

Irish Water: we'll repair leaks but you'll have to find them

Paul Melia

HOMEOWNERS hit with enormous water bills because of leaks will have to identify the problem themselves to avail of a "first fix free" scheme.

The *Irish Independent* has learned that people will have just a year to identify a problem with their supply that is resulting in very high bills, after which they will be obliged to pay for repairs themselves.

The Government believes as many as one-in-10 homes – or more than 100,000 properties – will need leaks repaired when water charges are introduced from October 1 next.

But Environment Minister Phil Hogan confirmed that the Government's first-fix-free policy will place the onus on homeowners to identify a problem and will only apply for 12 months after charges are introduced. After that, it would be up to the homeowner to fund the repairs, he said.

He also said just €30m would be set aside to fund repair works, and that problems would be identified by homeowners who received bills which were larger than expected.

Average bills, while not yet decided, are likely to be €300-€350 a year based on the UK experience.

Continued on Page 13

Homeowners will have to find leaks to avail of 'free' repair

Continued from Page One

Speaking to the *Irish Independent*, he also revealed further details of planned reforms to the water sector including changes to planning rules which will oblige all new buildings – including private homes – to be fitted with rainwater harvesting systems to help reduce demand.

But he stressed that only 'legacy' leaks found within a year of charges being introduced would be repaired, and that funding would be available for a "short period".

"We're working on a policy and hope to have some capital monies available, about €30m," he said. "About 10pc (of homes) may have leaks. There'll be complaints made about bills, and if it's a leak between the meter and front door it's a legacy leak (and will be fixed).

"It will be for a short period, a year, and if it's not identified in the first year, it's not a legacy issue."

In many cases, homeowners will not be aware they have leaks as the water can be found under front gardens and may never appear on the surface.

Most leaks are found around the stopcock of fittings, but they could also be in the pipe which would require the pavement or garden to be dug up and the pipe replaced. Older houses, serviced by metal pipes, are more likely to leak.

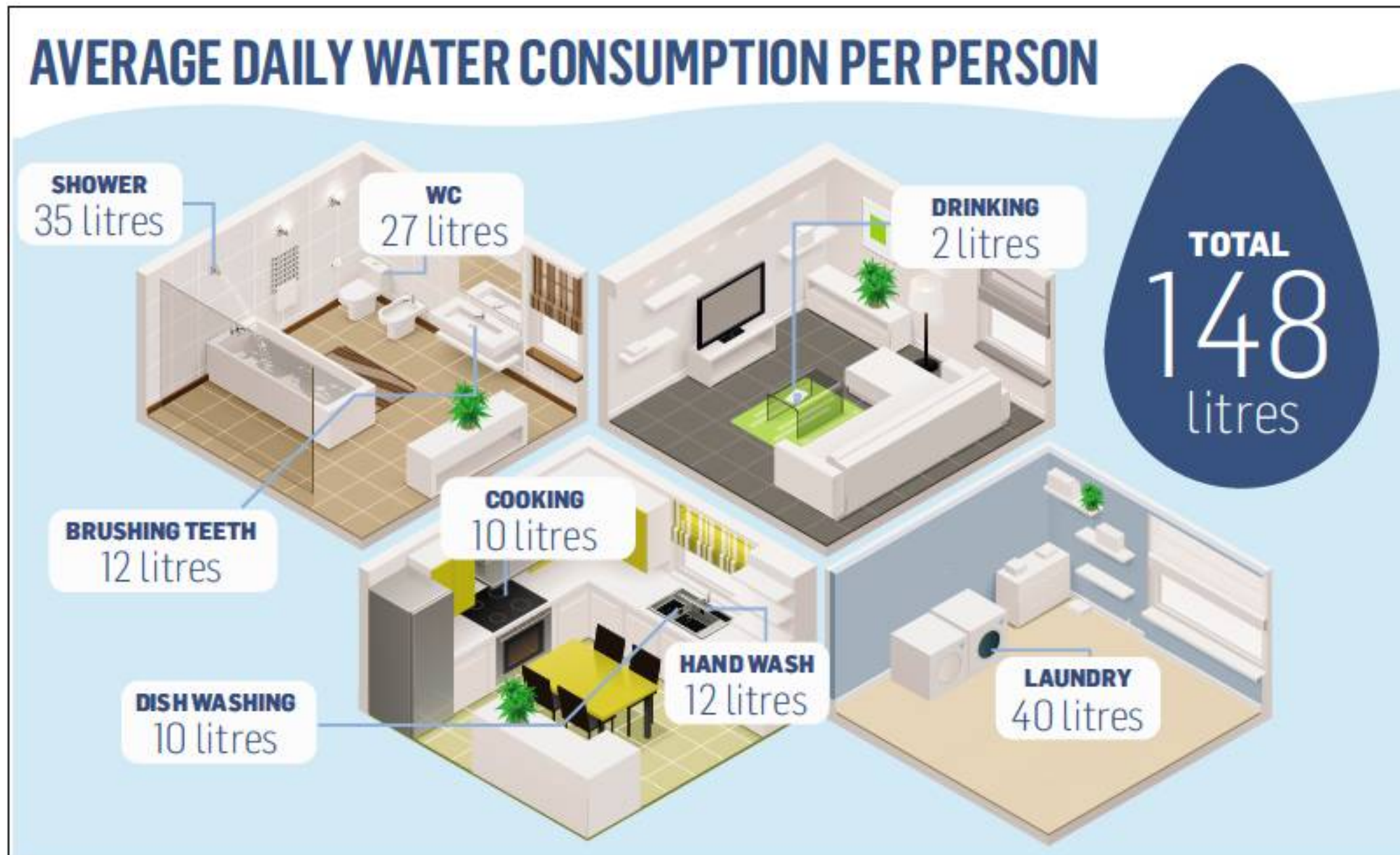
Average water use per person is estimated at 150 litres a day, but leaks can result in thousands of litres being wasted. A study by Galway City Council found that one home in the city was using 61,000 litres a day – the equivalent demand from almost 410 people.

Excessive

Homeowners will have a number of ways to check if they are using excessive amounts of water – by comparing bills with neighbours living in similar household sizes, or by calculating the 'average' use per person against their bill to see if excessive amounts of water are being used.

Irish Water, which took control of the water network from January 1, has previously revealed that leaks were found in supplies servicing one in 20 homes already fitted with meters.

Repairs had been carried out



WATER USE BY ACTIVITY

ACTIVITY	AMOUNT OF WATER (litres)	ACTIVITY	AMOUNT OF WATER (litres)
Bath	80	Washing machine modern	45
5 Minute Shower	35	Washing machine	65
Power Shower	125 in less than 5 minutes	Dishwasher	20
Brushing teeth with tap running	6 per minute	Washing car with Bucket	10
Brushing teeth with tap off	1	Hosepipe	9 per minute
W.C. Flush standard	9		
W.C. Flush modern	6		

after leaks were detected in mains pipes outside properties during the installation of meters, with experts putting the cost of fixing the leak at up to €600 each.

A total of 80,000 meters have already been fitted in homes across the State, and 1.05 million will be installed by December 2016.

Another 300,000 apartments will be billed based on an average, or 'assessed' charge, but a pilot project is under way to see if meters can be fitted in these buildings.

It had been expected that homeowners would have to pay for any repairs on their properties from their own pockets.

But last summer the *Irish*

Independent revealed that the first-leak policy was aimed at softening the blow for homeowners who are likely to be hit with average bills of up to €350 each. The scheme will cover the cost of repairing pipes between the footpath, where the meter is installed, and hall door. It will not cover internal leaks.

Similar schemes are in place across the UK. Anglia Water pays for pipe repairs, but only for people on social welfare.

The policy being developed here will apply to all homeowners regardless of their income, but any subsequent leaks will have to be repaired by the customer. The Government expects as many as 100,000 homes to need repairs.