

Rural Water Programme

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I am directed by the Minister for the Environment and Local Government to refer to the announcement of February 21st, 1998, concerning the approval of a package of measures aimed at establishing a new framework for the upgrading and development of rural water supplies and to announce details of the allocations under the rural water programme for 1998.

This year, over £28m is being provided for the improvement of rural water supply systems, particularly group water systems. It is essential that this investment is used to best effect and that all the measures within the rural water programme are properly focused, that the available resources are targeted at areas where needs are most acute and that the returns on the investment are optimised.

Part I: New Measures - Support for Devolved Programme

The difficult task of improving the quality, reliability and efficiency of rural water supplies must be founded on twin supports: firstly, it must be properly planned and, secondly, it must embody a true spirit of partnership and co-operation between the public and the private sectors. The new measures are designed to meet the following key objectives:-

- to give practical effect to the principle of partnership between the private and public sectors in the determination and implementation of rural water policy;
- to pursue a planned approach to investment and ensure best practice in all aspects of the management and operation of rural water schemes;
- to assist in the effective administration of the devolved rural water programme.

While responsibility for water supply and sanitary services lies with the sanitary authority under the Local Government [Sanitary Services] Acts 1878-1964, the burden of delivering domestic water supplies to consumers in rural areas is shared between the local authorities and the private group scheme sector. Any approach aimed at improving the level of service and quality of supply must be undertaken in a structured way with local authorities, group schemes and other rural interests, working together to achieve shared objectives and making best use of available resources.

To this end, each county must draw up a Strategic Rural Water Plan which will

- identify key needs of rural water consumers;
- assess existing water supply networks, both public and group, in terms of quality of supply, physical condition, service delivery, etc.;
- prioritise investment under the different financial measures;

- set down a strategy for delivering the most efficient and effective water supply possible.

The Department of the Environment and Local Government will arrange for the development of a model Strategic Rural Water Plan which can then be adapted for use in each county. In the meantime, the task of collecting baseline data for the plans, including water quality data, should be put in hand.

The main elements of the Minister's proposals to underpin the partnership approach in the development of rural strategies are outlined under:-

[i] National Rural Water Monitoring Committee

A National Committee is being set up to monitor and advise on the development of policy in relation to the rural water programme. It will also advise on the development of the model Rural Water Strategic Plan. This Committee will have representatives from the private group water scheme sector, the local authorities, rural organisations and the Department, under the stewardship of an independent chairperson.

The representation on the NRWMC from the local authority side will consist of one each from :

- City and County Manager's Association,
- City and County Engineer's Association,
- General Council of County Councils,
- Local Authority Member's Association.

The Committee will report annually to the Minister on the operation of the rural water programme with particular emphasis on the level of service provided by each local authority in administering the group scheme capital grants. Where the level of service falls below an acceptable standard in any county, the Minister has made a commitment to assume responsibility for the administration of grants in that county for a period of time.

[ii]. Arrangements at County Level

Consultation at county level concerning the implementation of the rural water programme is seen as being of fundamental importance to the future success of the programme. With the objective of providing an appropriate forum for consultation, it is intended that special local committees will be set up in most counties to

- advise on the development of the county strategic rural water plan;
- oversee the operation of the devolved programme locally;
- provide input to the National Monitoring Committee.

The local monitoring group should be representative of the elected members, the county group scheme federation, farming organisations, rural organisations and the local authority. A

chairperson should be elected from among the members of the group. The local authorities should provide secretarial services to the group.

Due to the variation in the level of group water scheme activity between counties, monitoring committees may not be required in all cases. Alternative less formal consultation and representation arrangements will suffice in such counties. The detailed arrangements regarding the structures to be put in place in individual counties will be decided following consultation with County Managers and the representative organisations for the group schemes sector within the county.

[iii]. County Liaison Officers

The third element of the partnership initiative focuses on the need to strengthen the consultative process and to facilitate the flow of information between the group sector and the local authority. To achieve this, each county council will appoint a County Liaison Officer who will deal with day to day issues in the implementation of the devolved programme.

In counties with a high level of group scheme activity, this will require a full time officer while part time officers will suffice in other counties. Ideally, these posts should be at Executive Engineer or Administrative Officer level.

County Councils are asked to notify the Department of their proposals with regard to the appointment of Liaison Officers including the name, grade and other relevant information relating to the appointee. Costs will only be recouped where such proposals have been notified to this Department [see below].

[iv] Meeting the training needs of the group scheme sector

The training needs of the group scheme sector is an area that has been neglected and is in urgent need of review. The National Water Services Training Group who currently provide training for local authority water services personnel, will review and develop a modern training programme suited to the specific needs of the group scheme sector. It is intended that training courses will be provided through the new and proposed regional training centres at Leixlip, Roscrea, Ballincollig, Castlebar and Ballybofey.

[v]. Management Information Systems (MIS)

In order to assist local authorities in the administration of the devolved programme, a computer based M.I.S. is being developed and will be made available to local authorities by the end of May. Further details of the system being developed is set out in Appendix 2

Part II: Allocations under the Rural Water Programme

Allocations for each local authority, which under the rural water programme is the county council, are set out at Appendix 1. The specific conditions which apply to the making of this allocation are set out under and should be read in conjunction with the Circulars L6/97 and L14/97.

Expenditure under the rural water programme falls under the following general headings:

- [i] capital grants for new group water and sewerage schemes and for the upgrading of such schemes. Specific conditions, including the setting of maximum grant levels per house and farm, apply to such grants;
- [ii] expenditure on the take-over and upgrading of group schemes, subject to the agreement of the group schemes themselves, such works may include the provision of water from a public supply to group schemes with a poor quality private supply and the upgrading of a group scheme connected to a public supply for the purposes of reducing loss of water through leakage;
- [iii] expenditure on small public schemes, subject to the local authority providing a minimum of 25% of the cost of the works;
- [iv] expenditure on the collection of data, including the carrying out of an inventory of group schemes and the development of baseline water quality information for such schemes, necessary for the preparation of Rural Water Strategy Plans.

The following conditions apply to the payment of monies allocated to local authorities:

- [i] block grants will be paid in two tranches, the first tranche will be for the balance of any monies remaining from the 1997 allocation plus 50% of the 1998 allocation, the second tranche will be for the remainder of the 1998 allocation;
- [ii] no payments will be made by the Department until at least 80% of any monies already allocated and paid to the local authority has been expended by the local authority and appropriate documentation provided to the Department;
- [iii] a payment claim must be submitted for each tranche by the local authority on the Rural Water Claim Form [copy enclosed] together with the associated documents;

The following general conditions apply to the expenditure so as to make the expenditure eligible for recoupment under the rural water programme : -

- [i] within the allocation provided to them, local authorities must spend at least the amount designated for group water scheme grants for this purpose;
- [ii] local authorities must ensure that all group schemes are water quality tested in order to establish baseline data on drinking water quality,

- [iii] an annual report must be submitted to the Department no later than the 31st January 1999, on the operation of the rural water programme in each county,
- [iv] local authorities must meet the requirements in relation to matching funding as set out in the conditions governing the various elements of the rural water programme.

Subject to the above conditions, local authorities have discretion, within the terms of the multi-annual programmes submitted to the Department, to determine the expenditure as between the various headings set out in the multi-annual programme.

Full payment in relation to the allocation for administrative costs will be made shortly.

Payments in relation to individual house grants and the subsidy to meet the operational cost of group schemes will continue to be made on foot of submitted claims from local authorities [See Circulars L8/97, L10/97 and L11/97]

Administrative Costs

An amount as a contribution towards meeting the administration costs of operating the rural water programme is notified in Appendix 1 of this circular and will be paid to each local authority shortly. This amount is based on the figure provided in 1997 with an adjustment to reflect the work associated with managing the single house grants.

It is proposed to introduce a new system for determining the contribution towards meeting the administration costs based on actual outputs during the year. It is proposed to set up a working group with the local authorities to determine the basis for the proposed new system.

In addition to the general contribution towards administrative costs, specific payments will be made out of the Equalisation Fund in respect of the costs of implementing the new 'partnership' arrangements recently announced by the Minister.

In the cases where a full time Liaison Officer is appointed, a sum of up to £28,000 will be recouped by the Department to the local authority concerned; in the case of a part-time officer, the amount is £12,000. Sanction of a temporary post, outside of numbers, is hereby granted for a period of three years for full time officers as required, at which point the position will be further reviewed.

General

Any queries relating to this Circular should be addressed to Mr. Jim Ganley at the Department's Ballina Office, telephone 096-70677, ext. 444. It is also proposed to hold a number of regional seminars for liaison officers and other staff dealing with the rural water programme in the early Summer.

Yours sincerely

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Water Services