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Chairperson  
WPAC  
Custom House  
Dublin 1

17<sup>th</sup> August 2022.

### **National Water Forum submission to the draft River Basin Management Plan 2022-2027**

To the Chairperson of WPAC,

The Water Forum is the national statutory body established to facilitate stakeholder input to water policy development in Ireland. Under the Water Services Act 2017, the Forum has advisory roles in relation to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Water Policy Advisory Committee in relation to the development and implementation of Ireland's River Basin Management Plan. The Water Forum consists of 25 members each with direct connections to issues relating to water quality and public water consumers and includes representatives from 13 different sectors.

The aim of the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) is to develop and implement measures to ensure Ireland meets its legal requirements under the European Water Framework Directive (WFD). While there have been some important strides to improve the management of our waterbodies over the past two RBMP cycles, the overall ecological status of waterbodies continues to decline. The Water Forum is asking for urgent, coherent and targeted action now.

In March 2022 the Water Forum made a submission to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) on the draft River Basin Management Plan 2022-2027, see executive summary and full submission attached. During the six months of the public consultation of the RBMP, the Forum had extensive engagement with the officials of the Water Advisory Unit of the DHLGH, along with discussions with key agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Local Authorities Waters Programme, the Department of Agriculture Food and Marine, the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme, the Agricultural Catchments Programme, Irish Water, the Forestry Service, Coillte, the Blue Dot Programme and the Waters of LIFE Programme. The Forum welcomed the opportunity to present a summary of the submission to Minister O'Brien and Minister Noonan in March, and to the Joint Oireachtas Committee in April 2022. However, we have not yet had the opportunity to engage with the Water Policy Advisory Committee in relation to our recommendations and we want to ensure that all members of WPAC are fully aware of our recommendations and that there is opportunity for regular engagement between the Water Forum and WPAC as we move towards finalising and implementing the third cycle plan. The recommendations made by the Forum

aim to strengthen the third RBMP, with a clear focus on targeted measures (protect or restore) for every waterbody in Ireland.

The submission was an agreed position of the 25 members of the Water Forum. This was a very significant achievement given the wide range of views and perspectives on the Forum. These agreed positions are to a large extent the 'common ground' on which there is broad consensus and therefore more likely to get the support of a wide and diverse stakeholder group during the implementation phase.

The Water Forum presented recommendations across four key areas of the draft RBMP;

- An outcomes-based approach for water bodies
- Enhanced governance of the third RBMP
- Public participation during the implementation of the RBMP and the 46 catchment plans
- Key recommendations for individual pressures

In June 2022 the Forum met with officials of the Water Advisory Unit of the DHLGH to discuss the response to the Forum's submission and the process of finalising the RBMP. While the officials of the DHLGH gave a positive response to the Forum's submission, members of the Forum have concerns in relation to a number of key recommendations, where it is still unclear if the Department will commit to including them in the final RBMP.

In relation to the proposed **outcomes-based approach**, while it appears from our engagement with the officials of the Water Advisory Unit that there is general agreement that we need an outcomes-based approach for the third cycle, it is not yet clear precisely what this will consist of and how it will be fully transparent. The Forum welcomes both the concept of sectoral action plans and the 46 catchment plans as mechanisms to both drive and track implementation but strongly recommends that clear outcomes need to be established for each and every water body and a mechanism fully integrated into the sectoral and catchment plans to track progress towards the achievement of these outcomes. The sectoral action plans currently being developed should be focused on waterbodies and should include, where known, the targeted measures required by the pressure owner or owners where multiple pressures apply, to restore or protect individual waterbodies. These, of course, should also be grouped at sub-catchment level where this makes sense from an integrated catchment management perspective, but the bottom line is that the WFD objectives apply to water bodies and there needs to be a high level of transparency as to how individual water bodies are being either protected or improved. Expected timelines for achieving their WFD objective, along with interim milestones will also be essential to ensure progress of the third cycle can be tracked. This outcomes-based approach would ensure effective and efficient planning and implementation of the plan, along with transparent monitoring of progress by the Department, agencies and key stakeholders. The detailed measures for waterbodies and associated timelines should subsequently be included in the

46 catchment plans. Where more work is required to identify specific measures for specific water bodies, this should also be made clear and the plans updated as this information becomes available.

In relation to **governance** of the third RBMP, the Forum recommended there should be a full-time project management secretariat, in line with recommendations made by the Institution of Public Administration. This would ensure successful implementation and monitoring of the Plan and support the required engagement and cooperation between the different tiers of governance. It would also ensure there is continuous engagement within and between government departments to ensure policy coherence and alignment with national and EU policies. The Forum acknowledges that the Water Advisory Unit are currently preparing a business case for a RBMP project management secretariat and recommend there is urgency and a commitment by Government to ensure this is facilitated.

The Forum has concerns that the Department is still not clear how **public participation** will be improved for the third cycle. Structures will need to be put in place to support the development and implementation of public participation dialogues, community action planning and project co-creation within and between Local Authority areas and within and between state agencies with responsibilities for water, climate and biodiversity. The Forum has recently set up a subgroup of members with expertise in this area and would welcome future engagements with the Department and LAWPRO to support the inclusion of public participation in the proposed pilot catchment plans and to subsequently develop a national framework for public participation in Ireland's third RBMP.

The Forum has made further specific recommendations for each of the **pressures** impacting on water quality. For **agriculture** as the most significant pressure the Forum recommended that the Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) would be reviewed to determine how effective they will be as tools to address the pressures from agriculture on waterbodies. The Forum also recommended that a targeted Farm Compliance Assurance regime should be put in place and that catchment management training be provided to inspectors and farm advisors.

The Forum members have a strong view that the third RBMP must address the 208 waterbodies where **urban wastewater** is the most significant pressure. The Forum understands that Irish Water is currently carrying out a review and developing action plans to address urban wastewater pressures on waterbodies. The Forum recommends that these plans have a clear focus on waterbodies and the requirements of the WFD. The Forum also recommends that the final RBMP includes a list of the 208 waterbodies where wastewater is the most significant pressure, with targeted measures and timelines, to address them.

The Water Forum is continuing to engage with Department officials in finalising the River Basin Management Plan and would welcome continuing to do so during its implementation. We would also

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welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations further with WPAC and are happy to answer any questions you might have and to provide any additional information your committee might request in relation to our recommendations for the 3<sup>rd</sup> RBMP cycle.

Your sincerely,

Matt Crowe  
Chairperson

