

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Thursday 23 September, 2021

Statement by Feargal Ó Coigligh, Assistant Secretary Water

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Choiste as deis a thabhairt dom labhairt libh inniu ar na dúshláin atá romhainn maidir le cúrsaí uisce. I am joined here today by my colleagues David Flynn, Principal Adviser, and Joanne Walsh Principal Officer for Rural Water.

Introduction

Ireland has a very high standard of drinking water quality, but we have seen in recent days the serious impact on people’s health – and indeed the breach of trust - when the proper operation of our water services breaks down. While the incidents at Gorey and Ballymore Eustace will properly be the subject of discussion here today, I think it is important to set out the broad challenges facing Ireland in ensuring the quality of our drinking water, the water we swim in and the health of our rivers and lakes. They are all part of the one eco-system.

The Programme for Government states that “water infrastructure deficits impact on the provision of safe and secure drinking water, lead to pollution and environmental damage, and present a challenge to achieving sustainable development across urban and rural Ireland”. The Programme sets out a range of commitments to address the infrastructural deficits, the need to adapt to climate change, and to progress institutional and regulatory reform in the water areas.

The Challenges

The past decade has seen a significant period of institutional reform in the approach to the delivery of water services and the promotion of wider environmental protection. However, complex and pressing challenges remain and it is crucial that the reform which has taken place since 2013 is built upon to meet the challenges being faced now.

Firstly, institutional reform must be completed to ensure that Irish Water can deliver on its potential as a world class public utility to serve the current and future needs of the Irish people. Reform of the delivery of rural water services must also be progressed, in order to support rural communities.

Secondly, a sustained high level of investment is required to ensure Ireland can meet its obligations to comply with EU drinking water and waste water requirements, to ensure our infrastructure is resilient to cope with the challenges presented by climate change and to support housing and regionally balanced economic development, in line with the National Planning Framework.

Finally, we must protect our rivers, lakes and groundwater by modernising our legal framework and by working across Government to address the causes of dispersed pollution, including through actions which coincide with, or support, national objectives in addressing Climate Change and Biodiversity loss. Recent EPA reports, including the most recent report on the State of the Environment in Ireland, have shown a concerning trend of decline in the quality of the waters in our rivers and lakes over the past 10 years. It is worrying too that this is impacting on those rivers and lakes of previous excellent or high water quality. Key actions must include credible management measures to address agricultural discharges and investment in urban and rural waste water infrastructure, which are the two most significant pressures on waters.

Policy Paper

In relation to institutional reform, the Government published the policy paper “Irish Water - Towards a national, publicly-owned, regulated, water services utility”, last February. The paper set out clearly that Irish Water must evolve to take full control of the water services workforce and of its assets. The paper pointed out that unnecessary risks would arise to the safe and effective delivery of water services unless further service integration was progressed. As the paper states, a fully integrated national utility provides “clear and effective lines of authority, responsibility and accountability. In

particular, the necessary alignment between operational control and statutory responsibility is achieved, thereby minimising the risks to service delivery.”

Local authorities and their staff have worked very closely with Irish Water under the Service Level Agreement system established to get Irish Water up and running. But the limitations of that model are clear. A process has commenced under the WRC to seek agreement on new arrangements which give Irish Water full control of service delivery.

Formal talks took place in July and further talks are scheduled for next month. However, it is clear in the light of the EPA findings of “abject failure of operational management” at Gorey and Ballymore Eustace that more immediate steps are required now to improve operational management and to rebuild trust in the delivery of our water services. Minister O’Brien set out a number of steps regarding his expectations in this regard on Saturday and we can discuss these further at the meeting.

Investment

In relation to investment, Irish Water, backed by sustained high level Government funding, is well-placed to develop the systems and services that Ireland needs to serve our citizens in the 21st century.

In the immediate term, as part of Budget 2021, the Minister secured funding of over €1.4 billion to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water being met by the Exchequer from the Department’s Vote. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our water and wastewater services right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and supporting a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area.

In the medium term, the recently published *Housing for All* recognises that investment in our water infrastructure is vital to reaching our target of 300,000 new homes by 2030. There is a commitment for €4.5 billion (in respect of domestic water services investment) to be spent on vital infrastructure in the period 2021 to 2025, including on projects focused on supporting growth and future development, with particular focus on those supporting housing delivery. Irish Water is continuing to work closely with

local authorities across the country, ensuring investment supports the growth of identified settlements, where these are prioritised in line with local authority development plans.

My colleagues from Irish Water can give more detail on investment priorities including in relation to town and village investment.

The Department itself, working through local authorities, is delivering €95 million of capital investment in the Rural Water Programme for the period 2018-2021. We are currently examining waste water requirements of villages and similar settlements that do not have access to public waste water infrastructure serviced by Irish Water and are engaging with local authorities to quantify and qualify the number of villages and similar settlements which may be supported by a new scheme. This process is at an advanced stage, and will feed into the development of proposals for consideration by the Minister.

The Wider Environment

Finally, we need also to respond to the challenges of Climate Change, the Biodiversity crises and of ensuring that our waters are protected. We would be doing the taxpayer and citizen disservice if we undermined our investment in water infrastructure by not protecting the sources of our drinking water. The measures required to take this overall approach to our water environment are set out in our national River Basin Management Plan. Minister O'Brien will be launching a six-month public consultation and dialog on the draft of our new six year plan next week and it might be of interest to come to the Committee to discuss the plan at a future date.

Conclusion

I thank you for your time today and we will be happy to take questions later.