Good afternoon. My name is Colin Byrne and I am a Senior Water Adviser representing the Water Division in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. I am joined by Deirdre Dunworth Assistant Principal Officer from the same division.

We welcome this opportunity to appear before the Committee today to discuss the issues raised in the Petition in relation to the weir at Fermoy.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has policy responsibility for the implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Ireland. The Directive is an important piece of environmental legislation which aims to both protect and improve our natural waters both in terms of water quality and the physical condition of water bodies. The Directive applies to rivers, lakes, groundwater, estuaries and coastal waters and is

The challenges that must be overcome in order to achieve the objectives of the Water Framework Directive are significant.

There are almost 5,000 waterbodies in Ireland which are generally required to achieve at least ‘good’ ecological status. Deterioration is not permitted.

The Plan has placed a major emphasis on establishing the right governance and delivery structures for an effective catchment-based approach. Clear priorities are set out in the Plan, which will ensure that all stakeholders are working together with a strong focus on delivering positive outcomes.

National authorities retain responsibility for the implementation of national programmes, with regional structures driving the implementation of prioritised supporting measures. Meaningful stakeholder and public engagement is being led by the recently-established Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) and the Local Authority Waters and Communities Office. The former facilitates public and stakeholder engagement in water policy at national level, while the latter drives public engagement, participation and consultation with communities and stakeholders at local and
regional level. This engagement is further supported by the catchments.ie and watersandcommunities.ie websites — and by a wide range of other activities aimed at facilitating and encouraging engagement.

While the Department has responsibility for leading on the development of the River Basin Management Plan, it is important to point out, much like the Climate Action Plan, that implementation depends on a large number of public and private bodies and individuals.

With regard to barriers on rivers, such as weirs, the primary concern of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is to ensure that these barriers do not impede natural processes such as natural fish migration. Measures have been identified in the River Basin Management Plan for the period 2018-2021 to improve the assessment of river barriers that may be impacting on a range of migratory fish species. In this context, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has provided some funding to Inland Fisheries Ireland to develop a national inventory of barriers to fish movements on rivers.

The IFI research will inform a prioritised programme to improve fish movement over barriers in the next river basin management planning cycle. The next cycle runs from 2022-2027. The funding of such a
programme would need to be considered across Government Departments in the context of the next plan.

Therefore, while the Department is supporting research in relation to barriers to fish migration, the Department does not have a direct role in relation to the construction or removal of barriers.

However, in view of the strategic importance of this project to Cork County Council the Minister is prepared to make a contribution in support of the initial consultancy element which is considering a solution, and on the basis that the appropriate body provide the substantive funding. The Department will engage directly with the County Council in this regard.

As I have mentioned previously the Department’s primary concern is to ensure that any works carried out on the weir take full account of the objectives of the River Basin Management Plan. This includes ensuring that modifications to weirs, such as that at Fermoy, do not negatively affect natural fish migration and preferably will improve migration.

Thank you for your attention. We are happy to answer any questions members may have.