

# **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage**

## **Committee Meeting 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2021**

### **Opening Statement on behalf of Irish Water**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Dear Chair & Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to address you on behalf of Irish Water on the areas of Infrastructure, Water Quality and the Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme.

I am joined here today by

- Margaret Attridge, Asset Operations
- Gerry O'Donoghue, Asset Management
- Kate Gannon, Connections and Developer Services

On the issue of drinking water quality and given the recent events at Gorey and Ballymore Eustace Water Treatment Plants, I'd like to begin by briefing members of the committee on these drinking water failures. I will then provide an overview of Irish Water's investment priorities and outline specifically how we are delivering the Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme and supporting related investment.

#### **Incident at Creagh Water Treatment Plant, Gorey, (Wexford)**

An incident occurred at the Creagh Water Treatment Plant in Gorey, Co. Wexford, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> August where the disinfection process at the plant was compromised. Wexford County Council who operate this plant on behalf of Irish Water under a Service Level Agreement, dealt with the issue on site and completed a repair by the 24<sup>th</sup> August. Irish Water

was notified of the issue on the 26<sup>th</sup> August and immediately notified the EPA and the HSE was also consulted on this date. The HSE advised that a Boil Water Notice (BWN) on the supply was not necessary at this point as the incident had passed and the plant was operating correctly.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August, Irish Water Customer Services received complaints relating to discoloured water and potential illness in the community in the Gorey area. On Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> September, an increased number of reported illnesses were notified to the Irish Water Customer Contact Centre. The HSE also confirmed that there were reports of multiple illnesses in the community. Irish Water issued an update to elected representatives in the Gorey area and updated our website advising customers that an issue had occurred and to contact their GP if they felt unwell.

Given the seriousness of the failure at the Gorey treatment plant and the potential impact on public health, Irish Water activated its incident management protocols as soon as we became aware of the problem. All relevant staff have been briefed on the correct procedure in relation to reportable incidents. Key systems and daily plant checks are being reviewed and a programme of works is in place. Plant staff have received immediate refresher training and will receive further training in the coming weeks to avoid any reoccurrences of an incident like this in future.

### **Incident at Ballymore Eustace Water Treatment Plant (Kildare/Dublin City)**

On Friday 20<sup>th</sup> August, outside of normal business hours, the coagulation dosing system at Ballymore Eustace Water Treatment Plant partially failed meaning that the cryptosporidium and disinfection barriers were compromised for a number of hours. Dublin City Council, who operate Ballymore Eustace Water Treatment on behalf of Irish Water under a Service Level Agreement, did not report the incident to Irish Water at the

time it occurred. The issue came to light on 30<sup>th</sup> August, on investigation of related issues at the sludge treatment facility at the plant.

As soon as Irish Water became aware of the issue, it notified the HSE and, as the incident had passed, immediate public notification was not required. Irish Water also formally notified the EPA of the incident, and the site was audited on 9<sup>th</sup> September with the EPA, HSE, Irish Water and Dublin City Council (DCC) in attendance. Irish Water activated our Incident Management Process and we are carrying out a post incident and process review.

Irish Water has placed personnel on site to review the escalation and response protocols. Staff retraining is being provided by the Irish Water Compliance team to plant engineers and supervisors on how and what water quality incidents should be notified to Irish Water. DCC Management and plant staff are working in collaboration with Irish Water in a joint response to the issues.

### **Follow up actions by Irish Water in relation to both incidents.**

The protection of public health is a priority for Irish Water and 99.9% of the water we produce meets or exceeds the required standards and is safe to drink. We rely on sampling and alarms to maintain high quality standards, which is why when something goes wrong, it should be reported immediately so that we can take corrective actions or, where necessary, put on a Boil Water Notice until we can rectify the situation.

Irish Water has been proactively engaging with key stakeholders since becoming aware of these incidents. We have been keeping the HSE fully apprised of our response to date in regard to their role as statutory consultee to Irish Water in matters of public health and we are co-operating fully with our environmental regulator, the EPA, to review both

incidents and to implement measures to avoid any recurrence of similar incidents ahead of receiving the full findings from the EPA audits.

The customer service staff in our Contact Centre have been fully briefed and are proactively following-up with customers who have contacted us to discuss any concerns that they may have and to deal with any specific customer complaints that have arisen. Irish Water briefed elected representatives in Gorey at a Councillor Clinic on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> September.

Following a meeting on Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> of September with the Minister for Housing Local Government and Heritage and the Chief Executives of Wexford County Council and Dublin City Council we have implemented the following immediate additional measures:

- We have prioritised a knowledge audit of the largest 20 water treatment plants in the country. This includes site visits, meeting with relevant staff to ensure that proper processes are in place to deal with and escalate any future incidents.
- We have proactively communicated with all Local Authority Chief Executives and Directors of Services nationally on the critical need to report incidents in a timely manner at all plants they operate, to allow for risk assessments to protect public health.
- Refresher training of all relevant water services staff nationally is being accelerated and we will audit all water treatment plants over time to ensure knowledge of all protocols is in place.
- Where appropriate, Irish Water will also put staff on site in water treatment plants to ensure the continued safety of water production.

I would like to apologise again for both incidents, while equipment failure and human error can occur, late reporting of issues relating to the process failures at the plants, left us unable to react and compromised water quality.

## **Implications of these incidents for the Single Public Utility**

The current Service Level Agreement, where Irish Water works alongside 31 Local Authorities to deliver water services, is no longer fit for purpose. The issues that have arisen at the water treatment plants in Dublin and Wexford clearly show the limitation of the present ways of working and emphasize the urgent need for change. Irish Water has legal responsibility but no direct control over water treatment plants around the country.

The Government's Water Sector Transformation Policy Paper sets out the necessary transformation to a Single Public Utility model where public water services will be controlled and managed by one national organisation.

We need to be clear that this is not a criticism of the thousands of experienced water services professionals working in the Local Authorities. We want to address structural issues so that individuals on the ground can avail of clear lines of communication and national support systems that a single organisation can provide. Drinking water incidents can, and do, occur and it is essential that we put the best possible structures and systems in place to reduce the frequency of such incidents, and to deal with them effectively when they do.

It is critical that moving to the Single Public Utility is progressed as a matter of urgency and Irish Water is fully committed to the talks process underway at the Workplace Relations Commission, with further engagement scheduled to take place next month.

## **Infrastructure Investment by Irish Water**

I will now give an overview of Irish Water's investment priorities.

Capital investment by Irish Water delivers on public water services, prioritised in the Government's Water Services Policy Statement, under

themes of Quality, Conservation and Future Proofing. Key outcomes for Irish Water are:

- Continued progress on leakage reduction
- Removal of at-risk water supplies from the EPA's Remedial Action List
- Building treatment plants where raw sewage is entering rivers, lakes and the sea
- Addressing water treatment failures identified by the Court of Justice of the European Union under the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive
- Supporting Housing Development
- Facilitating sustainable economic growth.

With strong policy and funding support from Government, Irish Water has produced three investment plans since 2014 and delivered major improvements in national water and wastewater services, including the commissioning or upgrading of 160 water (52) and wastewater (108) treatment plants.

The current National Development Plan (NDP) projects an investment of €8.5bn in public water services to 2027. Irish Water looks forward to the publication of the updated NDP in the coming weeks and confirmation of continued strong funding for water services.

Significant continued investment, coordinated with the planning process, will support the delivery of priority housing developments and urban renewal areas, while at the same time supporting implementation of national strategies in relation to public health, safety and environmental compliance risks. We will develop our future capital investment plans to ensure we can deliver critical strategic national infrastructure to enable

sustainable future economic growth and fit for purpose public water services that our economy requires and depends on.

Major national strategic infrastructure is being delivered, unlocking housing and growth across the country including:

- The new Vartry Water Treatment Plant which is currently being commissioned
- The Stillorgan Reservoir, nearing completion
- Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrade, which will deliver additional capacity and meet compliance standards
- The Cork Lower Harbour Main Drainage Scheme which now treats the equivalent of 40,000 wheelie bins of raw sewage that was being discharged every day
- The long awaited Arklow Wastewater Treatment Plant, where construction is about to begin
- We are also planning a new water supply for the Midlands and Eastern region and a new long term Wastewater Treatment Plant for the Greater Dublin Area.

Irish Water is investing over €38 million in Drainage Area Plans for 37 urban areas, including the catchments in Dublin. We are building resilience and growing capacity with the Blanchardstown Regional Drainage Scheme for West Dublin and East Meath supporting existing and future residential and commercial development. In Saggart we are building a covered treated storage reservoir to store 100 million litres of treated drinking water, the Upper Liffey Valley Sewerage Scheme is upgrading the existing sewer network serving Newbridge, Naas, Clane, Sallins and Kill and will significantly reduce the frequency and volume of untreated wastewater overflows, protecting habitats and ecosystems in the River Liffey and Dublin Bay.

## **Housing for All**

Irish Water is committed to supporting the recently announced Housing for All programme, in line with the high level of investment in water infrastructure we receive to support housing delivery nationwide. We will:

- Ensure that our network delivery stream supports timely delivery of housing connections
- Introduce an accreditation scheme to facilitate developers in providing water services infrastructure
- Work with the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities to review the water connection policy to address any issues with first mover disadvantage
- Publish a national water supply capacity register, to complement the wastewater capacity register, bringing greater clarity to planning for housing by identifying where capacity facilitates early housing provision or where constraints may exist
- Report to the Minister on policy initiatives to support villages and similar settlements without public wastewater infrastructure.

We recognise the significant housing challenges that we as a nation face and Irish Water will play its part in delivering solutions to the complex problems that we all have to deal with.

## **Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme**

Due to the overall scale of investment required nationally, the investment in wastewater collection systems will be focused on priority areas where environmental benefits can be maximised. This will require significant levels of investment over multiple investment cycles.

The Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme, formulated in direct response to the requirements for rural support for such settlements under the National Planning Framework, is one of a number of capital programmes that fall under Irish Water's overall Capital Investment Plan

(2020-2024) and aims to provide capacity in Wastewater Treatment Plants to cater for growth in smaller settlements that would not otherwise be provided for in the current plan. The total value of the Programme in the current investment period is €98m.

Under the current programme, each county has been given an allocation from this fund based on the estimated amount of capital investment that would be required to address growth capacity constraints in qualifying communities. The allocation of funding is developed to reflect an equitable approach of the relative constraints that each county faces from a capacity-for-growth perspective.

Given the overall scale of demand nationally, not all projects will be funded in the current investment cycle, however, Irish Water aims to ensure that at least one project is progressed in each county under the current programme. Some funds may be reallocated where a surplus exists in one or more counties.

Investment in providing water services infrastructure in un-sewered villages at relatively high cost per housing unit would require equivalent reduction in investment for other Irish Water investment priorities or would depend on alternative sources of funding. We are happy to support Local Authorities who seek funding through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund of the National Development Plan and we will continue working with stakeholders to provide technical support to establish cost effective and robust solutions to these problems. This may include building a new plant in tandem with a housing development, replacing existing private wastewater treatment systems in housing estates, or working with communities to develop collection systems.

Finally Chair, I would like to thank you and the committee members for your time in allowing me to give this opening statement and we will be happy to take any questions you might have.

**Thank you**