

The 3rd meeting of the 8th EPA Advisory Committee was held on Monday, 13th September 2021, via video conference from EPA Headquarters, Johnstown Castle Estate, County Wexford.

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), Elaine Nevin (via Video Conference), Sadhbh O'Neill (via Video Conference) & John Wenger (via Video Conference).

In attendance: Gerard O'Leary, Eimear Cotter (via Video Conference) & Jonathan Derham.
Micheál Lehane (via Video Conference) – Agenda items 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5.

Apologies: Elaine Mahon.

Secretary: Mary Donohoe

1. **Approval of the Agenda**

Laura Burke welcomed the Advisory Committee for their 3rd meeting.

The adoption of the Agenda was approved.

2. **Minutes of Meeting held on 25 June 2021**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 June 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 during the Covid-19 pandemic EPA staff demonstrated remarkable efforts to deliver on the Work Programme, and it is now envisaged staff working remotely will commence the return to buildings from 20 September, in line with Government guidance. Laura informed members it is also anticipated that additional staff will return from 22 October and the PRT are awaiting clarity on mask wearing, social distancing etc. The Committee were advised that the gradual return is taking 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 informed the Committee that preparatory work has commenced on a 'Blended Working' policy but it is not expected to be finalised until Spring 2022 at the earliest.

The Chairperson provided the Committee with an update on the EPA's budget and noted that income and expenditure are in line with expectations and similar to previous years. The Chairperson informed the Committee that the estimates have

been submitted to DECC for 2022. Laura advised members that in July the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform gave approval to increase EPA staff numbers by 28 additional posts, bringing the approved staff compliment to 448. The process for filling these additional posts is now in progress through use of recruitment competitions, existing panels and lateral mobility.

The Committee were advised that the Oversight Agreement 2021-2023 & Performance Delivery Agreement 2021-2023 with DECC and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage were signed in August. The agreements incorporate the key recommendations from the OECD review of the Agency including a reduction in the number of Key Performance Indicators.

Laura appraised the Committee on the positive external audit of the Environmental Management System and the ongoing greening initiatives across the Agency. A major lighting upgrade is underway in Headquarters which is expected to result in a significant carbon reduction for the building.

Laura also appraised the Committee on the progress in the development of the new EPA strategy which was paused during the Covid-19 pandemic. Laura stated that there will be an update to the Committee at the December meeting and there will be an opportunity for members to engage with the strategy development at the meeting. It is intended that the Strategy will be finalised in Q1 of 2022.

Laura appraised the Committee on the recent launch of: the 'Water Quality Indicators Report 2020'; the public consultation on the draft 'National Hazardous Waste Management Plan 2021-2027'; the Citizen Science 'Clean Air Together project'; and the 'Packaging Waste Statistics for 2019'. The Committee were informed of upcoming virtual events including the Circular Economy Conference on 15 & 16 September, the Air Conference on 10 & 11 November and the Environmental Law Conference on 17 & 18 November.

Discussion

A wide ranging discussion was had including: the impact of virtual / hybrid meetings and events in reducing environmental footprint; the increase in single use plastics and disposable packaging during the pandemic to limit infection transfer; the impact of remote working on EPA carbon emissions through reduced usage of vehicles and reduced attendance at buildings; progress on peat enforcement activities and the National Peatlands Strategy; challenges for land use and the importance of biodiversity; and the review of the Nitrates derogation and ammonia emissions in intensive agriculture.

Action:

The link to the OECD Review of the EPA will be forwarded to all members.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Office of Evidence and Assessment

(i) Presentation on the EPA Research Programme

Dr Jonathan Derham, Programme Manager Office of Evidence and Assessment gave a presentation on the EPA Research Programme under the themes of: addressing climate change evidence needs; facilitating a green and circular economy; delivering a healthy environment; protecting and restoring our natural environment. The presentation provided details on:

- statutory and policy basis for EPA research;
- consultation and implementation ecosystem;
- essential ambitions for EPA funded research;
- research framework, action plan and research needs;
- delivery of impactful research;
- topic selection and evaluation; and
- opportunities and challenges for the EPA research programme.

(ii) Discussion/Comments

A discussion was had on: the use of both prescriptive calls and open calls to broaden engagement with the research community; the challenges of translating knowledge for policy makers and feeding back research to communities at a local level; advancing research on motivation and behavioural change to translate research into actions; capturing the value of research and monitoring the range of outcome and impact indicators; developing strategic partnerships as *messengers* to circulate the evolving knowledge; recognising the networking opportunities from the EPA Research programme internationally and the benefits of independent research; evaluating the value of research and developing a database of EPA Alumni to act as champions for the programme; exploring options to offer and publicise small research grants to expand participation in the programme; leaving space for bottom-up (blue sky) research opportunity; improving connectivity between scientists and the public by developing meaningful messaging and sustainable communications; the use of both research consultancy and conventional research mechanisms in calls; harnessing the research outputs through direct involvement of researchers and advances in research education; strengthening the partnership approach between academic institutions and NGO's / communities (including Citizen Science); and translating evidence into behavioural change through targeted impactful communications to specific sectors (including schools and businesses).

Action:

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

- establishing an EPA Research Alumni;
- improving the promotion of smaller research grants;
- the development of sophisticated (audience appropriate) research output communication solutions;
- ensuring opportunity for 'blue sky' (bottom-up) funded research opportunities;
- alternative ways to engage and communicate with the public to drive behavioural change;
- developing a framework to measure the impact of EPA funded research; and
- the potential for researchers to present to the Advisory Committee.

7. **Any Other Business**

(i) Next Meeting

Based on member responses to a recent poll, the next Advisory Committee meeting is scheduled for Monday 6th December 2021. 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 December meeting are:

- Development of the Next EPA Strategy
- EPA Enforcement Activities

(ii) **2022 Meetings**

A poll will issue to members to agree dates for 2022 meetings.

This concluded the business of the meeting.