

# **Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage Committee Meeting 4<sup>th</sup> October 2022**

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

### **INTRODUCTION**

Good afternoon, Chair & Members of the Committee,

I am Niall Gleeson, CEO of Irish Water, soon to be Uisce Éireann. I am joined here today by my colleagues:

- Angela Ryan, Asset Strategy Manager
- Tom Cuddy, Head of Asset Operations
- Sean Laffey, Asset Management & Sustainability Director

Thank you for the invitation to address you on behalf of Irish Water on the area of water quality and supply. Water Quality covers a wide area. I am proposing today to cover drinking water quality and water quality as it applies to water sources.

### **Introduction – how we invest to protect water quality and supply**

Irish Water's Strategic Funding Plan and Capital Investment Plan sets out our ambition for the building, repair and upgrading of Irish Water's water treatment plants, wastewater treatment plants, and water and sewer networks. We will invest €5.3 billion in water services from 2020 to 2024 with significant benefits for the economy and the environment. In 2021 over half a million customers were removed from at-risk water supplies, major drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects were delivered, over 99% of our drinking water was compliant with regulations and we have now reduced untreated sewage discharges nationally by over 60%. We continue to invest heavily in leakage reduction. Our national leakage rate is now 38% and we aim to reduce this to 25% by 2030. We continue to support social and economic growth and the government's 'Housing For All' policy objectives. In 2021 Irish Water issued connection offers for 32,404 new housing units. We expect to exceed that number in 2022, with connection offers for over 18,000 housing units in the first half of this year alone.

Our Capital Investment Plan is approved by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) who monitor our progress against the agreed outputs and outcomes under the Plan. We prioritise investment to deliver the most urgently needed improvements in drinking water quality, leakage reduction, water availability, wastewater compliance, operational and capital efficiencies and improved customer service through new or upgraded treatment plants and networks, and national programmes including the Leakage Reduction Programme, the National Disinfection Programme, the Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme and the National Certification Authorisation Programme.

While government policy and funding support is acknowledged and very welcome, Irish Water still faces significant external challenges to deliver this ambitious investment plan. The current economic pressures including inflation and supply chain issues will impact our plans and we are working closely with our shareholder and our regulators to understand the extent of the impact now and for the remainder of the current investment cycle. The CRU recently undertook a public consultation based on our submission to adjust the allocated funding to take account of the rising costs of construction, inflationary pressures in general and we must take their decision on this consultation into account in our future plans.

Securing consent for our projects is a complicated and expensive process. We welcome and highlight the critical importance of the ongoing work by government to secure planning reform so that we can deliver public infrastructure more efficiently and in shorter timeframes. While we fully respect and encourage public participation and a necessary level of governance on public infrastructure projects, appropriate changes to the planning code, and overlapping consent processes, will enable national objectives to be achieved in a timelier manner, reduce the cost of delivering Irish Water's Capital Investment Plan and the wider National Development Plan and will provide greater certainty for all stakeholders.

### **Securing Long Term Drinking Water Quality & Supply**

The past summer has demonstrated in Ireland and across Europe the critical need for long term planning to secure resilient and sustainable water supplies to deal with the impact of climate change. In 2021 Irish Water adopted the framework for its first National Water Resources Plan which is a 25-year strategic plan enabling us to move towards safe, secure, reliable, and sustainable public water supplies for all communities, whilst safeguarding public

health and the environment. This framework plan follows a three-pillar approach of 'Use Less', 'Lose Less' and 'Supply Smarter', comprising water conservation, leakage reduction and right combination of assets and technology to provide a safe sustainable water supply. Two regional plans have been published for the Eastern & Midlands and South-West region and two further plans for the Southeast and Northwest regions will be published in the coming months. Projects required to deliver the plan level solutions identified will be included in future investment plans and prioritisation of funding will be considered in current and future investment planning cycles.

The Water Supply Project Eastern and Midlands Region (WSP) is identified as a project of national importance in the National Development Plan to meet the domestic and commercial needs of over 40% of Ireland's population up to 2050 and beyond in Greater Dublin and the midlands. Currently 85% of the Greater Dublin Area is reliant on the River Liffey to supply water. Such reliance on a single source creates risk, particularly as we expect its population to increase by 24% by 2044. This project will provide an alternative source of water for Dublin while also securing supply for towns and communities across the midlands to safeguard current shortfalls providing a sustainable and resilient water supply to support future population and economic growth across the entire region.

### **Irish Water as a key stakeholder for River Basin Management Planning**

The Third Cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) for Ireland, required under the Water Framework Directive for the period 2022-2027 is due to be published shortly and outlines water quality objectives and a programme of measures to achieve those objectives. Irish Water is a key stakeholder in achieving these objectives. We welcome the commitment that measures included in the third cycle RBMP aim to deliver multiple benefits and recognises the necessity for an integrated approach to water, climate, and biodiversity issues.

The draft third cycle Plan concluded that 53% of Ireland's surface waters are at good or high ecological status, with 47% at unsatisfactory ecological status. Continued investment and policy support since the establishment of Irish Water has delivered significant improvements. In the first RBMP, prior to the establishment of Irish Water, urban wastewater was listed as the 2nd most dominant pressure on catchment water quality. In the second cycle, it is now the 4th most significant pressure, and we expect that by 2027 urban wastewater will be the 7th most significant pressure on catchment water quality. This reflects the significant

investment by Irish Water in upgrading wastewater infrastructure and optimising operations at wastewater treatment plants.

There are currently 217 significant urban wastewater pressures impacting on 208 water bodies. This equates to 4% of water bodies nationally, where urban wastewater improvement measures are required to achieve Water Framework Directive objectives. Irish Water's prioritised approach to investment is focussed on the catchments where wastewater is a significant pressure on water quality in the catchment and investment of public money will make a meaningful difference to overall water quality. Works are complete to address urban wastewater pressures on 12 water bodies and projects are progressing in 61 further water bodies. Another 63 water bodies have assessments underway and for the remaining 72 water bodies assessments will be initiated in a rolling program, to be completed by 2029. All current wastewater treatment pressures should be addressed by the 2030s. Network pressures, particularly in cities, will take considerably longer to address due to scale and complexity, requiring innovative approaches in partnership with stakeholders.

Irish Water must and does collaborate with all stakeholders to achieve the objectives of the RBMP to protect drinking water sources. We are members of key policy and technical groups including the Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC), the National Technical Implementation Group (NTIG), the Regional Operating Committees, National Pesticide and Drinking Water Action Group and Catchment Focus Groups and the National Federation of Group Water Schemes Source Protection Steering Group, as well as a partner in the INTERREG Source to Tap project and we have established the Irish Water Pilot Drinking Water Source Protection Project. We also work closely with the EPA Catchment Unit (CSMU) and LAWPRO to achieve the objectives of the RBMPs.

Engagement with all stakeholders is key to development of our Drinking Water Safety Plan source risk assessments. The success of National Pesticide in Drinking Water Action Group is clearly evidenced by the reduction in pesticide enforcement files across public water supplies, and an overall reduction in average pesticide levels being detected in drinking water.

Irish Water also supports the development of nature-based catchment management solutions and has identified the areas with greatest potential based on collaboration with regulatory and

delivery partners to be nature-based sustainable urban drainage and diverting surface water out of combined sewers; the use of nature-based solutions at small wastewater treatment plants with potential multiple-benefits for climate, biodiversity, social and economic targets; and protecting and improving drinking water sources.

### **Significant improvement in water quality and supply since 2015**

Over the last six years, Irish Water has made enormous strides in identifying and addressing risks to public drinking water supplies. We performed almost 186,000 individual tests on public supplies last year. Many of these risks existed for years but only came to light due to the more robust testing and sampling regimes put in place by Irish Water and improved training and understanding of incident management. In some cases, rather than waiting for lab test results we have proactively imposed Boil Water Notices or other drinking water advisories, to safeguard public health while we put measures in place to address the issues. The amount of time Boil Water Notices remain in place has also reduced significantly. In 2014, notices being in place for over 200 days were considered long term, now 30 days considered long term. Last year Irish Water removed 250,000 customers from boil water notices; 211,000 customers had their notices lifted within 30 days.

The EPA also maintains a list, known as the Remedial Action List (or RAL), of all water treatment plants deemed to be at risk of producing non-compliant water which it publishes twice a year. Irish Water has plans for each of these plants to remove the risk of non-compliance and we report regularly to the EPA on our progress against these targets.

Irish Water has built new wastewater infrastructure for 21 towns and villages where none existed before, ending the discharge of raw sewage into the environment. 60% of the raw sewage discharge in Ireland has now been eliminated and we remain on track to eliminate 95% of raw sewage discharges by 2025. The EPA also maintains a Priority Action List (PAL) for existing wastewater treatment plants. Irish Water is progressing plans or assessments to deal with these, and we report regularly to the EPA on our progress.

### **Water Quality Incidents**

The protection of public health is a priority for Irish Water and 99.7% 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, so that when something goes wrong, we can take corrective actions or, where necessary, put on a Boil Water Notice or Do Not Consume Notice until we can rectify the situation and ensure water supplies are safe to drink.

Whatever the incident type, Irish Water makes every effort to go beyond our regulatory requirement to ensure people are made aware of an issue. We proactively issue press releases to print, broadcast, and online media outlets and news desks in advance of any significant outages or to advise of water restrictions (boil water notices or do not consume notices). We also share these updates with all Elected Representatives along with local business stakeholders and on our website. We also post updates on our social media channels.

We understand different people have different needs when it comes to using our water services and communicating with us. We have developed a special service register for customers who are registered as vulnerable and priority services register for those who are registered as critically dependent on water due to a medical condition. We phone or text these people at least two days in advance of planned disruptions, and for unplanned interruptions that may last longer than four hours.

Irish Water provided an update on our drinking water incident management processes to this committee in September 2021 following a number of serious incidents impacting drinking water quality at some of our treatment plants. In the past year, we have made significant progress in developing enhanced systems to monitor drinking water treatment plant performance and improve incident management across the country. When water quality issues arise, these measures have proven to be essential in allowing us to take the necessary steps to protect public health.

As a priority, the customer service staff in our Contact Centre have been retrained to better support and capture complaints from customers who have contacted us to discuss their concerns. We also continue to review our communications channels to ensure that timely and accurate information is provided to the public in relation to water supply issues. Operationally we implemented the following additional measures:

- We prioritised a knowledge audit of the largest 20 water treatment plants in the country. This included site visits and 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 Service 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 was accelerated and we audited all water treatment plants over time to ensure knowledge of all protocols is in place.
- 189 plants have been assessed for alarms and plant shut down arrangements to ensure critical controls are in place should there be any issue with water quality
- The largest 100 plants have been assessed to identify risks and ensure controls are in place. Measures to address any critical risks will be identified and addressed.
- Where appropriate, Irish Water have put staff on site in water treatment plants to ensure the continued safety of water production.
- 51 of Ireland's largest drinking water plants providing drinking water to 2.73 million people have now been connected to the new National Operations Management Centre for 24/7 monitoring allowing immediate action when issues arise.

Past incidents that have occurred further highlight the critical importance of building on the progress already made towards a single national body with full responsibility for overseeing all public water services. Only through the implementation of rigorous national standards and procedures across all of Ireland's 750 water treatment plants can the risk of these issues occurring in the future be reduced or eliminated.

Irish Water will continue to work closely with our stakeholders and regulators to ensure that the highest drinking water standards are maintained, and that public health is always protected.

## **Conclusion**

Irish Water welcomes last week's Budget announcement by Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD, of a record funding allocation of €1.557 billion in 2023 for Irish Water to provide public water and wastewater services, progress capital projects, deliver jobs, increase capacity for housing and development, and support economic growth; balanced with our vision for a sustainable Ireland where the environment is respected and protected. We remain fully committed to delivering best in class water services and infrastructure for Ireland now and in the future. Despite these challenges and with the continued support of our stakeholders, including elected representatives, we are confident we will continue to deliver critical water and wastewater infrastructure to support public policy objectives on housing, climate action and economic development.

I'd like to thank the committee members for the invitation to meet with you today and we welcome the opportunity to brief members on the important work Irish Water is doing. My colleagues and I are happy to take any questions you may have.