Urban Wastewater Treatment in 2025



Environmental Protection Agency
An Ghníomhaireacht um Chaomhnú Comhshaoil

Environmental Protection Agency

The EPA is responsible for protecting and improving the environment as a valuable asset for the people of Ireland. We are committed to protecting people and the environment from the harmful effects of radiation and pollution.

The work of the EPA can be divided into three main areas:

- **Regulation:** Implementing regulation and environmental compliance systems to deliver good environmental outcomes and target those who don't comply.
- **Knowledge:** Providing high-quality, targeted and timely environmental data, information and assessment to inform decision making.
- **Advocacy:** Working with others to advocate for a clean, productive and well-protected environment and for sustainable environmental practices.

Our responsibilities include:

LICENSING

- Large-scale industrial waste and petrol storage activities;
- Urban wastewater discharges;
- The contained use and controlled release of genetically modified organisms;
- Sources of ionising radiation;
- Greenhouse gas emissions from industry and aviation through the EU Emissions Trading Scheme.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT

- Audit and inspection of EPA-licensed facilities;
- Drive the implementation of best practice in regulated activities and facilities;
- Oversee local authority responsibilities for environmental protection;
- Regulate the quality of public drinking water and enforce urban wastewater discharge authorisations;
- Assess and report on public and private drinking water quality;
- Coordinate a network of public service organisations to support action against environmental crime;
- Prosecute those who flout environmental law and damage the environment.

WASTE MANAGEMENT AND CHEMICALS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

- Implement and enforce waste regulations including national enforcement issues;
- Prepare and publish national waste statistics and the National Hazardous Waste Management Plan;
- Develop and implement the National Waste Prevention Programme;
- Implement and report on legislation on the control of chemicals in the environment.

WATER MANAGEMENT

- Engage with national and regional governance and operational structures to implement the Water Framework Directive;
- Monitor, assess and report on the quality of rivers, lakes, transitional and coastal waters, bathing waters and groundwaters, and measurement of water levels and river flows.

CLIMATE SCIENCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

- Publish Ireland's greenhouse gas emission inventories and projections;
- Provide the Secretariat to the Climate Change Advisory Council and support to the National Dialogue on Climate Action;
- Support National, EU and UN climate science and policy development activities.

ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING & ASSESSMENT

- Design and implement national environmental monitoring systems: technology, data management, analysis and forecasting;
- Produce the State of Ireland's Environment and Indicator Reports;
- Monitor air quality and implement the EU Clean Air for Europe Directive, the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution and the National Emissions Ceiling Directive;
- Oversee the implementation of the Environmental Noise Directive;
- Assess the impact of proposed plans and programmes on the Irish environment.

ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

- Coordinate and fund national environmental research activity to identify pressures, inform policy and provide solutions;
- Collaborate with national and EU environmental research activity.

RADIOLOGICAL PROTECTION

- Monitoring radiation levels and assess public exposure to ionising radiation and electromagnetic fields;
- Assist in developing national plans for emergencies arising from nuclear accidents;
- Monitor developments abroad relating to nuclear installations and radiological safety;
- Provide, or oversee the provision of, specialist radiation protection services.

GUIDANCE, AWARENESS RAISING, AND ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

- Provide independent evidence-based reporting, advice and guidance to government, industry and the public on environmental and radiological protection topics;
- Promote the link between health and wellbeing, the economy and a clean environment;
- Promote environmental awareness including supporting behaviours for resource efficiency and climate transition;
- Promote radon testing in homes and workplaces and encourage remediation where necessary.

PARTNERSHIP AND NETWORKING

- Work with international and national agencies, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, representative bodies and government departments to deliver environmental and radiological protection, research coordination and science-based decision making.

MANAGEMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE EPA

The EPA is managed by a full-time Board, consisting of a Director General and five Directors. The work is carried out across five Offices:

- Office of Environmental Sustainability
- Office of Environmental Enforcement
- Office of Evidence and Assessment
- Office of Radiation Protection and Environmental Monitoring
- Office of Communications and Corporate Services

The EPA is assisted by advisory committees who meet regularly to discuss issues of concern and provide advice to the Board.

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CONTENTS

Executive summary 1

1 Introduction 3

2 Compliance with EPA licences 4

3 Management, operation and maintenance 5

4 Priority areas 6

5 Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive 7

6 Raw sewage 9

7 Wastewater collecting systems 11

8 Risks to surface waters 12

9 Freshwater pearl mussels and shellfish 14

10 Concluding remarks 15

Glossary 16

Appendix A: EU treatment standards 17

Appendix B: Areas discharging raw sewage 18

Appendix C: Priority collecting systems 18

Appendix D: Pressures on surface waters 19

Appendix E: Protecting freshwater pearl mussels and shellfish 21

Appendix F: Environmental incidents 22

Appendix G: Sewage sludge 23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wastewater treatment is essential to protect the environment and public health and to support the needs of a growing population. Uisce Éireann continues to deliver environmental benefits by improving treatment at priority areas identified by the EPA. Important projects completed during the past year included the provision of treatment for four towns and villages that previously discharged raw sewage and the upgrade of Ireland's largest wastewater treatment plant at Ringsend, Co. Dublin. However, improvements are not being delivered fast enough or at the scale needed to address all environmental risks, and wastewater discharges continue to adversely affect water quality in rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters.

Fifty-five per cent of licensed treatment plants discharged wastewater that did not always meet the treatment and effluent quality standards set by the EPA to prevent pollution and protect the environment. These failures ranged from occasional short-duration breaches to frequent or continuous discharges of poorly treated sewage. The causes of these failures were divided almost equally between deficient treatment infrastructure and inadequate operation and maintenance of treatment plants.

Problems with the operation and maintenance of treatment plants remain far too common. Many environmental incidents could have been prevented, and environmental risks mitigated, by better management of existing wastewater treatment infrastructure. Uisce Éireann must address this without delay and reduce discharges of inadequately treated wastewater through improved operating practices, staff training and support, and effective preventative maintenance.

Addressing deficiencies in treatment infrastructure is a more significant challenge due to the scale of construction involved. Sustained investment will be required over many years to provide all the infrastructure necessary to ensure wastewater is appropriately treated and effluent discharged from treatment plants consistently meets the standards set to prevent pollution and protect the environment. In addition, many collecting systems (sewers) require upgrades. Twelve per cent of storm water overflows do not meet the national criteria designed to limit pollution. These storm water overflows must be brought into compliance or decommissioned. As not all the infrastructure improvements can be provided in the short term, priority should be given to those that are needed most.

The EPA has identified priority areas where improvements are required to address the most significant environmental risks associated with wastewater discharges. These improvements will help protect and restore water bodies most impacted by wastewater, stop raw sewage discharges, protect shellfish waters and habitats of critically endangered freshwater pearl mussels, and resolve non-compliances with EU wastewater treatment requirements. While progress is being made at some locations, the improvements needed at around 60 per cent of the priority areas have not yet started.

Uisce Éireann must accelerate the delivery of the improvements needed to address the following priority environmental issues.

Comply with EU treatment standards. Wastewater discharges from 13 large urban areas failed to meet EU standards set to protect the environment, down from 14 in 2024. While infrastructure upgrades and operational improvements brought some areas into compliance in 2025, this progress was offset by new failures and declining effluent quality at other locations.

Eliminate raw sewage discharges. Raw sewage from a population equivalent of 15,000 is discharged daily from 11 towns and villages because the public sewers serving these areas are not yet connected to wastewater treatment plants. New treatment plants are under construction at two of these locations, works are due to start shortly at a third, and projects are progressing through various design and planning stages at the remaining eight locations.

Improve collecting systems. The wastewater collecting systems at six priority areas require upgrades to reduce overflows of untreated wastewater from sewers and address a judgment against Ireland from the Court of Justice of the European Union. Improvements have been carried out at four of these locations, but significant work is still needed at the remaining two.

Protect and restore water quality. The EPA has prioritised 35 areas where wastewater discharges are the main pressure on local rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters. Improvements needed at 26 of these priority areas have still not started and are not currently scheduled for completion for several more years. Delays in progressing the corrective actions needed at these locations are prolonging impacts on water quality.

Protect freshwater pearl mussels. Wastewater treatment must improve at nine priority areas to protect habitats of critically endangered freshwater pearl mussels. While improvements have been carried out or are underway at five of these, progress in designing and delivering the upgrades required at the remaining four locations is far too slow, with construction not scheduled to start until 2030. This lack of progress is putting the protection of these important habitats at risk.

Protect shellfish waters. Uisce Éireann's progress in assessing the impacts of discharges on shellfish waters is unsatisfactory, and urgent action is required to complete 16 overdue assessments. The assessments completed by the end of 2025 identified five priority areas where improvements in wastewater treatment are needed to protect shellfish waters. Upgrades are underway at one of these locations, but the remaining four are still at design stage.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides a summary of wastewater treatment in cities, towns and villages across Ireland during 2025.

Every day, more than one billion litres of wastewater (commonly referred to as sewage) is conveyed through approximately 26,000 kilometres of public sewers before being treated at over 1,000 treatment plants. The treated wastewater is then discharged to rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters. Uisce Éireann is the national water utility responsible for providing this important public service.

The importance of wastewater treatment

Treating wastewater to make it clean and safe before discharge is essential to protect the environment and public health. Untreated and inadequately treated wastewater can contain harmful bacteria and viruses that can make people sick. It can also pollute and degrade aquatic ecosystems by depleting oxygen levels in water and releasing nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, which can lead to excessive growth of algae and aquatic plants.

Regulation of wastewater discharges

The EPA is the environmental regulator of Uisce Éireann. It issues wastewater discharge authorisations that set out how Uisce Éireann must control and manage discharges. The EPA enforces these authorisations in line with its Compliance and Enforcement Policy[1].

In 2025, the EPA carried out 287 wastewater enforcement inspections. These inspections had a range of purposes, such as investigating discharges that adversely affect water quality, following up on environmental incidents and complaints, reviewing operational practices and testing the quality of treated wastewater.

The EPA requires Uisce Éireann to regularly monitor discharges from treatment plants. The EPA uses these monitoring results to assess compliance with the effluent quality standards set in wastewater discharge licences.

The EPA has taken 35 successful prosecutions against Uisce Éireann for breaches of wastewater discharge authorisations, including seven prosecutions during the past year. These prosecutions have highlighted poor operational practices and the need to improve the overall management and operation of wastewater treatment infrastructure. They have also helped drive infrastructure upgrades at priority areas, including those discharging raw sewage.

Correspondence between the EPA and Uisce Éireann relating to the authorisation and enforcement of wastewater discharges is publicly available on the EPA's Licence and Enforcement Access Portal[2].

[1] *https://www.epa.ie/our-services/compliance--enforcement/whats-happening/compliance-and-enforcement-policy/*.

[2] *https://leap.epa.ie/*.

2 COMPLIANCE WITH EPA LICENCES

The EPA issues wastewater discharge licences to Uisce Éireann that set site-specific standards for wastewater discharged from treatment plants[3]. These standards are set to prevent pollution in receiving waters, protect water bodies that are at good or high status, and help restore those that are below good status.

Fifty-five per cent of the 505 licensed sites active during 2025 discharged wastewater that did not meet the standards set in their licences, down from 59 per cent in 2024. These breaches ranged from occasional short-duration discharges of inadequately treated sewage to frequent or continuous discharges of raw or poorly treated sewage. Discharges that do not meet licence standards adversely impact many rivers and other surface waters (refer to Chapter 8).

The causes of these breaches were divided almost equally between:

- deficiencies in treatment infrastructure; and
- inadequate operation and maintenance of treatment plants.

Treatment infrastructure in many areas has not kept pace with growing demands, and treatment plants often lack the capacity to consistently meet the required standards. Resolving these issues will require sustained investment over many years to build and upgrade treatment infrastructure.

Around half of the sites that failed to meet licence standards did so because of problems with the operation and maintenance of treatment plants. Common problems include equipment breakdowns and inadequate procedures and training. The number of sites affected by such issues remains far too high, with no significant improvement compared to 2024. Operation and maintenance issues can and must be addressed by Uisce Éireann without delay. Ensuring all treatment plants are effectively managed will significantly improve compliance with licence standards and reduce discharges of inadequately treated wastewater without the need for major capital expenditure.

Actions for Uisce Éireann

The following are actions for Uisce Éireann to bring wastewater treatment up to the required standards and to maintain compliance at treatment plants that are already meeting the standards.

- Provide the outstanding infrastructure required to meet licence standards and upgrade or replace assets that are no longer fit for purpose or at risk of failure.
- Optimise the operation of all treatment systems and ensure staff are appropriately trained and supported so that treatment plants consistently perform at their best.
- Implement effective preventative maintenance and repair programmes to enhance resilience, prevent equipment failures and minimise breakdowns.

[3] Over 98 per cent of wastewater collected in public sewers is regulated under these licences. The remainder is collected in sewers serving smaller areas and is regulated through 554 Certificates of Authorisation issued by the EPA to Uisce Éireann.

3 MANAGEMENT, OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

The number of environmental incidents at treatment plants caused by equipment breakdowns and inadequate operation and maintenance remains too high, with more than 600 such incidents in 2025[4]. Many of these incidents could have been prevented, and environmental risks mitigated or avoided, through more effective management of treatment infrastructure.

One such example is the failure to operate and maintain the ultraviolet (UV) disinfection system at Midleton wastewater treatment plant in Co. Cork. UV disinfection is used to kill or inactivate harmful bacteria and viruses in wastewater. EPA inspections found that the UV disinfection system at the treatment plant was in poor condition and was not being properly maintained. Many of the UV bulbs were not working and needed to be replaced. Uisce Éireann was aware of the problems with the UV disinfection system but did not take corrective action or notify the EPA until after these issues were identified during EPA inspections. As a result, levels of faecal coliforms in discharges from the treatment plant repeatedly breached the standards set to protect local waters. The EPA prosecuted Uisce Éireann in relation to these breaches, highlighting the need for better operation and maintenance of treatment infrastructure[5].

Uisce Éireann must take immediate action to improve the overall management of its treatment infrastructure and substantially reduce the number of environmental incidents arising from operation and maintenance failures.

Uisce Éireann should also ensure effective oversight and supervision of activities carried out by contractors working on its behalf. This will help prevent incidents such as the discharge of untreated sewage from Dromiskin, Co. Louth, which occurred after pumps that were switched off to facilitate contractor works were not restarted when the works were completed.

When equipment breakdowns or other operational issues result in the discharge of untreated or poorly treated wastewater, Uisce Éireann must respond rapidly to minimise environmental impacts, address the root cause and prevent similar incidents from recurring.

Delays in responding to equipment failures have, in some cases, resulted in untreated sewage being discharged to the environment over extended periods. For example, more than 9 million litres of untreated sewage were discharged from Ballybofey-Stranorlar, Co. Donegal, over a six-day period in 2025 due to an equipment breakdown that Uisce Éireann failed to respond to promptly[6]. This highlights the need for effective operation and maintenance to prevent equipment failures and the importance of identifying and responding rapidly to incidents when they occur.

[4] There is further information on incidents in *Appendix F*.

[5] Uisce Éireann is implementing measures to improve the operation and maintenance of Midleton wastewater treatment plant.

[6] Uisce Éireann has taken action to improve operational oversight at the treatment plant following this incident.

4 PRIORITY AREAS

Wastewater treatment has improved in recent years, but much more needs to be done to bring all discharges into compliance with the requirements of EPA authorisations. Ensuring discharges meet these standards is essential to help protect and restore water quality.

While operation and maintenance issues can be addressed in the short term, the scale of the infrastructure deficiencies means it will take many years to resolve them all. Uisce Éireann should have clear plans and timelines for delivering all outstanding infrastructure. As it is not possible to address all infrastructure deficiencies in the short term, improvements should be prioritised where they are needed most and will bring the greatest environmental benefits.

The EPA has identified priority areas where Uisce Éireann should target resources to improve treatment and protect the environment. These are summarised below and discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 to 9.

Priorities

- **Comply with the treatment standards in the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive** by bringing 13 areas that failed these standards in 2025 into compliance.
- **Eliminate discharges of raw sewage** from 11 towns and villages that still discharge raw sewage daily by connecting them to treatment plants.
- **Address collecting systems found non-compliant with EU requirements** and reduce sewer overflows by upgrading six priority sewers identified in a European Court of Justice ruling.
- **Protect and restore rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters** most impacted by wastewater discharges by improving wastewater treatment at 35 priority areas.
- **Protect freshwater pearl mussel habitats** by improving treatment at nine priority areas identified as posing a risk to this critically endangered species.
- **Protect designated shellfish waters** at risk from wastewater discharges by upgrading infrastructure to improve wastewater treatment at five coastal towns and villages.

While good progress has been made at some sites, improvement works required at around 60 per cent of the priority areas have not yet started. Uisce Éireann must accelerate the delivery of corrective actions needed at these areas.

The EPA's website provides further information on the priority areas, including corrective action plans and estimated completion dates[7].

[7] *https://www.epa.ie/publications/compliance--enforcement/waste-water/priority-areas-list-current.php*.

5 URBAN WASTEWATER TREATMENT DIRECTIVE

The *Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive* sets minimum treatment standards for large urban areas across the European Union[8]. EPA licences may require stricter standards and include a wider range of parameters than the Directive, where necessary to protect the environment. Ireland's compliance with the Directive's treatment and effluent quality standards in 2025 is summarised below. The assessment covers 190 large urban areas[9].

177 areas complied with the standards (93%)	**13** areas did not meet the standards (7%)

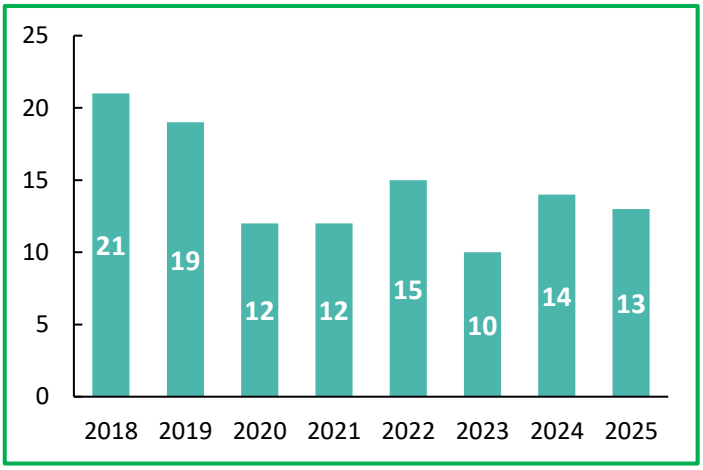
Since 2020, the annual number of towns and cities failing to meet the Directive's standards has remained relatively stable, ranging between 10 and 15. Improvements achieved at some areas in 2025, such as Arklow, were offset by new failures and declining effluent quality at others, such as Swords and Clonakilty. Further information on the Directive's requirements, the standards breached at each area, and changes in compliance since 2024 is provided in *Appendix A*.

The 13 areas that failed to meet the Directive's standards account for almost half (48%) of the wastewater collected in Ireland's large urban areas. Most of this wastewater was generated in the Greater Dublin Area and treated at Ringsend treatment plant[10].

Discharges from Ringsend exceeded the allowed limits for nitrogen and phosphorus in 2025 due to a lack of sufficient treatment infrastructure. Significant upgrade works were completed at the end of 2025 to address this issue, and the critical infrastructure needed to achieve compliance is now in place.

Bringing the remaining areas into compliance will require Uisce Éireann to deliver a combination of infrastructure upgrades and operational improvements.

Maintaining compliance at treatment plants that are currently meeting the standards and have sufficient treatment capacity will require effective management, operation and maintenance of plants.



Number of large urban areas that did not meet EU treatment standards 2018-2025

[8] Information on large urban areas and other technical terms used in this report can be found in the *Glossary*.

[9] Compliance is assessed using effluent monitoring results and information on the treatment type, the receiving waters and the size of urban areas. Uisce Éireann is responsible for providing this information to the EPA and ensuring it is accurate.

[10] Ringsend treatment plant served a peak population equivalent of 2.5 million in 2025. The combined wastewater load from the other 12 towns that failed the treatment standards was from a population equivalent of approximately 134,000.

Infringement proceedings

In 2019, the Court of Justice of the European Union found that Ireland had breached the requirements of the Directive at 28 urban areas. In 2025, the European Commission acknowledged progress in addressing compliance at 20 of these areas but considered that the remaining eight were still in breach and referred Ireland back to the Court requesting financial sanctions. The Court has not yet ruled on this matter.

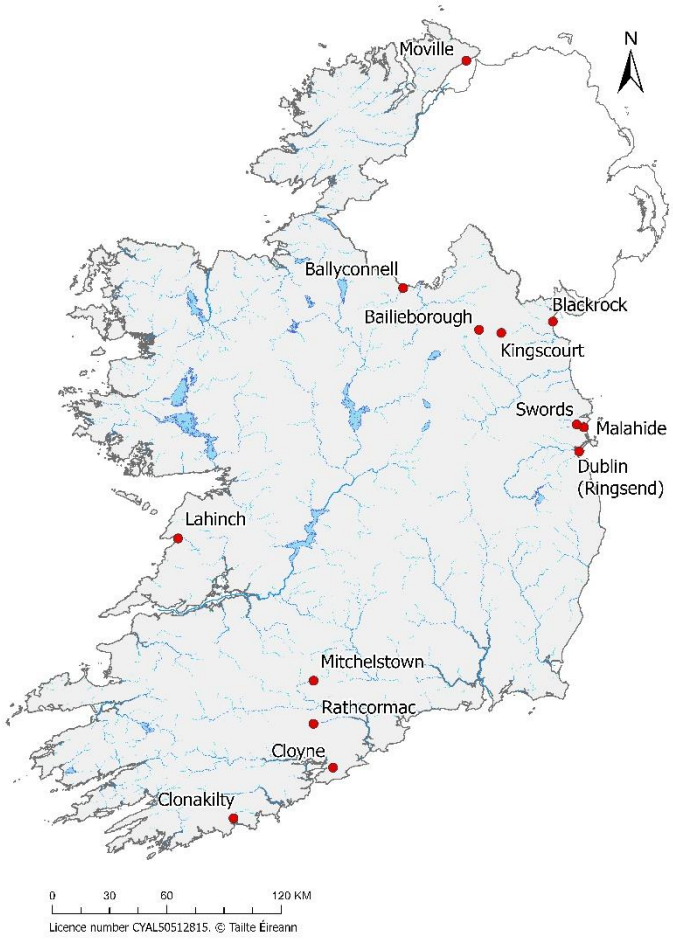
Separate to this case, the European Commission began a new infringement procedure against Ireland in 2024, alleging further failures to comply with the Directive. This procedure is ongoing.

Future requirements

While action is still needed to achieve and maintain compliance with existing requirements, Ireland must also prepare for the implementation of several new and more stringent obligations introduced by the recast *Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive*. These include:

- Secondary treatment requirements extended to include many smaller urban areas.
- Stricter limits on nitrogen and phosphorus discharged to sensitive areas.
- Additional treatment at larger plants to remove micropollutants that could be hazardous to the environment or human health.
- Stronger measures to limit pollution from storm water overflows.

These obligations, which will be phased in over the next two decades, will transform wastewater services across Europe and require significant long-term planning and investment. The recast Directive came into force in 2025 and must be transposed into Irish law by July 2027.



Areas that failed EU treatment standards (13)

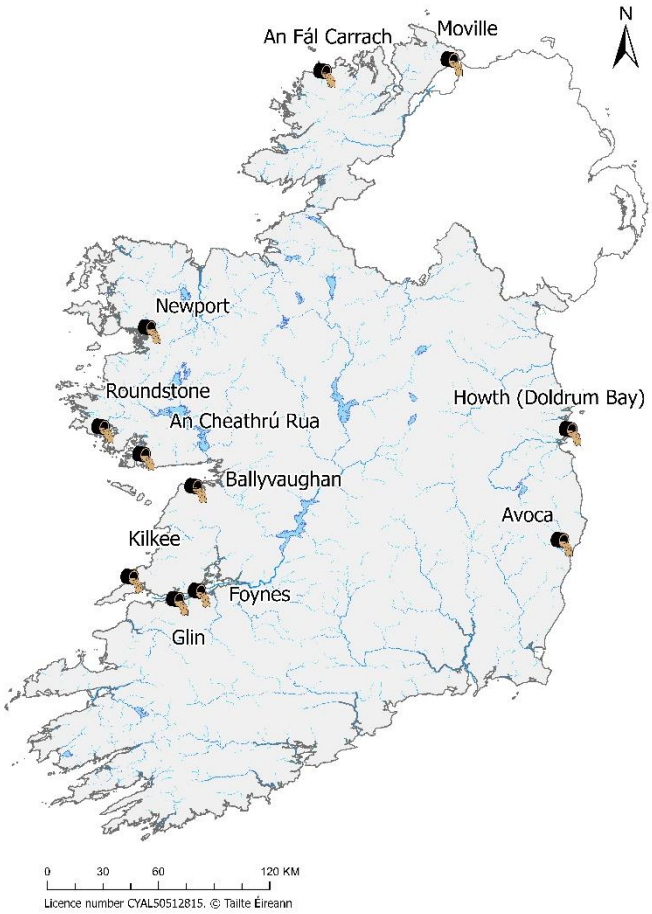
6 RAW SEWAGE

Progress continues in eliminating raw sewage discharges. During the past year, four towns and villages that previously discharged untreated sewage were connected to new treatment plants. As a result, untreated discharges from a population equivalent of approximately 6,000 in Ramelton and Rathmullan, Co. Donegal, and Ballycotton and Whitegate-Aghada, Co. Cork, have ceased.

Despite these improvements, raw sewage from a population equivalent of approximately 15,000 continues to be discharged daily from 11 towns and villages because the public sewers serving these areas are not yet connected to wastewater treatment plants[11]. Progress towards providing treatment at these locations is summarised below:

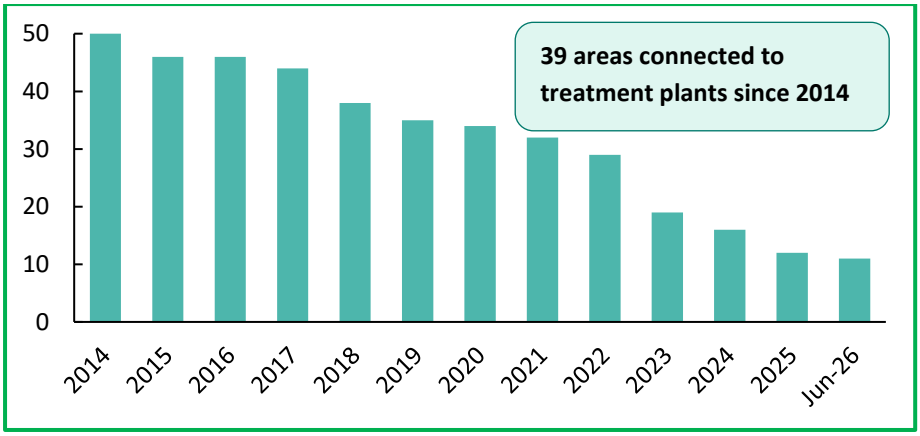
- Treatment plants are under construction at Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare and Avoca, Co. Wicklow, with completion expected in 2027.
- Construction of a new treatment plant for Glin, Co. Limerick is scheduled to begin in late 2026.
- Projects for the remaining eight locations are progressing through pre-construction stages, including detailed design, planning and land acquisition.

Appendix B provides the estimated timeline for delivering the required wastewater treatment infrastructure at each location. As the time needed to complete the remaining pre-construction stages at the final eight locations is uncertain, the completion dates for these sites are estimates.



Areas discharging raw sewage (11)

[11] Ten of these are small towns and villages, which are below the size thresholds for large urban areas discussed in Chapter 5. Moville is the only large urban area with no wastewater treatment.



Number of areas without wastewater treatment 2014-2026

Case study: Delivering environmental improvements at priority areas

For many years, sewage from Ramelton and Rathmullan, Co. Donegal, was discharged without treatment into the Swilly Estuary. In addition, an outdated and overloaded treatment plant serving the nearby town of Milford was releasing poorly treated sewage, contributing to pollution in Maggy's Burn and Lough Fern.

The EPA identified Ramelton, Rathmullan and Milford as priority areas and prosecuted Uisce Éireann for failing to provide adequate wastewater treatment. The EPA required Uisce Éireann to build the wastewater infrastructure needed to ensure that sewage from all three towns is properly treated before being discharged to the environment.

In response, Uisce Éireann completed a new wastewater treatment plant to serve these three towns in late 2025. New pumping stations and rising mains were also constructed to transfer sewage from the towns to the treatment plant. Wastewater from Ramelton, Rathmullan and Milford is now fully treated at the new plant before being discharged to the Swilly Estuary.

The new treatment plant is designed to meet the effluent quality standards set by the EPA and is helping to protect water quality in the local environment.



New treatment plant for Ramelton, Rathmullan and Milford, Co. Donegal

7 WASTEWATER COLLECTING SYSTEMS

Wastewater collecting systems are designed to collect wastewater and convey it for treatment. In Ireland, most are combined systems that carry sewage and rainwater runoff in the same pipes. Collecting systems must have sufficient capacity to retain wastewater during all normal weather conditions and all normal variations in wastewater flows. They should also be resilient to the impacts of climate change. If collecting systems lack capacity or are in poor condition, there is an increased risk of sewage being discharged to the environment before it reaches a treatment plant.

Uisce Éireann must continue to assess the condition, capacity and integrity of all collecting systems, identify any deficiencies and prioritise upgrades needed to prevent pollution from sewer discharges. Many collecting systems have yet to be fully assessed, and it is likely to take many years to identify, design and deliver all the upgrades needed to bring systems up to standard.

Priority collecting systems

The EPA has identified six priority areas where upgrades to collecting systems are required to reduce sewer overflows and address a 2019 judgment from the Court of Justice of the European Union. Improvement works have been carried out at four of the priority areas. Delays in completing upgrades at the remaining two areas, Midleton and Cork, are prolonging risks to the environment and putting Ireland at risk of fines for failing to resolve the Court's judgment.

The six priority areas and the status of works at each are listed in *Appendix C*.

Storm water overflows

In 2025, Ireland's collecting systems included an estimated 2,489 storm water overflows[12]. These act as emergency safety valves and are designed to discharge wastewater diluted by rainwater during periods of heavy rainfall, when sewers or treatment plants are at risk of being overwhelmed. However, they should not activate during normal conditions or be used to compensate for a lack of sewer capacity.

In response to EPA requirements, Uisce Éireann assessed all known storm water overflows against national criteria designed to limit pollution[13]. 294 overflows (12%) were found not to meet the criteria and must be brought into compliance or decommissioned to help protect receiving waters.

Uisce Éireann will also need to put systems in place to reliably estimate pollutant loads discharged through storm water overflows. This information is necessary to better understand environmental risks posed by storm water overflows and to help target longer-term measures to further protect water bodies from pollution, in line with aims of the recast Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

[12] The EPA's website provides further information on storm water overflows and their role in wastewater collecting systems at *https://www.epa.ie/our-services/compliance--enforcement/waste-water/urban-waste-water/*.

[13] The national '*Procedures and criteria in relation to storm water overflows*' is on the EPA's website at *https://www.epa.ie/publications/licensing--permitting/waste-water/UrbanWasteWater2.pdf*.

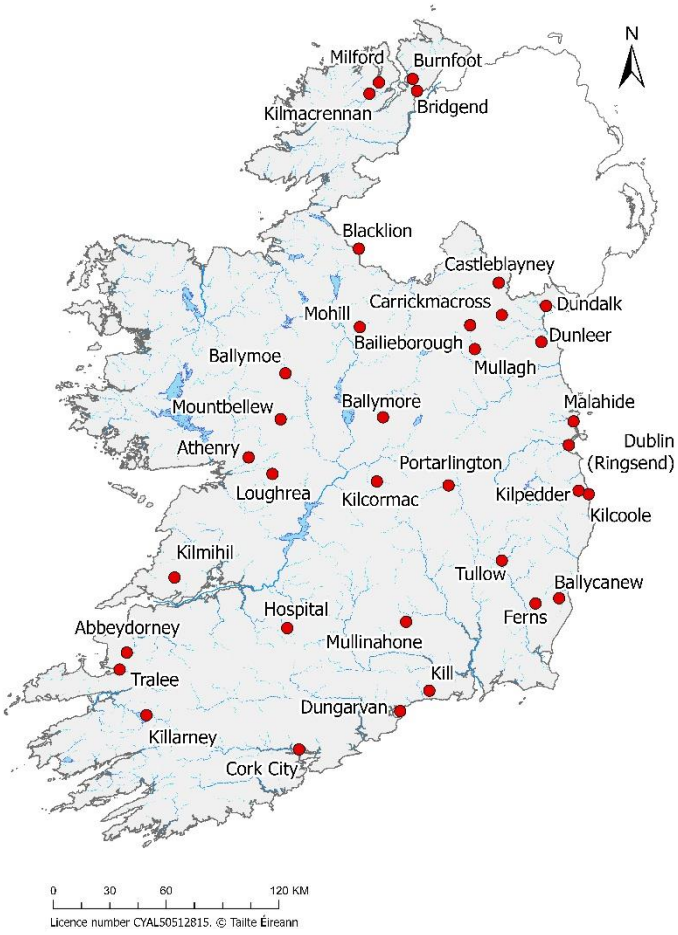
8 RISKS TO SURFACE WATERS

Inadequately treated wastewater can pollute rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters by reducing oxygen levels and increasing the concentration of nutrients. Excess nutrients, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, are the main causes of unsatisfactory water quality in Ireland. Urban wastewater discharges are the fourth most common pressure on water bodies nationally.

The characterisation process for Ireland's third cycle River Basin Management Plan identified wastewater discharges from 163 areas as significant pressures on water bodies that are not in satisfactory condition. Most of the affected water bodies are stretches of rivers. In many cases, wastewater is not the only pressure and there are additional pressures on these water bodies from other human activities such as agriculture and forestry.

Uisce Éireann must investigate all waters adversely impacted by wastewater discharges, identify the root causes of the wastewater impacts and determine the mitigation measures needed to address them. These measures should be identified as early as possible to provide a clear pathway for resolving wastewater impacts in all affected waters. Given the number of areas requiring improvements and the scale of work needed, it is likely to take several years to implement all the necessary measures. It is therefore important to prioritise improvements where they will deliver the greatest benefits for water quality.

The EPA has prioritised 35 of the 163 areas[14]. These were selected as priority areas because wastewater discharges from these areas were identified as the main pressure on local rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters[15]. In the absence of other significant pressures, water quality at these locations should improve when impacts from wastewater discharges are resolved.



Areas prioritised to protect surface waters (35)

[14] This is up from 34 last year following the addition of Killarney to the priority areas. Wastewater discharges from Killarney have been identified as the main significant pressure on the Folies Stream, which is at bad status.

[15] These were identified as the main or sole significant pressure during characterisation processes for Ireland's River Basin Management Plans.

Progress in delivering improvements at the 35 priority areas is summarised below and in *Appendix D*[16].

- Infrastructure upgrades have been completed at four priority areas and the outcomes are being assessed to determine whether the wastewater pressures have been resolved.
- Upgrades are underway at three areas, and works are scheduled to begin at a further two areas by the end of 2026.
- Improvements needed at the remaining 26 areas have not started and are not scheduled for completion before 2030 or, for some areas, a completion date has not yet been identified.

The pace of progress is insufficient at many of these priority areas, with improvements at around three-quarters of the locations not currently scheduled to be delivered for several years. Uisce Éireann has not given sufficient priority to advancing the corrective actions required at these areas and the resulting delays are prolonging adverse impacts on water quality. Uisce Éireann must accelerate the design and delivery of the works needed to address the adverse impacts of wastewater discharges at these priority areas. Pending the completion of any upgrades, the existing infrastructure must be operated and maintained effectively to minimise risks to water quality.

Bathing waters

Ninety-eight per cent of Ireland's bathing waters met or exceeded the minimum required quality standards in 2025[17]. Dún Laoghaire Baths was the only bathing water classified as poor. Overflows of untreated sewage from the Ringsend collecting system contributed to this poor classification. Action is needed to prevent sewage overflows adversely impacting bathing water quality at this location.

Buncrana, Co. Donegal, was removed from the priority areas following an upgrade of the wastewater collecting system in 2025 to reduce the risk of sewage overflows affecting nearby Lady's Bay. Bathing water quality at Lady's Bay was classified as poor for the years 2021 to 2024 but improved to sufficient in 2025.

[16] Based on information provided by Uisce Éireann in July 2026.

[17] EPA report on Bathing Water Quality in Ireland in 2025, available at *www.epa.ie*.

9 FRESHWATER PEARL MUSSELS AND SHELLFISH

Freshwater pearl mussels

Freshwater pearl mussels are a critically endangered species that need clean, free-flowing, well-oxygenated rivers. Juvenile mussels are particularly sensitive to pollution, and declining water quality is resulting in ageing populations, with few young mussels surviving to adulthood.

The EPA has identified nine priority areas where wastewater treatment must improve to protect freshwater pearl mussel habitats. This is down from 10 areas last year following a treatment plant upgrade that improved the quality of discharges from Boherbue, Co. Cork.

Upgrades have been completed at two of the nine priority areas and these are being assessed to determine whether the risks to freshwater pearl mussels have been resolved. Improvements are underway at a further three areas. Progress at the remaining four sites is far too slow, with Uisce Éireann still in the early stages of designing the required improvements and upgrades not scheduled to start until 2030. Uisce Éireann must accelerate the delivery of measures needed to protect freshwater pearl mussel habitats from the harmful effects of wastewater discharges.

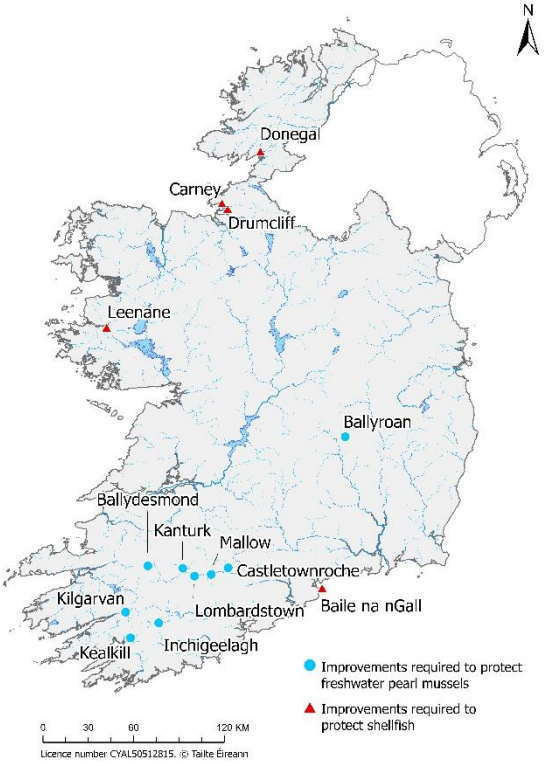
The status of works at each of the nine priority areas is summarised in *Appendix E*.

Shellfish waters

Shellfish waters are protected areas designated to support the life and growth of shellfish such as oysters and mussels. Wastewater discharged near these waters has the potential to contaminate shellfish with bacteria and viruses if it is not properly treated.

The EPA requires Uisce Éireann to assess the impacts of wastewater discharges on shellfish in designated waters and address any adverse impacts identified. Progress with these assessments remains too slow, with assessments for 16 shellfish waters still overdue, down from 18 last year. Uisce Éireann must expedite the overdue assessments and implement measures to resolve any impacts identified.

Assessments completed by the end of 2025 identified five priority areas where upgrades are needed to protect shellfish waters (*Appendix E*). Upgrades are underway at Baile na nGall, Co. Waterford. Uisce Éireann is still determining the works needed at the other four areas and must speed up the design and delivery of these projects.



Areas prioritised to protect freshwater pearl mussel habitats (9) and shellfish waters (5)

10 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Progress continues to be made in improving wastewater treatment in Ireland, and essential works to build and upgrade treatment infrastructure are being delivered. However, this is not happening fast enough or at the scale needed, and wastewater discharges continue to adversely impact many rivers and estuaries, as well as some lakes and coastal waters.

Discharges from over half of licensed treatment plants did not always meet the standards set by the EPA to prevent pollution and protect and restore water quality. Around half of these failures can be addressed through improved management, operation and maintenance of treatment plants. Improving operational performance should be an immediate focus for Uisce Éireann.

Addressing deficiencies in wastewater treatment infrastructure is a more significant challenge that will require substantial investment over many years. Upgrades completed at priority areas identified by the EPA are helping to address some of the most significant environmental issues, but the pace of infrastructure upgrades needs to accelerate.

Uisce Éireann provides an essential public service through the collection and treatment of wastewater. By delivering operational improvements and infrastructure upgrades, Uisce Éireann can significantly reduce environmental risks associated with wastewater discharges and help protect and restore water quality.



New treatment plant at Ballycotton, Co. Cork

GLOSSARY

Effluent	Wastewater discharged from a wastewater treatment plant or collecting system.
Large urban area	Towns and cities with a population equivalent of at least 2,000 that discharge to freshwater or estuaries, and those with a population equivalent of at least 10,000 that discharge to coastal waters. Over 92 per cent of Ireland's urban wastewater was generated in large urban areas in 2025, while the remainder came from nearly 900 smaller towns and villages.
Population equivalent	A term used to indicate the wastewater load generated in an urban area. It includes wastewater generated by the resident population, the non-resident population (for example, tourists) and industrial and commercial activities.
Sensitive area	A legally designated water body identified as being vulnerable to pollution by nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus.
Urban wastewater	Wastewater collected in public sewers. It consists mainly of domestic wastewater from homes but may also include wastewater from businesses, industrial activities and rainwater runoff. Urban wastewater is commonly referred to as sewage.
Wastewater collecting system	The network of sewers, pumping stations and associated infrastructure used to collect urban wastewater and convey it to a wastewater treatment plant.
Wastewater discharge authorisation	An authorisation issued by the EPA that sets out the conditions under which Uisce Éireann must control and manage wastewater discharges. ▪ A wastewater discharge licence is required for discharges from areas with a population equivalent of 500 or more. ▪ A certificate of authorisation is required for discharges from areas with a population equivalent below 500. Authorisations can be viewed on the EPA's Licence and Enforcement Access Portal at *https://leap.epa.ie/*.

APPENDIX A: EU TREATMENT STANDARDS

In 2025, wastewater treatment at the following 13 areas did not meet the mandatory standards set out in the *Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive*.

County	Urban area	Failed the secondary treatment standards	Failed the more stringent treatment standards
Cavan	Bailieborough	x	
	Ballyconnell[Note 1]	x	
	Kingscourt[Note 1]	x	
Clare	Lahinch	x	
Cork	Clonakilty[Note 1]	x	
	Cloyne	x	
	Mitchelstown	x	
	Rathcormac	x	
Donegal	Moville	x	
Dublin	Dublin (Ringsend)		x
	Malahide	x	x
	Swords[Note 1]	x	x
Louth	Blackrock[Note 1]		x

Changes since 2024

Note 1: These towns were not listed as failures in 2024 and have been added to the EPA's priority areas based on the results of the 2025 assessment.

Virginia, Macroom, Allenwood, Rathangan, Ballina-Killaloe and Arklow did not meet the Directive's standards in 2024 but came into compliance in 2025 and have therefore been removed from the EPA's priority areas.

Directive's treatment standards for large urban areas

1. Wastewater from all 190 large urban areas must receive secondary treatment to remove organic matter, and the treated wastewater must comply with two basic effluent quality standards designed to prevent pollution. If effluent does not meet these standards, it may lead to a drop in oxygen levels in receiving waters, which could harm aquatic life.
2. Thirty-nine of the large urban areas are also required to provide a more stringent level of treatment to remove nutrients, and the treated wastewater must comply with limits on nitrogen and/or phosphorus. These standards apply to towns and cities with a population equivalent of at least 10,000 that discharge to sensitive areas. If nutrient concentrations are too high, they can lead to excessive growth of algae and plants.

APPENDIX B: AREAS DISCHARGING RAW SEWAGE

In mid-2026, raw sewage was being discharged from the following 11 towns and villages because their public sewers were not connected to wastewater treatment plants.

County	Urban area	Date for treatment[18]
Clare	Ballyvaughan	2027
	Kilkee	No date provided
Donegal	An Fál Carrach - Falcarragh	2030
	Moville	2030
Dublin	Howth (Doldrum Bay)	2027
Galway	An Cheathrú Rua - Carraroe	2030
	Roundstone	2029
Limerick	Foynes	2028
	Glin	2028
Mayo	Newport	2030
Wicklow	Avoca	2027

APPENDIX C: PRIORITY COLLECTING SYSTEMS

Collecting systems serving the following six areas have been prioritised for upgrades to reduce sewer overflows and address a 2019 judgment from the Court of Justice of the European Union.

County	Urban area	Date for completion
Cork	Cork City	Not available
	Fermoy	Works completed
	Mallow	Works completed
	Midleton	2029
Roscommon	Roscommon	Works completed
Westmeath	Athlone	Works completed

The outcomes of the improvement works carried out at Fermoy, Mallow, Roscommon and Athlone are being assessed to determine whether the collecting systems now meet European Union standards.

[18] Dates provided by Uisce Éireann in July 2026.

APPENDIX D: PRESSURES ON SURFACE WATERS

Wastewater treatment must be improved at the 35 priority areas listed below to prevent wastewater discharges from adversely impacting rivers, estuaries, lakes and coastal waters.

County	Urban area
Infrastructure upgrades completed and outcomes are being assessed (4 areas)	
Carlow	Tullow
Donegal	Milford
Louth	Dunleer
Monaghan	Castleblayney
Infrastructure upgrades underway (3 areas)	
Donegal	Kilmacrennan
Limerick	Hospital
Monaghan	Carrickmacross
Infrastructure upgrades due to start in 2026 with completion in 2029 (2 areas)	
Cavan	Bailieborough
Galway	Mountbellew
Improvements not yet started and not currently scheduled for completion before 2030, or no completion date identified (26 areas)	
Cavan	Blacklion
	Mullagh
Clare	Kilmihil
Cork	Cork City
Donegal	Bridgend
	Burnfoot
Dublin	Dublin / Ringsend[19]
	Malahide
Galway	Athenry
	Ballymoe
	Loughrea
Kerry	Abbeydorney
	Killarney
	Tralee

[19] The pressure is associated with discharges from Ringsend wastewater collecting system, rather than the treatment plant.

County	Urban area
Laois	Portarlington
Leitrim	Mohill
Louth	Dundalk
Offaly	Kilcormac
Tipperary	Mullinahone
Waterford	Dungarvan
	Kill
Westmeath	Ballymore
Wexford	Ballycanew
	Ferns
Wicklow	Kilcoole
	Kilpedder

APPENDIX E: PROTECTING FRESHWATER PEARL MUSSELS AND SHELLFISH

The following nine priority areas require wastewater treatment improvements to protect freshwater pearl mussel habitats.

County	Urban area
Infrastructure upgrades completed and outcomes are being assessed (2 areas)	
Cork	Inchigeelagh
	Mallow
Improvements underway (3 areas)	
Cork	Ballydesmond
	Castletownroche[20]
Laois	Ballyroan
Improvements currently not scheduled to start until 2030 (4 areas)	
Cork	Kanturk
	Kealkill
	Lombardstown
Kerry	Kilgarvan

The following five priority areas require infrastructure upgrades to protect shellfish waters.

County	Urban area
Improvements underway (1 area)	
Waterford	Baile na nGall
Improvements not yet started and scope of works still under development (4 areas)	
Donegal	Donegal Town
Galway	Leenane
Sligo	Carney
	Drumcliff

[20] Uisce Éireann intends to deliver the improvements needed at Castletownroche through optimisation of treatment plant operations. Measures at the other eight priority areas involve infrastructure upgrades.

APPENDIX F: ENVIRONMENTAL INCIDENTS

An environmental incident at a wastewater treatment plant or collecting system is:

- a discharge that does not comply with the conditions of a discharge licence; or
- an occurrence that could cause environmental contamination or requires an emergency response.

Common types of incidents include discharges of inadequately treated wastewater and treatment equipment being out of service.

One-off incidents

During 2025, there were approximately 1,350 short-duration or one-off incidents. Almost half of these were caused by equipment at treatment plants breaking down or not being properly operated and maintained. Other common causes included blocked or broken sewers and overflows of untreated wastewater from collecting systems.

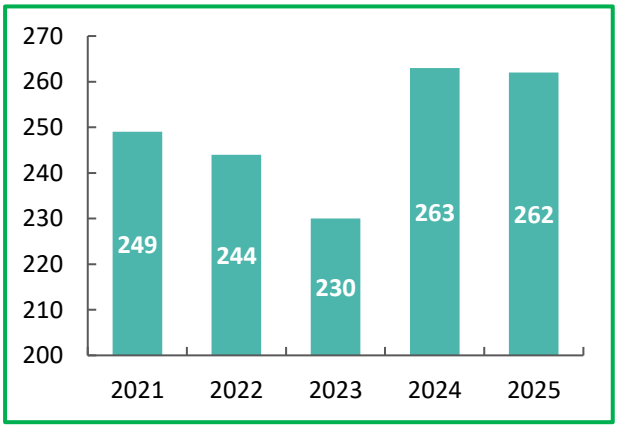
Around a quarter of the one-off incidents in 2025 were linked to adverse weather events, such as Storm Éowyn in January. This highlights the need to improve resilience to adverse weather events and the impacts of climate change.

Recurring incidents

At the end of 2025, there were also 262 longer-term incidents that had either been ongoing for some time or were likely to happen again because the underlying causes had not been fixed. Most of these involved recurring discharges of wastewater that did not meet the effluent quality standards set out in EPA licences. The number of open recurring incidents had increased in 2024 and remained high in 2025.

While infrastructure upgrades are required to resolve many of the open recurring incidents, around 75 are attributed to operation and maintenance issues at treatment plants. Uisce Éireann should address these issues promptly.

All incidents reported by Uisce Éireann are published on the EPA's website at *https://leap.epa.ie/*.



Number of recurring incidents at the end of each year 2021-2025

APPENDIX G: SEWAGE SLUDGE

Sewage sludge is a residue of wastewater treatment and is rich in nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus. The sludge generated in 2025 was treated before being reused as a fertiliser and soil improver on agricultural land. The quantity of sludge produced and the destination routes in 2025 are summarised below.

Sewage sludge produced and destination routes, 2025

	Agriculture	Compost[21]	Total
Tonnes of dry solids	65,824	4,409	**70,233**

Before being used on land, sludge must be treated to make it stable and free from odours, harmful bacteria and viruses. It should only be applied to suitable land and spread under appropriate conditions to ensure it is used effectively for plant growth or assimilated into the soil. Uisce Éireann must ensure that the sludge it produces is appropriately monitored and effectively managed and controlled in compliance with national regulations.

[21] All composted sludge was subsequently reused in agriculture.

An Ghníomhaireacht um Chaomhnú Comhshaoil

Tá an GCC freagrach as an gcomhshaol a chosaint agus a fheabhsú, mar shócmhainn luachmhar do mhuintir na hÉireann. Táimid tiomanta do dhaoine agus don chomhshaol a chosaint ar thionchar díobhálach na radaíochta agus an truaillithe.

Is féidir obair na Gníomhaireachta a roinnt ina trí phríomhréimse:

- Rialáil: Rialáil agus córais chomhlíonta comhshaoil éifeachtacha a chur i bhfeidhm, chun dea-thorthaí comhshaoil a bhaint amach agus díriú orthu siúd nach mbíonn ag cloí leo.
- Eolas: Sonraí, eolas agus measúnú ardchaighdeáin, spriocdhírithe agus tráthúil a chur ar fáil i leith an chomhshaoil chun bonn eolais a chur faoin gcinnteoireacht.
- Abhcóideacht: Ag obair le daoine eile ar son timpeallachta glaine, táirgiúla agus dea-chosanta agus ar son cleachtas inbhuanaithe i dtaobh an chomhshaoil.

I measc ár gcuid freagrachtaí tá:

CEADÚNÚ

- Gníomhaíochtaí tionscail, dramhaíola agus stórála peitril ar scála mór;
- Sceitheadh fuíolluisce uirbigh;
- Úsáid shrianta agus scaoileadh rialaithe Orgánach Géinmhodhnaithe;
- Foinsí radaíochta ianúcháin;
- Astaíochtaí gás ceaptha teasa ó thionscal agus ón eitlíocht trí Scéim an AE um Thrádáil Astaíochtaí.

FORFHEIDHMIÚ NÁISIÚNTA I LEITH CÚRSAÍ COMHSHAOIL

- Iniúchadh agus cigireacht ar shaoráidí a bhfuil ceadúnas acu ón GCC;
- Cur i bhfeidhm an dea-chleachtais a stiúradh i ngníomhaíochtaí agus i saoráidí rialáilte;
- Maoirseacht a dhéanamh ar fhreagrachtaí an údaráis áitiúil as cosaint an chomhshaoil;
- Caighdeán an uisce óil phoiblí a rialáil agus údaruithe um sceitheadh fuíolluisce uirbigh a fhorfheidhmiú
- Caighdeán an uisce óil phoiblí agus phríobháidigh a mheasúnú agus tuairisciú air;
- Comhordú a dhéanamh ar líonra d'eagraíochtaí seirbhíse poiblí chun tacú le gníomhú i gcoinne coireachta comhshaoil;
- An dlí a chur orthu siúd a bhriseann dlí an chomhshaoil agus a dhéanann dochar don chomhshaol.

BAINISTÍOCHT DRAMHAÍOLA AGUS CEIMICEÁIN SA CHOMHSHAOL

- Rialacháin dramhaíola a chur i bhfeidhm agus a fhorfheidhmiú lena n-áirítear saincheisteanna forfheidhmithe náisiúnta;
- Staitisticí dramhaíola náisiúnta a ullmhú agus a fhoilsiú chomh maith leis an bPlean Náisiúnta um Bainistíocht Dramhaíola Guaisí;
- An Clár Náisiúnta um Chosc Dramhaíola a fhorbairt agus a chur i bhfeidhm;
- Reachtaíocht ar rialú ceimiceán sa timpeallacht a chur i bhfeidhm agus tuairisciú ar an reachtaíocht sin.

BAINISTÍOCHT UISCE

- Plé le struchtúir náisiúnta agus réigiúnacha rialachais agus oibriúcháin chun an Chreat-treoir Uisce a chur i bhfeidhm;
- Monatóireacht, measúnú agus tuairisciú a dhéanamh ar chaighdeán aibhneacha, lochanna, uiscí idirchreasa agus cósta, uiscí snámha agus screamhuisce chomh maith le tomhas ar leibhéil uisce agus sreabhadh abhann.

EOLAÍOCHT AERÁIDE & ATHRÚ AERÁIDE

- Fardail agus réamh-mheastacháin a fhoilsiú um astaíochtaí gás ceaptha teasa na hÉireann;
- Rúnaíocht a chur ar fáil don Chomhairle Chomhairleach ar Athrú Aeráide agus tacaíocht a thabhairt don Idirphlé Náisiúnta ar Ghníomhú ar son na hAeráide;
- Tacú le gníomhaíochtaí forbartha Náisiúnta, AE agus NA um Eolaíocht agus Beartas Aeráide.

MONATÓIREACHT AGUS MEASÚNÚ AR AN GCOMHSHAOL

- Córais náisiúnta um monatóireacht an chomhshaoil a cheapadh agus a chur i bhfeidhm: teicneolaíocht, bainistíocht sonraí, anailís agus réamhaisnéisiú;
- Tuairiscí ar Staid Thimpeallacht na hÉireann agus ar Tháscairí a chur ar fáil;
- Monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar chaighdeán an aeir agus Treoir an AE i leith Aeir Ghlain don Eoraip a chur i bhfeidhm chomh maith leis an gCoinbhinsiún ar Aerthruailliú Fadraoin Trasteorann, agus an Treoir i leith na Teorann Náisiúnta Astaíochtaí;
- Maoirseacht a dhéanamh ar chur i bhfeidhm na Treorach i leith Torainn Timpeallachta;
- Measúnú a dhéanamh ar thionchar pleananna agus clár beartaithe ar chomhshaol na hÉireann.

TAIGHDE AGUS FORBAIRT COMHSHAOIL

- Comhordú a dhéanamh ar ghníomhaíochtaí taighde comhshaoil agus iad a mhaoiniú chun brú a aithint, bonn eolais a chur faoin mbeartas agus réitigh a chur ar fáil;
- Comhoibriú le gníomhaíocht náisiúnta agus AE um thaighde comhshaoil.

COSAINT RAIDEOLAÍOCH

- Monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar leibhéil radaíochta agus nochtadh an phobail do radaíocht ianúcháin agus do réimsí leictreamaighnéadacha a mheas;
- Cabhrú le pleananna náisiúnta a fhorbairt le haghaidh éigeandálaí ag eascairt as taismí núicléacha;
- Monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar fhorbairtí thar lear a bhaineann le saoráidí núicléacha agus leis an tsábháilteacht raideolaíochta;
- Sainseirbhísí um chosaint ar an radaíocht a sholáthar, nó maoirsiú a dhéanamh ar sholáthar na seirbhísí sin.

TREOIR, ARDÚ FEASACHTA AGUS FAISNÉIS INROCHTANA

- Tuairisciú, comhairle agus treoir neamhspleách, fianaise-bhunaithe a chur ar fáil don Rialtas, don tionscal agus don phobal ar ábhair maidir le cosaint comhshaoil agus raideolaíoch;
- An nasc idir sláinte agus folláine, an geilleagar agus timpeallacht ghlan a chur chun cinn;
- Feasacht comhshaoil a chur chun cinn lena n-áirítear tacú le hiompraíocht um éifeachtúlacht acmhainní agus aistriú aeráide;
- Tástáil radóin a chur chun cinn i dtithe agus in ionaid oibre agus feabhsúchán a mholadh áit is gá.

COMHPHÁIRTÍOCHT AGUS LÍONRÚ

Oibriú le gníomhaireachtaí idirnáisiúnta agus náisiúnta, údaráis réigiúnacha agus áitiúla, eagraíochtaí neamhrialtais, comhlachtaí ionadaíocha agus ranna rialtais chun cosaint chomhshaoil agus raideolaíoch a chur ar fáil, chomh maith le taighde, comhordú agus cinnteoireacht bunaithe ar an eolaíocht.

BAINISTÍOCHT AGUS STRUCHTÚR NA GNÍOMHAIREACHTA UM CHAOMHNÚ COMHSHAOIL

Tá an GCC á bainistiú ag Bord lánaimseartha, ar a bhfuil Ard-Stiúrthóir agus cúigear Stiúrthóir. Déantar an obair ar fud cúig cinn d'Oifigí:

- An Oifig um Inbhunaitheacht i leith Cúrsaí Comhshaoil
- An Oifig Forfheidhmithe i leith Cúrsaí Comhshaoil
- An Oifig um Fhianaise agus Measúnú
- An Oifig um Chosaint ar Radaíocht agus Monatóireacht Comhshaoil
- An Oifig Cumarsáide agus Seirbhísí Corparáideacha

Tugann coistí comhairleacha cabhair don Ghníomhaireacht agus tagann siad le chéile go rialta le plé a dhéanamh ar ábhair imní agus le comhairle a chur ar an mBord.

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