

## **Meeting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on the EU Commission proposal for a recast Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the quality of water intended for human consumption (the “Drinking Water Directive”)**

*Opening statement by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government*

**21 March 2018**

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the EU Commission proposals to re-cast the Drinking Water Directive. I am accompanied this evening by Pat Duggan, Principal Adviser, and Colin Byrne, Senior Adviser, from the Department’s Water & Marine Advisory Unit.

The proposal is a result of the EU REFIT process aimed at making EU law simpler and more cost effective and it implements the Commission's response to the European Citizens' Initiative on access to water which submitted in December 2013. It is also a contribution to meeting the targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Its core objectives are to;

- Improve access to water
- Update drinking water standards
- Provide more information on drinking water to consumers

As the Drinking Water Directive has been in place for 20 years now, it is entirely appropriate that it be revised to update existing standards taking account of the most recent international scientific advice and to provide consumers with more information regarding the quality and management of drinking water. We look forward to a detailed examination of the proposals, in conjunction with our fellow EU member states, at both official level in the Working Party on the Environment and also of course at Ministerial level.

The European Commission proposals were published on 1 February 2018 and the Department is now engaging with key stakeholders, including the organisations with us here today, as an important part of our internal deliberative process. We also intend to seek the views of An Fóram Uisce, the national water forum. This body was established in 2017 under the chairmanship of Dr. Tom Collins to facilitate national stakeholder engagement on water issues and to provide a strong, independent voice and advice on water policy issues. The proposals will also be examined by the Water Policy Advisory Committee which was established in 2014 to provide advice to the Minister on, inter alia, the protection and management of the aquatic environment and water resources.

In terms of the timetable for progressing the proposals, the European Commission has set an ambitious target of concluding negotiations with the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament by May 2019 when the next Parliament elections are due to take place. It remains to be seen whether this is achievable given the range of issues to be considered.

Therefore, at this juncture, the Department cannot set out definitive policy positions on the proposals but I would like to highlight some issues which, we believe, will require careful consideration and to set out the main building blocks of the proposals.

In terms of technical standards, the Commission proposes the inclusion of a range of new parameters largely based on recommendations by the World Health Organisation. However, in a number of instances, the parametric values proposed by the Commission go beyond the WHO recommendations. It will be important therefore to examine whether what's being proposed is proportionate and why there is deviation from WHO recommendations. It's also important to be sure that any additional monitoring provides added value.

A risk-based assessment of waters in order to identify possible risks to water sources is proposed. The principle of linking up what happens at the water source with what comes out of the tap is one that we fully support and my colleagues from Irish Water and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes will brief you on the progress being made to protect drinking water sources.

These proposals would also introduce new obligations on member states to improve access to public drinking water with a specific focus on vulnerable or marginalised groups that might have inadequate access to drinking water. The practical implications of this particular proposal will need to be examined carefully. The proposal is also intended to contribute to a reduction in the use of plastic bottles by promoting confidence in and consumption of tap water and through improved access.. Given the impact of microplastics on our water environment, this is a welcome contribution.

The re-cast Directive would also require the provision of significantly more information by water providers to consumers on issues such as drinking water quality, the input costs and the price of drinking water, the overall performance of the water systems, household consumption levels, the types of water treatment and information on consumer complaints. This will present challenges for water suppliers but, as a general principle, a broadening of awareness of the value and quality of water is a laudable goal.

My colleagues and I look forward to today's discussion and we would be happy to meet bilaterally with members having a particular interest in these proposals. Míle buíochas as ucht an deis seo labhairt libh inniu.

ENDS

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