alignment with targeted water quality measures.
- Member suggested analysing blockages to implementation and identifying enablers to progress.
- Members agreed on the importance of bringing farmers into the dialogue and promoting direct engagement among farming peers.
- AFU noted the need for more farm advisors, as access to good quality advisory support is essential.
- Member highlighted challenges with new agricultural consultation regulations, noting that some advisors are disengaging as a result.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chair emphasised the need for consistent, high-quality advisory services on water, available to all farmers. • Member noted that policy timelines vary (e.g., WFD – 6 years; NAP – 4 years; funding cycles differ), suggesting better coordination across cycles. <p>RL proposed developing a draft paper on education, communications, and advisory approaches as the next stage in forming the AFU position.</p> <p>RL also suggested inviting guest speakers or expert presentations to inform the next phase of discussions.</p> <p>Actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AFU to develop a draft position paper on education, communications, and advisory supports for agriculture and water. • The next discussion will take place at an upcoming CMSC meeting.
5.	Education & Communications actions	<p>Communications and Education Update</p> <p>Communications - incl. dissemination plan for the local water survey Due to time constraints, this item was not discussed. The Chair suggested that it be prioritised for the next meeting.</p> <p>Upcoming Events The Chair noted the upcoming Young Scientist Exhibition in Dublin and invited members to support AFU’s participation at the event. The exhibition is expected to generate strong public interest and provide valuable opportunities for engagement.</p> <p>Action: Communications Lead to circulate event details and briefing note to all members ahead of the next Plenary.</p>
6.	AOB	Any other Business
7.	Date for next Plenary	To confirm the date of the next Plenary meeting - Tuesday 9 th December in the Ashling Hotel