

Chapter 3

Objective:

Meet Customer Expectations



Our Strategic Aim

- Establish both Customer Trust and a Reputation for Excellent Service

Introduction

Irish Water's first strategic objective is to meet our customers' expectations through the provision of high quality, reliable water services, delivered through resilient systems, in an economic and efficient manner, reflecting the customer service levels expected in a modern economy.

We must ensure that the need to meet higher standards for compliance in drinking water quality and wastewater discharges to the water environment is balanced against the cost of water services that we provide to our customers.

Our first response to ensuring that we deliver our services in an economic and efficient manner has been to review all proposed capital investment in our water services assets, for which we took over responsibility in January 2014, to more accurately define the scope required to address short and medium term needs and ensure value for money invested. Even with this revised scope of projects, the capital investment need remains large (€5-6 Billion is estimated to be needed by 2021).

The Current Situation

As a new utility, we are in a period of transformation from the provision of water services by 34 (now 31) local authorities to operation and management of these services by Irish Water. Local authorities are presently working under service level agreements with Irish Water to ensure a continuity of service and a smooth transition. Our customers will continue to be served on the ground by local authority staff, operating the local treatment plants and networks. Irish Water staff will have an increasingly important role in planning and managing the provision of water and wastewater services, defining both the operational and investment strategies.

We are, therefore, in a period of transformation into a more centralised and cost effective customer operation. We will develop a new water industry operating framework to deliver more services regionally, with shared cross boundary working, centres of excellence and increased specialisation. This will enable transition to a leaner customer support team with a nationally consistent approach.

Key Challenges

There is presently a lack of detailed knowledge of the cost and technical challenges that Irish Water face in the provision of water and wastewater services to the standards expected in a modern economy. This is because of uncertain information on the condition and performance of the assets, especially underground water distribution and sewage collection networks. Despite these limitations, Irish Water recognises that customer expectations of the quality of the service they will receive will increase following the introduction of charges.

Key challenges facing Irish Water in relation to meeting customer expectations are summarised below:

Identifying our customer base

Water services for part of the population are provided by Group Water Schemes or private supplies, while wastewater treatment for much of the rural population is served by septic tanks. As a result, one of our earliest activities is to identify and obtain correct contact and scope of services information for all of our customers. A primary function of the domestic customer application campaign is to identify who receives their water and/or wastewater services from Irish Water and who doesn't. This will ensure efficient delivery of services to each customer, together with accurate billing information.

Delivering reliable water services

Our water and wastewater assets have suffered from significant under-investment over an extended period of years. Consequently, water and wastewater services can be variable and inconsistent. We will prioritise investment to firstly ensure universal, basic service availability and beyond that to deliver consistent service quality equivalent to that provided by high performing utilities in other sectors.

Meeting our customer service commitments and Codes of Practice

We are committed to achieving the service standards set out in the Customer Handbook. These standards are approved by the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER) and are the basis of the content of Irish Water's Customer Charter, Terms and Conditions and Codes of Practice.

Delivering customer satisfaction

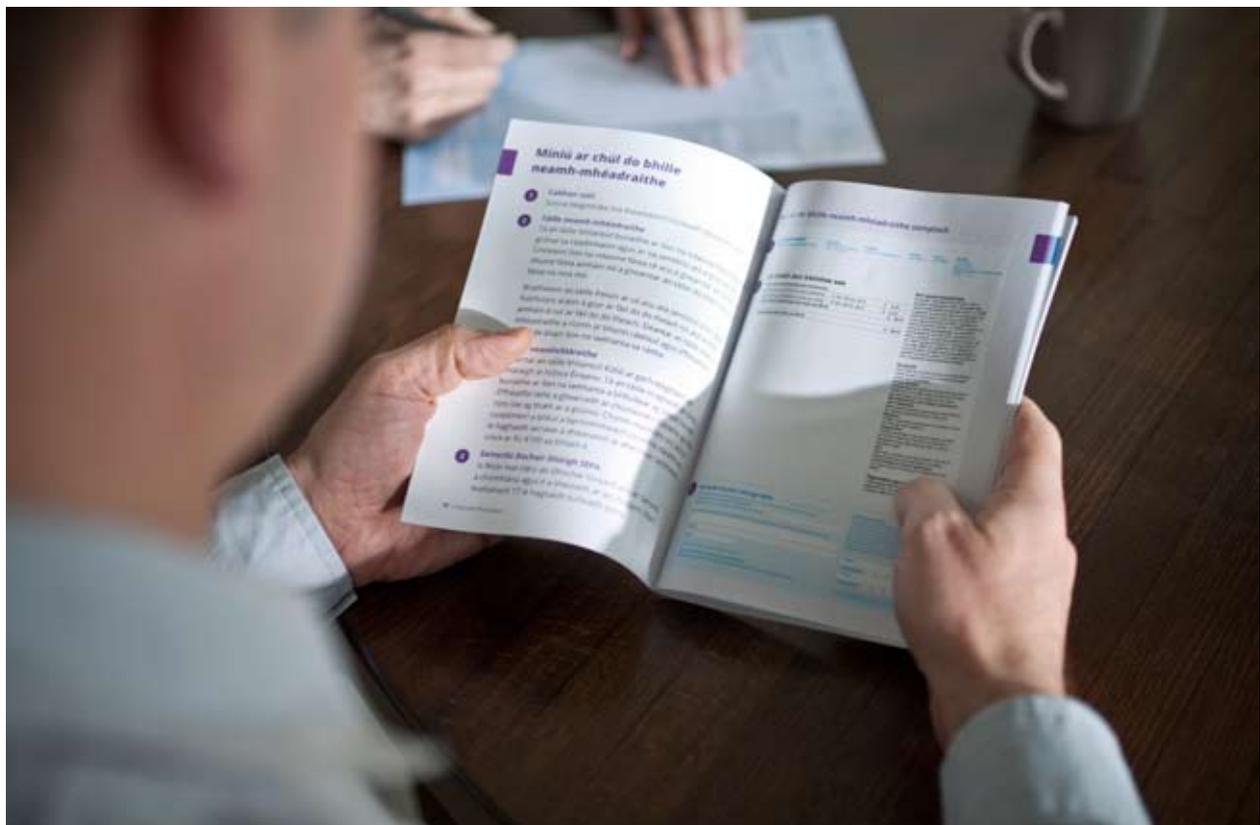
We anticipate a high level of communication with our customers by letter, email, phone, digital channels and through the media. We are committed to handling all customer communication in the manner expected of a modern professional utility. We aspire to deliver a consistent, functional and ultimately satisfying customer communication experience in relation to operational and billing queries, complaints, service requests, new connections services and all other interactions with Irish Water staff and contractors.

Establishing sustainable customer funding

We are in a period of transition from water services being funded primarily through general taxation to one where direct charging of the end user provides part of the funding. As a utility increasingly dependent on the payment of water charges, it is essential that our customers recognise the importance of good water services provided efficiently.

Balancing key customer objectives

Irish Water must work with our economic regulator to ensure that the costs incurred to deliver necessary improvements in infrastructure, services and standards is based on efficient working (both capital and operational).



Objectives and Strategies

The proposed strategies to meet the above challenges and to achieve this objective are summarised in the table below and are detailed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Strategy		Purpose
Aim CE1 – Establish both Customer Trust and a Reputation for Excellent Service		
CE1a	Create and operate a lean and effective Customer Operation.	Deliver best practice and value for money in customer operations.
CE1b	Build and maintain accurate customer databases.	To ensure accurate customer services and billing.
CE1c	Establish sustainable customer revenue.	To secure funding necessary to deliver efficient and effective water services.
CE1d	Establish effective communication channels with customers.	To ensure that customers can communicate with us when they need to in a manner that suits them and can be promptly informed of changes to services.
CE1e	Establish national customer service standards and robust customer protection measures.	Set appropriate customer expectations and deliver to these.
CE1f	Fully support the work of the Public Water Forum and establish effective communication with all our stakeholders.	To address the comments and suggestions of the Public Water Forum in relation to the performance by Irish Water of its functions and to ensure that we are open and transparent in relation to our obligations under Freedom of Information legislation and the Aarhus Convention.

CE1: ESTABLISH BOTH CUSTOMER TRUST AND A REPUTATION FOR EXCELLENT SERVICE

[CE1a] Create and operate a lean and effective customer operation.

The employment of an effective workforce is an important part of delivering a competent customer service operation. This also requires Irish Water to establish the structure and governance procedures needed to deliver effective customer services. To ensure that the customer service operations are efficient, flexible long term service contracts with our suppliers will be required which will incorporate strict contract management systems. Irish Water is working with each local authority to ensure that effective structures, work practices, management and training of water services employees under the service level agreements is in place. It is working actively with the sector to achieve cross boundary working by local authority personnel to drive efficiency and improve service quality.

[CE1b] Build and maintain accurate customer databases.

Collating an accurate database of customers is critical to efficient delivery of services to each customer as well as Irish Water's revenue generation capability and customer acceptance of water charges. Irish Water is currently validating its domestic customer lists whilst simultaneously working with local authorities to transfer all non-domestic customers. This will provide Irish Water with the capability to communicate with, and provide quality water services to, customers effectively into the future and to implement accurate billing. Maintenance of an accurate database is crucial to Irish Water to enable delivery of an effective water service to all customers.

[CE1c] Establish sustainable customer revenue.

To be willing to pay for the water and wastewater services that they are receiving, customers need to be satisfied that they are paying a fair amount for a defined service level. It is essential that Irish Water has a clear and transparent tariff structure and that we explain this clearly. We are working closely with our economic regulator (the CER) and other stakeholders on tariffs and customer protection consultations in order to achieve this objective. Customers expect to be able to pay in a way that best suits their needs. Irish Water will provide payment methods and frequency of payments that meet with customer demand.

[CE1d] Establish effective communication channels with customers.

A number of documents have been published setting out how Irish Water will communicate with our customers.

The Customer Handbook, published by the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER) provides guidelines on the required levels of customer service. The Handbook is available at;

<https://www.cru.ie/home/customer-care/water/customer-protection-2/>

The Codes of Practice and Customer Charter set out our commitments for effective communication with our customers.

The Customer Charter (**<https://www.water.ie/docs/Customer-Charter.pdf>**) sets out the service provided and service quality levels offered to our customers. It also sets out a number of commitments where charter payments apply for domestic customers.

The Codes of Practice (**<http://www.water.ie/our-customer-commitment/>**) set out the standards and conditions of service for our customers and include information on: our charging structure, payment options, customer complaint handling (including the CER's dispute resolution role), frequency of bills and the testing of meters. They also include details on how you can expect us to communicate with customers and what we will do during planned and unplanned interruptions to the water supply.

All new domestic customers are issued with a copy of our Domestic Terms and Conditions for Water Services

<http://www.water.ie/docs/Domestic-Terms-and-Conditions-English.pdf>

We understand that some of our customers have different needs when it comes to using our water services and communicating with us. We have developed a register of vulnerable customers, which includes:

- a special services register for those customers who require additional support communicating or receiving services from us and;
- a priority services register for those customers who are critically dependent on water for their medical needs.

The vulnerable customer Code of Practice **http://www.water.ie/docs/Vulnerable_Services_Booklet_ENG_web_final.pdf** gives details of how we plan to respond and adapt the services and communications provided to suit the needs of customers who tell us they are vulnerable.

We are committed to providing an excellent service to our customers that meets their evolving needs and requirements, while taking into account the challenges we face in establishing a modern water utility and the necessary upgrade of our assets to provide a reliable water supply.

Our communications are intended to reach all of our customers and other interested parties and include the use of:

- **Our website;**
- **Social media;**
- **SMS messages (texts, used in clusters to communicate local operational problems);**
- **Telephone;**
- **Letter; and**
- **Face to face.**

Irrespective of the form of communication used we will always listen to feedback from our customers.



Water Treatment Plant at Dock Road, Limerick. Photo: Kieran Clancy

[CE1e] Establish national customer service standards and robust customer protection measures.

Irish Water is committed to providing a satisfactory standard of water services to our customers with robust customer protection measures in place.

Our service standards outlined in our Codes of Practice and Customer Charter (for both domestic and non-domestic customers) are approved by the CER. Our Customer Charter originally published on the 30th September 2014 (<https://www.water.ie/docs/Customer-Charter.pdf>) commits us to engage with customers through a range of communication channels. It also offers a process for the resolution of Customer Complaints and sets out Guaranteed Service Standards.

We operate under a range of Codes of Practice which comply with the requirements of the Water Handbook relating to:

- **Domestic Customer Communications Code of Practice**
- **Domestic Metering Code of Practice**
- **Domestic Billing Code of Practice**
- **Domestic Vulnerable Customer Code of Practice**
- **Domestic Network Operations Code of Practice**
- **Domestic Complaint Handling Code of Practice**
- **Business Customer Codes of Practice**

These are available from our Customer Communications team or on our website (<https://www.water.ie/our-customer-commitment/>). We expect our published codes and charter commitments to expand and evolve over time.

[CE1f] Fully support the work of the public water forum.

Irish Water will fully support the work of the Public Water Forum to be established under the Water Services Act, 2014. This forum represents the interests of Irish Waters' customers. We will work with this customer consultative forum to fully understand the expectations of our customers in relation to how we perform our statutory functions. We will listen to and address the comments and suggestions coming from the forum in relation to the performance of our functions.

In addition to and complementing our communication channels with our customers through the strategies outlined in above and through the Public Water Forum, Irish Water will take a proactive approach to communicating with our broad stakeholder base and will fulfill our obligations under the Freedom of Information Act, 2014 and the Aarhus Convention as outlined below;

Freedom of Information Act 2014

Irish Water is a listed FOI body and full information on our FOI process and approach can be found on our website: <http://www.water.ie/about-us/freedom-of-information/>

Aarhus Convention

The aim of the Aarhus Convention is to link environmental protection with human rights by ensuring access to environmental information (AIE), public participation in decision making and access to environmental justice.

Access to Environmental Information (AIE)

Full information on our approach to AIE can be found on our website:

https://www.water.ie/about-us/freedom-of-information/Access-to-Information-on-the-Environment_.pdf

We are currently developing a facility on our website where the public can access information on the quality of drinking water in any Water Supply Zone. Results of our sampling regime of 11 drinking water parameters will be available on our website in Q3 of 2015 and the site will continue to be developed to allow the customers/members of the public to link an address to the water quality in a specific Water Supply Zone.

In addition, Annual Environmental Reports (AERs) for all our licensed wastewater treatment plants are available on the EPA's Website and Irish Water will work with the EPA to ensure this information continues to be available through access to their website and links on Irish Water's website.

Public participation in decision making

There are a number of existing statutory instruments through which Aarhus is legislated for, these include Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and our national statutory planning process. Irish Water will ensure that we comply with this legislation and examine where additional public participation can be incorporated in the early phases of these processes.

Irish Water has demonstrated this approach in the consultation undertaken to date on the WSSP, which has had both statutory and non-statutory consultation phases in order to ensure that the general public can participate as early as possible in the decision-making process.

Environmental Justice

All persons who feel their rights to access to information have been impaired (request for information ignored, wrongfully refused, inadequately answered) must have access, in the appropriate circumstances, to a review procedure under national legislation.

Irish Water will, as stated above, endeavour to help people access information; however there are procedures within the legislation that a person can follow if they feel they are not satisfied.

Indicators and Targets

Indicators and targets to demonstrate that we meet this objective are presented in the table below.

MEET CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS					
Indicators	Definition	Current Baseline	End of 2021 Target	End of 2027 Target	2040 Target
AIM CE1	Establish both Customer Trust and a Reputation for Excellent Service				
Contact Handling	Call answering and call abandonment	80% of calls answered in less than 20 seconds. Less than 5% of calls abandoned	80% of calls answered in less than 20 seconds. Less than 5% of calls abandoned	80% of calls answered in less than 20 seconds. Less than 5% of calls abandoned	80% of calls answered in less than 20 seconds. Less than 5% of calls abandoned
Complaint Handling	Time based	90% resolution or understood steps to resolution within 5 working days	100% resolution or understood steps to resolution within 5 working days	100% resolution or understood steps to resolution within 5 working days	100% resolution or understood steps to resolution within 5 working days
Supply Interruption	Advanced Notice	Not established	Minimum 2 day advanced notice of planned interruption	Minimum 2 day advanced notice of planned interruption	Minimum 2 day advanced notice of planned interruption
Billing & Payments	Meet CER's requirements	Accurate quarterly bills based on actual reads (for metered customers) Range of customer focused payment options available Sympathetic handling of payment difficulty cases			