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WATER QUALITY PROTECTION FUNCTIONS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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OVERVIEW

Based on Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assessments, surface waters and groundwaters continue to be under pressure from human activities; particularly from nitrogen and phosphorus from agriculture and urban waste water discharges. Under the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) Ireland is required to manage waters on a river basin scale via River Basin Management Planning (RBMP), to protect rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters. RBMP requires cooperation across public bodies, including local authorities that historically worked solely within their geographical administrative areas. The success of RBMP depends to a great extent on the capacity of public bodies to develop effective plans, coordinate activities and share data, especially among staff engaged in day-to-day operational decision making. While responsibility for water quality encompasses a wide hierarchy of both private and public sector entities, this research focuses on local authorities, examining the dissemination of knowledge of key water quality metrics among local authority staff and the effectiveness in transferring the high level strategic vision of the RBMP into practical daily actions across the functions of local government.

METHODS

The data for this study was collected by survey, administered to 1209 staff across 31 local authorities employed within the four operational divisions with greatest relevance to water quality (i.e., Environment, Planning, Roads and Communities). The survey elicited information on knowledge of local water quality indicators, as well as RBMP issues within their local authority area. Multivariate statistical

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Grilli, G., and Curtis, J., "Knowledge and awareness of water quality protection issues within local authorities", *Environmental Science and Policy*, Vol. 135, pp. 46-57 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2022.04.017>. The paper is an output of a research programme funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

methods were used to analyse staff responses controlling for factors such as staff experience, seniority, division, and region.

FINDINGS

General knowledge of WFD and RBMP issues, particularly at national level, is relatively high. Detailed knowledge of RBMP-related issues within staff's own local authority area is substantially lower. Knowledge levels are highest among Environment division staff. Knowledge levels also differ by length of service, and by whether in managerial roles or not. Senior managers are 3–4 times more likely to have knowledge of WFD and RBMP compared to junior staff, for example. Nonetheless, there is scope for improved knowledge and awareness among local authority staff. For example, more than half of those interviewed were unaware of critical RBMP priority areas (e.g., Blue Dot catchments and Priority Areas for Action) within their local authority area.

A conspicuous finding on water quality knowledge relates to staff in upper management roles within Environment divisions, where responsibilities are not solely related to water quality. For example, just 1 in 3 senior managers are aware of the share of rivers with good or high ecological status. A lack of awareness of the broader context for water quality may negatively influence priorities towards water quality issues when managers are facing competing demands across their functional areas.

The dissemination of RBMP priorities and actions through local authority hierarchies is evident. For example, knowledge among senior managers, who are higher up the hierarchy, is greater than more junior staff, which is consistent with the fact that the same level knowledge and expertise related to water quality and RBMP is not required across all functions and roles.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Local authority staff have responsibility for day-to-day decisions on many issues that ultimately impact on water quality (e.g., environmental protection, roads drainage, planning and development). The research demonstrates that there is considerable scope for improvement in knowledge of water quality and specific issues relevant to the RBMP among local authority staff. Recommendations to help improve the dissemination of pertinent information and competencies of staff to help people perform better in their roles include:

- Greater staff training, covering new staff inductions, role-based training, including specific training for senior management roles should focus on priorities and responsibilities for LAs in implementing the RBMP.
- Local authorities should assess their internal communications processes to ensure staff at all levels are being adequately briefed on water quality issues, whereas the Environmental Protection Agency should consider how it can more actively engage with LA staff, especially in Environment and

Planning divisions, across all job levels to improve awareness of the status of water quality and increase understanding of how local authority work contributes to water quality protection.

- Across all local authorities there is extensive institutional knowledge and practical experience dealing with issues related to water quality protection but within individual local authorities, staff numbers in specific functional areas can be relatively small and depth of experience more limited. Developing national forums on water quality protection issues to support local authority staff and share practical experiences would enhance environmental protection work nationally.

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