

Good morning everyone. I would like to begin by thanking Owen McQuade for inviting me to speak at this year's Irish Water Summit and I would also like to thank Minister Darragh O'Brien for his excellent speech on protecting our island's precious water resources. We all know that water flows freely across our island and we need to work collectively to protect our water supplies across the whole island.

I can see from your Programme that you have a packed schedule, with many experts and professionals sharing ideas on the future of the water industry and am particularly pleased to see a focus on sustainability and climate change, so I am sure this will be a very informative event.

I think we are all under no illusions that the weeks and months ahead will still be very challenging. The threat of COVID-19 is still very much with us, although we are hoping that there is light at the end of the tunnel and restrictions will be able to be eased further in the near future.

Around the world, governments and businesses are continually having to adjust and respond to the acute challenges posed by the pandemic and as restrictions are gradually lifted. Lives and livelihoods across the world have been affected and, over the past year, the need for our precious water supplies has been ever more evident. Many of us have been working from home

and this has led to a change in the demand for water, to some extent, away from office buildings and into our own private homes.

However, even in these difficult times, it is important that we do not lose sight of our longer term vision – we know that the climate crisis is impacting on us all and that sustainable options must be the way forward for the future.

Sara Venning, Chief Executive of NI Water has also joined us today and I understand that she will be outlining how NI Water is supporting sustainability and economic growth.

Our strategy, Sustainable Water – A Long Term Water Strategy for Northern Ireland is a multi-faceted programme which aims to achieve a sustainable water sector by 2040. It proposes a sustainable future which will be essential for us as we look to grow our economy, address regional imbalance, improve wellbeing and support a thriving island where people want to live, work, visit and invest.

The Strategy is based on five key principles designed to foster economic development and growth, manage the affordability of water treatment, provide environmental protection, manage flood risk and ensure a sustainable service delivery.

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The first principle of the Strategy is Economic Development and Growth and this is also one of the main priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Providing a modern and sustainable water, sewerage and drainage infrastructure is now more important than ever in the wake of a global pandemic which has caused such hardship. Significant investment is absolutely essential to support our recovery because, without it, economic growth will be virtually impossible.

I continue to make the case that our wider commitments to economic wellbeing cannot be delivered without the infrastructure in place to underpin it.

I am supporting NI Water in its utilisation of the latest technology in wastewater management to enhance efficiency and meet environmental standards. New methods of treatment are planned for the major works required to increase the capacity at Belfast Wastewater Treatment works, but can also be applied to smaller works such as the new £1.5m Wastewater Treatment Works in Ballintoy. This investment has created capacity in and

around Ballintoy, enabling new domestic and commercial properties, and unlocking the economic potential of the area.

We are also moving to more sustainable options for wastewater treatment, and an example of such innovation is the use of Constructed Wetlands. These are based on processes that occur naturally within indigenous wetlands, providing an environment where the interaction of the wetland and the plants cleanse the wastewater.

The wetlands contribute to biodiversity, providing habitats for insects and birds, and eliminate the need for NI Water to use chemicals to treat the wastewater, reducing the economic and environmental cost.

The second principle of the Strategy is affordability.

Since 2007, when NI Water was established, it has made a lot of progress in reducing the cost of providing water and sewerage services. Investment in sustainability and innovation could see NI Water's service delivery costs further reduced.

For example, at Dunore Water Treatment Works on the eastern shore of Lough Neagh, NI Water has dramatically reduced its electricity costs and carbon footprint by using 24,000 solar

panels to complete a £7 million solar farm, producing enough electricity to supply the power needs of one of its largest treatment plants and allowing the contribution of spare capacity to the grid.

The third principal of the Strategy is Environmental Improvement and Compliance.

Investment in water and sewerage infrastructure and in agriculture over the last decade has resulted in significant improvements to our inland and coastal waters and in the quality of our drinking water.

Our drinking water is sourced from the catchments of our rivers, lakes, loughs and aquifers. Sustainable catchment management focuses on managing all the water-related activities to protect and improve the quality of water, but also through enhancing the landscape and biodiversity.

Raw water monitoring enables potential contaminants to be removed at source through catchment management solutions, rather than traditional high energy treatment at the water treatment works. This is often a more cost-effective and energy efficient way of tackling water quality issues.

NI Water has a dedicated Sustainable Catchment Area Management Planning (SCaMP) team working in partnership with a range of organisations to restore blanket bogs and undertake tree planting, both of which can deliver tremendous benefits to river water quality.

An example of how successful our joint work on major environmental projects has been is the cross-border Shared Waters Enhancement and Loughs Legacy, or SWELL project.

The SWELL project is a €35m EU-funded project which aims to improve the quality of water in Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle through the upgrade of wastewater assets on both sides of the border.

The project represents a cross-border partnership comprising NI Water, Irish Water, Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute, Loughs Agency and East Border Region, working collaboratively to improve water quality within the shared waters of Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle.

The project will deliver sustainable upgrades to wastewater assets on both sides of the border and make a positive contribution towards 'Good Ecological Status' under the EU Water Framework Directive.

The fourth principle of the Strategy is Flood Risk Management and, with that, the threat of pollution.

Flooding can have potentially devastating impacts, on human life and health, damage to property, pollution to rivers and the sea and severe effects on economic activity, infrastructure, agriculture and the environment. Flooding is also becoming more frequent, and climate projections indicate that changing rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and more severe extreme weather events will increase its occurrence and impacts in the future.

The Strategy sets out a clear framework for action which will facilitate the implementation of a range of initiatives aimed at delivering sustainable flood risk management. This includes Natural Flood Management measures in both rural and urban catchments to minimise surface runoff and provide flood storage in a more natural way. These types of measures may reduce requirements for engineered defences and alleviate the effects of climate change.

Also key to meeting these challenges is Flood Risk Management Planning which, as in the South, follows a six-year cycle. My Department has worked in partnership with a range of stakeholders, to develop a shared understanding of flood risk

and to consider and agree roles and responsibilities in managing this risk. This stakeholder engagement has, of course, included ongoing engagement with The Office of Public Works, given that two of our three main river basins are shared.

The draft Flood Risk Management Plan for the period from 2022 – 2028 is currently out for public consultation until June and will be finalised by the end of the year.

The actions and policy proposals set out in the Strategy, along with the implementation of the second Flood Risk Management Planning cycle will help us to manage flood risk and drainage more sustainably, both now and into the future.

As part of my commitment to a green and sustainable recovery, and to delivering the commitments in the New Decade New Approach, in November 2020, I published Living with Water in Belfast – an integrated plan for drainage and wastewater management in greater Belfast.

The draft plan aims to deliver a new, strategic, long term approach to drainage and wastewater management to protect people and properties from flooding, provide a cleaner and greener environment and ensure that Belfast is open for business and investment.



The draft plan indicates that approximately £1.4bn of investment is needed over the next 12 years to upgrade the drainage and wastewater infrastructure in the greater Belfast area to protect against flooding, enhance the water environment and facilitate growth. The Plan enshrines many of the principles I have already outlined and includes delivering greener catchment based solutions such as sustainable drainage systems and river floodplain restoration works, alongside more conventional hard engineered infrastructure such as bigger pipes or higher flood defences.

I am also pleased to have established a new £20 million Blue/Green Infrastructure Fund to support the transformation of our communities, promote active travel and shape our places for our new 'normal'. But there is so much more to do in order to help address the climate emergency and improve the well-being of our people.

Greenways are a wonderful example of positive place shaping. They can enhance connectivity and provide a popular space where communities can improve their physical and mental health and come together, while socially distanced under present circumstances. But they can also provide opportunities for water

management, especially in our towns and cities and I am keen to promote initiatives such as this that deliver on multiple levels.

This is why, as part of my drive to deliver more sustainable infrastructure, I want to work in partnership with Minister O'Brien, councils and local communities to develop more green projects that can drive lasting change, enhance our economy and improve lives.

The Connswater Community Greenway is one such excellent example.

The Greenway has created vibrant, attractive, safe and accessible parkland for leisure, recreation, community events and activities and has helped to reduce flooding to 1700 local properties.

The three river channels had been artificially influenced in the past and a key project goal was to restore the rivers back to more natural forms in order to increase biodiversity, allow greater public access and improve their general appearance, whilst also mitigating flood risk.

A new greener environment has emerged which has improved the quality of life of the 40,000 residents in the area, the pupils

and students attending the 23 schools and colleges, visitors and tourists and those who chose to work and invest in east Belfast.

The Connswater Community Greenway is a living landmark for east Belfast and a fantastic legacy for our children.

The fifth principle of the Strategy is that of Sustainable Service Delivery.

NI Water recognises that the water business is circular. And as a result requires a huge amount of energy, mostly in the form of electricity.

Pumping and treating water and sewage is extremely energy intensive. It is, therefore, no surprise that NI Water is the largest single electricity consumer in Northern Ireland, utilising 3% of all power generated.

NI Water is investing in renewable energy such as the solar panels at Dunore Water Treatment Works, which I mentioned earlier.

Dunore is NI Water's third largest site in terms of energy consumption accounting for 7% of the company's annual usage

and this major project is saving over half a million pounds annually in energy costs.

I hope that the past few minutes have not only given you an overview of the challenges that we face in managing our water, but also the great work being done to cope with these challenges.

We have restored damaged peatbogs, healing the environment in the process. We are investing in blue green infrastructure and sustainable drainage. We have powered one of the most energy-intensive treatment works entirely by solar energy. We have begun designing and building constructed wetlands to naturally cleanse the wastewater from small settlements with minimal maintenance costs. And importantly, we have undertaken work with you, our colleagues in the South, to improve the quality of water in our shared loughs.

These are just a few of the many examples of how I am supporting the greater sustainability of our water sector. Through the latest technology, cooperation and a focus on the environment, we are making sure our precious water is kept clean, safe, and protected for future generations.

In conclusion, the Long Term Water Strategy is a bold, ambitious Strategy which lays out how we will manage our water over the next 20 years. It is a comprehensive plan which aims to unlock our economic potential, to revive fragile ecosystems and environments damaged by human activity and climate change, to secure sustainable solutions to wastewater management, and to efficiently deliver clean, safe drinking water to every home.

Right across this island we can and we must work together to find solutions to overcome our shared environmental, economic and social .

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.