

# NFGWS Annual Delegates Conference

7<sup>th</sup> March 2019

## Chairpersons Address

It gives me great pleasure to introduce this year's annual report, my 17th since taking over as NFGWS Chairperson from Dr Jerry Cowley in 2002 and my final report as Chairperson. Reflecting on those years and, indeed, on the years since I first joined the Board of this Federation following its formation 22 years ago, the determination of men and women across Ireland to give freely of their time and energy to provide a drinking water service to their communities has remained constant, as has the effort of my national Board colleagues and our management and staff team in providing stewardship and support for the sector, negotiating on its behalf and securing the financial resources needed to bring all group water schemes up to the required standard. Together with our partners in the Department and across a range of statutory and voluntary organisations, we have shared an incredible journey and can take satisfaction from knowing that the accomplishments of recent decades have provided a solid foundation for our successors – and for generations to come – to continue on that journey for as long as rural communities require a safe and wholesome drinking water supply.

Back in 2002, the EPA reported *E.coli* failures on more than 700 GWS supplies, many of them gross exceedances. In its latest report, 13 schemes had *E.coli* failures. The massive and sustained improvement in drinking water quality across the GWS sector is undeniable, thanks in part to the construction of treatment facilities but due also to the development and promotion of a Quality Assurance approach that is grounded in consistent management. There was a time when water demand in the GWS sector put enormous pressure on treatment facilities, pumping systems, storage tanks and distribution networks. Today, this sector is recognised as a leader in water conservation efforts. The concept of source protection was almost unheard of in Ireland when this Federation was established, but over the years we played a leading role in the National Source Protection Pilot Project and in the mapping of source catchments so that today we are equipped to provide a lead in the development and implementation of full source protection plans. Equitable treatment for domestic connections on group water schemes in

relation to State financial supports was an aspiration, whereas today it is a reality.

Of course, nothing can be taken for granted and building the resilience of the GWS sector will always be a challenge. In some areas the process of implementing change has been painfully slow, nowhere more so than in the continued over-reliance on voluntarism and the hesitancy of committees to employ paid personnel to manage their drinking water service. It is more than 10 years now since the NFGWS Board began advocating, as policy, a professional approach to drinking water delivery, yet to this day only a minority of schemes have paid staff employed, either in an operational or management capacity, or both. It is time to face reality: rural organisations are competing for a shrinking pool of volunteers and the prospect of having to maintain pumps, treatment systems and distribution networks – in addition to the onerous legal responsibilities that attach to a group water scheme – will deter all but the most committed volunteer community activist. Another compelling reason for schemes to move towards paying someone to do the job day-in and day-out is the mounting evidence that parametric non-compliance (and microbiological non-compliance in particular) is largely confined to small schemes that don't have employees.

The increased subsidy rate is pitched at a level that makes it affordable to employ staff, especially for large and medium sized schemes. For schemes with less than 100 houses and even for larger schemes, an obvious solution is to enter (at a minimum) into some kind of shared services agreement with your neighbours. Better still if you and your neighbours give active and positive consideration to rationalisation and to fully amalgamate where that makes sense. The examples provided by the Pathfinder projects in Limerick and in Offaly are there for all to see. The process is now established and NFGWS development officers will guide you through it. The financial incentive provided by Subsidy C for smaller schemes has been increased and the recently-announced capital programme will assist, as a priority, those schemes that are in the process of rationalising. In welcoming the evidence that many schemes are seeing the sense of rationalisation, I would appeal to schemes generally to critically examine their own situation with regard to providing a sustainable and quality service and to set aside narrow, parochial considerations in deciding what is best for your members.

The broad issues guiding investment of public monies in water services over the next seven years were announced in a Water Services Policy Statement issued in May last. Quality and conservation remain priorities, while future proofing is introduced as a priority consideration. Just as these three priority headings are informing the deliberations of the working group established to consider the rural water investment programme, they must also inform the thinking of individual group water schemes wishing to secure funding support under the new multi-annual Rural Water Programme. A more stringent, evidence-based approach to funding submissions has been introduced and the Expert Panel has been given an enhanced role in deciding awards. What this means for group schemes is that a full audit of assets and infrastructural gaps needs to be completed from catchment to tap. Is there a variation in raw water quality that could be addressed through infrastructural investment in the catchment or at the source abstraction point? Is the current treatment process fit for purpose and, if not, what capital improvements are required? Will storage tanks require refurbishment or replacement over the coming years? Are there critical mains that will need replacement? Is there any deficiency of valves, bulk meters or domestic meters and are we using these tools to their full extent? Have we the resilience to withstand severe weather conditions and, if not, are there infrastructural improvements that would make us better prepared? These are the questions that all schemes need to be answering and that 139 schemes have already been answering as part of the comprehensive infrastructural survey currently being conducted by this Federation. The more than 200 schemes that have yet to complete this survey should be doing so as a matter of urgency, so that both they and those deciding on capital funding can make informed decisions about investment needs over the next 7 years, at least.

It isn't always about financial investment, of course, and changing mindsets/building water awareness in communities is a valuable investment in its own right, especially at a time when the issue of Climate Change is moving to the top of the global agenda. Those schemes that have engaged with local schools as part of our Educating Communities Through Schools initiative will bear testimony to the great value of such outreach and I would strongly urge schemes more generally to follow suit and to avail of the excellent *All About Water* booklet that underpins the Federation's work in this area. The NFGWS will be there to support you in this endeavour, while the assistance of local authority water services staff and of other statutory

agencies can be relied upon, as can the co-operation of DBO treatment plant operators. It is one thing to shape the thinking of young people, it is quite another to teach an old dog new tricks! Although the engagement with schools goes some way in that pupils are encouraged to talk to their parents and wider family circle about what they learn, there is also a need for more direct engagement with householders and farmers and businesses within our catchments so that they become more water aware and understand that their actions or inactions can impact on the quality of local drinking water sources and on treated water demand.

From the early days of the Rural Water Programme we focused on end-of-pipe treatment solutions to our raw water quality issues because the immediate protection of human health was of paramount importance. The investment of some €1.2 billion has proved its worth as witnessed by the massive improvement in drinking water quality and a key objective for the future must be to protect that investment through timely upgrading and maintenance of infrastructure, remembering also that additional parameters are being introduced under the recast EU Drinking Water Directive. In this regard, the evaluation of processes being conducted in treatment plants that have had THM issues is surely a model that could be adapted to assess other potential contamination risks. Schemes nearing the end of their DBO contracts that have full treatment in place should be particularly keen to complete competent evaluations of their treatment infrastructure and processes so that identified gaps may be addressed in any future O&M contract.

There is a growing consciousness that drinking water suppliers must focus on preventative as well as end-of-pipe solutions. While in Austria last September as part of a gathering of Europe's community-owned drinking water co-operatives, our NFGWS delegation was highly impressed at the reliance of both rural and urban drinking water supplies on source protection as their **primary** barrier in ensuring drinking water quality. As outlined in the most recent issue of *Rural Water News*, simple, low cost and usually non technical solutions are employed in the catchment to deal with specific threats to the water supply, with remarkable results. What was evident was a long-standing buy-in by citizens to the concepts of source protection and water conservation. What we also learned was that landholders within source catchments do not suffer any financial loss, as vulnerable lands are rented by

the drinking water scheme against landspreading, while still allowing the farmer to harvest the grass that grows there.

The Irish privately-sourced group water scheme sector as a whole needs to adopt as its mantra 'prevention is better than cure' and to utilise completed catchment mapping/zone of contribution delineation reports as a starting point in developing full source protection plans. 'Putting the right measure in the right place' to prevent or mitigate the risk of pollutants entering sources is critical, as is the co-option of citizens within the source catchment as partners in the development and implementation of such plans, rather than as mere spectators. These are objectives of Phase II of the NFGWS Source Protection Pilot Project that is currently underway on an impacted surface water supply in County Monaghan and groundwater sourced schemes in Roscommon and Westmeath that vary in vulnerability. As group water schemes cannot do this job on their own, a key element in both pilot projects is the active engagement of a range of statutory and non statutory agencies and the enthusiasm with which these agencies have greeted our initiative is to be applauded, as is the recognition by the Department-led working group on the funding of rural water that source protection needs to be a funding Measure in its own right. Buy-in at community level to environmental objectives, including source protection, has to be the goal for all group water schemes and I am confident that these pilot projects will provide a template towards reaching that goal that all schemes can follow.

2018 will be remembered as the year when Climate Change rose to the top of the agenda in drinking water services, as in other sectors that are directly impacted by extreme weather events. Water services are particularly vulnerable to such events; prolonged freezing conditions pose a risk to pipework, violent winds can disrupt power supply and churn up the beds of lake sources, intense rainfall changes the character of raw water, may wash contaminants into the supply and can result in flooding that prevents access to infrastructure and, of course, there are periods of drought when both the quantity and quality of raw water become an issue. Yes, we have always had such extremes, but as a consequence of Climate Change, they are now more frequent and arguably more intense. So members of this Federation have to be Climate Change ready, evaluating the risks posed by extreme weather events to their supply from source to tap and considering measures that may be introduced to ensure the continuity of adequate, safe and wholesome drinking water supplies regardless at what nature throws at us. To this end,

group water schemes should be active in preparing for the future, whether by installing back-up power systems, abstracting from a cleaner and more secure point in their lake sources, developing alternative borehole sources and, of course, by continuing to focus on water conservation and the reduction of unaccounted for water in their networks.

If my years of involvement with the group water scheme sector and with farming organisations have taught me anything, it is that with appropriate supports, rural communities have the resilience and determination within themselves not only to sustain a quality drinking water service, but also to give leadership on related issues such as climate change, pollution prevention, alternative or substitute energy solutions etc. One of the most important supports towards this end is appropriate training that builds the capacity of individuals and groups to perform to their best. Targeted and specialist training programmes have been key aspects of our success in raising standards of delivery of quality drinking water supplies by our many affiliated schemes across rural Ireland and I am delighted to report that it is intended to add suitably-tailored training programmes in the areas of source protection, climate change etc. over the 3-year phase of the multi annual Rural Water Programme. Again, schemes are strongly urged not only to participate in these courses, but also to critically evaluate them and to make suggestions where they identify gaps or room for improvements. Such suggestions will feed in to a review of training courses by the NFGWS in the coming year.

I want to extend sincere thanks to our partners in the Department and in a wide range of statutory and non-statutory agencies, organisations, third level institutions and others besides that have worked with the NFGWS over the years and have provided incredible support to us and to individual schemes. Partnership is the foundation upon which all of our successes to date have been built and I am in no doubt that a continued genuine partnership approach will deliver for the GWS sector and for Ireland. And finally, to group water schemes activists the length and breadth of Ireland, to my Board colleagues, our management and staff team, go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

Brendan O'Mahony  
Chairperson, NFGWS