

# CORK ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM

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## SUBMISSION TO

**Public Consultation on the draft River Basin Management Plans for Ireland  
2018-2021.**

August 2017

*The enclosed observations were collated from issues raised at a Local Environment Network Meeting in Cork on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2017, and from Cork Environmental Forum members and associates on an ongoing basis in relation to water matters.*

## Introduction

Cork Environmental Forum is a non-governmental organisation founded in 1995 to promote and foster sustainable development at a community level in County Cork in accordance with the principles of Local Agenda 21. One of the core ambitions is to engage people in consultations relevant to them.

We work from a collaborative approach with many organisations and in relation to water issues are an active member of the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN), we assist with the Coordination of the Coastwatch Survey in Cork on an annual basis and participate in other relevant activities, locally we currently support the Funshion Catchment Group and we deliver on an on-going basis a behavioural change module on water as part of our Global Action Plan Greener Living Programme.

Cork Environmental Forum has been active in relation to the first River Basin Management cycle which included representation on the Advisory group and engagement with the South West River Basin District Plan.

Cork Environmental Forum is a local partner of the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) and endorses the points laid out in the very detailed SWAN submission on the River Basin Management Plan.

## General Observations

As the development of River Basin Management Plan is a key requirement under the Water Framework Directive we welcome this draft and wish to acknowledge the more explicit detailing of some of the other key requirements of the Directive in this Plan which we consider crucial:

- Water quality based around the concept of ecological quality.
- Water management from an integrated catchment management model.
- Active involvement of the public

There is a need for far **more ambitious targets** in the Plan. Given the poor status of many of our water bodies, the significant decline in intervening years as well as the lag time in preparing this plan, meeting the requirements of the Directive is not only vital for restoring and protecting this precious life giving resource and protecting public health but to allay the considerable fines for breaches of the legislation. Restoration in the region of just 12% is unacceptably low and would indicate that Ireland will not comply with the obligations of the Directive.

It would be useful if the Plan could reflect the significance of individual water bodies, and give more detail on proposed measures so that everyone can engage in discussion about what it is proposed to actually do to change things on the ground relating to those individual water bodies.

**New measures** clearly need to be put in place as to date we have failed to protect and maintain the status of our water bodies. The measures need to be resourced and able to address adequately the key pressures identified through the very good scientific characterisation work carried out by the EPA.

It would be beneficial if the plan could communicate more effectively the essential importance of water, its vulnerability, etc. There is nothing to motivate individuals to act, to realise that each one of us can make a difference, and that these individual contributions are all important.

## Significant Pressures & Measures

One thing that the Plan presents very well and is clear upon from the conclusive scientific work of the EPA is the Significant Pressures on River and Lake Water Bodies. We wish to refer to some of these in more detail.

### ***Agriculture – model and policy augment against water quality***

Agricultural practices and our intensive methods of producing food (primarily for export) is the most significant pressure on the quality of all of our water bodies. This current model and the policy of Foodwise 2025 is wrong in terms of water protection and as long as we persist with such an unaligned and contradictory model we have little hope of any significant improvement to our water bodies.

Whilst not the direct remit of the RBMP per se, it evidences the need for joined up thinking across Government policy. More flexibility and new opportunities are required for the primary producers and largest custodians of both the land and our water. Primary production is only 1.5% of GDP, it is the agri-food processors who generate most for the export market and support a very narrow production base. Most of our fruit and vegetables are produced elsewhere with Irish imports of food in the region of €6 billion.

During the short –term period of this plan we need improved agri-environmental schemes to reduce impacts. A change of policy is required longer term to reflect greener production which would reduce use of the main pollutants such as pesticides, nitrates and slurry. This is possible as other countries such as Denmark are committed to moving towards a National Policy of organic production. Ireland is missing a real opportunity in this sphere and all of our production could be high value organic produce. Despite the industry citing no demand, why are we then importing high volumes of organic produce to meet indigenous consumer demand?

Consider payments to farmers for services such as flood mitigation and habitat restoration and provision. Good practice examples of such projects exist including riparian zone planting e.g. IRD Duhallow LIFE and biodiversity protection and conservation e.g. Burren LIFE. These could be expanded and replicated in other regions.

In relation to measures, adherence to Good Agricultural Practices and the Nitrates Directive, have not achieved the expected results in relation to protection of water. A practical support would be to provide access to ecological expertise for farmers when drawing up farm plans which could also give more appropriate information and education with an emphasis on stewardship of water bodies within or bordering their land.

### ***Water treatment***

The use of chemicals in drinking water treatment should be stopped. Many of these chemicals are banned elsewhere e.g. fluoride and aluminium. Their use is a sign of fire fighting to secure drinking water supplies where sufficiently clean water is not available. The problem of poor water quality at source has to be addressed by outlining sufficient and effective measures to deal with problematic quality issues across the country reflected in regular boil water notices etc.

## **Waste water treatment**

This area has many shortcomings most notably:

- A historical lack of investment means that we still have 43 sites around Ireland still discharging raw sewerage, addressing this should be one of the priority measures.
- Capacity is an issue in many more waste water treatment plants. Infrastructure of adequate capacity MUST be in place before new developments are permitted.

## **Wetlands & reed beds**

- There is no mention of the need to restore wetlands to secure a wide range of benefits and help deliver WFD objectives – such as reduced flooding, improved water quality, enhanced aquatic flora and fauna.
- Waste water treatment plans should be set back from water bodies to allow for additional use of reed beds that can polish water (and improve quality) and to act as a safety valve to handle variable waste flows.
- A positive attitude to reed bed systems (and training on these) is required amongst local authority staff.

## **Hydromorphology**

Integration of the Flood Directive is crucial as part of the RBMP as hydromorphology and flood risk have been identified as significant pressures. The Floods Directive requires that: *'Flood risk management plans shall take into account ... areas which have the potential to retain flood water, such as natural floodplains, the environmental objectives of Article 4 of Directive 2000/60/EC, soil and water management, spatial planning, land use, nature conservation ...'*

Currently in Cork alone we have some less than satisfactory examples of flood works and plans that have not allowed for a catchment approach, with the Bandon river looking at times like a highly industrialised development site running an opaque brown for 4 months, Skibbereen is developing an aesthetic blemish in an otherwise picturesque town and the Cork City Flood Defence plans have ignited a public outcry. The fragmentation of responsibility for water across a number of Departments is not constructive, however, a better way forward is for integrated flood risk management needs to be allied to an integrated catchment management approach in the Plan

In fact, there are a significant number of measures that could be taken to reduce the risk of flooding that could also contribute to achieving WFD objectives. These 'win-win' measures include:

1. Increasing natural retention and storage capacity e.g. floodplain restoration
2. Adaption of structural measures to take WFD obligations into account; and
3. Using Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) and increasing storm drain capacities to decrease urban flooding.

River banks erosion from heavier rainfall and impacts of invasive species also need to be addressed more clearly by measures in the Plan.

## **Coastal and Transitional Waters**

There is an oversight in the Plan in respect of our coastal and transitional waters which are also subject to significant pressures and what happens upstream generally flows down into our estuaries. This needs to be

addressed by inclusion of a separate section dedicated to these waters. Our coastal water is the one which most often resonates and engages people in a more personal way as it is where many of us choose to relax, submerge ourselves or recreate in an active way.

There are many significant pressures which need to be dealt with more comprehensively in the Plan, including

- Fishing pressure – need to better measure impacts.
- Fish farming is problematic.
- Lack of monitoring of extractive industries, uncontrolled activity harvesting sea life e.g. kelp
- Use of marine resources for energy e.g. oil, gas, wave & tidal power.
- Pollution – chemical and litter
- Planning - where things are sited e.g. dump by estuary
- Economic focus of Port activities. Port of Cork, despite Eco Port participation doesn't really have a strong environmental focus and yet part of the harbour area has Natura 2000 designation.
- Tourism can be both positive and negative e.g. impacts of large cruises in for instance Cobh

Some measures which would engage the public and help to protect our coastal waters:

- Blue ways – increase access to water
- Ecological protection through education and greater support for Coastwatch which is a very successful citizen science programme.
- **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)** are an opportunity to address many of the diverse pressures on coastal marine environments. Need to identify and designate through a proper community consultation with support to establish and monitor.
- From quotas to reserve system, no go areas Marine Protected Areas could address this.
- Build in-house expertise as the Department has done in Northern Ireland.
- Extend blue dot programme to Marine/ Coastal areas.
- Introduce a coastal erosion policy.
- Stricter licencing for aquaculture.
- Development of small scale sea vegetable production rather than destructive mechanical harvesting of the existing invaluable kelp which are our marine forests.
- Cost and pilot the implementation of Coastal Zone Management Plans. Previously some very good CZM work was carried out e.g. Bantry Bay Charter, however, due to a lack of resourcing measures and actions were never implemented. Plans such as these could be revived easily and they had the involvement and buy-in from large swathes of the community.

## Policy Alignment

The full potential of taking an integrated catchment management approach has not been realised in the RBMP as there is a lack of alignment with other relevant policies and strategies. Integration of the Flood Directive is crucial as part of the RBMP as hydromorphology and flood risk have been identified as significant pressures. The Floods Directive requires that: *'Flood risk management plans shall take into account ... areas which have the potential to retain flood water, such as natural floodplains, the environmental objectives of Article 4 of Directive 2000/60/EC, soil and water management, spatial*

*planning, land use, nature conservation ...*' The Plan also need to fully reflect meeting requirements under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive.

In addition we would like to see evidence in the plan with regard to other cross cutting and complementary policies and strategies including at a minimum the National Planning Framework 2040, National Landscape Strategy 2015 -2025, and the National Mitigation Plan 2017/ National Adaptation Framework given the particular challenges posed by planning, climate change and management of the broader landscape in which our waters reside.

There is much to be gained by strengthening the alignment of these policies with many resultant co-benefits and more effective use of resources.

## Governance and Structure

We welcome the establishment of the National Water Forum, a diverse stakeholder forum, which will improve dialogue and understanding across sectors. The establishment of LAWCO has been another very positive step which has already helped to engage the public on this consultation phase and will have an important on-going role to interface with and support communities.

However, we have concerns in particular with regard to:

- **FRAGMENTATION** including within Departments responsible for different water issues.
- Who is the **COMPETENT AUTHORITY** when it comes to Water Quality? – the public need a clear determination of who ultimately has the responsibility, authority and will act when different Departments, agencies and organisations are involved?
- **ENFORCEMENT** – not enough disincentives to dissuade people from bad practices, often on-going and multiple offences. The absence of penalties for acts compromising water quality is a problem.
- At a local level there is no clarity as to who within Local Authority is overseeing implementation of Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP)
- **TRANSPARENCY** – we welcome the availability of the scientific evidence though the public platform [www.catchments.ie](http://www.catchments.ie) which is a really valuable source of information. Details of the levels of information and transparency in processes need to be outlined in the Plan e.g. how water bodies will ultimately be prioritised/ how measures will be decided etc. Just as putting the right measure in the right place, the right information needs to be available at the right time to the public. Greater transparency allows for accountability and a greater likelihood that more people will engage.
- **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT** – it is not very clear how the public and community stakeholders can really engage effectively in the process. There is an opportunity in this Plan to develop very positive catchment management approaches involving all stakeholders to manage our water bodies more effectively. However, unless there is a real respect for the need and effect of those local stakeholders and a commitment to provide considerable resourcing and efforts put in to strengthening engagement the ability of communities and the public to support local implementation of measures may be limited.

## Communication and Public Engagement

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) stresses a 'bottom up' approach involving all citizens and communities contributing towards achieving good status waters – indeed this participation across society

will be essential to achieve the objectives. As a Local Agenda 21/ grassroots organisation this is the area we see as being crucial and yet aside from the establishment of LAWCO we don't see how this is to be fully developed.

This Draft Plan is not written in a manner which makes it easy for the public to read and absorb, even for organisations there is a certain amount of calculation required to assess what the Plan is really stating and what the targets really are. As stated earlier it would be preferable if the Plan could have an introductory section that could communicate and evoke the essential importance of water, its life giving properties, its fragility, and highlight why all citizens have an active role in restoring and protecting our waters. There is a need to help make connections with the heritage and culture of land and water. Much of our folklore, history, poetry and art depict water as a central theme and a most important element.

We clearly see evidence of the public's interest and willingness to engage with water issues from previous Seminars on water related issues such as the Water Services Amendment Bill (2011), celebrations of UN World Water Days, level of participation in the Coastwatch Survey and many other water themed activities. The Water Heritage Day is another example with last week's Open Day event at Lifetime Lab in Cork (just one of thousands such events across the country) evidence of the importance water has in people's lives and their yearning to have more opportunities to engage in practical ways to understand, enjoy and protect both the water and the incredible ecosystems it supports.

We are disappointed that this consultation is a consultation of two halves, there is the public consultation with a deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> August 2017, which it would seem is to some extent for optics only and to tick the box of having carried out a public consultation process. Meanwhile regional committees are already engaged with a prioritisation process, without public stakeholder involvement, and without the input from the official consultation process. This implies the familiar attitude of 'the government will sort it out' / 'leave it to the experts' style of management giving little or no credibility to a belief that the public and communities are an essential part of the process to deliver objectives of the RBMP. NGOs and the public are jaded by the pretence of consultation which sends a message that their views are not important enough.

## Practical measures

- Mechanisms needed to facilitate and resource grassroots action on monitoring, planning and how measures can be implemented locally. Including local monitoring to flag blockages at bridges promptly.
- There is a huge reliance on individual members of the public to report breaches but difficult to meander through the quagmire of agencies in order to get any action. A one-stop shop on water matters would be useful where procedures on reporting are clear and outcomes shared.
- The environment including water bodies are not really available to the public, there is a lack of access and too much privatisation with abandonment of rights of way. The Plan needs to look at ways of addressing this, maybe by reinstating greater public access.
- Conserving this valuable resource is a practical measure we can all take. A better communication strategy and support for behavioural change initiatives will help citizens to appreciate the value of water, and become involved in actions to protect its quality, including reducing use.

- More emphasis on the importance of broadleaf forestry is required to deliver many water benefits and involve people in achieving the goals. Communities can plant trees and care for them, understanding the many benefits that result.
- Water harvesting and other simple practical measures to reduce individual water use and re-use of water should be encouraged and are not at all adequately addressed in the Draft Plan.
- Examine practical solutions that we can do and that have a short-term positive impact and that people can get involved with locally e.g. control run-off and siltation, provide simple environmentally positive alternatives for stream flood relief measures etc.

## New Initiatives

- Adopt a stream/ river/ coast – many examples already exist.
- Citizen science can support protective measures through an integrated catchment model. A programme similar to the Coastwatch survey could be rolled out for rivers, streams and lakes.
- Citizen science programmes are a very effective means of engaging the public, strengthening the knowledge and resources of communities and are very cost effective. They tend to be an enjoyable and as has been proven we all learn best by doing!
- The education curriculum could do with strengthening, currently we rely on initiatives such as the green schools which cannot deliver in the same way as a subject embedded in the system can. A new subject on Landscape and Environment is needed which would help to bring a focus to many of our current challenges including water.
- Engage with academic institutions and the private sector for investment in remote monitoring which is possible with current IT and satellite.

The spirit of the Water Framework Directive is all-inclusive action to protect our common resource. To deliver on this aim the RBMP needs to give information at sufficiently local scale, and then consult with the interested parties at that level.

Already there are a number of groups operating at Catchment level and we would like to reference one whom we are involved with and support, the Funshion Catchment Group. We are aware that the group which includes 4 local angling clubs and members of the community have already identified the 5 main pressures on the river and its sub catchments and have an estimated cost of €266k to implement the necessary measures to address those issues and improve the water quality. The group has made a submission to the Plan in this regard and we hope that the work of such voluntary community groups are supported and progressed as they are the very necessary interface with communities required to action measures identified that will deliver within the short timeframe of the Plan so that we do get the necessary improvements to our water bodies and meet the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

The River Basin Management Plan gives us a chance as a society as a whole to halt the widespread despoliation of water and instead to again revere it as a sacred element which gives us life and provides for us throughout that life in so many ways.