



Compliance Investigations: Irish Water – Cavanhill Public Water Supply & Gorey Regional Creagh Public Water Supply

Introduction

This paper details two recent investigations conducted by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) following water quality incidents that took place at two Irish Water public water supplies (PWS) in 2021. These PWSs are:

- Cavanhill PWS, Dundalk, Co. Louth – serving approximately 45,604 people
- Gorey Regional Creagh PWS, Co. Wexford – serving approximately 7,241 people

Incidents that occurred at both these facilities during 2021 had a significant negative impact on the public. This is particularly the case regarding Gorey Regional Creagh PWS, where inadequately disinfected water entering the public water supply led to a confirmed total of 46 people falling ill.

While customer communication and complaint handling – areas the CRU regulates – are always key customer protection areas, their importance is highlighted during water quality incidents.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the environmental regulator of Irish Water, conducted site visits of Cavanhill water treatment plant (WTP) and Gorey Regional Creagh WTP in June 2021 and September 2021 respectively. In its audit of Cavanhill WTP, the EPA noted a large number of complaints in relation to discoloured drinking water from consumers of the supply.¹ It also found that as well as manganese exceedances recorded in 2021, additional manganese exceedances had occurred in 2020, which were not reported to the EPA or communicated to the public. With regards to Gorey Regional Creagh WTP, the EPA conducted two audits. The first took place virtually on 7th September 2021. It found that incidents had occurred at the WTP between 19th-24th August and 28th-30th August which caused inadequately disinfected water to enter the public water supply during these periods and that Wexford County Council and Irish Water failed

¹ EPA, Cavanhill PWS Audit, <https://www.epa.ie/publications/compliance--enforcement/drinking-water/audit-reports/louth/Cavanhill-Audit-Report-12072021.pdf>

to respond in a timely manner to complaints relating to discolouration and illness.² The second EPA audit took place on 16th September 2021.³

As the EPA's audits raised issues in relation to customer communications and complaint handling, the CRU decided to open investigations into both incidents.

How did the CRU investigate these incidents?

The CRU began investigating these issues in October 2021 and requested information regarding areas such as:

- The number of customer contacts and complaints received
- How these contacts and complaints were categorised
- The escalation process triggered by a cluster of contacts
- Communication provided to customers
- Staff training

Preliminary findings were issued to Irish Water in relation to Gorey Regional Creagh PWS on 25th April 2022 and in relation to Cavanhill PWS on 7th June 2022. The CRU provided Irish Water with the opportunity to make representations or objections to the findings on both occasions. Following the CRU's review of Irish Water's representations, final findings were issued in relation to Gorey Regional Creagh PWS on 5th July 2022 and in relation to Cavanhill PWS on 20th July 2022.

What did the investigations find?

The Gorey Regional Creagh PWS investigation made two findings, as follows:

1. **Categorisation of customer contacts:** The CRU found that Irish Water did not accurately categorise several contacts as complaints despite customers expressing dissatisfaction and an expectation of a response or resolution. The categorisation of complaints is important given the use of complaints as a customer service metric, as well as the different processes Irish Water follows on receipt of a complaint; customers who have logged complaints receive more follow-up correspondence from Irish Water compared to when a complaint is not logged.

² EPA, Gorey Regional Creagh PWS (Virtual) Audit, <https://www.epa.ie/publications/compliance--enforcement/drinking-water/audit-reports/wexford/gorey-regional-creagh-pws-virtual-audit-070921.php>

³ EPA, Gorey Regional Creagh PWS (On-site) Audit, [https://www.epa.ie/publications/compliance--enforcement/drinking-water/audit-reports/wexford/Gorey-Regional-Creagh-PWS-\(On-site\)-Audit-Report-16.09.21.pdf](https://www.epa.ie/publications/compliance--enforcement/drinking-water/audit-reports/wexford/Gorey-Regional-Creagh-PWS-(On-site)-Audit-Report-16.09.21.pdf)

In one example reviewed by the CRU, a customer contacted Irish Water to report that her child had been ill for the past six days and that her tap water had a green tinge. She asked for something to be done as soon as possible and to receive a response on what would be done. This was not categorised as a complaint and the customer did not receive a response from Irish Water until three days later, after she contacted Irish Water via social media.

In another example examined by the CRU, a customer contacted Irish Water three times before a complaint was logged. On the third call, the customer said her neighbour's children had tested positive for *E. coli* and thought they had gotten it from the water. The customer stated her own children were also feeling unwell. It was only when the customer called for a fourth time, one month after her initial contact, that Irish Water raised a complaint for the customer.

In another example, a contact was received from a government minister's office on behalf of a customer whose teenage son became ill and was admitted to hospital, where he tested positive for *E. coli*. He had not been swimming in open water and had drunk tap water. This was not categorised as a complaint. Irish Water stated that it does not raise complaints for contacts from Ministers and Councillors as they "do not want numerous calls/emails in relation to each representation they make".

2. **Communications provided to impacted customers:** The CRU found that Irish Water did not provide clear and updated information to customers on its website between the 2nd September and 17th September 2021.

The Cavanhill PWS investigation resulted in four findings, as follows:

3. **Categorisation of customer contacts:** The CRU found that Irish Water did not accurately categorise several contacts as complaints despite the customer expressing dissatisfaction and an expectation of a response or resolution.
4. **Updating and informing customers who have contacted Irish Water:** Irish Water did not follow up with some customers who contacted it in relation to discoloured water and were not informed of an explanation for the issue they were reporting.
5. **Absence of communication to customers during a water quality incident in 2020:** Irish Water failed to provide information to customers impacted by manganese exceedances in 2020.

6. **Delay in information provided on Irish Water’s website:** Irish Water failed to ensure information was made available to customers on its website in a timely manner. Irish Water became aware of the issue on 8th June 2021 and a press release was issued. However, while customers are directed to Irish Water’s website to obtain information, information on this incident was only uploaded on 17th June 2021.

Further details of the findings made are available in the [annex](#) to this information paper.

What remedial actions have been / will be taken?

Contact categorisation (Findings No. 1 and No. 3)

The CRU notes that the categorisation of customer contacts emerged as an issue in both investigations. A similar finding was made in relation to the Bailieborough PWS investigation,⁴ as well as in the Q1 2022 audit.⁵ The CRU has not been reassured that remedial actions put in place by Irish Water to date fully address this issue.

The correct categorisation of complaints is important in terms of customer service – complaints are handled differently to contacts – and in terms of comparative customer service metrics, such as the response to complaints and unresolved complaints metrics that are monitored in the Performance Assessment Framework.⁶

The CRU welcomes that during this investigation, Irish Water confirmed that it has now changed its guidance to the contact centre staff to instruct that all reports of personal or household illness suspected to be from drinking water will be logged as “red” complaints.⁷ Previously, Irish Water was not logging all such contacts as complaints. The CRU believes this is an important change in approach but that further improvements are required in Irish Water’s contact categorisation and resolution processes.

On this basis, the CRU has required Irish Water to conduct a review of its contact handling and categorisation processes, from receipt to resolution, against comparable water utilities to identify best practice and potential improvements in Irish Water’s processes.

⁴ [Compliance Investigations - Water - Commission for Regulation of Utilities \(cru.ie\)](#)

⁵ [CRU202276-Irish-Water-Compliance-Audit-Q1-2022 Information-Note.pdf](#)

⁶ The Performance Assessment Framework is designed to assess Irish Water’s overall performance in delivering defined services to its customers for the money it is allowed to spend by the CRU. Further information available at: https://www.cru.ie/document_group/irish-water-performance-assessment/

⁷ Red complaints are described by Irish Water as “serious complaints that have potential to cause risk of injury”. Irish Water uses five colours to categorise complaints.

Communications provided to impacted customers (Finding No. 2)

In relation to the finding on communications provided to impacted customers, Irish Water now places a note reading *“Information below is relevant until further updates appear here or on our Supply and Service Updates section”* at the top of news items relating to boil water notices, drinking water restriction notices and interruptions to supply to inform customers that this is the most up-to-date notification in relation to their supply. The CRU is satisfied that this remedial action addresses this finding.

Updating and informing customers who have contacted Irish Water (Finding No. 4)

Irish Water has introduced an outbound SMS (text message) on the second working day to inform customers that it is looking into the issue. However, Irish Water has stated that due to operational constraints, it is unable to consistently facilitate update or close-out calls to customers. While the provision of a text message to customers is an improvement, the CRU is not entirely satisfied with this response and has required Irish Water to review its contact handling processes, from receipt to resolution, against comparable water utilities to identify best practice and potential improvements in Irish Water’s processes.

Absence of communication to customers during a water quality incident in 2020 and delay in information provided on Irish Water’s website (Findings No. 5 and No. 6)

Relating to the finding on communication to customers during a water quality incident, the CRU acknowledges that remedial actions completed by Irish Water following the findings of the Bailieborough investigation were not yet in place when this incident took place. The CRU expects improvements, such as the clustering recognition functionality, to assist Irish Water to quickly detect issues and provide the required communications to customers in a timely manner.

In relation to the delay in publishing information on its website, Irish Water has confirmed that training for members of its media team took place following this incident. The CRU is satisfied that these remedial actions address this finding.

What are the next steps?

The CRU is liaising with Irish Water to ensure satisfactory remedial actions are implemented to address the findings concerning contact categorisation and the updating of customers who have contacted Irish Water (Findings No. 1, No. 3 and No. 4)



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The CRU aims to promote a good compliance culture within Irish Water by conducting audits and investigations to monitor compliance with its obligations. Further detail can be found in the Compliance and Enforcement [Annual Reports](#).

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Annex – findings

Area	Code of Practice requirement	Gorey Regional Creagh PWS	Cavanhill PWS
No. 1 & No. 3 Categorisation of customer contacts	<i>Complaint handling Code of Practice</i> <i>“A complaint is defined as “the expression (through various channels, for example letter, email, phone call, physical claim) of a customer’s dissatisfaction and his/her explicit expectation for a response or resolution”. The term “explicit” denotes that the customer state they are seeking some action to address their concern, even if they are not able to identify and state what action is required.”</i>	Irish Water did not accurately categorise all contacts expressing dissatisfaction and an expectation for a response or resolution as complaints. This has implications for how contacts were handled and resolved, and for comparative customer service metrics, in addition to the provision of satisfactory customer service by Irish Water.	



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	<p><i>“We will also accept complaints from a recognised agency or third party who are confirmed as acting on your behalf.”</i></p>	<p>Regarding Gorey Regional Creagh PWS, the CRU reached this finding following analysis of contacts relating to suspected illness which did not have a complaint raised.⁸ Irish Water firstly stated that of the 13 customers who contacted it and did not have a complaint raised, two of these were incorrectly categorised by Irish Water customer service agents as queries and should have been recorded as complaints. Of the remaining 11 contacts, Irish Water stated that it was satisfied with how its agents had categorised the contacts.</p> <p>The CRU then assessed the 12 contacts relating to illness (one further case was added by Irish Water during</p>	<p>Regarding Cavanhill PWS, the CRU reached this finding following analysis of sample of 16 customer contacts. Of these, the CRU found that eight should have been logged as complaints. Irish Water agreed with the CRU in one of the eight cases only.</p> <p>The CRU maintains that a customer should be considered to be raising a complaint if they contact Irish Water having exhausted the triage advice offered by Irish Water (e.g. to run the cold-water kitchen tap for 15 minutes) and continue to observe discoloured water. The CRU does not accept that a customer observing discoloured water for a prolonged period, who has gone to the effort of contacting Irish Water,</p>
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⁸ As noted above, during this investigation, Irish Water confirmed that it has now changed its guidance to the contact centre staff to instruct that all reports of personal or household illness suspected to be from drinking water are to be logged as “red” complaints



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		<p>the investigation) and found that in seven of the 12 cases, it did not agree with Irish Water's evaluation. Irish Water subsequently agreed with the CRU in four of these seven cases, contrary to its previous review of decisions made by its customer service agents.</p> <p>In the CRU's view, Irish Water's change in opinion reflects the inconsistent and subjective approach used by Irish Water to categorise customer contacts and highlights the need for a more robust and objective process for categorising contacts.</p> <p>The CRU was also dissatisfied by Irish Water's explanation that contacts received from ministers, councillors, senators, TDs etc. on behalf of customers are not raised as complaints</p>	<p>could be considered as being satisfied. Furthermore, the CRU believes that any such customer would be expecting resolution of the issue.</p>
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		by Irish Water because it considers that a close-out response rather than continuous communication is required. While a close-out response may be appropriate, the CRU does not accept that this stipulates that complaints cannot be raised. As stated in the CoP, Irish Water must accept complaints from a recognised third party.	
No. 2 Communications provided to impacted customers	Communications Code of Practice 3. Timeliness <i>Information relating to Irish Water's planned operations will be published in the most appropriate media for the customers living in an area impacted by the operations. The information will be provided in a timely manner to minimise inconvenience to our customers.</i>	<p>Irish Water did not provide clear and updated information to customers on its website between the 2nd September and 17th September. Even if no further update was advised, Irish Water should have made it clear to customers that the latest published information was still accurate.</p> <p>The CRU considers this to be particularly important given that</p>	N/A



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	4. Adequacy⁹ <i>All information will be as detailed as possible, clear and accurate so that customers are informed of all water-related matters affecting them.</i>	members of the public became ill during this period as a result of consuming contaminated water and reassurance that the water was now safe to drink may have been required.	
No. 4 Updating and informing customers who have contacted Irish Water	Communications Code of Practice 4. Accurate information <i>We will give you accurate information that will be as detailed as possible. This will make sure our customers know about any water-related matters affecting them.</i>	N/A	<p>Irish Water failed to follow up with some customers who contacted it in relation to discoloured water and could not be informed of an explanation for the issue they were reporting. The CRU considers that these customers were thus not fully informed of the water-related matters affecting them.</p> <p>Of the sample of 16 cases (categorised as queries) assessed by the CRU during this investigation, it was found</p>

⁹ The CRU notes that Irish Water published revised Codes of Practice in early July 2022, following the review of the CRU Domestic Customer Handbook. The findings relating to Gorey were made with reference to the former Codes of Practice, while the final findings relating to Cavanhill were made with reference to the current Codes of Practice. This accounts for the differences in wording used here.



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			that in 10 cases, customers were not provided with any explanation for the issue they were reporting and were not provided with a call back or a close-out call afterwards.
No. 5 Absence of communication to customers during a water quality incident in 2020	Communications Code of Practice 3. Timeliness <i>Information relating to Irish Water's planned operations will be published in the most appropriate media for the customers living in an area impacted by the operations. The information will be provided in a timely manner to minimise inconvenience to our customers.</i> 4. Adequacy <i>All information will be as detailed as possible, clear and accurate so that customers are informed of all water-related matters affecting them.</i>	N/A	<p>Irish Water failed to provide timely and adequate information to customers impacted by manganese exceedances in 2020. The large number of customer contacts was not used to alert Irish Water of the water quality issue and to put adequate communications in place.</p> <p>The CRU found that between 28th May – 20th October 2020, 337 customer contacts in respect of water quality issues were received by Irish Water in relation to Cavanhill PWS. During this time period, it is now known that there were 12 exceedances of the</p>



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			<p>manganese parametric value. However, despite the large volume of customer contacts, Irish Water did not identify the issue or provide any proactive customer communications in relation to this issue in 2020. Irish Water has acknowledged that “due to a breakdown in internal communications, these parametric failures were not identified to and therefore not actioned by Irish Water’s drinking water compliance team”.</p>
<p>No. 6</p> <p>Delay in information provided on Irish Water’s website</p>	<p>Communications Code of Practice</p> <p>3. Timeliness <i>Information relating to Irish Water’s planned operations will be published in the most appropriate media for the customers living in an area impacted by the operations. The information will be provided in a timely</i></p>	N/A	<p>While Irish Water provided press releases to media, elected representatives and business representations, it failed to ensure that information was made available to customers on its website in a timely manner.</p>



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	<i>manner to minimise inconvenience to our customers.</i>		Irish Water has acknowledged that an administrative error led to information not being published on its website until 17 th June 2021, despite updates being available on 11 th and 15 th June 2021.
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