

# PUBLIC INITIATIVES TO CHANGE BEHAVIOURS IMPACTING WATER QUALITY

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## OVERVIEW

Ireland implements the EU Water Framework Directive, which aims to improve water quality, through River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) in six-year cycles. One aspect of RBMPs is the organisation of community engagement initiatives to increase awareness and build relationships within communities with the objective of improving and protecting water quality, an action that is led by the Local Authority Water Programme (LAWPRO). LAWPRO is a national shared service working on behalf of all 31 local authorities in Ireland. This research explores the extent to which initiatives to build community engagement on water quality and river basin management lead to more sustainable practices both among individuals and community groups.

LAWPRO partner with other organisations and run initiatives in parallel with third party events (e.g., World Wetlands Day). Examples of community engagement events facilitated by LAWPRO include: public consultation meetings, nature-themed public events (e.g., Biodiversity Week), project-related meetings (e.g., rural development, drinking-water source protection), community meetings (e.g., Resident's Association), meetings with angling groups or water recreation clubs, educational/training events, farming group meetings, or water quality-related conferences.

## METHODS

The data for this research comes from two separate online surveys. One is a 'treatment' group that comprised registered participants of LAWPRO water quality engagement events. The second is a 'control' group that comprises a sample of adults from the wider population. The research compares the adoption of pro-

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Grilli, G., and Curtis, J., "An evaluation of public initiatives to change behaviours that affect water quality", *Environmental Policy and Governance*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1999>. The paper is an output of a research programme funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

environmental behaviours, particularly those that protect water quality, between the treatment and control groups. The analysis is based on 385 respondents in the treatment group and a control group sub-sample also totalling 385 respondents that have characteristics very similar to the treatment group so that comparisons are undertaken between two similar groups. Across these two groups we compare how participation in community events related to improving water quality are associated with a variety of behavioural response outcomes (e.g., subsequently organised a local water-related event or project).

## **FINDINGS**

LAWPRO's activities achieve a high level of engagement with participants that are representing NGOs, consistent with its strategy to galvanise local community groups to take responsibility for water quality and catchment management in their areas. More broadly, participants at LAWPRO events are characterised as being older, well educated, and financially comfortable thus it is likely that LAWPRO's initiatives are not engaging with all sections of society.

The research finds that attendance at water quality events encourages participation in community-led initiatives but the impact varies across event types. However, more robust contemporaneous collection of outcome metrics is needed to fully assess the effectiveness of LAWPRO's outreach programmes.

In terms of changes in behaviours among individuals after attending water quality community engagement events, the balance of evidence is that there is a greater adoption of pro-environmental behaviours compared to those that do not attend. All behaviours are not equally amenable to change and it is unclear why participants adopt some behaviours and not others (e.g., conserve water, use in-sink food waste macerators, or flush baby wipes, etc.), even among activities where sustainable alternatives have no obvious cost or effort barriers.

The research finds clear evidence that the switch to more environmentally sustainable behaviours are not sustained indefinitely, as over time people often revert to long-standing behaviours. The implication is that successful engagement, whether aimed at communities or individuals, is not achieved through a single event or series of events, rather ongoing enforcement of behaviours is necessary.

It was not possible to conclusively say which types of engagement activities are most effective in yielding behavioural change but one noteworthy finding related to farmers. Among farmers that participated in LAWPRO initiatives there is a strong uptake of good farming practices with respect to nutrient planning and management.

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