

**From the Office of the
Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs**



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AQW 20111/17-22

To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 18991/17-22, to detail any discussions his Department has had with Northern Ireland Water in relation to the prevention of further significant water pollution incidents caused by the public body.

As advised in the response to AQW 18991/17-22, NIEA regulate discharges from Northern Ireland Water Ltd (NI Water) under the Water Order 1999 as amended. NIEA implement an extensive regulatory regime setting consent standards and conditions to assist in the achievement of Good Status in Northern Ireland Rivers, and to achieve compliance with the treatment requirements set down in the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive. The Regulatory regime includes a substantial amount of NIEA resource targeted to engage and work with NI Water to improve their environmental performance and to drive down pollution incidents.

Critically NI Water have not been adequately funded since they came into operation back in 2007. As a result the wastewater infrastructure in Northern Ireland is aging and is experiencing severe constraint across the province. The wastewater infrastructure requires long-term adequate funding to improve the



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performance of the infrastructure and to build in capacity for our growing society. Given the level of investment required, NIEA, in 2007, committed to a prioritised approach to capital investment through the price control process. An extensive governance structure, with a range of regular meetings both scheduled quarterly/monthly and focused adhoc meetings to allow for the prioritisation of infrastructure requiring upgrade/ investment to improve environmental compliance and to drive down pollution incidents. NIEA have developed a prioritisation matrix which ensures that those wastewater assets which are significantly contributing to water quality issues in Northern Ireland are prioritised to receive funding. The outputs from this prioritisation then informs the development of the capital investment programme within Price Control Periods. This approach has been applied since 2007 and informed the development of the new PC21 price control period 2021 - 2027. The level of investment required for ensuring environmental performance will continue to grow and a prioritised approach will be required for a number of decades.

Annex 1 provides a breakdown of the pollution incidents and demonstrates the success to date since 2007 in driving down the level of pollution incidents caused by NI Water. NI Water has invested heavily since 2007 in improving the level of treatment of wastewater which is discharged to the environment and have developed an operational model to ensure a quick response to asset failures preventing pollution incidents. The quality of the effluent following treatment has improved significantly reaching compliance levels of 95% in 2020. However significant investment is needed to improve the sewerage systems to reduce the volume of untreated sewage spilled to the environment before it reaches the Wastewater treatment works.



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In addition to this work in relation to the prioritisation of the Capital Investment Programme, NIEA work closely with the Department for Infrastructure and NI Water in the development of sustainable drainage and wastewater. In particular the development of the Living With Water Programme (LWWP) brings forward improvements to the wastewater infrastructure serving Belfast. The wastewater infrastructure serving Belfast City requires major investment to improve water quality, out of sewer flooding, and capacity issues. The solutions designed for the Belfast area will provide a good framework for other urban areas to improve environmental performance of the assets and to drive down pollution incidents.

Coupled with the significant level of engagement between DAERA, DfI and NI Water on developing Sustainable Drainage and Wastewater, NIEA also implement an extensive regulatory inspection programme and pollution response.

Approximately 1000 site inspections per annum are carried out to assess compliance with the Water Order Consent. Each inspection generates a report documenting the findings of the inspection and this is shared with NI Water to take action where issues have been identified. Regular interface meetings are carried out on a monthly basis between NI Water and NIEA to deal with issues highlighted and to agree solutions.

NIEA and NI Water also hold quarterly Pollution Incidents Liaison Group Meetings. The agenda for these meetings includes; (i) specific water pollution incidents and issues and (ii) incident causes and ways to minimise the risk of incident recurrence. The work of this Group is to review and ensure that communications channels remain fit for purpose in ensuring that an optimal response can be provided to reported water pollution incidents and ensure that NI



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Water staff are appropriately trained in respect of the requirements of the Water (NI) Order 1999.

I trust this provides you with the necessary assurance that NIEA has a significant level of engagement in place with DfI and NI Water to ensure investment is targeted to improve environmental performance and drive down pollution. Annex 2 provides a breakdown of the range of working groups and meetings currently in place involving both NIEA and NI Water on the improvement of the wastewater infrastructure environmental performance.



EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



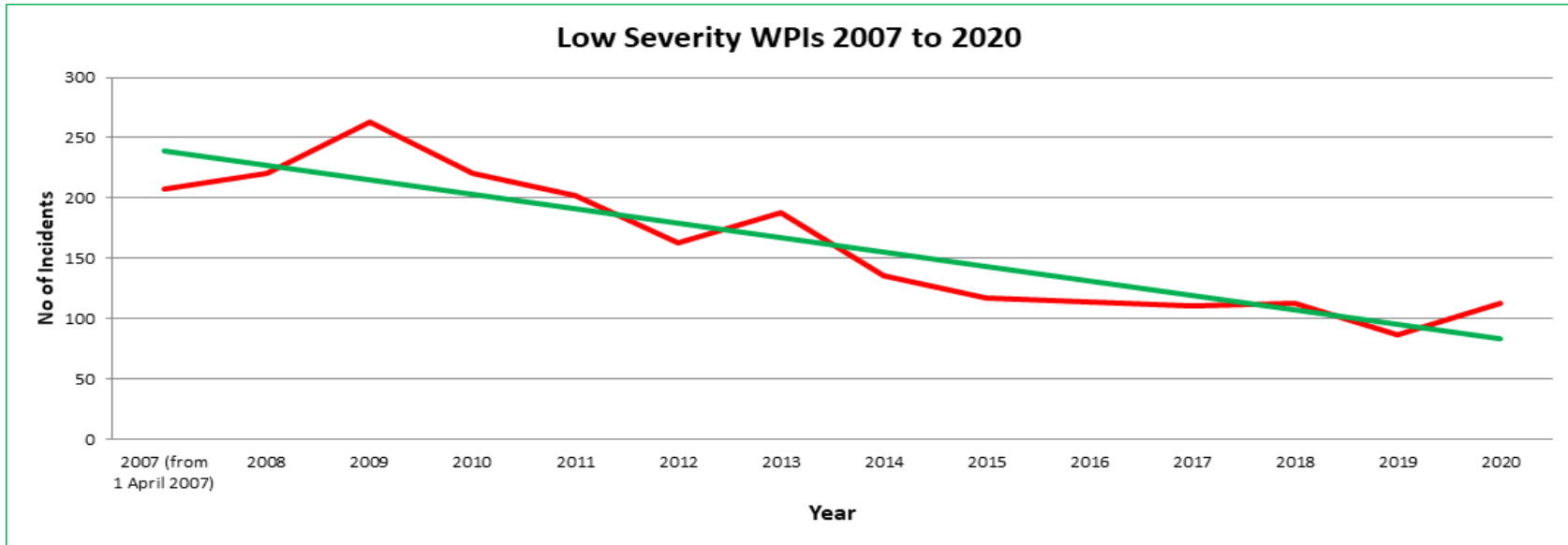
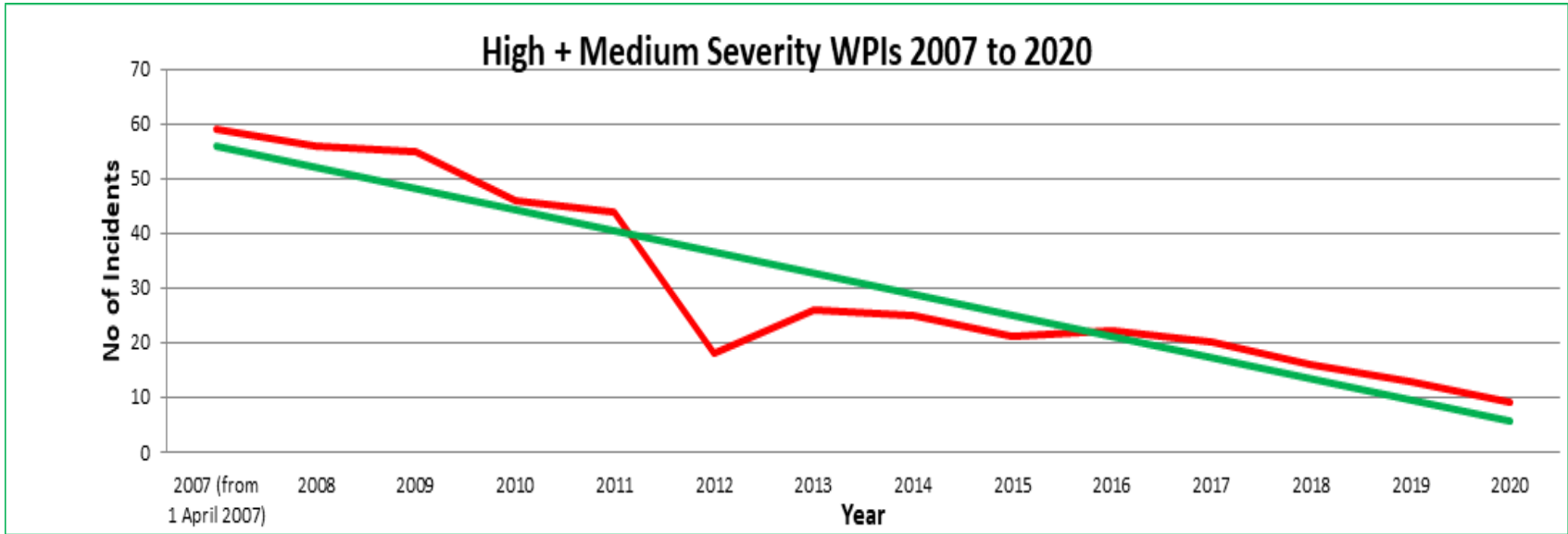
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Annex 1 Summary of Pollution Incidents

Year	High	Medium	Low	Total	Total H & M
2007 (from 1 April 2007)	1	58	208	267	59
2008	0	56	221	277	56
2009	1	54	263	318	55
2010	0	46	221	267	46
2011	4	40	202	246	44
2012	0	18	163	181	18
2013	0	26	188	214	26
2014	1	24	136	161	25
2015	1	20	117	138	21
2016	1	21	114	136	22
2017	0	20	111	131	20
2018	0	16	113	129	16
2019	0	13	87	100	13
2020	0	9	113	122	9



Annex 2: Summary of Working Groups that NIEA is currently engaging on improving re NI Water's Environmental Performance and Pollution Prevention

- Senior Water Sector Working Group
- DfI Output Review Group
- Regulation Sub Group
- Price Control Environmental Quality Group
- NI Water Compliance Reform Working Group
- NI Water Compliance Network and Wastewater Treatment Working Group
- NI Water Pollution Incident Liaison Group
- Living With Water Programme Board
- Living With Water Steering Group
- NI Water Living With Water Marine Modelling
- Integrated Ecosystem Working Group
- Dundrum Priority Catchment Working Group
- Misconnections Working Group