

TEN YEARS OF TEAMING UP



Peter Drake marks the milestone of WIF's tenth anniversary by reflecting on its decade of facilitating collaboration.

This month, the Water Industry Forum (WIF) celebrates its ten-year anniversary. Executive director Peter Drake says the real cause for celebration is the decade of “facilitated collaboration” that WIF has enabled, helping the water sector to advance and to work through some challenging issues that needed multi-stakeholder input. WIF's greatest attributes, he explains, are its neutrality, independence and not-for-profit status, which have served to provide a place where water companies, supply chain, academia, government and regulators can come together confidently to explore the art of the possible.

Drake launched WIF back in January 2012, after taking early retirement from Yorkshire Water. He says he pitched his vision for a neutral stakeholder forum and information hub to then Kelda board member Roger Hyde and Arup's global water business leader Dr Mark Fletcher. This involved tallying the challenges facing the water industry of ten years ago – ageing assets, climate impacts, population growth and environmental needs – with a diagram of active participants in the space. This showed there were “lots of challenges, and not a lot of collaboration,” Drake observes. What was needed, he recalls, was a “neutral space in the middle” and a multi-stakeholder approach.

Hyde and Fletcher agreed, and went on to become WIF's first directors. It launched with its first seminar at the start of 2012.

The plan was to build an extensive network of stakeholder organisations; to provide a neutral platform to determine the action required to meet sector challenges; to encourage action through facilitated workshops and collaborative projects; and to create opportunities for innovation.

Achievements to date

Fast forward ten years, and WIF has around 600 member organisations spanning five categories, ranging from senior partners who pay full fees to associate members who do not contribute financially but “provide the reach” for Forum activities. Fletcher chairs a strong board of industry leaders which, along with Drake, features Professors Ian Barker and Tony Conway, Jean Spencer and Margaret Read. There is also now a small executive team.

Drake says the Forum has taken a “challenge-led” approach to its work and has tackled issues including: innovation, asset management, people issues, research, business processes, technology, the environment and the supply chain.



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Recent outputs include papers on:

- Totex experiences, supported by Arup.
- Catchment system operation, supported by Mott Macdonald.
- Natural capital principles, supported by Atkins.
- Making direct procurement for customers a success, supported by Turner and Townsend.

Among the areas WIF is currently working on is how to take a multi-capital approach to investment decisions. Drake muses: “Can we develop an approach with some common foundations ahead of PR24?” The Forum is also researching an ideal procurement model for AMP8 from a supply chain perspective, and has other topics in sight.

Make a difference

Drake stresses of the WIF: “We don't want to just be a talking shop, we want to make a difference”. He offers a couple of examples of where it has gone beyond business as usual and had a real impact.

The first is “shining a light” on academic research that could be of value to water companies. In 2015, the Forum sifted through online information provided under the auspices of the Research Excellence Framework (REF, which provides star ratings for university departments based on their research activities) for water-relevant entries. It shortlisted around 30 organisations for consideration by an expert judging panel, which announced water ‘winners’ at a Research Councils UK conference. Drake says the next REF is due soon and that WIF may repeat the exercise. “I always felt there was a gap between academic output and what gets used by the industry,” he reflects.

The second example is a project to support young water professionals to build their networks, get exposure to other stakeholder groups and increase their knowledge – or “get them motoring sooner,” as Drake paraphrases. In 2019, WIF set up a young water professional team challenge. Forty entrants from different stakeholder groups were split into ten teams of four and given eight weeks to come up with and pitch an idea with a circular economy theme. Judges picked a winning team, and part of the prize was lunch with Anglian Water's chief executive Peter Simpson. Plans for further rounds were disrupted by Covid, but Drake says the hope is to restart this work this year.

Ten years and beyond

To celebrate its ten year anniversary, WIF is about to invite all of its member organisations to consider their work at the Forum over the last decade and submit entries (under various categories including a young professionals' category) for the innovation they are most proud of. Winners will be recognised at a dinner and awards ceremony in April. Drake says this will be a great way to mark the milestone, and celebrate the achievements of all the stakeholders who have been involved on the journey so far.

Looking ahead, WIF's journey is set to take a different turn, with a plan in place for a merger with British Water by 1 April. Given WIF will retain its independence, Drake sees only upsides from the development. He cites having a larger membership base to draw on for expertise and contributions; having more time to focus on tackling sector challenges rather than running the business side of the operation; securing administrative economies of scale; and running complementary events and activities. A bright outlook, then, for WIF's next ten years.