

Public Water Forum Response to Consultation Document on the Emerging Investment Plan for 2017 to 2021

The Public Water Forum (PWF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation process. It notes, however, that the consultation deadlines have provided the Forum with a greatly constrained window in which to consider and develop its response. In particular, these constraints have prevented the Forum from sourcing the technical and other inputs necessary to the formulation of a comprehensive response.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, the Forum proposes to respond to the following three aspects of the Plan:

- ❖ Scope
- ❖ Assumptions
- ❖ The Nature of Public Consultation and Participation

Scope:

The Forum recognises the substantial work done by Irish Water in capturing the scale and nature of the task confronting Ireland in the efforts to realise a water infrastructure - both in terms of drinking water and waste water treatment - which is fit for purpose, compliant with EU and national standards with regard to public health and environmental considerations and capable of underpinning the long term economic and social development of the country. While the Investment Plan eschews an analysis of the factors which have contributed to the ongoing degradation and deterioration of such a key infrastructural asset, the Forum considers that a debate on this issue is required at broader societal level as to advance public awareness of the fragility of the situation which currently prevails. This fragility is manifest in a range of issues including:

- the exposure of many water treatment plants to the risk of contamination with the consequent implications on public health and commercial activity;
- the fact that there are in excess of 43 waste water schemes discharging raw sewage into waterways;
- the health risks - particularly for babies and small children - associated with lead pipes;
- the risk management challenges associated with the oversight of more than 800 drinking water treatment plants;
- a chronic problem of leakage, exacerbated by a network of in excess of 65,000 kilometres;
- The fact that many areas are served by plants - both drinking water and waste water - that are already at, or close to, capacity.

The Forum notes the analysis of the challenge as detailed in the Investment Plan. It is concerned, however, at the failure of Irish Water and cognate agencies to generate a broadly based level of public awareness of this challenge and considers that such public awareness and a shared sense of urgency are fundamental to achieving a concerted, consensus-based platform from which these problems can be addressed.

Assumptions:

The low level of appreciation of the importance of an informed and engaged public is also evident in both the assumptions underpinning the Plan and in the approach to consultation around the Plan.

The Investment Plan is predicated on a view of water supply as a 'utility'. As such, the tendency is to approach water supply or waste water treatment as a 'delivery' problem in which users are perceived as customers who relate to the supplier on a relatively narrow, contractual base of vendor and purchaser.

While in utilities such as electricity or telecommunications this paradigm may hold true, in the case of water there are three aspects where it is open to challenge.

The first of these is the view of water as a public good. As such and as a basic need for survival, issues of access and affordability assume a significance with water which is lacking in most other utilities. The Forum draws attention to the existential distinction between water – as central and critical to life – and these other utilities. Citizen entitlements are derived from membership of the civic. Customer entitlements are derived from market place position. If rights to water are derived from citizen entitlement as opposed to the contractual expectations of a customer, the relationship of the supplier with the user is profoundly altered. As a basic need it is unarguable that a citizen's access to a minimum supply of water should not be contingent on ability to pay. Irish Water needs to address the distinction between citizen and customer explicitly in shaping all of its strategies and plans, recognising therein that the experience with other utilities may not be entirely transferable to the issue of water. It should also be pointed out that Irish Water is in receipt of substantial exchequer funding, which also alters its relationship to the citizen.

Secondly, the Investment Plan is based on a highly centralised model of production and supply, with an associated assumption that big is better. The Forum accepts that there are certain risks and management challenges associated with a multiplicity of small treatment plants in the system. It also draws attention, however, to the spreading and dissipation of risk which follows from such a proliferation. It notes furthermore that small, locally managed plants can contribute to a heightened awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of water and to an enhanced sense of personal and local responsibility for its protection and conservation. They can contribute to public education on the costs involved in bringing drinking water to the tap and can provide for innovative local action – both in domestic and commercial settings - to water conservation and waste water treatment.

Similarly, the Forum would have welcomed and expected more explicit attention to issues concerning source protection, innovative approaches to water conservation in both domestic and commercial contexts and some consideration on incentivising households and businesses to take a proactive role in such conservation and innovation. There appears to

be an excessive reliance on end of pipe solutions in the approach as outlined.

The Forum accepts the need for a national strategy for water in Ireland, not only to try to achieve integration within the sector but also to ensure cross-sectoral alignment with the economic, environmental and social objectives of the country. It notes, however, that integration can be enabled through a combination of centralised and devolved stratagems, where water supply is retained as a strategic public asset and the State retains the capacity to meet all the water requirements of the society.

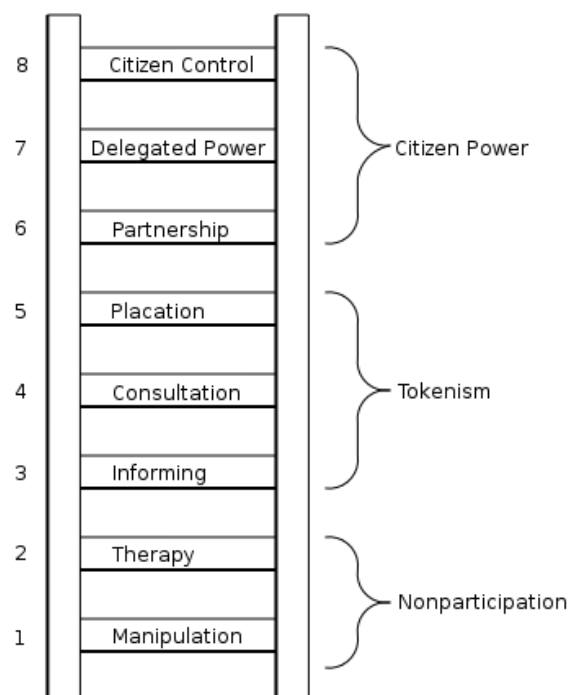
The Forum notes, in particular, the success of the Group Water scheme in pioneering a model of community owned and locally driven group schemes servicing more than 500,000 people distributed over 500 membership based schemes in rural Ireland. The Group Scheme sector draws attention to a major resource of personnel, local commitment and readiness to pay for water which appears to have been largely overlooked in the formulation of its approach by Irish Water.

Nature of Public Consultation and Participation:

The approach to public consultation adopted by Irish Water in rolling out this Investment plan is the third element which the Forum wishes to reflect upon. It is concerned at what appears to be a world view which has little appreciation of the requirement or potential of public engagement in the strategising of Irish Water. The Forum notes in this regard the references in the Irish Water presentation to customer research. While undertaking such research is to be welcomed, the Forum draws attention to the limitations of market research as a form of public participation. Market research is driven by the need to position a product or strategy in the market place. Public participation is driven by an objective of empowering the participants through public education and mobilisation. Furthermore, with regard to this particular market research, it is noteworthy that no information was provided regarding the aims of this research, the questions addressed, the population included - and excluded - in the research, the identity of the company or agency which carried out the research on behalf of Irish Water or how the research informed any decision making regarding the Investment Plan.

The Forum, therefore, suspects that the culture of Irish Water needs scrutiny in terms of its attitude to public engagement and citizen participation in its decision making. In this regard, Arnstein's definitive and widely cited 'ladder of citizen participation' comes into focus. Arnstein suggests that there are eight rungs on the ladder of participation. These range from the lowest rungs of manipulation and therapy - which she considers to be non-participation; through the next three levels of informing, consultation and placation - which she refers to as tokenism; through to the two highest levels of citizen power-delegated power and citizen control.

Figure 1: Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969)



The experience of the PWF around the consultation regarding this Plan is one where Irish Water was prepared to inform the members - and other stakeholders - on the rationale and details of the Plan but showed little evidence of any active engagement with the external environment in the evolution of the Plan. In essence, it was clearly a *fait accompli* prior to any engagement with the Forum and it is not clear if this was not also the case with other stakeholders. It is acknowledged that opportunities for such dialogue were constrained by factors outside of the control both of Irish Water and the Forum considering the recentness of the establishment of the Forum. It is, however, important that in the future the timing and nature of consultation with the Forum is agreed at the outset.

Meaningful engagement implies an approach based on an equal relationship between two or more bodies working together towards a common purpose. Each participant brings different skills, knowledge, experience and capability to the table where there is parity of esteem and mutual respect and a dynamic process of exchange of positions and world views. Decisions are taken jointly among those organisations and they cooperate to varying degrees in implementing the consequences of those decisions. Such an approach goes far beyond mere consultation or representation of users in the decision-making processes. It means that consumers identify areas that can be enhanced, help to identify ways in which that enhancement can be carried out and help facilitate the implementation process wherever possible. A true partnership means that neither party acts unilaterally but rather that there is an active collaboration between the two.

The Forum is conscious of the highly contested environment into which Irish Water emerged and in which it continues to work. Given that environment a culture of dialogue and meaningful interaction with the citizenry is all the more important – albeit perhaps more difficult.

The Forum is concerned that given the prevailing culture, Irish Water may resort to a campaign of winning the public driven by the precepts of marketing and public relations rather than by meaningful engagement driven by a commitment to active citizenship, an informed participation and parity of esteem.