

Rural Water Programme

Background to RWP

The need for a strategy that would address the rural water sector was underlined by environmental and legislative pressures that had evolved since the 1970s when most group schemes were in their infancy.

Lifestyle changes, in particular the intensification of agricultural production, have had a profound impact on water quality and little has been done in the intervening period to address this issue. Investigations under the auspices of the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** identified water supplied by group schemes as particularly vulnerable to contamination, by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of schemes had insufficient or non-existent facilities to treat raw water. The consequent risks to public health provided a compelling incentive to deal with the issue of water treatment.

A secondary incentive was provided by EU directives and by various Statutory Instruments [see **Legislation**] introduced at a national level, laying down specific parameters in relation to the quality of drinking water. The current directive defines as ‘wholesome and clean’ water that,

- is free from micro-organisms, parasites and other substances which, in numbers or concentrations, constitute a potential danger to human health.
- meets with requirements set out in the directive for microbiological and chemical parameters.

Beyond legislation addressing water quality, the legal framework covering the water services industry was, at best, disjointed. A raft of legislative enactments, amongst these the Local Government (Sanitary Services) Act 1878-1964 [for various Acts and Statutory Instruments between 1922 and 1978, visit www.irlgov.ie], covered the wider water services industry, while various pieces of legislation directly affecting the private water sector had been introduced via

primary legislation in other areas: the basis for group water schemes, for example, being legislated for in the Housing Act, 1958.

Given the determination on the part of government to meet its obligations under the EU Directive and the improving state of the economy, the political will and the resources necessary to pursue a new strategy were available. Moreover, the devolution of responsibility in the water sector to local authorities and the emergence of the NFGWS as the representative organisation for the private water sector, meant that structures were in place which had the potential, given goodwill on all sides, to facilitate agreement on a radical new approach that would address both the environmental and legislative issues that had arisen.

Agreeing the RWP

In February 1998, the then Environment Minister Noel Dempsey, TD, announced the launch of a Rural Water Programme (RWP), an initiative that arose directly out of discussions over several months between his Department and representatives of the NFGWS. The plan (as published in **Circular L4/98**) included a package of measures aimed at establishing a new framework for the upgrading and development of rural water supplies. Furthermore, it included the promise of substantially increased capital provision for the improvement of rural water supply systems, with resources being focused on the areas of greatest need. Several key objectives were included:

- To protect public health by ensuring compliance with the Drinking Water Directive.
- To pursue a planned approach to investment and ensure best practice in all aspects of the management and operation of rural water schemes.
- To give practical effect to the principle of partnership with the voluntary group scheme sector in the determination and implementation of policy on rural water supply through the local monitoring committees.
- To assist in the effective administration of the devolved rural water programme.
- To sustain the rural environment and promote economic development.

Partnership approach to implementation

In introducing the Rural Water Programme, the Minister stated that the task of improving the quality, reliability and efficiency of rural water supplies would have to 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. He proposed underpinning the partnership approach by creating new and inclusive structures.

The lynchpin of the partnership arrangements outlined by the minister was the **National Rural Water Monitoring Committee** (NRWMC) established in May 1998. Acting under an independent chairperson, and with representation from the **Department of the Environment & Local Government**, the Department of Arts, Culture, Heritage and the Islands, the NFGWS, local authorities, farming and rural organisations, the key functions of the new committee were twofold:

- To advise the Minister on matters relating to rural water supply policy
- To monitor the implementation by local authorities of the devolved capital grant measures

The need for a co-ordinated approach to operational and management training for those involved in the water services industry is acknowledged in the RWP. The **Water Services National Training Group** (WSNTG), including representation from the NFGWS, plays the lead role in this area, providing courses at several regional **training centres**.

Partnership was introduced at a local level also, with rural water monitoring committees being established in each county to formulate, agree and implement strategies, based on guidelines provided by the NRWMC. Newly-appointed **local authority liaison officers** were tasked with ensuring that these partnership arrangements worked effectively.

Investing in the RWP

The Department's commitment to seeing through implementation of the RWP has been confirmed by sustained and substantially increased spending over several years. Annual expenditure increased from IR£10.5 million (€13.3 million) in 1996 to €46 million in 2002, with a further IR£14 (€17.78) million allocated to small public schemes. Capital works on group schemes have attracted the lion's share of this funding, standing at €40 (IR£31.50) million in 2002. Emphasising the focus on water quality, capital investments in treatment works now enjoy one hundred per cent funding with respect to essential elements of treatment and the adoption of **DBO** method of procurement, while ancillary works receive eighty-five per cent support.

Financial incentives have also been extended to the operation and training of the group schemes themselves. **Operational subsidies** introduced under the RWP have been significantly increased, from (€95.23) Ir£75 per dwelling in 2000 to (€101.58) IR£80 a year later, but a significantly higher rate of increase €196.81 (IR£155) has been granted to schemes which have installed treatment works. Expenses incurred by group schemes in terms of affiliation to the NFGWS, training, meetings and other activities may also be claimed from the relevant local authority.