

STRUCTURES OF NATIONAL FEDERATION OF GROUP WATER SCHEMES

The National Federation of Group Water Schemes was formally established as a Co-operative Society in 1998.

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NFGWS

**National Federation of
Group Water Schemes**

Strategic Plan 2006-2008

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Foreword

Three years ago the National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) adopted a Strategic Plan setting down our mission statement, broad objectives, general targets and specific actions to be undertaken between 2003 and 2005.

Since 2003 our annual reports measured progress in relation to this plan and, in my view, these have provided a ringing endorsement of our adopting a strategic approach to the activities of the NFGWS. This is not to say that we accomplished all that was set out, but there can be no doubt that we made major progress and actually surpassed our targets in many areas.

As with any plan, we have had to adapt its implementation in line with wider strategic considerations that have arisen since it was formulated. In particular, publication by the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee (NRWMC) of *An Action Plan for Rural Drinking Water Quality 2003-2006* significantly influenced our focus as a Federation.

As a direct result, the work of the NFGWS Board, staff and members has been substantially directed in recent years towards the achievement of fully treated potable water on all group water schemes that come within the terms of the regulations. This has called for monumental commitment and has, to some extent, impacted on the delivery of our programme in other areas. For example, the scheduled delivery of our Quality Assurance Scheme to group schemes has been delayed.

In other areas, we can say with the benefit of hindsight that some targets set in 2003 were over optimistic. We had, for instance, envisaged far greater progress in respect to the uptake and delivery of management training. Those targets were somewhat ambitious and we now know that at current staffing levels and with the best will in the world, there is a limit to the number of schemes that can be accommodated annually.

While the NFGWS Board, management, development officers and administrative staff have worked hard to reach our targets in all areas, the Federation is happy to acknowledge the major role played by outside individuals and organisations in furthering our strategic objectives. In particular, we appreciate the continued expert advice and practical support provided by the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government and the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee.

In terms of training, we are especially indebted to FÁS for providing us with necessary financial resources and

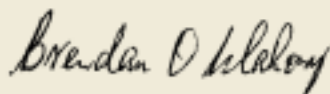
advice, and to the Water Services National Training Group (WSNTG) for their design and delivery of operational training courses relevant to the GWS sector. Both agencies continue to play a positive part, most recently in the development and roll-out of new specifically-tailored operational training for group schemes.

We appreciate the efforts of local authorities and of locally-based Rural Water Monitoring Committees, through which we are working to deliver the Rural Water Programme. Cross-party support for this programme has been a highly significant factor in its success to date and this spirit of partnership has been fostered by the present Minister, Dick Roche TD, as well as by his junior ministers and officials. Their endorsement of our strategic vision and their assistance in bringing quality water and a quality water service to our rural communities has been most welcome.

In the foreword to our Strategic Plan 2003-2005, I wrote that it would present 'a major challenge but a necessary and a reasonable challenge' to our Federation. In terms of the infrastructural challenge alone, we faced the mammoth task of dealing with deficient water supplies on some 440 group water schemes, largely through an unprecedented investment programme. I believe that the NFGWS has risen to that challenge and I am confident that we will also rise to the challenges presented in this Strategic Plan for the years 2006-2008. Our mission statement and broad strategic goals are unchanged. This plan sets down what we believe are achievable objectives, targets and actions in respect of these.

As I stated previously 'the essence of forward planning is to decide where you want to go and, more importantly, how and at what pace you intend to get there'. We want to get to the point where the Federation effectively services the needs of community-owned group water schemes run to a professional standard. We want to finally resolve the issue of deficient water quality and move beyond the present focus on end-of-pipe solutions to providing sustainable quality water supplies through an increasing emphasis on source protection and water conservation.

As regards our timescale for achieving all of this, there is still some way to go, but over the next three years I look forward to our continuing this journey together as a united and greatly strengthened Federation.



Brendan O'Mahony
Chairperson

1. Introduction

The core function of the Federation is to service the needs of our group water scheme members, as outlined in our mission statement. The context in which we attempt to realise this mission statement is, however, constantly evolving and the goals, objectives, targets and actions in keeping with our mission statement have been formulated to meet these new conditions.

In a continuing climate of legislative change and ever-higher consumer expectations, achieving and sustaining drinking water quality at a price that offers value remains a priority objective for the NFGWS. As the quality issue moves towards resolution on schemes serving more than 50 persons (>15 houses), the sector is focusing on two key issues: how to effectively manage a modern water service and how to meet the costs of providing both treated water and a professional service.

Given that the consistent delivery of a quality rural water service depends on building effective management structures, the Federation is committed to ensuring the viability of group water schemes and to providing the necessary supports, advice and training that will allow GWS boards/committees to perform to their full potential as community-owned and community-run businesses.

The viability of smaller schemes, in particular, is a matter that warrants urgent consideration. In the first instance, analysis is required to determine the number and location of schemes of less than 50 persons (<15 houses) that come under the terms of the water quality regulations by virtue of including a business or social centre. A strategy for dealing with water quality compliance on these schemes will have to be agreed and implemented. For its part, the NFGWS will actively encourage rationalisation and connection to an existing treated water supply where this offers the most cost-effective solution.

The Federation accepts that environmental sustainability is a core responsibility of all those charged with delivering a drinking water supply and that end-of-pipe solutions alone are inadequate. As the issue of water treatment is resolved, our determination is to equip group water schemes to adopt and implement a tailored (scheme-specific) source protection strategy.

Water conservation is a further concern of GWS activists. The implementation of measures to limit water

wastage will remain a priority throughout the life of the plan. Approaches to regulating the extent of abstraction from groundwater sources will be considered and the potential of rainwater harvesting fully examined.

The NFGWS is concerned at the loss of public confidence in tap water. Through targeted communication and education, we aim to convince the population served by the group scheme sector (and the wider public) that treated water is not only safe, but that it is a wholesome and essential part of a healthy lifestyle.

As the period of this strategic plan draws to a close, we intend ensuring that the negative perception of the group water scheme sector is replaced by an acknowledgement that community-owned and community-run services operate to the highest professional standard and have the capacity to provide real leadership on key environmental issues.

Recognising the benefits to the rural water sector of the partnership approach first adopted in 1997, the Federation will continue to encourage the fullest co-operation with all rural water stakeholders, consistent with our primary responsibility to representing the interests of our members.

2. Planning for the Future

2.1 Mission Statement

“To service, protect, revitalise and advance the rural group water scheme movement in all relevant EU, national and local forums through the provision of representational, advisory, training, developmental and other services that will facilitate the sourcing, management and delivery of environmentally-sustainable water supplies of the highest quality at the lowest cost, to the members of group water schemes, while also ensuring the equitable treatment of rural group water schemes by government and the EU.”

2.2 Goals for life of plan

As in our previous strategic plan, the goals are drawn up with particular reference to:

- the key role of the Federation as an umbrella organisation, acting on behalf of group schemes,
- the critical part being played by the NFGWS as part of a partnership for radical change in the water services industry.

Bearing this in mind, the changing regulatory and legislative framework within which group water schemes operate, in particular the introduction of licensing under new Water Services legislation, calls for a reassessment of our goals. In broad terms, for group water schemes to survive, they must be viable.

Goal I: To assist group water schemes in developing their capacity to meet the challenges facing the community-owned drinking water sector in the 21st century.

In terms of its wider responsibilities, the second goal remains as before:

Goal II: To ensure that the Federation successfully fulfils its remit under the Rural Water Programme and consolidates the partnerships that have been established.

2.3 Establishing objectives for Goal I

To assist group water schemes in developing their capacity to meet the challenges facing the community-owned drinking water sector in the 21st century.

2.3.1 Management

In terms of day-to-day administration, schemes are being asked to give serious and positive consideration to employing a full-time or part-time manager and such other staff as are required to ensure the smooth running of the scheme. The NFGWS accepts that this is a difficult decision for group scheme committees, but it is an issue

that needs to be addressed in the context of declining voluntarism in the community sector and the increasingly regulatory context within which water providers operate.

The role of the GWS Board will inevitably change from that of hands-on management towards the strategic development of their business. Far from diminishing the input of the board and its directors, a strategic management approach provides an opportunity to secure the future viability of the scheme, both in terms of its business operations and its relationship with the community.

An objective of this plan is ‘to assist boards in adopting a strategic role in running a community-owned business’.

2.3.2 Finance

As upgrading strategies have evolved in recent years, the issue of pricing has emerged as an important consideration for group schemes. In addition to paying a DBO contractor or local authority for a treated water supply, group schemes face employment and general maintenance costs. All of this requires adequate financing.

To date, individual group water schemes have established various means of financing their businesses. There are, in general, four broad sources of funding: new connection fees, charges for water used, a flat rate service charge and subsidy. While the Federation would not wish to interfere in individual pricing policies, its role is to ensure that schemes adopt a financial plan capable of meeting their expenses and providing a cushion for future works.

An objective of this plan is ‘to provide schemes with support in managing their business expenses’.

2.3.3 Viability

The demands placed on water supply services in the 21st century have transformed the context within which group water schemes operate. The Federation recognises that despite best efforts, many smaller schemes (in particular) will find it impossible to survive into the future, especially where upgrades are required. In such circumstances, schemes can expect the assistance of the Federation in considering their options and in progressing any viable proposal, whether that be in building umbrella co-operative management structures, assisting rationalisation through amalgamation, or facilitating take-over by a neighbouring group scheme or local authority.

An objective of this plan is ‘to pro-actively encourage and assist schemes in adopting a sustainable course of action’.

2.3.4 Training

Following on from the development of GWS-specific operational and management training courses, there will be an intensification of training within the group scheme sector over the next three years, with the completion of the Performance Management System training course for all schemes in DBO bundle arrangements to coincide with the start up of O&M contracts.

The Federation will continue to facilitate schemes in providing courses in this and other courses in local venues and at times suitable to GWS activists. Where necessary, training courses will be updated to take account of new legislative requirements and changes in the wider operational environment.

With regard to the management of water delivery through the distribution network, as the immediate concern about drinking water quality is comprehensively addressed through the provision of full treatment, the Federation aims to ensure that quality assurance is embedded in the operational procedures of group water schemes. Training in this area will be available to all schemes that have otherwise achieved drinking water quality. In addition, a training package dealing specifically with the management of a GWS distribution network will be actively promoted.

Throughout the life of this plan, a key objective will be 'to continue to make relevant training available to group water schemes'.

2.3.5 Communication

The loss of consumer confidence in tap water is an issue that concerns all of those involved in providing a potable water supply. The Federation is anxious to play a lead role in equipping group water schemes to actively persuade the public that they are committed to source protection and the delivery of a treated water supply that is both safe and healthy.

The objective is 'to provide group schemes with the information and wider support needed to win the confidence and loyalty of their members'.

2.4 Establishing objectives for Goal II

To ensure that the Federation successfully fulfils its remit under the Rural Water Programme and consolidates the partnerships that have been established.

2.4.1 Strengthening partnership

The NFGWS has a responsibility to its constituent members to build on the partnership approach that has served the sector well since the inception of the Rural Water Programme in 1997. A key to the success of these partnership arrangements has been the work of the National Rural Water Monitoring Committee (NRWMC), the Water Services National Training Group (WSNTG) and rural water monitoring committees established in each local authority area outside of the major urban centres.

An objective of this plan will be 'to further strengthen all of the partnership committees with which the NFGWS is involved'.

2.4.2 Water Quality

In line with the timetable agreed under the NRWMC *Action Plan for Rural Drinking Water Quality 2003-2006*, the end of 2006 will see the implementation of solutions to deficient drinking water quality on virtually all group water schemes serving more than 50 persons (>15 households). Attention is focused on 404 schemes identified as being non-compliant with EU water quality standards, but steps are also being taken to ensure the continued compliance of the remaining 233 schemes that are privately-sourced and have 15 or more households.

Based on strategies submitted by local authorities, it was envisaged that of the 404 non-compliant schemes, a total of 193 would pursue a DBO bundling strategy, 104 would connect to a public main, 45 would be taken over by the relevant local authority and 65 would avail of minor upgrades, principally the installation of simple disinfection (where appropriate).

To the end of 2005, considerable progress had been made under the DBO strategy, as some 41,000 households (representing 82% of those served by privately-sourced GWS) were included in DBO bundles. DBO construction had either begun or was completed on treatment facilities

to serve 107 GWS (26,000) households, while a further 129 group water schemes serving almost 15,000 households were at an advanced planning stage. Of 154 schemes to connect to public mains, 103 were non-compliant with drinking water quality standards. By the end of 2005 construction was completed or was underway on 70 schemes. Similarly, 41 schemes identified for take-over had either been completed or work was in progress. Disinfection/sterilisation had been installed (or was in the process of being installed) on 36 schemes.

In all of the above categories, there were schemes where no progress had been made. Additionally, there are an undetermined number of schemes of less than 50 persons (<15 households) that are required to meet the water quality standards, by virtue of their including a business or social centre.

An objective of this plan is 'to contribute actively and positively to initiatives aimed at bringing treated water to GWS consumers and to assist in the implementation of strategies in relation to all non-compliant schemes, of whatever size'.

A second objective under 'water quality' is 'to assist schemes in implementing strategies to effectively manage the distribution of their water supplies so that the risk of recontamination is avoided'.

2.4.3 Project management

The NFGWS will continue to play a full and active part in the work of DBO Steering Groups until the completion of such contracts. In addition, the Federation will (where requested) provide ongoing assistance to schemes in managing their DBO projects. Such support might include assuming the role of Client's Representative for schemes during the service (O&M) phase of contracts, sitting on Liaison Monitoring Committees and otherwise helping schemes to address any issues or problems that arise.

The objective is 'to provide ongoing support to group schemes during the O&M phase of their DBO contracts'.

2.4.4 Subsidy

As the water quality issue nears resolution, the cost of water treatment is emerging as a key consideration for group water schemes. For schemes involved in DBO projects, long-term O&M contracts were agreed on the basis

of supports being available from the exchequer. Beyond this, the demands of a modern water service require that wider scheme management is also supported, by way of acknowledging the key public service provided by the GWS sector in rural Ireland.

An objective of this plan is 'to defend current subsidy arrangements and to pursue enhanced grant aid towards the operational and management costs of group schemes'.

2.4.5 Conservation

The Federation has its sights clearly focused on water conservation as a key environmental demand and as a major factor in managing the costs of water treatment. Addressing the issue of unaccounted for water (UFW) is clearly a priority on all group water schemes.

In terms of an objective the Federation aims 'to ensure that water wastage is eliminated in so far as possible'.

2.4.6 Source protection

The completion of the National Source Protection Pilot at Churchill & Oram remains a priority focus for the Federation, as is the promotion of wider strategies that will reduce contamination or depletion of drinking water sources. This is vital in terms of reducing the need for 'end of pipe solutions' and to secure supply.

The objective is 'to assist in the development and promotion of workable strategies to protect drinking water sources'.

3. Targets & actions : internal

3.1 OBJECTIVE 1

'To assist GWS boards in adopting a strategic role in running a community-owned business'.

Target:

Persuade all group water schemes within DBO bundles and larger non-DBO schemes (both privately and publicly-sourced) to employ suitably qualified personnel to perform day-to-day management duties.

Actions:

- provide schemes with a questionnaire, specifically asking if they have paid management/staff and, if not, would they positively consider moving in this direction, assuming the issue of finance can be successfully addressed.
- work with those schemes that respond positively to address their concerns, financial or otherwise.
- inform group schemes that respond negatively of the benefits of having a paid staff, particularly in the context of declining voluntarism.
- ensure that all amalgamations of group water schemes incorporate a management/staff structure.

Target:

Have business plans in place on all group water schemes within DBO bundles and larger non-DBO schemes (both privately and publicly-sourced).

Action:

- assist schemes completing the NFGWS management training course in formulating an appropriate business plan.

3.2 OBJECTIVE 2

'To provide schemes with support in managing their business expenses'.

Target:

Achieve a measure of consistency in the pricing structure of group water schemes, while respecting the right of individual schemes to price as they see fit.

Actions:

- encourage the formation of GWS sub-committees at local Federation level to discuss and, where appropriate, to agree guidelines for charges and to make recommendations re same.
- distribute information in respect to current pricing policy on individual schemes as a means of encouraging discussion on the issue of pricing.

Target:

Provide a financial model to all group water schemes within DBO bundles and larger non-DBO schemes (both privately and publicly-sourced).

Actions:

- prepare a data base of schemes that have already availed of financial modelling and identify/target schemes which have yet to do so.
- invite schemes to avail of this service.

Target:

Explore the potential of alternative energy as a source of funding for group water schemes.

Action:

- investigate and provide schemes with accurate information on various options including wind power and bio-energy crops.

3.3 OBJECTIVE 3

'To pro-actively encourage and assist schemes in adopting a sustainable course of action'.

Target:

Complete the amalgamation of smaller scheme participating in DBO bundle projects in Counties Mayo, Galway and Roscommon.

Actions:

- approach schemes involved and secure agreement to amalgamate.
- provide assistance in progressing the amalgamations.

Target:

Where appropriate, form umbrella management co-operatives amongst a number of group water schemes.

Action:

- progress the West Cavan Alliance as a model of a management co-operative.

3.4 OBJECTIVE 4

'To make relevant training available to group water schemes'.

Target:

Complete management training on all group water schemes participating in DBO bundle projects and on such other schemes as request the course.

Action:

- specifically target schemes involved in DBO projects, encouraging participation in the training course.

Target:

Provide PMS training to all completed DBO bundles.

Action:

- through NFGWS development officers, organise training for each bundle shortly before the commencement of the O&M contract.

Target:

Facilitate the provision of leak detection and network maintenance training to all schemes providing a treated drinking water supply.

Actions:

- encourage and support schemes to identify stopcocks on distribution networks on GWS that come within the terms of the drinking water regulations.
- in association with local authorities, prepare a case for once-off grant aid towards GIS mapping of group schemes, indicating pipelines and connections.

Target:

Introduce training in the quality assurance scheme on schemes which have completed the management training course.

Action:

- implement quality assurance training on a phased basis for schemes in completed DBO bundles, or where treated water is being supplied.

Target:

Assist schemes in the preparation of health & safety measures.

Actions:

- ascertain the schemes which have health & safety statements and suggest changes as necessary to ensure compliance with legislation.
- prepare samples of health & safety statements tailored to the needs of group schemes, and invite schemes to adopt these.

3.5 OBJECTIVE 5

'To provide group schemes with the information and wider support needed to win the confidence and loyalty of their members'

Target:

*Distribute **Rural Water News** to the individual members of all GWS committees within DBO bundles.*

Actions:

- approach GWS committees in specific bundles, inviting them to subscribe for individual board members.

Target:

Assist schemes in the production of newsletters/information material for distribution to their members.

Actions:

- encourage the production of regular information for scheme members.

- provide a template newsletter/annual report which schemes might adapt for their own members.

Target:

Highlight the quality of the drinking water provided through group schemes.

Actions:

- emphasise the importance of communicating the results of monitoring to scheme membership and assist schemes in doing so.
- devise pilot initiatives appropriate to local schools and other public facilities as a means of addressing concerns about drinking water quality.
- utilise World Water Day as an opportunity to secure regional and national publicity surrounding the transformation of rural water supplies.

4. Targets & actions : external

4.1 OBJECTIVE 1

'To further strengthen all of the partnership committees with which the NFGWS is involved'.

Target:

Ensure that local rural water monitoring committees are functioning properly.

Actions:

- identify local authority areas in which committees are non-existent, are meeting infrequently or are otherwise failing to fulfil the requirements of the Rural Water Programme and pursue these through the Rural Water Monitoring Committee and the Department.
- press for bi-monthly meetings of all RWMC.
- in association with the NRWMC, provide a standardised agenda for local rural water monitoring committee meetings.

Target:

In conjunction with the NRWMC organise events that will demonstrate to the European Commission and to media the progress made under the Rural Water Programme in recent years.

Actions:

- distribution of *Rural Water News* to members of the EU Commission.
- invite the Commission to visit areas where upgrading work has been completed on formerly non-compliant schemes.

Target:

Agree a joint approach to the regulations being introduced under the Water Services legislation.

Actions:

- organise consultation at a regional level, involving RWMC, local authority personnel, representatives of group water schemes and the NFGWS, from which proposals can be forwarded to the NRWMC.
- include the proposed regulations as an item for discussion at the annual rural water services conference.

4.2 OBJECTIVE 2

'To contribute actively and positively to initiatives aimed at bringing treated water to GWS consumers and to assist in the implementation of strategies in relation to all non-compliant schemes, of whatever size'.

Target:

Undertake a detailed assessment of all schemes that come under the terms of the drinking water quality directive and pursue upgrade plans in respect of each of these.

Actions:

- prepare a detailed summary of all schemes of 50 persons and more (>15 houses), indicating the proposed upgrade route and progress made
- list (by local authority area) non-compliant schemes of less than 50 persons that come under the terms of the directive and through local RWMC agree upgrade proposals in respect of these.

4.3 OBJECTIVE 3

'To assist schemes in implementing strategies to effectively manage the distribution of their water supplies so that the risk of recontamination is avoided'.

Target:

Provide practical advice and support to schemes in relation to network management, including delivery of the Quality Assurance Scheme.

Actions:

- organise distribution network maintenance training for local Federations.
- implement quality assurance training on a phased basis for schemes in completed DBO bundles, or where a treated water is being supplied.

Target:

Secure financial support towards the provision of additional disinfection and pressure reduction valves where required on longer networks.

Actions:

- prepare a submission to the NRWMC and the Department and work through local monitoring committees to identify schemes that have difficulty with regard to residual chlorination or with regard to bursts caused by water pressure.

4.4 OBJECTIVE 4

'To provide ongoing support to group schemes during the O&M phase of their DBO contracts'.

Target:

To reassure schemes that the NFGWS is available to act as an intermediary in addressing any issues that may arise.

Actions:

- present this option to schemes at PMS training
- where requested, to assume the role of client's representative for individual schemes in relation to general administrative issues.
- organise distribution network maintenance training locally for schemes involved in O&M bundles.

4.5 OBJECTIVE 5

'To defend current subsidy arrangements and to pursue enhanced grant aid towards the operational and management costs of group schemes'.

Target:

Secure an increase in subsidy support that takes into account two factors: 1. the costs associated with water treatment and 2. management costs.

Actions:

- prepare submission to Department, arguing for an appropriate increase along these lines, payable from 1 January 2006.

Target:

Achieve cross-party understanding of the importance of continuing subsidy supports.

Actions:

- lobby all political parties in advance of the next election to ensure an understanding of the importance of continued subsidy supports for the GWS sector.
- raise this as an issue with RWMC and have resolutions adopted in support of continuing subsidy arrangements.

4.6 OBJECTIVE 6

'Ensure, as far as possible, water wastage is eliminated'.

Target:

Complete critical mains replacement and metering on all schemes involved in DBO bundles.

Actions:

- encourage and support schemes to identify stopcocks on distribution networks on GWS that come within the terms of the drinking water regulations.
- In association with local authority, prepare a case for once-off grant aid towards GIS mapping of group schemes, indicating the pipelines and connections.

Target:

Extend supports for water leakage control, including metering, across all group water schemes supplying treated water.

Actions:

- publicise evidence of water saving on metered schemes
- preparing an updated cost-benefit submission to the Department arguing the case for providing grant aid beyond schemes in DBO bundles.

Target:

Leakage control training to be provided to all group water schemes supplying treated water.

Actions:

- assist the WSNTG in the general roll-out of the leak detection training programme.
- facilitate training in line management to County Federations and/or DBO bundles.

Target:

In association with the NRWMC, complete investigation re viability of rainwater harvesting as a substitute for treated water in non-essential areas.

Actions:

- publish regular updates on the progress of this pilot.
- through the RWMC, lobby individual local authorities to pilot rainwater harvesting projects in new housing projects as well as agricultural/business enterprises.

Target:

Highlight the need for groundwater protection.

Actions:

- initiate discussion around the issue of groundwater abstraction and on the need for regulation in this area, with a view to avoiding the unnecessary depletion of groundwater resources.

4.7 OBJECTIVE 7

'To assist in the development and promotion of workable strategies to protect drinking water sources'.

Target:

Complete (in association with partners) the National Source Protection Pilot Project at Churchill & Oram GWS and implement recommendations that arise from this.

Actions:

- continue active co-operation with project team.
- produce regular updates on progress.
- investigate the potential of bio-fuel cultivation as a means of protecting water courses.

Target:

Have tailored REPs scheme implemented.

Actions:

- Lobby TEAGASC, the IFA, dairy co-operatives and other relevant agencies to support the introduction of a specific scheme that will allow farmers to buy into the water protection elements of REPS.

Target:

Establish source protection as a key element of GWS management.

Actions:

- Provide an additional training module specific to this area to be delivered to schemes in conjunction with the delivery of their Quality Assurance Scheme.