

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sustainable Water Network (SWAN):

Lack of action to address sewage problem out of step with public concern about water pollution

03 November 2021: The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is calling for immediate action from government to dramatically improve Ireland's waste water infrastructure, following today's publication of a report from the EPA on Urban Waste Water Treatment [1] and this week's CSO Household Environmental Concerns survey, [2] which found water pollution was the environment problem of most concern to Irish households.

The report highlights that raw sewage from 34 towns and villages flowed into our water every day in 2020, down by only one from 35 in 2019. Inadequately treated sewage is the main source of pollution in 42 areas and is the primary reason these waters are unhealthy and failing mandatory standards under the EU Water Framework Directive. The law required that these polluted areas be restored by 2027, yet Irish Water has no clear action plan for two-thirds of them (29 out of 42) and, since they are not included in Irish Water's capital investment plan 2020- 2024, they are unlikely to start before 2025. Furthermore, four years ago the European Court of Justice found that Ireland was failing to meet obligations of the older Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, and the state is now at risk of incurring significant fines if the situation isn't remedied swiftly.[3]

The network of 25 environmental organisations has highlighted decades of lack of investment and lack of political will as the root cause of this failure to deliver a most basic public service, vital for the protection of public health and the environment.

Sinéad O'Brien, SWAN Coordinator said: "The fact that raw and poorly treated sewage is still being released into our rivers, lakes and sea is completely unacceptable. It's polluting our water environment and posing a serious risk to sensitive habitats and to public health."

"Since the onset of the pandemic, Irish people have rediscovered a love of the great outdoors and in particular our beautiful beaches, lakes and rivers – but many experience the reality of under-resourced, ineffective waste water infrastructure, as sewage overflows result in unpleasant encounters with sanitary waste. With water pollution now the top environmental concern, this situation is no longer going to be tolerated by the Irish public."

"Despite the fact that the EPA has been highlighting this issue since the 1990s, successive governments have neglected our sewage infrastructure and failed to provide the necessary investment to prevent pollution of our rivers, lakes and coast with human waste. Adequate resourcing for urgent improvements to our waste water infrastructure must be prioritised by this government. The Irish public and EU courts are rightly running out of patience."

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Notes to editor:

1. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), [Urban Waste Water Treatment in 2019](#).
2. Central Statistics Office (CSO), [Household Environmental Behaviours - Environmental Concerns Quarter 3 2021](#)

3. European Commission, [Commission takes Ireland to Court for failure to upgrade waste water treatment infrastructure](#), 2017

The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is an umbrella network of twenty-five national and local environmental groups working together for the protection and sustainable management of Ireland's water environment.

SWAN Members: An Taisce, Bat Conservation Ireland, BirdWatch Ireland, Carra/Mask/Corrib Water Protection Group, Cavan Leitrim Environmental Awareness Network, Celebrate Water, Coastal Concern Alliance (Associate), Coastwatch, Coomhola Salmon Trust, Cork Environmental Forum, Cork Nature Network, Dodder Action, ECO-UNESCO, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Irish Environment, Irish Peatland Conservation Council, Irish Seal Sanctuary, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Irish Wildlife Trust, Longford Environmental Alliance, Macroom District Environmental Group, River Shannon Protection Alliance, Save the Swilly, Slaney River Trust, Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment (VOICE).