

25-30

STRATEGIC
PLAN



The National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) is the representative organisation for the community-owned group water scheme (GWS) sector in Ireland.

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Chairperson’s Statement

As we begin a new strategic period at the NFGWS, we do so amid a time of significant transformation for drinking water services and the wider environment.

The group water scheme sector faces increasing regulatory demands, including a renewed emphasis on water safety planning. At the same time, we are called upon to contribute meaningfully to Ireland’s efforts to improve water quality and tackle the growing climate and biodiversity crises.

Perhaps most interestingly, although much around us is changing, the mission and vision of the NFGWS remain unchanged. For over 25 years, the NFGWS has been committed to providing effective leadership, representation and mentoring for group water schemes. It has maintained a goal of ensuring sustainable safe and wholesome drinking water supplies on a consistent professional basis, through a co-operative approach that is also mindful of the role the sector can play in taking broader environmental action.

Regulations change, external factors fluctuate, but the goalposts remain the same. The community-owned and community-operated group water sector has played an enormous role in helping rural Ireland to thrive and it will continue to do so over the coming years. Our strategic plan details how the NFGWS hopes to contribute in this regard.

Looking ahead, the sector is entering what may be considered the third major chapter in its history. In its formative years, it was all about finding a source and getting pipes in the ground. Since the late 1990s, over €1

billion has been invested in treatment systems, infrastructural works and other upgrades that have helped to build a sector that can be relied upon by 200,000 people for potable water. As we explore the key touchstones that will define the next period, the concept of ‘sustainability’ comes very much to the fore.

But what does sustainability mean in this context? It means the implementation of a robust water safety planning process that helps to ensure safe and reliable drinking water for all members. It means focusing on source protection as the primary barrier to water pollution. It is the successful turnaround of Design, Build and Operate contracts, a concept that has proved very successful for the sector. It includes the completion of the rural water sector review, thus providing a roadmap for rural water and an improved long-term vision.

It is placing a renewed emphasis on water demand management as climate pressures increase on drinking water sources. Financial sustainability is key, with amalgamation and rationalisation being important discussion points in this regard. Lastly, sustainability relies on impeccable GWS governance structures, professionally organised and managed, backboned by a dedicated board and community ethos.

Through this Strategic Plan, the NFGWS outlines how we will support group water schemes in rising to these challenges and in seizing the opportunities for a resilient, community-led future.

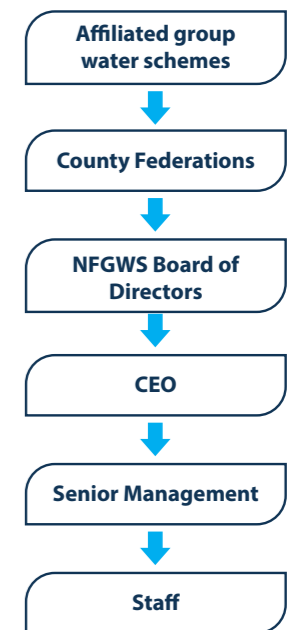


Organisational overview

Who we are

Group water schemes are community-owned and community-operated drinking water supplies, which provide drinking water to approximately 200,000 people across rural Ireland. The National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) is the representative organisation for the group water scheme sector. While representing the sector at national, regional & local level, the Federation also provides an essential advisory and mentoring service for approximately 380 group water scheme members through its regional offices located in Monaghan, Tuam & Tullamore.

Established in 1997, the NFGWS continues to represent and provide support to the community-owned group water scheme sector today in its delivery of essential drinking water services across rural Ireland. The organisation also works in partnership with local authorities and the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government.



Our key work areas



Leadership



Support & Mentoring



GWS Training



Facilitation



Representation



Policy Input

Key components



Our mission

To provide effective representation and mentoring for group water schemes, securing a sustainable and resilient rural water sector that provides a professional service to its members and meets its obligations towards protection of sources, water conservation, and the consistent delivery of safe and wholesome drinking water supplies.



Our vision

- Safe and wholesome drinking water supplies on a consistent professional basis.
- A sustainable, financially secure, reliable and efficient GWS sector.
- Increased sustainable environmental action within the rural water sector.
- A co-operative approach to water services delivery.



NFGWS values

- Quality water and quality service
- Professionalism in service delivery
- Partnership approach with statutory and non-statutory agencies
- Democratic governance: ownership and control by the community for the community



2025-2030 Touchstones

- Compliance with new regulatory obligations
- The turnaround of Design, Build and Operate contracts
- The completion of the rural water sector review
- Continued investment in GWS infrastructure and operations
- Climate adaptation and mitigation throughout the sector
- Drinking water source protection and the GWS sector's role in Ireland's Water Action Plan
- Strengthening community participation in group water schemes

2025-2030 NFGWS Strategic Priorities

In keeping with the State's Water Services Policy Statement 2024-2030, the NFGWS's Strategic Plan is structured under three overarching strategic priorities. These priorities are key themes that will underpin the organisation's objectives between now and 2030. They are:

Availability and reliability

Accessible, dependable and reliable water services, with a focus on continued investment in infrastructure.

Safety and quality

Water services that are safe and protect human health, with the prioritisation of source protection and effective oversight.

Sustainability

Water services that are efficient, resilient and sustainable in the long term.

The next section breaks down each strategic priority into further detail, which includes NFGWS objectives, desired outcomes for the GWS sector and examples of NFGWS actions that the NFGWS will use to measure its impact in achieving said objectives. The list of actions under each objective are not exhaustive but are included to give an insight into how the NFGWS will structure its internal workplans over the period.



Strategic Priorities



Availability and Reliability

Assist group water schemes in maintaining reliable, sustainable sources, compliant with abstractions legislation.

Desired Outcome

That every group water scheme (GWS) source is environmentally sustainable and can provide adequate levels of supply at all times.

NFGWS actions

- Promote and assist GWSs with the completion of abstraction assessments on privately sourced schemes where required.
- Ensure GWSs are well-informed of legislative requirements and options, and assist GWSs in meeting said requirements.



Help to ensure group water schemes are prepared and are adapting to meet the challenges of climate change.

Desired Outcome

Group water schemes are energy efficient and have a reduced carbon footprint, with a significant portion of GWSs having undertaken an energy audit by 2030. A sector that has adapted to build resilience into supplies to mitigate against the challenges of climate change.

NFGWS actions

- Encourage and facilitate the completion of energy audits on GWSs and the implementation of its recommendations.
- Promote the learnings from the NFGWS Enabling Rural Communities to Combat Climate Change and Enhance Biodiversity through Community-Owned Water Supplies (BECA) project across the GWS sector.
- Encourage the implementation of climate adaptation measures on every GWS to prepare for extreme weather events.

Promote a drinking water service that meets the demands and expectations of group water scheme members.

Desired Outcome

A GWS sector that is renowned for its professional service and community-orientated approach to drinking water delivery.

NFGWS actions

- Help to establish regular and timely member communication through appropriate channels.
- Encourage and help GWSs to have high levels of member service, through training, mentoring and regular communication.
- Assist in ensuring quality Design, Build Operate (DBO) service through the NFGWS DBO validation service and the Federation's liaison role within the DBO model.

Assist in the delivery of adequate capital and operational supports for the GWS sector.

Desired Outcome

A revised Multi-annual Rural Water Programme (MARWP) that is streamlined and adequately resourced to meet the needs of the sector. A successful turnaround of DBO projects with enhanced, 20-year contracts, based on the learnings since the introduction of the concept. There is continued capital funding support provided for essential water quality investment needs and the principle of equity and fairness in regard to State funding for water services continues to be reflected in the levels of operational and capital funding for group water schemes.

NFGWS actions

- Make effective representations to help ensure that the medium and long-term water quality needs of the sector are met.
- Assist in ensuring the successful turnaround of 20-year DBO contracts and the inclusion of new GWSs into the DBO process.
- Advocate for improved funding availability for capital investment and operational supports in both DBO and non-DBO group water schemes.



Safety and Quality

Work with all stakeholders to maintain high water quality standards on group water schemes.

Desired Outcome

That there is effective operational monitoring programmes (including raw water) in place on all regulated privately-sourced GWSs. There is full compliance with the new drinking water regulations by 2029. There is continued support for quality-related upgrade projects available to all GWSs under the MARWP and that solutions to legacy water quality-related projects are completed under the MARWP 2024-2026.

NFGWS actions

- Assist GWSs in developing more robust operational monitoring programmes.
- Help GWSs to identify sustainable solutions to address water quality issues and provide support to GWSs through the construction process for water quality-related projects.
- Advocate for GWSs in securing associated funding to address issues in a sustainable fashion.

Support effective water safety planning from catchment to consumer.

Desired Outcome

The successful completion and roll-out of the NFGWS water safety planning tool to undertake risk assessments and risk management, as well as improved implementation of the NFGWS quality assurance (QA) system.

NFGWS actions

- Complete the NFGWS water safety planning tool and assist in the development of individual water safety plans for all group water schemes.
- Update the NFGWS quality assurance system in line with the WSP process.
- Promote effective implementation of the NFGWS QA system.



SAFE DRINKING WATER STARTS WITH US ALL

Lead the sector in placing an enhanced focus on drinking water source protection and better quantify the wider environmental and societal benefits of such source protection efforts.

Desired Outcome

Risk assessment and risk management of all privately-sourced GWSs is completed by July 2027. The completion of integrated source protection plans (ISPPs) on schemes in Areas for Action assigned to the NFGWS under the River Basin Management Plan's Water Action Plan. The preparation and commencement of ISPPs on further privately-sourced GWSs by 2030. Continued implementation of targeted source protection measures, including the promotion of projects for the Farming for Water EIP.

NFGWS actions

- Manage procurement and provide oversight for completion of ISPPs under the MARWP.
- Assist in the completion of risk assessment and risk management on all GWS source catchments by July 2027.
- Work with GWSs and other stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of targeted source protection measures with multiple environmental benefits.

Provide improved training and mentoring support for GWSs on all aspects of water quality.

Desired Outcome

The successful roll-out of training for water safety planning source protection and other water quality related courses. Continued and enhanced support for GWSs on QA implementation and operational training needs. Enhanced mentoring and guidance is available to GWSs for water quality monitoring.

NFGWS actions

- Develop and launch new training courses, such as water safety planning training and source protection training for GWS staff and boards.
- Provide one-to-one guidance to GWSs on all water quality-related aspects.
- Promote widespread participation in operational training through the Water Services Training Group (WSTG) and facilitation of other relevant training courses.



NATIONAL FEDERATION of GROUP WATER SCHEMES

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT DRINKING WATER SOURCES

Promote health & safety on group water schemes.

Desired Outcome

Fully trained and adequately resourced GWS personnel that are mindful of all aspects of health and safety.

NFGWS actions

- Review GWS health and safety measures and preparedness as part of NFGWS QA visits.
- Continually promote best practices regarding health & safety through NFGWS communication channels.
- Facilitate health and safety-related training courses for GWS personnel.



Sustainability

Help to ensure that GWSs are financially secure and have robust operational structures.

Desired Outcome

GWSs have sustainable operational structures and adequate finances. They are well trained in financial management and are planning for the future.

NFGWS actions

- Promote amalgamation & rationalisation as a means to ensure sustainable GWS structures and assist GWSs throughout the process.
- Provide financial training & guidance to GWSs.
- Promote GWS strategic planning and professionalism in GWS approaches to all aspects of operations.

Place a renewed emphasis on water demand management and assist the GWS sector in promoting water conservation.

Desired Outcome

Consistently low levels of unaccounted-for water (UFW) maintained across GWS networks thanks to infrastructural investment, good management and proactive leak detection.

NFGWS actions

- Advocate for necessary funding for GWSs under the MARWP and other sources to address UFW issues.
- Promote the completion of universal metering & district metered area establishment on all GWSs.
- Encourage a consistent approach to water auditing and investment in water conservation across GWS networks.



Help to strengthen community participation in drinking water delivery.

Desired Outcome

Diverse and energetic GWS boards, working with engaged, educated, and supportive GWS members. GWSs are exemplars of good governance, effective community-ownership and the co-operative ethos.

NFGWS actions

- Promote good governance on GWSs and deliver appropriate training.
- Assist GWSs in improving board/committee participation, with improved gender and age balance.
- Help GWSs to develop communication strategies that bolster community participation.

Ensure best governance and operational practices across the group water scheme sector.

Desired Outcome

A more professionally organised and managed GWS sector, delivering an efficient and cost effective water delivery service to all its membership. A sector that learns from each other and showcases its co-operative values to the wider public.

NFGWS actions

- Seek the wider introduction of paid management personnel, on a full or part-time basis, to help to achieve a more sustainable GWS sector.
- Continue to celebrate the GWS Excellence Awards and the subsequent media promotion of award winners.
- Utilise annual events, such as World Water Day, the NFGWS Rural Water Week and Heritage Week, to highlight the work of the sector, and explore new initiatives to provide opportunities for discussion and learning.

Guide a sector that continues to innovate and is a leader in delivering quality water services.

Desired Outcome

The sector continues to explore new ways of improving GWS operations; it is embracing technology and piloting new projects.

NFGWS actions

- Create and roll-out online training courses for GWSs that maximises the potential of on-demand training and multimedia delivery.
- Continue with NFGWS involvement in academic research, through direct partnership and by facilitating relevant research involving the GWS sector.
- Encourage GWSs to embrace new ideas and developments in the sector.

Promote the ability of the GWS sector to assist in addressing biodiversity, climate and wider environmental crises in Ireland.

Desired Outcome

The group water scheme sector is renowned as an environmentally-sustainable sector that contributes to positive outcomes for biodiversity, climate action and the wider environment.

NFGWS actions

- Encourage the implementation of BECA learnings that have co-benefits for biodiversity, climate action and water quality across that sector.
- Help to ensure GWS compliance with the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and other relevant regulations.
- Educate GWSs in understanding the importance of addressing the biodiversity and climate crises, and of the need to promote action within their communities.



Ensure that the NFGWS is effective, efficient and is adequately resourced to achieve its strategic priorities.

Desired Outcome

The Federation delivers on its priorities and objectives, set out in its Strategic Plan. It is adequately resourced and effective in its partnership with DHLGH and local authorities. It maintains a strong working relationship with other like-minded organisations. It maintains good governance structures in keeping with its co-operative ethos. Its staff are well-trained, motivated and fulfilled.

NFGWS actions

- Place renewed emphasis on the partnership approach with DHLGH and LAs to support a robust GWS sector.
- Completion of interim reviews of the NFGWS Strategic Plan.
- Uphold good governance at NFGWS board level and improved engagement between the board and staff.



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