



Water Forum Position Paper on Group Water Schemes

12th July 2024

Background

Under the Water Services Act 2017, the Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) has a statutory role to advise the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on rural water in Ireland. The Forum's Strategic Objective to 'Be a proactive and authoritative national statutory body, leading on water policy, management and governance' also applies to rural water, with an aim that the Forum has direct input into rural water policy and the development of rural water services.

This piece of advice is focused on the delivery of drinking water services to the group water sector, which is an agreed position of all Members of the Water Forum. A series of additional pieces of advice will be made on other aspects of rural water (including private wells) later in 2024. In order to develop this policy advice, Members of the Forum's Water Services Standing Committee received presentations on rural water services from the Rural Water Section of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and also the National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS). The Executive also incorporated learnings of the Tobin Report on the Review of the Rural Water Sector. Members participated in a fieldtrip organised by the NFGWS to a number of Group Water Schemes to learn about work on the ground to produce potable water and initiatives of community engagement and source protection.

Background to the Group Water Sector

- Group Water Schemes (GWSs) are community owned, community-run organisations which provide potable drinking water to their local members.
- The Group Water Sector represents 6.2% of the population, with 4.4% of the population connected to private Group Water Schemes and 1.8% connected to public Group Water Schemes.
- Private group water schemes are supplies where a group water scheme, set up by the local community, manages the abstraction, treatment and

distribution of potable water. There are 380 private GWS, serving ~200,000 people.

- Public group schemes are supplies where a group water scheme, set up by the local community, manages the distribution of treated water to the users. Uisce Éireann manages the abstraction and treatment of the water.

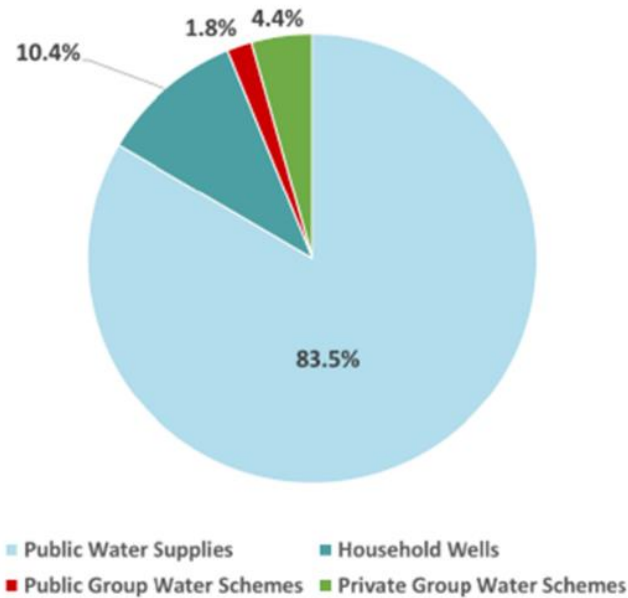


Figure 1. Population Served by Water Supply Type in Ireland (Published in the Tobin Report)

Key Roles and Responsibilities in GWS

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) is the government department responsible for the delivery of rural water services in Ireland. The DHLGH is responsible for the development of rural water policy and funding for the GWS sector through the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme (MARWP - capital funding and investment, operation and management costs). The DHLGH also provide support funding to the National Federation of Group Water Schemes.
- The National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) is the representative organisation for the community-owned group water scheme (GWS) sector in Ireland. The NFGWS works in partnership with government departments, Local Authorities (LAs) and other state and non-state stakeholders to support drinking water services for its GWS members. They provide advisory, training and developmental services to GWS.
- Under the Drinking Water Regulations, Local Authorities are the Supervisory Authority for private water supplies. They also have a devolved role from the DHLGH to administer funding under the Rural Water Programme.
- Uisce Éireann (UÉ) is the national single public utility for the delivery of public water services and do not have a statutory role in relation to rural water services. However, UÉ supply water to publicly sourced GWS and engage

with the DHLGH and the NFGWS in relation to Taking in Charge of GWS, where required.

- The Rural Water Working Group of the DHLGH was established in 2018 by the Minister to conduct a review of the wider investment needs relating to rural water services to ensure an equality of outcome between those who receive water services from Uisce Éireann and non-Uisce Éireann customers. In 2021, the DHLGH funded Tobin Consultancy to conduct a review of the governance, supervision, funding and wider investment needs relating to the Rural Water Sector, to support the Rural Water Working Group.

Strengths of the GWS Sector

- GWS provide many tangible and intangible benefits beyond their core function of providing potable water to rural communities.
- The sector has taken on an increased role in environmental management through its source protection pilot projects, typified by the ongoing integrated source protection planning and mitigation actions initiative. These projects aim to protect or improve drinking water quality and also have a significant number of co-benefits for the environment as a whole. These pilot projects have now become part of the mainstream funding programme under the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme (MARWP) to support the implementation of the River Basin Management Plan.
- The Tobin Review of the rural water sector found that the level of trust between the GWSs and Local Authorities was strong, where GWS welcomed the access that they have to technical personnel based in their own county, who can respond at short notice to issues that arise on their schemes.
- Inclusive engagement and participation form an essential component of GWS, run by and for local communities, and the sector has developed effective models of community engagement around water and environmental management.
- Participation and community engagement in GWSs gives members a sense of ownership, engagement and connection with the local water supply. This was reflected in the Water Forum's commissioned national survey, which found that those connected to private GWSs were more knowledgeable about where their water comes from and how it is treated, relative to public water consumers. In a study commissioned by the NFGWS, the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland and Dublin City University reported that those connected to private GWSs also had a very good knowledge of the impact they had on the quality of water in their vicinity.
- The NFGWS report that the vast majority of private GWSs do not wish to be taken in charge, illustrating the sense of ownership and commitment by the communities.
- The sector has benefited from an investment of over €1.2 billion for water by the state since the late 90's which has significantly improved water quality

compliance. This has resulted in the growth of professional expertise within the sector with over 140 GWSs in Design Build Operate (DBO) contracts and circa 170 people directly employed by GWSs themselves in terms of management, administration and caretaking roles, along with resilient boards and officers, including chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers. A DBO contract is where an outside contractor has been employed by the GWS to design, build and operate the treatment plant for the duration of that contract.

Challenges for the GWS Sector

- Annual EPA reports show that drinking water quality in private supplies lags behind that of public supplies. 1 in 20 Private GWS is failing to meet the main microbiological standard *E. coli* (*Escherichia coli*), compared to 1 in 200 for public water supplies.
- In 2022, 16 private GWSs supplying 14,000 people failed the standard for Trihalomethanes (THMs). In 2020, the European Commission stated that Ireland had failed to take the measures necessary to ensure THM compliance in 13 private GWS.
- It is usually GWS which do not operate under Design Build Operate (DBO) contracts that have water quality issues (1.3% of the population) where the management weakness can present risks for consumers when equipment failures occur. One finding from the Tobin Report was that the most sustainable long-term solution for GWSs with limited management capacity is rationalisation/amalgamation with neighbouring GWSs or taking in charge by Uisce Éireann. There is also considerable potential for GWS currently not in DBO to join DBO bundles as the current round of contracts come to an end.
- The management structures of Public GWSs vary from very strong, to inactive, to none. The majority of Public GWSs have no active management structure in place and are commonly referred to as 'orphan' schemes, which make the process of taking in charge difficult.
- The existence of the 'orphan' Public GWSs in particular, if not taken in charge quickly, will present progressively increasing difficulties once Local Authorities fully exit from their agreement with Uisce Éireann between now and 2026. Such challenges include leakage impacting on the quality and quantity of the supply to the consumers on the schemes.
- Following a review of the role of Local Authorities in rural water as part of the Tobin Report, it was found that the number of LA staff dedicated to rural water is decreasing and the current rural water model, based on county structure, predates Uisce Éireann operating as the national single public utility.
- There is significant variance in the structures within Local Authorities in respect of the delivery of rural water services, where responsibilities sometimes fall between the water services and the environment directorates.
- Regulated private GWS under Design Build Operate (DBO) management are nearing the end of their contracts, so agreeing and drafting new contracts will

need to be prioritised, keeping in mind the need to incorporate climate adaptation into these contracts.

Policy Recommendations to the Minister / DHLGH

Governance

- The role of Local Authorities in the delivery and administration of rural water needs to be defined, along with a commitment to additional resources and training where required to ensure effective governance of the rural water sector.
- Each Local Authority should review and update its Rural Water Strategic Plan (first developed in the 2000s), which should include;
 - An assessment of the primary needs of rural water consumers (current and future growth)
 - Identification of existing assets and infrastructure and their condition
 - Identification of existing water quality and quantity issues in each scheme
 - Consultation and agreement with GWSs within each county regarding possible long-term options for optimal management of each GWS, such as standalone, consolidation (amalgamation, rationalisation or taken in charge), expansion of group water schemes in addition to future operational management such as DBO or otherwise
 - Preparation of cost estimates and a prioritised investment strategy
- These Rural Water Strategic Plans should provide a comprehensive, costed and strategically objective approach for the development of rural water services in Local Authority areas, and they should inform decisions at policy level.
- The proposal for a shared national service (similar to LAWPRO) to oversee and administer the rural water sector, which was approved in principle by the rural water working group in 2019, should be reviewed. This governance approach has the potential to reduce the inconsistencies in the oversight and administration, which was highlighted as an existing challenge by the Tobin Report.
- Due to the short timeframe for remaining LA water services staff to transfer to Uisce Éireann, the review of the role of the LA and consideration of a shared service for rural water should be carried out as quickly as possible. This would support retaining LA staff and their expertise in the rural water sector.
- The process of amalgamation and rationalisation of small GWS needs to be prioritised, particularly where there are water quality issues. The DHLGH, LAs and the NFGWS should continue to work in partnership by using a joined-up thinking approach to communicate the long-term benefits

of rationalisation/amalgamation for relevant GWSs. During this process, the LAs should consult with a scheme to consider and agree on all options available to them (standalone, amalgamation/rationalisation, taken in charge) and the agreed changes should be included in the LA Rural Water Strategic Plan and a project recommendation made to the DHLGH.

- The process to Take in Charge of remaining 'Orphan Schemes' should be expedited due to poor governance and lack of management of these schemes. This would not only address the water quality issues, it would also allow for better management of leakage and improve the sustainability of the supply. The prioritisation and timeframe for schemes to be Taken in Charge by Uisce Éireann - should be informed by Revised Local Authority Rural Water Strategic Plans.
- The drafting and agreeing of new Design, Build and Operate contracts needs to be prioritised to ensure the delivery of clean drinking water to the sector. Consideration of the length of these contracts must be carefully considered; while the current 20-year contracts provide stability and assurance to the schemes, there is a risk that the contract does not account for changes in raw water quality due to climate change (and associated changes to water treatment requirements). The Forum is of the view that if a long contract (>10 years) is granted, an interim review of raw water quality and potential changes due to climate change must also be included in the contract.
- The DHLGH should engage with the NFGWS to identify the best approach to the management of non-DBO private schemes (new DBO bundles/rationalisation/amalgamation/taken in charge) to ensure all water supplies meet the required EU Drinking Water Standards. There is also significant potential for private GWSs that currently don't have a DBO contract, to join as DBO bundle as the first round of contracts come to their end over the next 3 to 5 years. Recruitment of GWSs to enter into DBO should be prioritised given the success of the process over the past 20 years.
- The community engagement model being implemented by GWSs in source protection should be replicated for public water supplies and for the implementation of the River Basin Management Plan.

Funding

- Funding should be prioritised for the development of Integrated source protection plans and their implementation (Measure A1 in MARWP) as this would not only improve drinking water quality in a scheme, it would also support the protection and restoration of waterbodies required for the Water Framework Directive. It is our understanding there are 84 funding

applications for source protection projects under the next MARWP, which the Forum believes should be evaluated and prioritised where successful.

- Funding applications for Water Treatment Provision, Improvements and Capital Replacement (Measure A2 in MARWP) should be prioritised where the scheme has an existing water quality issue. This is essential to ensure that drinking water from GWSs meets EU Drinking Water Standards. Where possible GWSs should be encouraged to enter into a DBO contract to ensure treatment infrastructure is managed as professionally as possible, as it is these schemes where water quality issues have been more prevalent.
- Funding should be prioritised for the private GWSs who have reported THM exceedances, particularly the schemes which have an EU judgement against them for persistent THM issues.
- Funding and training may also be needed to support schemes for climate change adaptation, where a change in raw water quality may need additional treatment, outside of existing DBO contracts. Where new DBO contracts are being developed, consideration of the impacts of climate change on water availability and water quality should be included. Funding may be required to support a scheme during/following extreme weather events.
- Clarity and possible funding support may need to be provided to GWSs (e.g. completion of abstraction assessments) that are impacted by the new Water Environment (Abstractions and Associated Impoundments) Act 2022.
- Funding should be provided for training to support employees and volunteers of group water schemes, to ensure they have the capacity to manage their scheme to produce high quality drinking water aligned with European Drinking Water Regulations.
- Funding should be allocated for the improvement of oversight and governance of the sector.

Policy Recommendations to the Group Water Schemes / NFGWS / Local Authorities

Communications

- In line with the EU Recast Drinking Water Directive, management committees of group water schemes (i.e. the water suppliers) will have to develop a clear plan to improve access to information on local water supply to their members. The NFGWS should provide guidance to each scheme on how improve this communication.
- Members of each group water scheme should have easy access to information about the management of their supply (contacts, details of

management – e.g. DBO) and water quality, including any water quality issues, such as THMs. This is the responsibility of the GWS management committees, however the NFGWS can encourage and support GWSs through this process. A summary of water quality monitoring data carried out by the Local Authorities should be circulated to GWS members. This water quality monitoring data carried out by the Local Authorities should be made available to the public in a searchable, open-data format, the same format and metrics to be common across all Local Authorities.

- To support source protection initiatives, the management committees of GWSs, with support from the NFGWS, should educate their Members on the source of their supply, any pressures on raw water, along with advice on source protection measures.
- In line with the EU Recast Drinking Water Directive, GWS Members should have access to information on their water use. This is the responsibility of the GWS management committees, however the NFGWS could provide guidance to schemes on how this information could be shared. Each GWS should educate their members on the need to conserve water, along with advice on how to improve water efficiency in the home.

Sustainability

- Each GWS should be planning for future impacts from climate change; for example, changes to water availability, water abstraction pressures during drought periods, changes to raw water quality and treatment requirements (e.g. THMs, Manganese). The NFGWS and the Local Authorities must continue to engage with the schemes to ensure that each scheme is preparing for climate change adaptation.
- Local Authorities should engage with the GWS sector on the implementation and review of any Local Authority Climate Action Plans.

Water Quality

- It is the responsibility of the GWS management committees to ensure that water quality produced is of high quality, and that management plans are in place to deal with incidents at water treatment plants and any water quality issues. Local Authorities, in partnership with the NFGWS, must support GWSs to ensure they are prepared for emergency response if an unforeseen water quality incident occurs. All contractors (where schemes have a DBO contract) and other private GWS must develop clear emergency response plans to ensure they have the capacity to deal with an incident, and a clear plan for communicating any issues with members of the GWS and with the HSE.