

Take-Home Recommendations

Based on commissioned research and review of the literature, An Fóram Uisce provides the following recommendations regarding the design and facilitation of effective public engagement in water management in Ireland:

- 1. Introduce and support public participation processes which incorporate the three key principles of effective public engagement:**
 - address inequity and power imbalances between different individuals and stakeholder groups
 - incorporate various forms of knowledge/expertise to recognise the value of lay knowledge as well as scientific expertise
 - address issues of scale e.g. how pressures and processes that operate at national levels circumscribe local decision-making regarding water management.
- 2. Conduct an evaluation of current engagement initiatives** based on the above principles. This should also include an **assessment of wider water governance** for compliance with good governance principles: accountability, transparency, equity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency. This is because such governance is necessary to support public engagement.
- 3. Include communities and individuals in procedures and decision-making around water resources from the beginning.** This recognises the value of their knowledge early in the catchment management process. It also elicits concerns, connections, and expertise early on and, vitally, it builds trust.
- 4. Support medium/long-term interdisciplinary research on public engagement** including in the form of pilot projects. These should trial a range of approaches, while integrating multiple forms of expertise (e.g. biological; sociological; lay) into scientific research in ways that produce meaningful public engagement. Because this kind of participatory research involves time to establish relations of trust between stakeholders and across disciplines and expertise, medium/long-term institutional and financial supports are essential.

Introduction & rationale

Public engagement in water management seeks to protect and improve the quality and availability of water resources through **inclusive and equitable decision-making** processes. Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) and other integrated water resource management frameworks include public engagement as a central pillar for their delivery. The complex nature of the challenges associated with managing water has led governments to recognise that these issues cannot be

tackled in isolation. Worldwide there has been a trend towards a more inclusive ‘bottom-up’ approach to engaging the public around water management, which fosters greater participatory involvement of stakeholders and builds bridges between governments and citizens. This trend has largely been driven by failings of purely ‘top-down’ approaches.¹

Additionally, there is a specific legal requirement for public engagement in the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). Public participation in water resources management is also included in the Dublin Principles (1992),² and public participation in decision making is a core pillar of the Aarhus Convention (1998).³

Public engagement is therefore critical for the successful management of Ireland’s water resources through the River Basin Management Planning process; the achievement of the objectives of the WFD; and ultimately, securing healthy rivers, lakes, coasts, and groundwaters. A new and evolved form of **inclusive and equitable** engagement is essential in the preparing, reviewing, and implementing of Ireland’s third River Basin Management Plan, including in the setting out of Significant Water Management Issues.

In 2019, The Water Forum commissioned a research paper on *Public Engagement in Water Governance*,⁴ which can be accessed [here](#), and which provides the basis for this information brief.

Characteristics of effective public engagement

Effective public engagement is not only about ‘raising awareness’, addressing ‘a knowledge deficit’, or encouraging behaviour change; it also includes a commitment that the public, broadly defined, is involved in decision-making processes and outcomes. This level of participation is not only statutorily required, but can also lead to more just, equitable, and sustainable decision-making.⁵ This approach allows the time to develop ideas, options, and priorities with communities and stakeholders;⁶ it embraces the idea of social transformation with the accompanying potential for dissent and critique of the status quo.

Effective public engagement facilitates multiple viewpoints and interests, and recognises inequity and diverse expertise in the design, delivery, and outcomes of decision-making around water resources. It has three pillars:

1. It recognises the historic inequities between different sectors of society that shape social, political, and ecological conditions.

¹ Rolston, A., Jennings, E. and Linnane, S. (2016). Towards Integrated Water Management. Synthesis report to the Environmental Protection Agency of Ireland. [Online]. Available from: https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/water/EPA%20Research%20180%20Essentra_web.pdf [Accessed 6 January 2020].

² The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development. <http://www.un-documents.net/h2o-dub.htm>

³ Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/>

⁴ Bresnihan, P. & Hesse, A. (2019). Public engagement in water governance. Report to The Water Forum. [Online]. Available from: https://thewaterforum.ie/app/uploads/2020/03/Water-Forum_Public-Participation_Bresnihan-and-Hesse_2019.pdf

⁵ Blue, G. (2016). Framing Climate Change for Public Deliberation: What Role for Interpretive Social Sciences and Humanities? *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 18(1), 67–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2015.1053107>

⁶ Andersson, E. and Shahrokh, T., 2011. *Not Another Consultation! Making Community Engagement Informal and Fun*. Report by Involve for the UK Local Government Improvement and Development’s Healthy Communities Programme. [Online] Available from: <http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Not-Another-Consultation.pdf> [Accessed 6 January 2020].

2. It values different forms of knowledge and expertise by rejecting hierarchical and ‘additive’⁷ approaches to public input throughout the decision-making process.
3. It is simultaneously global and local, meaning that public engagement initiatives cannot be one-size-fits-all or limited to decision-making and action at a pre-determined scale, e.g. local/catchment only.

1. Equity, inequity & the imbalance of power

One of the central tenets of effective public engagement is equity, or more specifically, inequity. Inequity is the idea that there are differences in the power, resources, and authority that individuals and groups have; and that these differences stem from combinations of historic, social, political, and ecological processes. These differences mean that members of the public and stakeholder groups do not begin from the same starting point, and do not have the same ability to participate, nor the same power to impact on decision-making processes and effect change. Consideration of equity should shape how public engagement is designed and delivered by addressing these inequities and standing as a corrective to dominant discourses around equality (Figure 1). This is important when considering dominant modes of public engagement that involve public meetings and hearings. Offering ‘a place at the table’ or an open space for views to be shared misses the critique of equity – not everyone is equally able to participate or be heard.

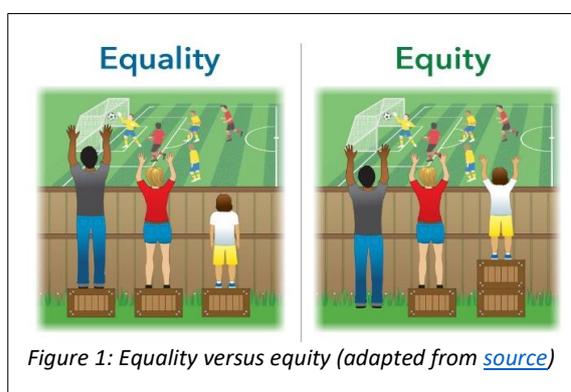


Figure 1: Equality versus equity (adapted from [source](#))

As is the case in Ireland, public engagement in water governance can often fail to acknowledge the power imbalances within societies and communities, potentially leading to a lack of trust in political authority and thwarting of the broader goals of public engagement.

By approaching communities and societies as stakeholders who do not start from the same vantage point, and by acknowledging and openly addressing historical relationships and key power dynamics, issues of inequity can be addressed.

2. Imbalance of expertise

Participatory approaches which incorporate community input frequently position local or lay knowledge as a useful complement, or ‘add-on’, to scientific knowledge. However, it is often considered as additive and secondary to scientific analysis and restricted to moments within the management process where scientific experts deem local input helpful and/or beneficial in securing compliance with regulation.

Research shows that where local expertise and knowledge has not been integrated in governance and management meaningfully and consistently, low levels of trust and collaboration have been found. In contrast, meaningful engagement and communication have been associated with higher

⁷ For example, incorporating local knowledge in addition to scientific knowledge, but in an unequal and tokenistic manner. In such situations, the aims, objectives, methods and forms of expertise are determined in advance without the incorporation of local concerns, aspirations or forms of local expertise, which are ‘added’ on afterwards.

levels of trust, adoption of implementation strategies, and meeting environmental targets⁸. A challenging solution to the imbalance of expertise is to fundamentally rethink how knowledge and expertise are valued within participatory approaches so that water management is not 'led' by experts, but instead, incorporate scientific experts as one kind of expertise among many, allowing effective public engagement to seek the co-production of knowledge through multiple forms of expertise.

3. Scale

Water is at once global and local, influenced by international and national economic policies and trade, global climate change, and local social relations and practices. In the context of the complex, widely-distributed social, political, and economic drivers of changing water quality, the question of scale (what counts as local) is all-important because it defines what is relevant and irrelevant, and what measures are available or unavailable for addressing the problem at hand. It is important to note that focusing on the local does not resolve long-standing challenges regarding how to govern water resources across various boundaries (catchment, river basin, towns, counties, etc.). Nor does it resolve the issue of the different (often more removed) scales and levels at which much oversight, decision-making, and accountability is located.

4. Public engagement & environmental governance

The effectiveness of public engagement in environmental decision-making is also related to the role it has within environmental governance strategies more generally, since it is just one component of wider governance in which the government plays the role of facilitator. This requires "considerable capacity of the state and compliance with good governance principles [of] accountability, transparency, equity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency".⁹ Adherence to these wider principles, supported by the required resources, are necessary for effective public engagement.

Reviewing public engagement in the management of Ireland's waters

Through the new governance structure introduced in Ireland's second RBMP,¹⁰ public engagement in the management of Ireland's waters is undertaken through local public consultation events hosted by the Local Waters and Communities Programme (LAWPRO). At national level, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) funds the independent stakeholder Water Forum and runs 'traditional' written consultations and hosts occasional workshops.

⁸ Bosch, D., Pease, J., Wolfe, M. L., Zobel, C., Osorio, J., Cobb, T. D., & Evanylo, G. (2012). Community DECISIONS: Stakeholder focused watershed planning. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 112, 226–232
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301479712003957?via%3Dihub>;

Rhoads, B. L., Wilson, D., Urban, M., & Herricks, E. E. (1999). Interaction Between Scientists and Nonscientists in Community-Based Watershed Management: Emergence of the Concept of Stream Naturalization. *Environmental Management*, 24(3), 297–308
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs002679900234>

⁹ Pahl-Wostl, C. (2019). The role of governance modes and meta-governance in the transformation towards sustainable water governance. *Environmental Science and Policy* 91: 6–16.

¹⁰ River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018–2021. Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. [Online]. Available from: https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/rbmp_full_reportweb.pdf [Accessed 6 January 2020].

A review of the effectiveness of the public engagement processes undertaken to date is necessary in order to assess where improvements can be made. Such an evaluation should assess how successful public engagement is in addressing inequity, how well it involves multiple forms of expertise/knowledge, and how well it works across scale. It must also evaluate how wider governance supports public engagement through compliance with good governance principles, namely: accountability, transparency, equity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency. Finally, it should assess how public engagement ultimately contributes to improvements in water quality and status.

Qualitative methods are recommended for measuring levels and experiences of public engagement (e.g. semi-structured interviews, focus groups, facilitated discussions). These methods can provide more valuable insights than simple quantitative approaches (e.g. numbers attending a particular meeting). Undertaking these reviews will assist in providing guidance to the DHPLG to inform and improve the development and implementation of Ireland's third River Basin Management Plan.

Recommendations

Based on the commissioned research and review of the literature, some general recommendations can be made regarding the design and facilitation of effective public engagement in water management in Ireland:

- 1. Introduce and support public participation processes which incorporate the three key principles of effective public engagement:**
 - address inequity and power imbalances between different individuals and stakeholder groups
 - incorporate various forms of knowledge/expertise, in particular to recognise the value of lay knowledge as well as scientific expertise
 - address issues of scale e.g. how pressures and processes that operate at national levels circumscribe local decision-making regarding water management.
- 2. Conduct an evaluation of current engagement initiatives** based on the above principles. This should also include an **assessment of wider water governance** for compliance with good governance principles: accountability, transparency, equity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency. This is because such governance is necessary to support public engagement.
- 3. Include communities and individuals in procedures and decision-making around water resources from the beginning.** This recognises the value of their knowledge early in the catchment management process. It also elicits concerns, connections, and expertise early on and vitally, it builds trust.
- 4. Support medium/long-term interdisciplinary research on public engagement** including in the form of pilot projects. These pilots should trial a range of approaches, while integrating multiple forms of expertise (e.g. biological; sociological; lay) into scientific research in ways that produce meaningful public engagement. Because this kind of participatory research involves time to establish relations of trust between stakeholders and across disciplines and expertise, medium/long-term institutional and financial supports are essential.