

Report of the 8th Advisory Committee of the Environmental Protection Agency to the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment

INTRODUCTION

The 8th Advisory Committee of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was appointed by the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (the Minister) on 18 February 2021 for a three-year term. The committee's membership is included in the Appendix to this report, as are the details of the 12 occasions on which the committee has met to date.

As has been the practice with previous Advisory Committees, the 8th Advisory Committee has prepared this report on its activities for submission to the Minister. The report is based on three years of activity and records the main issues considered by the committee during its term of office. It sets out a series of recommendations to the EPA, and to the Minister, relating to the Agency's functions. The recommendations cover a range of key issues.

The recommendations made to the EPA cover the following areas:

- **Organisational Matters;**
- **Communications and Environmental Information;**
- **Citizen Science;**
- **Climate Change;**
- **Circular Economy;**
- **EPA Research Programme;**
- **Regulation;**
- **Local Authority Enforcement; and**
- **Air Quality.**

The recommendations made to the Minister concern:

- **Resourcing;**
- **Climate Change;**
- **Circular Economy;**
- **EPA Research Programmes; and**
- **Air Quality.**

The report also contains recommendations that may be of assistance to the work of the incoming Advisory Committee (page 11).

Background

Section 27 of the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 (the EPA Act) provides for the establishment of an Advisory Committee which is chaired by the Director General of the EPA and includes eleven other members. Seven members are appointed by the Minister from nominations received from a number of prescribed organisations under section 27(5) of the EPA Act, with the remaining four members appointed directly by the Minister.¹

Under section 28(1)(a) of the EPA Act, it is the duty of the Advisory Committee “to make recommendations to the Agency or to the Minister relating to the functions of the Agency.” Section 28(1)(b) provides that the Agency or the Minister (as appropriate), “shall have regard to any recommendations made by the Advisory Committee”.

Under section 28(3), the Minister may also consult the Advisory Committee on any matter arising in relation to his functions with respect to environmental protection. The Minister has not requested a consultation with the 8th Advisory Committee during its term of office.

The value of the Advisory Committee lies primarily in the diversity of views and the depth of expertise and experience in a wide range of environmental matters that its members offer.

The Advisory Committee provides value in the form of an informed, independent perspective on the Agency’s activities, particularly in relation to emerging issues and matters of scientific and public concern.

At the end of every meeting the Chair of the Advisory Committee, EPA Director General, Laura Burke, invited committee members to suggest topics for discussion at future meetings. This ensured committee members had an opportunity to input and discuss issues of interest.

The term of office of the 8th Advisory Committee coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of a blended working policy for Agency staff and the development of the EPA’s new Strategic Plan for 2022–2026.

OVERVIEW OF THE 8TH ADVISORY COMMITTEE’S ACTIVITIES

Over the course of its 12 meetings, the Advisory Committee received detailed overviews on the following topics from EPA staff:

- The responsibilities of the five Offices of the EPA and the work activities of the respective Office Programmes
- Impacts of COVID-19 on the Agency
- Update on EPA’s response to recommendations from the 7th Advisory Committee on Communications
- Bridging the Science-Policy Gap
- Development and launch of EPA’s new mobile compatible website
- Consultation on EPA’s new Strategic Plan
- Citizen Science within the EPA and the “Clean Air Together” project to collect

environmental data

- Role of the EPA in energy regulation, trends, and current workload
- Climate change functions of the EPA
- Yale partnership on Climate Change Communication
- National Economic and Social Council Work on Environmental Sustainability
- EPA Research Programme
- Circular Economy Programme
- EPA's enforcement activities.

The Committee were appraised on the following:

- Overview of EPA Work Programmes and staffing pressure points
- Recruitment and the challenges in the current workforce market
- EPA Budget trends, accounts, and funding
- EPA events
- The EPA's Environmental Management System
- National Water Quality
- Drinking water quality
- National Waste Statistics
- Irelands Greenhouse Gas emissions
- Air Quality

Updates took the form of both oral and PowerPoint presentations followed by round table discussion. This approach enabled committee members to engage in well-informed, high-level discussion and exchange of views with the relevant EPA personnel, to provide feedback and suggestions directly.

Meeting Locations

The Advisory Committee met via video conference in 2021 for the first four meetings, in a Dublin hotel for the first face-to-face meeting permitted during the pandemic, four times at EPA Headquarters at Johnstown Castle, Wexford and twice at EPA Regional Inspectorate in Dublin and in a Dublin hotel for the final face-to-face meeting of the Committee.

The Advisory Committee publishes detailed minutes of all its meetings on the EPA website. Full details of the 8th Advisory Committee's activities are available on the EPA's website <https://www.epa.ie/who-we-are/roles-responsibilities/organisational-structure/advisory-committee/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with its statutory mandate under section 28(1)(a) and section 28(2) of the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992, the Advisory Committee makes the following recommendations.

Corporate Functions

Resourcing

The Advisory Committee welcomes and thanks the Minister for the sanction received for additional staff in 2021, 2022 and 2023 to support the EPA in carrying out its mandate, bringing the number of employees to 494. The Advisory Committee is aware of the challenges the EPA is facing recruiting resources to fulfil its mandate. The Advisory Committee believes that the continued support for resourcing of the EPA needs to be maintained. Flexibility is necessary to meet specific demands when and where they arise. It is essential that the EPA has the staffing capability, resources, and flexibility to carry out effectively the functions assigned to it.

The Advisory Committee recommends the Minister:

- Maintains sufficient resources and funding to deliver on the current and future mandate obligations of the Agency. A significant increase in the level of non-pay funding will be needed for 2024 and beyond to maintain its current level of activities and deliverables.
- Consider a multi-annual funding model, which would offer greater certainty to the Agency and enable it to plan ahead in a more informed and impactful way.

Organisational matters

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Maintain its support for EPA staff to avail of blended working as in addition to the flexibility it affords staff and the Agency, it also contributes to supporting the Agency in reducing its environmental emissions.
- Continue to explore how the EPA can further reduce its environmental footprint through both infrastructural changes like those undertaken during the term of the Advisory Committee and through its organisational policies. The Committee recommends the Agency consider a policy decision for its own publications to be only available as online publications, keeping the use (and volume) of colour in publications (hardcopy and electronic) to a minimum.

Communications/Environmental Information

The EPA plays a key role in raising environmental awareness in Ireland. The EPA's website has undergone a significant upgrade in terms of its look and operation.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- In organising events, consider the most appropriate format, whether in person, virtual or hybrid, depending on the nature of the engagement, including consideration of the

environmental footprint and cost. The EPA should look at broadening the audience, continue to recognise the value of networking and the importance of showcasing environmental action and solutions, including hearing from practitioners 'on the ground.' Where events are recorded, the availability of these should be promoted.

- Explore additional opportunities and options for multi-agency event collaboration to build relationships and connectivity between agencies to enhance promotion of shared areas of interest.
- Explore opportunities for multi-agency engagement to harness public support for climate action at opportune times.
- Consider novel and alternative formats for stimulating alternative thinking and co-creation to engage a wider audience.
- Consider options to direct traffic to the EPA website and review layout of the home page of the website to promote more popular content and new information repository initiatives e.g. in my local environment area, FAQs. Ensure website portal is kept up to date and sources of additional information and content continues to be added.

Citizen Science- Raising Awareness and a call to action

The Advisory Committee is particularly impressed by the work undertaken by the EPA in the area of Citizen Science. The recent air quality project (Clean Air Together) is a good example of a practical way to engage and raise awareness among citizens on areas of environmental concern while also serving the needs of the Agency to capture up to date environmental data. The Agency has been successful in its role in educating the public on environmental matters to date and the use of citizen science increases their ability to turn awareness raising into a call to action.

Relevant real time validated data from professional scientists is important but increased activity in citizen science is vital to increase scientific communication, data capture and environmental action.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Promote and develop more opportunities to use the citizen science concept where possible (e.g., Research, data capture) by identifying key projects with desired outcomes to promote.
- Investigate ways to support moving from participation in a citizen programme to taking action. Identify and share 'pathways to action.' Seek suggestions from the public.
- Continue to expand the range of stakeholder partnerships and projects covered with clear metrics to measure the impact of projects.

Climate Change

It is recognised that Ireland must embark on transformational changes to transition to a climate neutral, climate-resilient country. Such change requires leadership from Government and state agencies to drive structural and behavioural changes by enterprises and the general population.

The Committee notes the EPA's role in addressing climate change challenges include preparing Ireland's greenhouse gas inventories and projections; regulating emissions from industrial sectors; supporting climate science research; supporting behavioural change and facilitating the National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA). The Committee notes the active engagement by the EPA in the NDCA and its partnership with Yale University. It is important that those activities and learned insights culminate in a transition to action through behavioural change within enterprises and the general population.

The Advisory Committee recommends the Minister:

- Prioritise senior level multi-agency co-operation. It is essential that all Government departments and agencies with a mandate in environment need to connect in new agile and effective frameworks to work together towards common goals for Ireland's Climate Action Plan.
- Develop upskilling opportunities to facilitate a greater transition of workers into work that supports sustainability activities.
- Identify, create and share 'pathways to action' through which the wider public can engage in positive action for climate.

The Advisory Committee recommends both the Minister and the EPA:

- Improve the method of stakeholder engagement to overcome challenges to climate change transitioning or challenges created from fake news.
- Take account of the findings from the survey undertaken in collaboration with Yale University and the hesitance of people to change their behaviours:
 - develop communication capacity for promotion of climate-related public behaviours using all media platforms and including relevant, targeted, local and national stories.
- Acknowledging the degree of eco and climate anxiety amongst young people, drive a greater focus on the "greater good" and "environmental education," and harness the creativity of younger generations to drive behaviour change among other cohorts of the Irish population.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Develop and publish a user-friendly version of greenhouse gas inventories and emissions data.
- Help policymakers and the wider public understand the link between our climate and biodiversity crises. Collaborate with relevant bodies to promote nature-based solutions and 'nature-proof' climate actions.

Circular economy

A circular economy is essential for a sustainable future and the extension of the life cycle of products. Materials should be kept within the economy to be used productively again and again generating environmental and economic benefits. Creating more efficient and sustainable products from the outset will reduce energy and natural resource consumption.

The Advisory Committee recommends the Minister:

- Highlight the importance and added value of developing EU harmonized end of waste (EOW) criteria to the EU Council & Parliament over national criteria to remove the necessity of establishing national EOW criteria for materials that are recycled/reused across other EU member States.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Develop communication initiatives to highlight issues with recycling rates in Ireland.
- When establishing new end of waste criteria (EOW criteria) build into the EOW impact assessment, potential impacts on other existing EU legislation e.g. REACH.
- Increase engagement between EPA and partner agencies in other EU Members States in developing national EOW criteria to ensure a greater level of harmonization across EU.

EPA Research Programme

The Committee notes that the EPA delivers an environmental research programme to provide essential scientific support for environmental policy development, implementation and broader decision making. The Committee considers that the EPA funded research needs to connect with a more significant impact on policy and society in general. The Committee considers that the development and coordination of bottom-up solutions to environmental challenges are gradually becoming more significant in the Irish context.

The Advisory Committee recommends the Minister:

- Strengthen engagement and collaboration between EPA and the NESC through the use of EPA data and information to support NESC.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Continue to work to bridge the gap between environmental science, policy *and practice*.
- Incentivise environmental projects and positive ways to deliver innovative solutions.
- Deliver research initiatives and findings earlier to policy makers.
- Continue to support research in transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary areas including through co-funding with other agencies.
- Develop a framework to measure the impact of EPA funded research.

- Ensure greater opportunity afforded to “bottom up” and “blue sky” research.
- Consider the reintroduction of open call small research grants.
- Continue to research options for engaging with the public to drive changes in behaviour.
- Consider opportunities for researchers to present to the Advisory Committee.
- Investigate establishment of an EPA research Alumni.

Regulation

The Committee notes that a primary function of the EPA is environmental regulation, including assessment, authorisation and enforcement of activities across a range of industries including waste, pharmaceutical, and the power sector.

The EPA also has a supervisory role in relation to the performance by local authorities of their statutory environmental protection duties and is the environmental regulator of Uisce Eireann.

Drinking Water

The EPA has an important regulatory function in relation to compliance with environmental standards for Drinking Water Quality. In March 2022 the Committee wrote to the Secretary General of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) with regard to the EPA’s enforcement powers under the Drinking Water Regulations (SI 122 of 2014, as amended). The Advisory Committee highlighted its concerns regarding the limited enforcement powers available to the EPA under the Drinking Water Regulations and recommended that the Minister extend the powers of the EPA to enable it to take enforcement actions, including prosecutions for specific offences.

Subsequent to the letter from the Advisory Committee and as part of the recast of the Drinking Water Directive, the DHLGH brought in new regulations including strengthened powers for the EPA, addressing this regulatory gap. The Advisory Committee would like to express its appreciation for the satisfactory resolution of this issue.

Local Authority Enforcement

The Committee recognises that while the scale of environmental enforcement work carried out by local authorities is significant, in many areas it is not delivering the necessary environmental outcomes such as improved water and air quality and waste segregation.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Assess whether the EPA has sufficient powers to sanction local authorities for failure to implement adequate monitoring, inspection and enforcement of air pollution, water pollution and waste management laws.

Air Quality

The Committee considers that the EPA has provided good leadership on air quality in recent years. Government investment in the Ambient Air Monitoring Programme (AAMP) has enabled the EPA to develop the national air quality monitoring network into one that is now well-equipped, appropriately sized and fit for purpose. The introduction of the national air quality forecast, developed through the LIFE Emerald research project, is also a particularly welcome initiative for communicating air quality information to the Irish public and local authorities.

Recent years have also seen the introduction of two important pieces of new legislation on air quality, the updated solid fuel regulations and the national Clean Air Strategy. The proposed revisions to the EU Air Quality Directive represent a step-change in how we will monitor the air. New measurement parameters, such as particle number concentration, black carbon and ammonia may all be introduced, and it is essential that the EPA Air Quality Team receives appropriate levels of investment for upskilling staff and purchasing equipment.

The Advisory Committee recommends the Minister:

- Provides the necessary assistance (financial, technical and legal) to the EPA and local authorities to facilitate proper enforcement of the solid fuel regulations.
- Supports the EPA through appropriate level of investment for continued delivery of its Air Quality Programme.
- Fully supports the EPA, along with other government agencies and stakeholders, to implement the Clean Air Strategy to reduce emissions from all sectors and make measurable progress towards achieving the WHO guideline values for key air pollutants.

The Advisory Committee recommends the EPA:

- Fully maintain and enhance, where necessary, the measurement and modelling activities to ensure delivery of accurate, near-real time information on air quality to all stakeholders.
- Consider incorporation of low-cost sensors into the monitoring strategy and how they can best complement the data obtained by the national network.
- Continue to build further on their partnerships with the atmospheric science research community to ensure that Ireland responds effectively to the revised EU Air Quality Directive.

Recommendations to the Incoming Advisory Committee

Advisory Committee's report to the Minister

Reporting to the Minister will need to be determined by the new Advisory Committee as a matter of priority within the first or second advisory meeting.

The incoming Advisory Committee may also wish to consider recording recommendations on

discussion items after each meeting to assist with the compilation of the end of term report to the Minister.

Advisory Committee's meeting

The Advisory Committee meets quarterly, which works well. While there are obvious environmental benefits to having online meetings it is important that a good mix of face-to-face and online meetings are used to facilitate good interaction among members of the Advisory Committee and the executive of the Agency.

The availability of presentations to Advisory Committee members prior to the meeting has assisted members to better prepare for discussion at the meetings.

The Committee supports maintaining the current practice inviting Advisory Committee members to suggest topics for discussion at future meetings.

Concluding Remarks

The outgoing Advisory Committee members would like to record that it has been an honour and a privilege for them to serve on the 8th Advisory Committee and to have had the opportunity to provide support for the EPA in its activities. We would also like to thank the EPA staff for the professionalism and respect with which they treated the Advisory Committee.

The particular membership of the 8th Advisory Committee continued to provide the EPA with a significant diversity of views, expertise, and experience across a wide range of environmental matters. This range of expertise and experience enabled constructive and deep engagement with many complex issues over the three-year period and valuable contributions to the development of the EPA's next Strategic Plan.

It is essential that a wide range of expertise and experience is maintained in the composition of the incoming Advisory Committee.

Appendix

8th Advisory Committee of the Environmental Protection Agency Members

Committee Member	Affiliation/Nominated by	Date Appointed	No. of Meetings Attended	Additional Information
Ms. Laura Burke	Chairperson of the Committee and Director General EPA	5 December 2016	12	
Ms. Aebhín Cawley	Managing Director Scott Cawley Ltd, Ecological Consultancy	1 July 2019	10	Re-appointed for another term from 1 July 2022
Dr Laure Marignol	Associate Professor of Radiobiology, Trinity College Dublin	1 July 2019	3	Stepped down from Committee on 30 June 2022
Ms. Sadhbh O' Neill	Policy Co-Ordinator, Stop Climate Chaos	18 February 2021	11	
Professor John Wenger	Professor of Physical Chemistry, University College Cork	18 February 2021	11	
Professor Frances Lucy	Head of Department of Environmental Science, ATU Sligo	18 February 2021	11	
Mr. Thomas Cooney	Dairy Farmer and Former Environmental Chairperson IFA	18 February 2021	12	
Ms. Elaine Nevin	National Director ECO-UNESCO	18 February 2021	11	
Dr. Brendan Dunford	Environmental Consultant and Manager of the Burren Programme	18 February 2021	10	
Ms. Elaine Mahon	Manager, Irish Development Education Association	18 February 2021	7	

Ms. Yvonne Mullooly	Assistance Chief Executive (Chemicals & Prevention) HSA	18 February 2021	9	
Dr. Aoife Foley	Queens University Belfast	18 February 2021	4	
Dr. Niamh Lynam Lennon	Irish Radiation Research Society	18 January 2023	3	

Schedule of Meetings

The 8th Advisory Committee met on 12 occasions to date as follows:

1. 28th April 2021
2. 25th June 2021
3. 13th September 2021
4. 6th December 2021
5. 9th March 2022
6. 24th June 2022
7. 28th October 2022
8. 11th January 2023
9. 8th March 2023
10. 5th July 2023
11. 2nd October 2023
12. 4th December 2023

Minutes of Meetings

Approved minutes of Advisory Committee meetings are available via this link:

<https://www.epa.ie/publications/corporate/governance/advisory-committee-meetings-minutes-/>