

Joint Committee
on
Housing, Local Government and Heritage

OPENING STATEMENT

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairperson and members. Thank you for the invitation to meet with the Joint Committee to discuss issues surrounding water quality and supply. I am joined today by my colleague(s):

- Dr Deirdre Mulholland, Area Director of Public Health
- Ms. Deirdre Lavin, Regional Chief Environmental Health Officer

The safety and quality of drinking water has a direct influence on the health of consumers.

As the Committee will be aware there are a number of bodies involved in ensuring the supply of drinking water.

The responsibility for the provision and supply of safe drinking water rests with Irish Water, Local Authorities, Committees of Group Water Schemes and those who individually provide their own drinking water.

The Environmental Protection Agency is the drinking water quality regulator, responsible for enforcing the Drinking Water Regulations for public water supplies and the Health Service Executive (HSE) has a key role in assessing and advising on potential risks to human health.

In the context of drinking water the HSE has a role as a statutory consultee under the EU Drinking Water Regulations 2014 (Regulation 9 (1)) and has a further role under public health Medical Officer of Health legislative provisions to investigate and prevent spread from probable sources of infection including water.

In accordance with this Regulation, where Irish Water or a Local Authority considers that a supply of water intended for human consumption constitutes a potential danger to human health, they must consult with the Health Service Executive. The water service authority is obliged, in so doing to obtain the agreement of the HSE on the action they propose to take to protect human health.

I have attached to this statement an excerpt from the Drinking Water Regulations 2014 Regulation 9 (1) for ease of reference.

The Environmental Health Service and the Departments of Public Health are the two main services within the HSE with whom water services authorities interact in relation to drinking water safety.

In addition, HSE laboratories have a role in providing analysis of clinical samples and, in some laboratories, analysis of water samples, and in providing microbiological expertise for the management of some drinking water issues.

Agreed Process for Statutory Consultation

To enable the application of Regulation 9 statutory consultation, there is a process referred to as the 'Management of Initial Notification of Drinking Water issues of Potential Danger to Human Health'.

In summary an Initial Notification Record or INR, has been developed and implemented by all those with an interest in the provision of and monitoring of safe drinking water. The process outlines the consideration and steps to be followed by the appropriate parties when dealing with a water incident.

On becoming aware of an incident with a supply, Irish Water or the Local Authority undertake a review and risk assessment to determine if it is necessary to consult with the HSE in accordance with Article 9 of the Drinking Water Regulation 2014 and prepare a submission to the EPA. Initial contact with the HSE is made to the HSE National Environmental Health Service via the local Principal Environmental Health Officer (PEHO). The PEHO will then assess the information provided and further consider the matter with colleagues in the local Public Health Department to ensure a consistent and cohesive engagement within the HSE and response to the water service provider.

The Management of Initial Notification Procedure (INR) also outlines the steps to be followed by the HSE Environmental Health Service and Public Health Departments should they become aware of water incidents on foot of their own work. The identification of potential cases /outbreaks may come about due to Public Health monitoring of infectious disease notifications.

If a drinking water issue is of sufficient seriousness and complexity, an Incident Response Team (IRT) will be convened and chaired, by the Local Authority or by Irish Water as relevant. This Incident Response Team includes representatives of the various relevant agencies with an input into the provision of safe drinking water.

In the event of an outbreak of infectious disease where a drinking water source is suspected to be a cause of the illness, the HSE may request that the water services authority convene an IRT. Where a HSE Outbreak Control Team (OCT) is also convened, the OCT will liaise with the IRT, and vice versa, as appropriate.

Separately within the HSE, the National Drinking Water Group is the interdisciplinary forum to support best practice and promote competence among HSE personnel who have a role in the protection of public health in relation to drinking water. It reports to the relevant heads of Service for Environmental Health and Public Health. It has representatives from the Environmental Health Service, Public Health Departments, Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), Microbiology and Public Analyst Laboratory services.

This concludes my Opening Statement

Thank you

APPENDIX 1 – EXCERPT OF DRINKING WATER REGULATIONS

S.I. No. 122/2014 - European Union (Drinking Water) Regulations 2014

Protection of human health

9. (1) Where Irish Water or a local authority, in consultation with the Health Service Executive, considers that a supply of water intended for human consumption constitutes a potential danger to human health, Irish Water or the authority shall, subject to agreement with the Health Service Executive, ensure that—

(a) the supply of such water is prohibited, or the use of such water is restricted, or such other action is taken as is necessary to protect human health,

(b) consumers are informed promptly thereof and given the necessary advice, and

(c) in the case of a public water supply, the Agency is informed promptly.

(2) For the purposes of paragraph (1), and subject to agreement with the Health Service Executive, where a supervisory authority is of the opinion that—

(a) non-compliance with a water quality standard or other parametric value specified in Part 1 of the Schedule, or

(b) the presence of any substance or micro-organism for which no water quality standard has been prescribed,

in water intended for human consumption, or the inefficiency of related disinfection treatment, constitutes, or may constitute, a risk to human health, the supervisory authority shall issue such direction to the relevant water supplier as it considers necessary to ensure that appropriate measures are taken for the purposes of preventing, limiting, eliminating or abating such risk, and the water supplier shall comply with such a direction.

(3) For the purposes of paragraph (2), a supervisory authority shall decide what action should be taken under this Regulation having due regard to the risks to human health that would be caused by an interruption of the supply or a restriction in the use of water intended for human consumption.

(4) The duty imposed on Irish Water or a local authority by paragraph (1) shall apply whether or not any failure to meet a parametric value specified in Part 1 of the Schedule has occurred.

(5) The Agency may issue guidelines to assist Irish Water or local authorities to fulfil their obligations under this Regulation.

(6) A water supplier commits an offence if it fails to comply with a direction from a supervisory authority under this Regulation.

(7) Irish Water commits an offence if it fails to inform the Agency in accordance with paragraph (1)(c).