



**Opening Statement to the meeting
of the
Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government & Heritage
on
Ireland's River Basin Management Plan**

**Delegation: Dr Matt Crowe, Chair, An Fóram Uisce
Mr. Donal Purcell, Senior Executive Officer, An Fóram Uisce
Dr Triona McGrath, Research Lead, An Fóram Uisce**

7th April 2022

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss Ireland's River Basin Management Plan & the submission prepared by the members of the Water Forum. My name is Matt Crowe, I am the current Chairperson of the Water Forum. I am joined here today by my two colleagues, Donal Purcell and Dr Triona McGrath who both work with the Water Forum.

The Water Forum | An Fóram Uisce was established on a statutory basis in 2018 to provide for stakeholder input and advice to policy development. The Water Forum is the national statutory body representative of stakeholders with an interest in water quality and public water supply. It consists of 25 members and has advisory roles to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Irish Water, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities and the Water Policy Advisory Committee, on water management and water services.

The River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) is an essential national policy setting out the measures necessary to protect and restore the quality of Ireland's waters. The overall aim of the RBMP is to develop and implement measures to ensure Ireland meets its legal requirements under the European Water Framework Directive (WFD).

The Forum had extensive dialogue and engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage & other agencies during the development of its submission bringing a range of interests and different perspectives together - a core strength of the Forum. The Forum in its submission has made recommendations in four key areas:

- An outcomes-based approach
- Governance
- Public Participation
- Pressures

Executive Summary – Water Forum RBMP Submission 31st March 2022

An outcomes-based approach

One of the most significant recommendations made by the Forum for the third RBMP is the need for an outcomes-based approach with targeted measures, metrics and key performance indicators to be included for every water body. Under the Water Framework Directive, each water body in Ireland has an associated WFD objective to achieve by 2027, therefore details are required of targeted measures to either protect water bodies from deterioration, or to restore water bodies to at least good status. 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. This outcomes-based approach will target and strengthen efforts to reduce each of the pressures outlined in the RBMP.

Governance

In relation to governance of the third RBMP, the Forum recommends 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 calls for increased transparency and accountability of the implementation bodies of the RBMP and recommends for structured engagement between all tiers. Finally, there should also be opportunities for engagement between the Forum and all tiers of governance to allow for stakeholder input into the implementation of the RBMP. The Forum recommends an urgent commitment to complete the proposed interdepartmental group to develop a comprehensive financing strategy to support the implementation of measures to deliver on the ambitious Water, Climate and Biodiversity objectives. Adequate resourcing will be essential to the successful implementation and progress of the third RBMP.

Public Participation

The overall level of meaningful public and stakeholder engagement in the implementation of the WFD needs to radically improve. A new national approach to public participation needs to be developed that includes a vision and action plan for meaningful public engagement in the 46 catchment areas. The Forum recommends that a phased approach should be taken in a number of pilot catchments to test various approaches, to improving public engagement, contributing to the development of a new national approach. These pilots should take place very early in the 3rd cycle so that more effective and more meaningful public engagement processes are in place for the remainder of the 3rd cycle. A framework will have to be developed 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. There needs to be consistent, ongoing and informed discussion at local level that facilitates the co-creation of solutions and action (agency, community and individual) to protect our natural resources and build truly resilient communities across Ireland.

Pressures

In relation to individual pressures affecting WFD status of water bodies, the Forum emphasises the need for alignment of policies and strategies from different sectors with the objectives of WFD. Furthermore, the Forum recommends increased accountability of different Government departments and state bodies for reducing their key pressures and highlights the need for WFD assessments for many sectoral activities impacting the aquatic environment. Training in WFD and catchment management is recommended for staff within Government departments, state bodies and agencies to improve licence application processes, along with targeting of inspections, for better alignment with the WFD 'protect' or 'restore' objectives. Emphasis will also need to be placed on building relationships with

landowners (farmers, peatlands, forestry), facilitating training and knowledge exchange to ensure they can take ownership over the protection of water, climate and nature.

Concluding remarks and next steps

The Members of the Water Forum look forward to continued engagement with the Department when finalising the River Basin Management Plan & during its implementation. We are happy to answer any questions you might have and to provide any additional information your committee might request in relation to our submission.