

The 4th meeting of the 8th EPA Advisory Committee was held on Monday, 6th December 2021, via video conference from EPA Regional Inspectorate, Block 3, Clonskeagh Square, Dublin 14.

Members Present: Laura Burke (Chair), Aebhín Cawley (via Video Conference), Thomas Cooney (via Video Conference), Brendan Dunford (via Video Conference), Aoife Foley (via Video Conference), Frances Lucy (via Video Conference), Laure Marignol (via Video Conference), Yvonne Mullooly (via Video Conference), Sadhbh O'Neill (via Video Conference) & John Wenger (via Video Conference).

In attendance: Gerard O'Leary (via Video Conference) & Tom Ryan;
Stephen Fennell – Agenda item 6;
Darragh Page – Agenda item 7.

Apologies: Elaine Mahon & Elaine Nevin.

Secretary: Mary Donohoe

1. **Approval of the Agenda**

Laura Burke welcomed the Advisory Committee for their 4th meeting.

The adoption of the Agenda was approved.

2. **Minutes of Meeting held on 13 September 2021**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 September 2021 were approved.

3. **Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures of interests declared.

4. **Emerging Issues**

Laura Burke appraised the Committee of the ongoing work by the Pandemic Response Team (PRT) to facilitate the transition of staff back to EPA buildings. The Committee were informed that measures were in place to facilitate all staff returning to the office one day per week from 18 October 2021, with a subsequent plan for staff to attend 2 days per week from 8 November 2021. Following Government guidance, which took into account developments with regard to the incidence of Covid-19, the EPA revised their advice to a recommendation that staff revert to working from home, with attendance now in EPA buildings for specific business requirements only. The Committee were advised that any future return to EPA buildings will take into consideration business needs, staff wellbeing, the Governments Work Safely Protocol and guidelines, Public Health advice and ongoing engagement with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) and other Government departments and public bodies. Laura updated the Committee on progress for a 'Blended Working' policy which is not expected to be finalised until Spring 2022 at the earliest. The EPA await guidance from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

The Chairperson updated members on the progress for filling the 28 posts sanctioned by DPER in July 2021. Posts are being filled through use of recruitment competitions, existing panels and lateral mobility, with the aim to complete all

competitions by year end. Preparations are in place for new staff joining the Agency, including the newly appointed Programme Manager for the Circular Economy. The Committee were appraised of the EPA Employee Engagement Survey 2021 which yielded a high response rate of 91%, with the results benchmarked against the Civil Service survey and Ipsos norms.

The Chairperson provided the Committee with an update on the EPA's 2021 accounts and 2022 budget and noted that engagement is ongoing with DECC regarding the 2022 allocation from the Exchequer.

Laura informed members on EPA progress and planned actions for reducing carbon emissions from EPA activities, including plans to migrate to carbon friendly heating systems, the upgrade to LED lighting for all EPA buildings and energy audits.

The EPA is partnering with the Yale Programme on Climate Change Communications to produce a baseline study of the attitudes, policy preferences and behaviours of the Irish population on climate change. The Chairperson informed members of the first output from this project is the report 'Climate Change in the Irish Mind' which provides a summary of high level findings of the survey conducted during the summer of 2021. Laura advised that a communications plan has been developed to disseminate the findings and an initial report will be published before Christmas.

Laura advised the Committee on the recent launch of the: 'National Hazardous Waste Management Plan 2021-2027'; 'Air Quality Report 2020'; 'Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies Report 2020'; 'National Waste Statistics Summary Report 2019'; and the publication of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions for the period 1990-2020. The Committee were updated of recent virtual events including the Health and Wellbeing Conference 2021, the Air Conference, the Environmental Law Conference and the Climate Lecture.

Discussion

A wide ranging discussion was had including: the questions posed in the 'Climate Change in the Irish Mind' survey; research opportunities for a sustainable way of homeworking; addressing the challenges of remote working involving culture, teambuilding and engagement; opportunities to reach new audiences for EPA events through a wider variety of speakers and innovative content at events and the increased use of hybrid events; and options to undertake surveys on the energy needs of specific groups.

Action:

The topic of Climate and the role of the EPA will be raised at the next meeting.

5. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

6. **Office of Office of Communications and Corporate Services**

Presentation on Development of the Next EPA Strategy

Dr Stephen Fennell, Programme Manager, Office of Office of Communications and Corporate Services gave a presentation on the development of the next EPA Strategy. The presentation provided details on:

- the review of the current EPA Strategy;
- the process and timetable adopted to develop the next EPA Strategy;
- outputs from the staff consultation;

- the draft EPA Strategic Plan 2022-2026
- next steps including stakeholder consultation

(ii) **Discussion/Comments**

A discussion was had on: linking the strategy of the EPA to the benefits for future generations; consideration of a *just transition* in the creation of a more sustainable future to meet the climate challenge; improved reference to the global climate challenge; addressing a reversal in the decline of the environment to reflect the aspiration to restore as well as protect and improve; the impact of environmental decline on society and working for societal change; behavioural change through public engagement; emphasising a strong focus on regulation; creating a sense of urgency and crises to address the environmental challenges; the importance of holistic thinking and integration of all elements when addressing environmental issues; engagement of external stakeholders in the strategy development process; input from EPA staff; public consultation plans; and opportunities for increased input from the Advisory Committee prior to public consultation.

Action:

Welcoming the feedback from the Committee, the Strategy Development Team are to consider the recommendations, suggestions and comments of the Committee and to investigate:

- holding a workshop with the Advisory Committee early in 2022;
- more communications prior to finalisation of the strategy, such as youth engagement; and
- maximising staff engagement including with EPA partnership committee, Meitheal.

7. **Office of Environmental Enforcement**

Presentation on EPA Enforcement Activities

Darragh Page, Programme Manager, Office of Environmental Enforcement, gave a presentation providing an overview of EPA Enforcement Activities. The presentation provided details on:

- Office of Environmental Enforcement people and numbers;
- Waste Water Treatment enforcement;
- Drinking Water Treatment enforcement;
- Radiological Protection Regulation;
- Enforcement – Industrial, Waste & Intensive Agriculture;
- Illegal Peat Harvesting;
- Local Authority oversight and coordination;
- Other areas of activity and interest; and
- Reports and Advocacy.

(ii) **Discussion/Comments**

A discussion was had on: the application of social media for enforcement activities; use of variable environmental charges and fees as an incentive to comply with a licence; recognition of the important role played by Non-Government Organisations; the function of protected disclosures and whistle-blowers; ongoing opportunities for external reviews; the deployment of the Environmental Liabilities Directive to compensate for damage to the environment; Financial Provision to be continually kept under review; the possibilities around bog rehabilitation to address maintenance and environmental risks; risk management in priority areas e.g. maintaining a high standard for drinking water supplied by Irish Water; addressing the limited nature of the enforcement powers for the EPA under the Drinking Water

Regulations 2014 (as amended); and enhancing EPA enforcement powers in the enforcement of drinking water to minimise the impact on public health.

Action:

The Enforcement Team to consider the recommendations, suggestions and comments of the Committee and to investigate:

- highlighting the issues of Drinking Water enforcement; and
- drafting a letter from the Advisory Committee, to be signed by the Chair, to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage recommending the Minister consider extending the powers of the EPA to ensure that drinking water supplied by Irish Water meets the standards of the Drinking Water Regulations. The draft letter will be circulated to members for comment prior to the next meeting.

8. **Any Other Business**

Next Meeting

Calendar invites for the 2022 meetings have been issued to all members. The next Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 9th March 2022. The meeting location will be confirmed in due course and it is hoped this meeting can be held in-person in EPA Headquarters Wexford or the Dublin Regional Inspectorate.

Topics for inclusion at the March meeting are:

- Climate and the role of the EPA
- *'Climate Change in the Irish Mind'* survey

This concluded the business of the meeting.