

Eila McTernan - Wastewater Compliance Analyst

Meet the science sovereign keeping our wastewater treatment plants compliant



Unsurprisingly Eila McTernan had no grand plan when she sat her Leaving Cert at the tender age of 16.

She enjoyed science and maths, but she never imagined the aspects of those subjects that caught her attention in class in Manorhamilton were a hint of where her career journey was headed.

Even when the recession hit, and she found herself trawling through Sligo IT's prospectus to remap her path did she ever think her love of science would lead her to becoming a vital cog in the Irish Water wheel.

But Eila McTernan is the perfect example of a student who explored the infinite possibilities of science - the theme of this year's Science Week.

"Some days I certainly have imposter syndrome and ask myself how I ended up working as a wastewater compliance analyst with Irish Water, but I suppose the writing was always on the wall.

"I grew up on a farm and always loved the outdoors and nature and certain subjects in science class caught my attention more than others – subjects that now tie into my role.

"I also had a fantastic maths teacher and she pushed me to do my best."

Now Eila's days are spent ensuring a number of the wastewater treatment plants in the Northwest are compliant with regulations. She manages data keeping a close eye on trends, works closely with local authority colleagues and is a link between Irish Water and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

But she wasn't always convinced that science was going to play a role in her life.

Armed with an Information Technology course from Sligo IT in 2002, Eila's working life began carrying out administration duties in Jennings O'Donovan Consulting Engineers in Sligo. Engineers were busy tendering for water and wastewater projects at the time and she soon got an introduction to the world of water and wastewater and the terminology that goes with it.

She was quick to put her hand up when an opportunity came knocking for employees to train in computer aided design before she was put to work on network drawings. Assisting engineers to survey sites also gave her a taste for onsite visits.

But then the economy shuddered to a halt, recession became the buzzword and Eila found herself on a three-day week with too much time to kill.

But again, her resilience shone through, and she turned to Sligo IT for inspiration.

"I'm lucky that Dromahair is so close to Sligo, and I signed up to a course in Science and Environmental Management. It was a great mix of online lectures and in person workshops with visits to different wastewater treatment plants were part of the training."

She secured a Level 8 Honours degree, and, in the meantime, she had transferred over to the planning and environment department in Jennings and O'Donovan.

"The engineers were working on a lot of wind and solar farms, and they needed environmental impact assessment reports and planning applications so the subjects I had studied aligned nicely with that."

But it wasn't all plain sailing. Eila was back working five days a week and juggling study with work.

"I stuck with it from certificate to honours degree. I would be the first to admit I was never the most studious, but I persevered. I enjoyed the course and I got great opportunities to put what I learned into practice at work."

In 2018 she accepted a job with Irish Water as a Wastewater Compliance Analyst based out of the Cavan office.

She's proud of her role in ensuring the wastewater systems remains compliant.

"The objective of our wastewater treatment plants is to produce cleaned water that will not harm or pollute the surrounding environment to which it discharges. To achieve this there are a variety of stages that can take place including a combination of physical, biological and chemical processes.

"The way plants are managed and run in balancing the biological process of the food supply the bugs that in turn breakdown the food i.e. waste material is an art form in itself. It's lovely to go to site and see first-hand the science at play."