



An Fóram Uisce (The Water Forum) as an Example of Stakeholder Engagement in Governance

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Introduction and background

How to involve stakeholders in policy is an important element of governance (Bingham et al., 2005). Stakeholder engagement is one of 12 principles for good water governance identified by the OECD. The importance of stakeholder engagement for water governance is emphasised by the OECD definition of water governance as the ‘range of political, institutional and administrative rules, practices and processes (formal and informal) through which decisions are taken and implemented, *stakeholders can articulate their interests and have their concerns considered*, and decision makers are held responsible for water management’ (OECD, 2015).

Stakeholder engagement is a subset of wider participatory initiatives that aim to involve people in decision-making regarding public policies and their implementation (Wehn et al., 2017; Shannon and O’Leary, 2020). Involving stakeholders can be particularly important when addressing wicked problems, such as water governance, where ‘the definition of the problem is clear, but the solution is not ... and therefore learning and discussion are required by both the governmental managers and the stakeholders they lead’ (Head and Alford, 2015: 717), and where there is stakeholder contestation about the nature of the problems and solutions. In these situations, as Conklin (2006: 5) identifies: ‘You don’t so much “solve” a wicked problem as you help stakeholders negotiate shared understanding and shared meaning about the problem and its possible solutions. The objective of the work is coherent action, not final solution.’

This report addresses one aspect of stakeholder engagement: how to formally engage stakeholders in policy deliberation and formulation at the national level. The case examined is that of An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum). The report summarises the findings from a range of interviews carried out in June and July 2020 as part of a wider research study funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) into water governance arrangements associated with the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018-2021 (Boyle et al., 2021). Fifteen of these interviews were carried out with An Fóram Uisce (12 interviews with members and three interviews with the executive), and these provide the main data source for the report. The purpose of

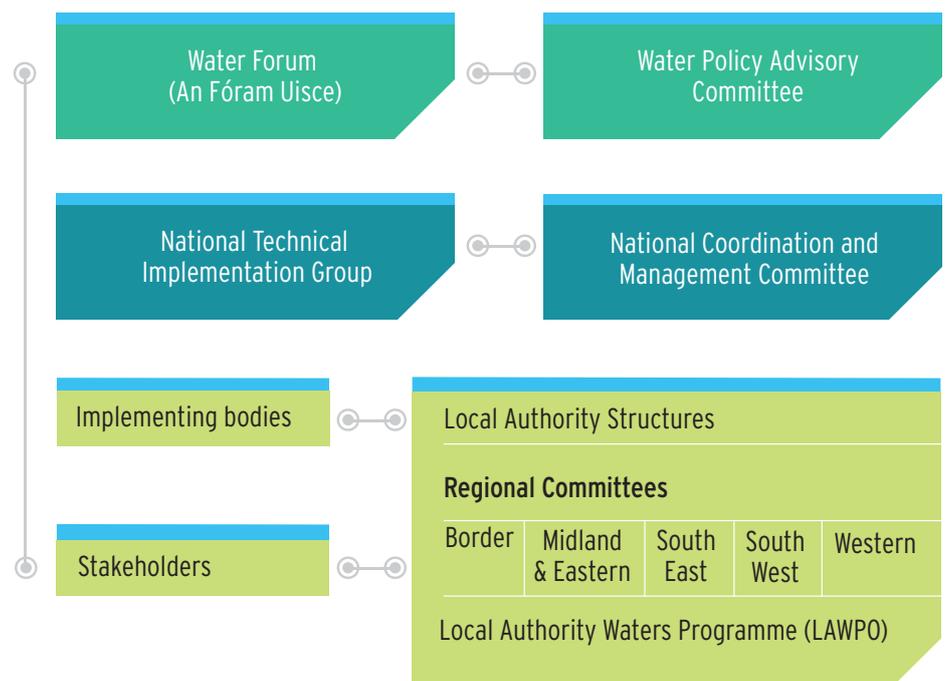
highlighting the role of An Fóram Uisce here is that it represents an innovative approach to the formal engagement of stakeholders in policy development at the national level.

An Fóram Uisce was established by statute in June 2018, pursuant to the Water Services Act 2017. Upon its establishment, two pre-existing stakeholder fora, the Public Water Forum and the National Rural Water Services Committee, were dissolved and their functions transferred to An Fóram.

An Fóram was set up to facilitate stakeholder engagement in water quality issues. Its place in the structure for Ireland’s water governance is set out in the figure below. Alongside a Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC) made up of senior officials from a number of government departments and state agencies, An Fóram operates as part of the top tier of three tiers of governance, providing advice to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. At the middle tier, a layer of technical support is provided by the National Coordination and Management Committee (NCMC) and the National Technical Implementation Group (NTIG), supported by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Local Authority Waters Programme, supported by regional committees and a local government shared service, the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO), are involved in implementation at the bottom tier.

An Fóram consists of 28 members, including Irish Water consumers, rural water interests, business interests, education, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, trade unions, water sports and activities and environmental organisations. An Fóram is intended to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to debate and analyse a range of issues with regard to water quality, including the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018-2021. The functions of An Fóram include but are not limited to:

- Advising the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in respect of water conservation, rural water services and the interests of the customers of Irish Water.
- Advising the Water Policy Advisory Committee in relation to the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive in Ireland.
- Making recommendations to Irish Water in relation to the performance of its functions.
- Advising and providing observations to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities.
- Examining such other water-related matters as the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage requests and advising the Minister accordingly.



Strengths of An Fóram Uisce

Broad range of interests and sectors represented

Forum for information sharing and mutual learning

Statutory and independent status

Strong and facilitative chair

Builds consensus

Building the evidence base through research

A number of notable strengths of An Fóram were highlighted during the course of the interviews. All interviewees emphasised the fact that An Fóram represents a broad range of interests, with the main sectors and stakeholders interested in water quality coming together around the table. No major stakeholder groups are excluded or have decided not to participate, as happens in some policy forums (Griffin, 2007). It has developed as an important forum for mutual learning, the sharing of information, and keeping stakeholders up to date. Interviewees emphasised the willingness of members to listen to others and understand where they are coming from. Members feel more informed, that their knowledge of water issues has increased, and that it has strengthened relationships with others in the group. With regard to being more informed and enhancing their knowledge base, this aspect of the work of An Fóram reflects the importance of social learning as an emerging governance mechanism to promote collaborative action among stakeholders to improve water governance (Collins and Ison, 2009).

The fact that An Fóram Uisce is a statutory body was noted as a strength by several interviewees. This was seen as giving credibility and standing to stakeholder engagement, and providing a means for departments and agencies to gain access to stakeholder views, both formally and informally. The fact that An Fóram is independent is also seen as important.

The degree of consensus arrived at in a wide range of areas was remarked on positively by most interviewees. Given the disparate and conflicting views on many water quality issues among the stakeholder groups involved, this was seen as a significant achievement. Several interviewees commented that since its establishment, the members of An Fóram, facilitated by the chair, had built an atmosphere of trust and willingness to collaborate and work hard to reach mutual agreement where possible. By participating in forums, participants have established

network contacts with other actors interested in the same issue that they may not normally have had dialogue with, and this has helped establish trust, one of the potential benefits of forums noted by Lubell (2007). One interviewee stated that An Fóram Uisce is the 'closest we've got at the moment to joined-up thinking'. However, as noted below, limitations with regard to the degree of consensus building were also highlighted.

Most interviewees emphasised the positive role of the chair as one of the reasons for the successes to date of An Fóram. Having an independent chair not linked to any particular interest group was seen as an important element in the process. The fact that the chair operates in a respectful and inclusive manner, allowing diverging views to be articulated, was emphasised as a significant factor in the generation of trust among members. This reflects practice that forums with diverse membership and interests often need a facilitative leader in order to operate effectively (Provan and Kenis, 2008).

An Fóram is building a research/evidence base to support its work, and interviewees regard this as an important, positive development. Research was seen as crucial to enabling An Fóram to speak with authority on topics. Building the evidence base was also seen as vital because there are a lot of data gaps that need to be filled. As noted by Fischer and Leifeld (2015), policy forums work best when they bring together policy makers and experts and aim at establishing a knowledge exchange between groups of actors with different types of knowledge.

One interviewee stated that An Fóram Uisce is the 'closest we've got at the moment to joined-up thinking'



Limitations of An Fóram Uisce

Limited impact to date on policy and practice

Focus on consensus building can limit debate on contentious issues

Need for greater diversity of representation

Demanding time commitment of members

Wide-ranging brief - need to focus on priority issues

Most frequently mentioned by interviewees with regard to the limitations of An Fóram was the sense of a limited impact to date given all the work put in by members. Several interviewees felt that a level of fatigue could start to adversely affect members' commitment unless results start to be seen. Here, transaction costs such as time and resources invested could be seen to exceed the benefits of participation (Fischer and Leifeld, 2015). In this context, the potential of An Fóram to be seen as merely a talking shop and a tick-box exercise was noted as a source of frustration by some interviewees. This refers less to the performance of An Fóram than to how it is perceived by government departments and agencies, a point developed further below when discussing the impact of An Fóram on policy development.

While the emphasis on consensus building was generally seen as a positive, some interviewees noted that it could also be a limitation. It could mean that the more contentious issues were not, perhaps, addressed as thoroughly as they might be, with more of a focus on information-sharing than on problem solving.

In a similar vein, some interviewees perceive An Fóram to be reactive rather than proactive, responding to rather than setting the agenda. However, those who made this point also felt that this situation had improved in recent times and was now less of an issue.

Several interviewees commented on limitations with regard to the make-up of membership. One interviewee referred to the preponderance of white, middle-aged men. With regard to stakeholder representation, the fact that there was only one education representative covering the whole of education was mentioned as an issue by some interviewees. Other groupings that were mentioned who should possibly have representation included young people, aquaculture or commercial fisheries, and artisanal food suppliers. However, the need for additional representation was balanced by a view that as An Fóram is already a large grouping, adding more members could challenge its effective



An Fóram is working to address limitations

operation even further. As Fischer and Leifeld, 2015: 10) note, 'As the number of actors participating in a forum increases, the number of potential actor relations grows exponentially. This increases transaction costs.'

The other point made with regard to membership was that a couple of interviewees felt that membership could get 'stale' if the same people are retained for too long. Balancing continuity of membership and the building of trust and good working relationships with the need to inject new blood periodically was seen as a challenge.

Some interviewees noted a sense that some members are more vocal than others, and strong voices can dominate discussions. To some extent this is inevitable in groups of this size, with disparate members and power relationships. The role of the chair in moderating discussions is important here in ensuring all members feel they have a voice.

The time commitment required of members, particularly those with limited resource supports or who are not working full-time in the area, was referenced by several interviewees as a limitation in terms of their participation. It was felt that this could lead to disadvantages for lesser resourced stakeholders in determining the direction of work. It was recognised that the chair is conscious of this and attempts to ensure equity in this regard to the extent possible.

The wide-ranging brief of An Fóram was referenced by several interviewees as posing challenges in terms of possibly having too diverse an agenda, and hence failing to address selected issues in a thorough and comprehensive manner. Some interviewees saw the need for a tighter brief, with more focused priorities. The strategic plan was seen as being of assistance here in terms of giving a focus, providing a sense of direction and an articulation of common goals, and helping An Fóram move from being reactive to more proactive. But more work was felt to be needed here.

Influence of An Fóram Uisce on policy

'Green shoots' - now engaging more effectively with government departments and agencies, though limited engagement beyond Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Concern about impact of submissions - no way of tracking responses or impact

An Fóram has been active in its attempts to influence policy, having published a range of policy submissions, press releases and reports. With regard to policy submissions, An Fóram has made 25 submissions from its inception in June 2018 through to January 2021. These cover a wide range of issues, for example a submission to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) on significant water management issues in Ireland, and a submission to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) on the 2019 Nitrates Derogation Review.

The degree of influence of An Fóram on policy was highlighted as a source of concern by most interviewees, with many stating that they don't know whether or not the submissions of An Fóram are having any influence. One interviewee expressed a sense of the outputs of An Fóram going into a black hole, with no way of tracking progress. Most interviewees felt that there is very little feedback from government departments other than acknowledgement that the submission has been received. Good practice examples were cited that it was suggested departments could follow, whereby organisations asking for policy inputs from stakeholders show submissions received on their website, and in their reports reference the submissions and the subsequent decisions they made in relation to them. This has happened in some cases, but to a limited degree to date. Interviewees felt it was important that state bodies publish the results of consultation, and show that the submissions have been considered. It was accepted that the outcome would not necessarily be to agree with the submissions, but it was thought to be important to show that they have been seen and heard.

On the plus side, a couple of interviewees noted that An Fóram has been in existence for only two years, and is still seen as a new body by many. Indeed, most interviewees felt that its influence is growing. One described it as 'green shoots' - not yet having major influence but now engaging more, and more effectively, with government departments and

The degree of influence of An Fóram on policy was highlighted as a concern but there are some signs of progress



agencies. Most interviewees felt that An Fóram was engaging with the right people in departments and agencies, and is seen by them as relevant.

Several interviewees felt that there was a relatively good working relationship with the DHLGH, but that influence was less effective with other departments. This also raised the issue in interviewees' minds of inter-departmental policy coherence, with a sense of An Fóram having some influence within DHLGH but not inter-departmentally. An example was cited where An Fóram commissioned behavioural economics research on how the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) might be modified to influence farmer behaviour regarding water, and proposed to the DAFM that An Fóram be represented on the committee looking at CAP reform, but the Department didn't provide a place on its consultative committee.

Specifically on the issue of CAP reform, one interviewee felt that, with regard to policy influence, if An Fóram could present a shared position on CAP reform, this could be hugely persuasive and potentially act to 'de-risk' policy changes in this area for government, as it would illustrate broad support across stakeholder groups.



The main information source with regard to changes in water quality is EPA reports



4

Monitoring progress of the River Basin Management Plan

Largely reliant on secondary rather than primary data sources

More of a focus on monitoring process rather than outcomes, with much anecdotal data

Time-lag effect regarding the monitoring of outcomes

Need for agency metrics to be more aligned to the actions in the River Basin Management Plan

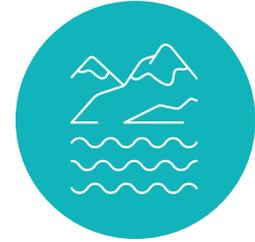
An Fóram largely engages in secondary rather than primary monitoring of the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), relying on the EPA, LAWPRO and Irish Water data sources in particular. Most interviewees felt that the monitoring of actions taken with regard to the RBMP is an issue that needs to be addressed more effectively than it has been up to now. Having said that, it was widely accepted that with regard to the ultimate outcome of improved water status, it will take time to determine if progress is being made, and it is difficult to know in real time how effective things are. The main information source with regard to changes in water quality is EPA reports, but with regard to the final outcomes of changes in water status there can be significant time lags between actions taken and results.

Interviewees expressed a view that they were monitoring the process rather than the outcomes at present. For example, several interviewees noted that LAWPRO gathers statistics on what it is doing (number of meetings organised, numbers of attendees, etc.) but not, so far, on what results are being achieved. It was also felt that feedback from LAWPRO and others tended to be quite anecdotal and largely of a positive nature, and that there is a need to go beyond this. One interviewee expressed a wish to hear more from NCMC and NTIG as to how they propose to fill the data gaps. In terms of trying to get a more balanced picture, several interviewees noted that they get anecdotal information from their own stakeholder groups, feeding in what stakeholder groups are seeing on the ground, and this is helpful contextual information. However, it is still largely subjective and cannot be relied on to give an accurate picture.

There was a general view among interviewees that agency reporting metrics need to be more aligned to the actions in the RBMP, with An Fóram having a formal position whereby it must be reported to regarding progress on the implementation of the RBMP.

There was also a recognition that good public engagement is far from straightforward, and requires detailed planning and the use of a range of appropriate methods of engagement





5

An Fóram Uisce as promoter of public engagement

An Fóram not widely known among the public

Developing a better profile with the media

Public engagement is best done through agencies 'on the ground', with An Fóram having a monitoring and supportive role

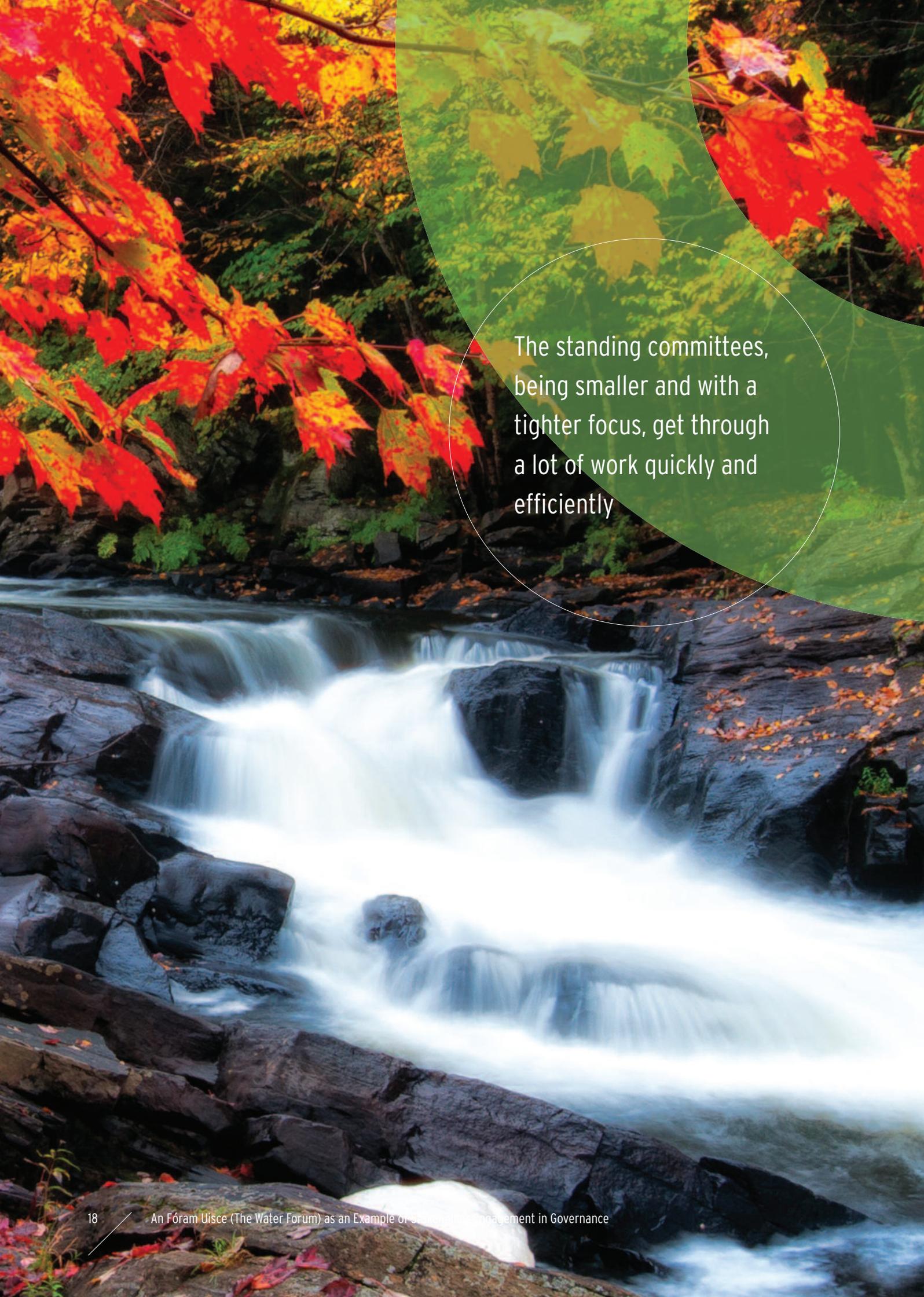
The general view among interviewees was that An Fóram itself is not widely known among the public, although it was recognised that recently, with the development of the communications strategy and staffing, it is getting more traction and better buy-in from the media, which is raising its profile somewhat. The media now know that An Fóram exists. There was seen to be a need to build on this.

It was also felt that the education awareness strategy will help with public engagement. With regard to their educational role, a couple of interviewees felt that there was a role to be played by An Fóram as an interpreter of technical reports produced by the EPA, LAWPRO etc., which may not be easily digestible for members of the public, by providing plain language guides of issues raised for public consumption.

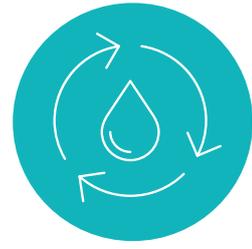
Most interviewees felt that engaging with other organisations who are out there 'on the ground' rather than undertaking public engagement exercises themselves was the best way to go in terms of getting community groups involved at catchment basin level. LAWPRO, for example, when they attend meetings of An Fóram, should not be asked all the time who is involved in their engagement exercises, but rather who is not involved. There was also a recognition that good public engagement is far from straightforward, and requires detailed planning and the use of a range of appropriate methods of engagement.

A couple of interviewees also noted the importance of ensuring good communication between An Fóram members and the stakeholder groups they represent.

Revetment works using natural materials on the banks of the Culdaff River, Co. Donegal in 2018. This project was supervised by Gareth Pedley of the Wild Trout Trust and engaged volunteers from the Culdaff Community Angling Association, Inishowen Rivers Trust, and Loughs Agency



The standing committees,
being smaller and with a
tighter focus, get through
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efficiently



6.1 Staffing

An Fóram has a small full-time support staff, comprising a senior executive officer, a research officer, a communications and education officer and a clerical officer. An Fóram members interviewed spoke highly of the executive support staff. The benefits from the appointment of the research officer and communications and education officer to supplement the senior executive officer post were seen as significant in helping An Fóram to advance and achieve its work agenda. Further staffing supports would be welcomed, though interviewees recognise the challenges posed to the financial environment by the Covid-19 situation. The continuation of the development of closer links with third-level institutions and research centres is seen as one helpful way of supplementing existing resources.

6.2 Committee structure

The creation of the two standing committees, covering water services and catchment management, was widely seen as beneficial and indeed essential to the effective operation of An Fóram. Interviewees noted that it wasn't possible to do everything in plenary sessions. The water services committee has identified issues in the strategic plan relevant to its brief, and made them the agenda for the group. The catchment management committee focus is on the RBMP.

The standing committees, being smaller and with a tighter focus, get through a lot of work quickly and efficiently, and are seen as a good way of using the expertise of members. Several interviewees noted that it is possible to get the 'heavy lifting' done in the standing committees, and then have policy positions brought to the plenary group for decision. One difficulty noted was that attendance at the standing committee meetings can be a challenge (more so than at the plenary sessions), though there was a sense that this had improved recently. The committees, while beneficial, place additional time demands on members.



Conclusions

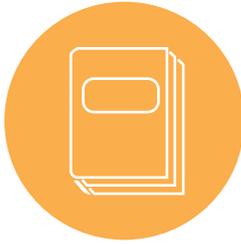
In this report we have examined An Fóram Uisce as a specific example of national-level formal stakeholder engagement in the process of policy development and governance. As a policy forum, it would seem to provide an example of a structure well suited to giving a voice to stakeholders in national policy debate and development, especially when addressing complex, 'wicked' problems. An Fóram is not a partisan or advocacy grouping set up to promote the views of one interested party or a select group of stakeholders. Rather, it aims to develop policy solutions to challenging problems through the generation of consensus where feasible. While members of An Fóram aim to represent the views of the groupings to which they belong, there is little evidence of their primary aim being to defend their own predefined preferences. Developing a shared understanding of the issues and agreeing potential solutions is an important part of the work of An Fóram.

An Fóram is gradually playing a role in agenda setting: highlighting or putting an issue on the political, state agency and public agenda, and helping frame ways in which problems are addressed (Fischer and Leifeld, 2015). There is also evidence of An Fóram promoting social learning among the various members, encouraging knowledge exchange among the various actors, and promoting a better understanding across members of the positions taken by the different stakeholder groups.

An Fóram is not a partisan or advocacy grouping set up to promote the views of one interested party or a select group of stakeholders

However, this is not to say that all challenges have been resolved. Policy differences and challenges to policy coherence remain. There is limited evidence to date of the impact of An Fóram on policy development in practice. Stakeholder engagement involves significant time commitment by members, especially challenging for those for whom it is not part of their day job, and for limited return. Linkages between An Fóram and other elements of the water governance framework remain tenuous.

It is also important to remember that a forum such as An Fóram Uisce should be seen as complementary to, not a replacement for, wider stakeholder and public engagement initiatives. In the case of water governance, other engagement initiatives at the regional and local levels have an equally if not more important role to play in terms of providing a stakeholder voice in the process of securing good water status (Boyle et al., 2021). An Fóram is a positive element of water governance, but only one element, and one that can be improved and developed to strengthen its role in enhancing stakeholder engagement in policy development and implementation.



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