

Minister O'Brien welcomes Framework for future of water services

Framework paves the way for voluntary transfer of Local Authority water services staff to Irish Water

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Darragh O'Brien TD has today [24 June 2022] welcomed a new framework for the future of water services developed through an engagement process facilitated by the Workplace Relations Commission.

The Framework will enable the delivery of the Government's ambition for a world class public water system, as set out in the Policy Paper on Water Sector Transformation (February 2021). It will help to ensure a stable operational environment is maintained as the water sector completes the transition to a national water services authority, based on the full integration of public water services within Irish Water.

To facilitate the transition to a national water services authority, the Framework provides for:

1. Irish Water to assume responsibility for the management and direction of water services operation and activities
2. The voluntary transfer, of existing local authority water services staff to Irish Water as permanent employees between now and 2026;
3. The identification of opportunities for water services staff not transferring to Irish Water to avail of opportunities to re-deploy to other areas within local authorities;
4. The commencement of water services staff recruitment directly by Irish Water to fill vacancies arising in water services;
5. A voluntary redundancy scheme for local authority water service staff; and
6. A new Irish Water-Local Authority agreement, replacing the existing Service Level Agreement arrangements, to ensure that Irish Water has full accountability for the delivery of water services and direct management of the water services staff who choose to remain employed by their local authority under contract to Irish Water for the transitional period to the end of 2026.

Marking a key milestone on the Government's drive to create a world-class water services authority, Minister O'Brien said:

“The sustainable development of our public water services in Ireland now requires their full integration within Irish Water as the national water services authority. Only a national authority, backed by strong Government investment in water infrastructure, will deliver the standard of water and wastewater networks and environmental management systems required by Irish citizens and consumers in the 21st century. By combining unprecedented public investment with much needed institutional reform, this Government is determined to ensure that a world class water services authority will soon be a reality.”

The Framework was developed through an engagement process facilitated, at the invitation of the Minister, by the Workplace Relations Commission. The engagement involved the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, Irish Water, the County and City Management Association, the Local Government Management Agency, and union representatives.

From the outset the engagement process sought to accommodate the concerns of key stakeholders as follows:-

- a. The need to ensure Irish Water is given direct control of water services to provide for the safe and effective delivery of water services for citizens and to provide water services that meet the needs of a modern society and economy;
- b. The union position that there is no forced transfer of the workforce; and
- c. The need for local authorities to cease their involvement in public water services while also ensuring that they retain their capacity to continue to deliver on the full range of their vital statutory local government services and to fulfil social and economic development roles.

Acknowledging the collective effort and commitment shown by the key stakeholders and by the Workplace Relations Commission in successfully concluding a unique and unprecedented engagement process, the Minister said:

“I am encouraged by the partnership and collaboration shown by all parties to the engagement process. We now have a suitable framework in place to facilitate the enormous transformations that are needed in our water sector and in our local government system in the next few years. The Government will continue to work closely with all parties to ensure that the Framework is implemented in a fair and balanced manner that respects the key concerns of all parties, not least the workers.

“I will continue to work with the County and City Management Association to ensure that local authorities are not left with un-supported financial liabilities as a result of the transformation programme.

“We now have the opportunity to move forward with the integration of our public water services within Irish Water’s organisation structure so that we have a single organisation that is tasked with developing, and fully equipped to deliver, a world class public water system of which Ireland and its citizens can be justifiably proud”.

A copy of the framework can be accessed here: [\[LINK\]](#)

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Notes to Editor:

1. Our Shared Future, the Programme for Government, includes a commitment to “retain Irish Water in public ownership as a national, standalone, regulated utility”, with further commitments being given to ensuring that Irish Water is sufficiently funded to make the necessary investment in drinking water and wastewater infrastructure to serve citizens and customers and to support balanced regional development.
2. The realisation of this commitment will complete the broad policy and legislative reforms which have seen the public water system embark on a journey of transformation, from a structure based on locally-organised water services authorities, towards a single, national, water utility.
3. The Government policy paper “Irish Water - Towards a national, publicly-owned, regulated, water services utility” (February 2021) charts the way forward for the completion of the transformation of the water sector in Ireland based on the integration of water services within the organisational structure of Irish Water.
4. The transition to a national water services authority will necessarily involve the following step changes in current arrangements:
 - Irish Water will separate from the Ervia Group during 2023.
 - A stable operational Framework for the future delivery of water services, identified by the parties to the transformation process, facilitated by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), will enable the water sector transformation programme to advance by:
 - Providing Irish Water with the necessary control of water services operations and staff, and full accountability for same;
 - Addressing the concerns of staff in relation to the future deployment of current local authority water services staff; and
 - Ensuring that Irish Water is not left without an appropriately skilled workforce to carry out its statutory functions.
 - Irish Water, working with local authorities and current water services staff, will plan for the integration of water services into its organisational structure, in place of the current Service Level Agreements; and
 - The local government system will prepare for the gradual phasing out of the direct involvement of local authorities in the delivery of public water services.
5. Implementation of the Framework for the future of water services between now and 2026 will require ongoing partnership and collaboration between the parties at local, regional, and national level.
6. The continued safe delivery of water services by Irish Water and local authorities must be maintained through the transition period.