



National Federation
of Group Water Schemes

CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERS ON COMMUNITY-OWNED GROUP WATER SCHEMES

(AND THE DUTIES OF MANAGEMENT IN
UPHOLDING THE RIGHTS OF MEMBERS)

Endorsed by



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Pleanála agus Réaltas Áitiúil
Department of Housing,
Planning and Local Government

Charter of Rights and Responsibilities of members on community-owned group water schemes

(and the duties of management in upholding the rights of members)

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Disclaimer

It remains the direct responsibility of the group water scheme management committee/board alone to ensure that the supply is at all times safe and wholesome for human consumption and that the rights outlined in this document are upheld.

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Charter

Rights and responsibilities on community-owned and managed group water schemes (GWSs) are grounded on principles of shared ownership and on agreed Rules and Operating Regulations that have been formally adopted by the scheme at a general meeting of members. A copy of its Rules and Regulations is provided to each member and is available on request to any member from the management of the scheme.

The right to group water scheme membership is not absolute. Economic viability and environmental sustainability will determine if a supply can be provided to an applicant, while a breach by a member of the agreed Rules and Operating Regulations may result in an existing supply being terminated or suspended until the issue is resolved. In effect, members have a right to avail of/buy into a GWS service in most situations, but with some **exceptions** (see *Explanatory Notes*).

Rights:

Where a group water scheme service is provided and as a general statement of rights,

1. members are entitled to a **reasonable quantity** of a **quality-assured, safe and wholesome** potable water supply, at a **reasonable cost** and **adequate pressure**.
2. members are also entitled to **information** from the scheme management about this supply and to have any **complaints/grievances** dealt with in a timely, efficient and respectful manner.
3. members have a right to **participation** in the management of their scheme, through putting themselves forward for election to its voluntary management committee/board, attending general meetings and casting their vote in elections to the committee/board and on proposals put before such meetings.

Responsibilities:

In terms of general responsibilities,

1. members must avoid any action or inaction that will impact negatively on the drinking water supply service or on the rights of other members.
2. members also have a responsibility to conserve water, avoiding wastage, and to pay fees, charges and levies agreed by the membership in advance at a general meeting in relation to new connections, capital works or other initiatives.

The above outlines the rights and responsibilities that members can expect when receiving a supply from a group water scheme. The sections highlighted in bold are further explained in the *Explanatory Notes*.

Explanatory Notes

1. EXCEPTIONS TO THE RIGHT OF APPLICANTS TO MEMBERSHIP OF A GROUP WATER SCHEME

Group water schemes considering applications for membership of, or a new connection to, their scheme must, as part of the application process, establish if they are in a position to provide the applicant with a supply that will meet their needs and the requirements of the Drinking Water Regulations on a sustainable, long-term basis.

An application for group water scheme membership, or for a new connection, may be refused for the following reasons:

Excessive cost:

Where individual houses or small groups of houses are so far removed from a group water scheme network that the laying of a mains connection is not technically viable (i.e. the group water scheme could not ensure with certainty either the quantity or quality of the supply), or is not economically viable (i.e. the cost would exceed the grant funding available to the group water scheme plus any contribution from those seeking the connection).

Insufficient capacity:

Where the capacity of a group water scheme source, treatment plant or existing pipe size is insufficient to accommodate additional connections.

Elevation:

Where new connections are proposed for elevated locations and there is insufficient pressure to supply those locations, the group water scheme may refuse a connection. However, in doing so, the scheme management must give consideration to proposed solutions, such as the applicant installing a booster pump, the operation and maintenance of which will remain their own responsibility. Such solutions must only be accepted if they are viable, sustainable and do not otherwise place a burden on the long-term operation and maintenance of the scheme.

Refusal of membership and/or of new connections on any grounds should be in writing and be supported by documentary evidence including, where possible and practicable, a report by the scheme's consulting engineer.

2. REASONABLE QUANTITY

The quantity of potable water available from a group water scheme will depend on a range of factors, including the resilience of the source to withstand prolonged periods of drought, the availability or otherwise of a back-up source, the capacity of a treatment plant, the availability of storage, dependence on pumping systems, the extent of water loss on the distribution network and excessive demand by one or more members. Each of the above factors will have a bearing on the rights and responsibilities of members.

RIGHTS

- Members have, in normal circumstances, a right to the consistent supply of a reasonable quantity of potable water.
- Members have a right to prior notification of any planned loss of supply. Except in an emergency, members should be notified at least 24 hours in advance of any planned abnormality that may occur (e.g. turbid water due to flushing of mains).
- Where loss of supply results from an unplanned event (e.g. a mains burst), members that have provided contact details to the group water scheme have a right to speedy notification of the reason for the outage and its anticipated duration. All other members have a right to this information on contacting the group water scheme.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members have a responsibility to conserve water and avoid wastage (*see water-saving tips included in Appendix*).
- Members also have a responsibility to heed alerts issued by the GWS during periods of reduced water availability, avoiding activities that will put further pressure on an already scarce resource.
- Members have a responsibility to prepare for planned outages by ensuring that there is sufficient potable water in storage to meet basic human needs.

3. QUALITY-ASSURED, SAFE AND WHOLESOME

Quality drinking standards are set for potable water in national legislation that has transposed the EU Drinking Water Directive into Irish law. This requires that drinking water be ‘safe and wholesome’ at the point of human consumption.¹ It must not pose a risk to human health.

RIGHTS

- Members have a right to a potable supply in compliance with the microbiological, chemical, physical and aesthetic parameters included in the EU Drinking Water Directive, national legislation and the Drinking Water Regulations.
- Where a non-compliance is detected and a risk to health may arise, the member has a right to expect that:
 - the supervisory authority² will be notified immediately by the management of the scheme.
 - in the interests of public health, a ‘precautionary approach’ will be adopted by the management of the scheme.
 - appropriate actions will be taken by the management of the scheme, in consultation with the supervisory authority and the health authority³, to protect the health of members and to notify them appropriately in relation to the incident.
 - the incident will be thoroughly investigated by the management of the scheme.
 - where required, an action plan will be formulated and implemented by the management of the scheme in consultation with the relevant statutory agencies (i.e. the relevant county council and the HSE).
- As a further guarantee of a ‘safe and wholesome’ drinking water supply and to better protect human health, members have a right to the proper operation and maintenance of the physical assets of their scheme (i.e. the source abstraction point, treatment system, water storage tanks and pipe network and fittings) and to the quality-assured management of their water supply from source catchment to tap.

¹ The point of human consumption is usually the kitchen sink in a domestic dwelling.

² County councils are the supervisory authority for group water schemes within their area of responsibility.

³ This is the Health Service Executive, more commonly called the HSE.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members have a responsibility to better ensure the provision of a 'safe and wholesome' drinking water supply by:
 - co-operating with measures introduced by the management of the scheme to protect the water source.
 - installing appropriate non-return valves/backflow prevention devices to avoid contamination of the mains supply where an additional supply source is in use. The use of cross-connections with other water supplies (e.g. a private well) should normally be avoided as bad practice (due to the risk of contaminants passing from the other source into the group water scheme mains supply).
 - taking steps to prevent water contamination in the service pipe and at the kitchen sink (point of compliance with the Drinking Water Regulations).¹
 - reporting, without delay, to the management of the scheme any actual or suspected water quality irregularities (e.g. smell or taste issues).
 - repairing, without undue delay, leaks on the member's side of the meter/boundary box. Such leaks may result in contaminants entering the scheme pipework (e.g. where pressures fluctuate) and will also put unnecessary pressure on treatment systems through increased water demand.

¹. In addition to maintaining appropriate hygiene standards, it is important that water in the service pipe/drinking water tap is drained to waste where the tap has not been used for several days (e.g. on your return from holidays). Over time, the disinfectant residual that protects consumers from microbiological contaminants will have been depleted in standing water and there is an added risk of copper or nickel exceedances where water has been in prolonged contact with plumbing fittings. Run the tap until fresh mains water is flowing.

4. A REASONABLE COST

Privately sourced group water schemes are free to set their own costs in relation to new connection fees, water charges and upgrade levies, while publicly sourced schemes may do the same, except for those water charges that are determined by Irish Water. In both cases, schemes have a fiduciary responsibility to set charges with a view to ensuring financial security and, where seeking State subsidy or capital supports, with a view to meeting their terms and conditions.

As a general rule, however, where there is good management, group water schemes will not make onerous financial demands on their members. Through a general meeting that is open to all members in accordance with the Rules and Operating Regulations of the scheme, members decide on any proposed changes to fees, charges and levies.

RIGHTS

- Prospective members applying for connection to a group water scheme have a right to expect that it will cost no more than the fee agreed by the scheme members at a general meeting, plus any costs directly associated with making the connection (e.g. road opening fee, contractor costs, boundary box etc.).
- Where operational subvention from the State is claimed by a scheme, domestic members are entitled to an annual household allowance of potable water as determined by the scheme membership in accordance with the terms and conditions of the operational subsidy.
- Where members find themselves in financial difficulties, they have a right to discuss this, in confidence, with the management of the scheme, and to receive sympathetic consideration of the rescheduling of charges and levies.
- Members have an entitlement to attend all general meetings where future fees, charges and levies are to be decided upon and the management has an obligation to ensure that all members are notified of upcoming meetings in accordance with the Rules and Operating Regulations of the scheme.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members have a responsibility to pay such charges and levies as are agreed by the GWS members at general meetings.

5. PRESSURE

As with water quantity, water pressure in a distribution network can be affected by factors that are outside of the control of the management of a group water scheme. For example, the unacceptable practice of running taps to avoid freezing in cold winter conditions is likely to reduce pressure and may negatively impact on the supply to members further along the distribution network. Scheduled repairs, unexpected mains bursts, delays in carrying out repairs to leaks and periodic scouring operations to clean pipework will also impact on pressure in the short term.

Pressure on some communal lines may vary, especially if pumped directly. Some appliances (e.g. electric showers), may need to be of a particular specification suited to the water pressure at the stopcock. Booster pumps may be used to supply water at an adequate pressure to elevated locations on a communal piped supply. Where pressure is excessive, the group water scheme may decide to install pressure-reducing valves on its distribution pipe network.

RIGHTS

- In normal circumstances, members are entitled to sufficient pressure to fill attic storage in a two-storey house in a reasonable time while operating normal domestic appliances. To this end, a pressure of 15 metres (22 p.s.i.) is recommended at the stopcock.
- Members have a right to be informed, on request, of water pressure at their stopcock.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members have a responsibility to turn off taps/connections when not in use, to speedily fix identified leaks on their properties and to report to the GWS management leakage on the scheme's distribution network.

6. INFORMATION

The General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (more commonly called GDPR) is an EU regulation on data protection and privacy for all individual citizens of the European Union and the European Economic Area.

Given GDPR legislation, a group water scheme cannot share the contact details of its members with any third party without the expressed consent of those members. It is important, however, that the management of the scheme has the contact details of all members – and preferably mobile phone numbers – so that information can be communicated to them speedily and efficiently. This is particularly important in terms of notifying members about water quality issues and any interruption or disruption to normal supply. In this regard, it is crucial that the scheme management is made aware of consumers with relevant medical conditions (e.g. persons on dialysis) that may be aggravated by disruptions to the normal drinking water supply.

RIGHTS

- Members are entitled to the full protection of GDPR legislation when supplying their contact details, including phone number, e-mail address etc. to scheme management.
- Members have a right to be provided with water quality information without undue delay and to have access to historic information on the water quality of their scheme.
- Members are entitled to – and the management of a scheme is obliged to provide – information concerning the overall management of the scheme, including its financial management.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members have a responsibility to provide contact details to their scheme, including a mobile number and/or email address (where available).
- Members have a responsibility to inform their scheme of any change in their contact details.
- Members also have a responsibility to act on information/advice issued by their scheme in emergency situations (e.g. a water contamination incident, drought conditions, freezing conditions).
- Members that are vulnerable (as a result of particular medical conditions or disability), or are carers for someone that is vulnerable, have a responsibility to inform their group scheme management of this fact.

7. COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

There may be occasions when a member is dissatisfied with some aspect of the service provided by their scheme.

RIGHTS

- Members with a complaint/grievance have the right to put this in writing to the management of their scheme and to expect a prompt acknowledgement. They also have a right to expect an early indication of the timeframe within which their issue will be addressed and an actual response within that timeframe. They have a right also to be treated at all times with courtesy and respect. Where a complaint/grievance is not upheld, the management of the scheme should set out the reasons for its decision and provide details of how its decision may be appealed and the timeframe for doing so.
- Where the appealed complaint/grievance is not resolved by the scheme to the member's satisfaction, it may (as a last resort) be submitted in writing to the authority tasked with overseeing the rural water sector (i.e. the relevant county council) on the understanding that its arbitration decision is binding on both parties. The authority may decide to hear direct details separately from the member and the scheme and make a recommendation to the parties.
- Where the complaint/grievance is still not resolved to the member's satisfaction, there remains a right of appeal to legal process.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members submitting complaints should refrain from insulting or abusive language and should deal with the scheme management and committee/board in the respectful manner to which they are entitled.

8. PARTICIPATION

Regardless of the corporate entity status under which the scheme operates (i.e. whether as a co-operative, company or trusteeship), the scheme is owned by the members and not by any individual or group of individuals. It is on the basis that they are community-owned that group water schemes are supported through the operational subsidy and capital grant aid. Membership of a scheme, therefore, confers rights and responsibilities in relation to democratic participation, as set out in the Rules & Operating Procedures.

RIGHTS

- Members have a right to attend all general meetings organised by the scheme.
- Members have a right to vote on motions put before such meetings.
- Members have a right to put their names forward for election to the board/committee of management at general meetings, in accordance with the procedures outlined in the Rules & Operating Regulations.
- Members have a right to nominate other members in good standing for election to the board/committee of management and to vote in said election.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Members should positively consider active participation in their scheme, including attendance at general meetings.

Duties of management in upholding the rights of members

- Provide a copy of the Rules and Operational Regulations to all members of the scheme.
- Where a new connection is deemed non-viable due to pressure issues, give consideration to proposed solutions, such as the applicant installing a booster pump.
- Where a connection is deemed non-viable for other technical or for financial reasons, the reasons should be explained to the applicant in writing and be supported by documentary evidence including, where possible and practicable, a report by a consulting engineer.
- Make all reasonable efforts to supply members with a reasonable quantity of potable water on a consistent and long-term basis.
- Provide prior notification of any planned disruption to the water supply, including at least 24 hours forewarning in advance of any planned works that may result in dirty water (e.g. flushing of mains) or no water (e.g. installation of a valve or length of piping).
- Notify members without undue delay of the reason for any unplanned outage and its anticipated duration.
- Issue alerts during periods of reduced water availability.
- In the event of a non-compliance:
 - a. notify the Statutory Authority immediately (verbally and in writing).
 - b. adopt a precautionary approach.
 - c. take appropriate actions to protect the health of members, in consultation with the Statutory Authority and HSE.
 - d. investigate the cause of the non compliance.
 - e. formulate and implement an Action Plan where required, having agreed same with the relevant Statutory Authorities.
- Ensure proper operation and maintenance of the scheme's physical assets (source abstraction points, treatment system, water storage tanks and pipe network) and implementation of the quality-assured management of the water supply from source catchment to tap.

Appendix

- Deal in confidence with members experiencing financial difficulties and give sympathetic consideration to the rescheduling of charges and levies.
- Develop and propose strategies that are for the benefit of the scheme and implement such strategies having secured the required endorsement from members at properly convened general meetings.
- Aim for a pressure of 15 metres (22 p.s.i.) at member stopcocks and inform members of the pressure at their stopcocks, where asked to do so.
- Strictly adhere to the requirements of GDPR legislation by not sharing members' contact details with any third party without the expressed consent of those members.
- Provide water quality information (including historic information) to members without undue delay.
- Provide information to members on the overall management of their scheme, including its financial management.
- Where complaints or grievances are received in writing, provide speedy acknowledgement of same and an indication of the timeframe within which the complaint or grievance will be addressed.
- Deal with complainants with courtesy and respect.
- Where a complaint or grievance is not upheld, explain in writing the reasons for this decision and provide details of how it may be appealed and the timeframe for doing so.

General tips to avoid water wastage on your property

- Read you meter at the same time each day for a week and record daily usage and average daily usage over the seven day period. Discuss the figures with family/work colleagues and set water demand reduction targets, but without compromising on health and hygiene requirements.
- Periodically check water meters to ensure that no water is being lost. If the meter counter is still running when everything is turned off in your premises, you probably have a leak.
- Fix dripping taps and hosepipes, replace worn washers and fix overflows.
- Do not leave taps unattended when water is flowing.
- Use 'low-flow' water saving heads on taps, showers etc., as these reduce water demand without any reduction in pressure.
- Toilet flushing is a major element of water demand (accounting for a third of consumption in households). Positive consideration should be given to replacing older, inefficient toilets with modern, dual flush/automatic flush cisterns, as these use far less water than older models.
- Ensure that your water pipework, outside taps, drinking water troughs and attic header tank are 'winter ready', to guard against avoidable bursts in freezing conditions.¹

Tips for householders:

- Where you have an older toilet and are not yet in a position to upgrade it, install at least one litre-sized cistern bag as an interim measure. When filled with water and inserted in the cistern, this device displaces water volume in the tank so that you are flushing less water.
- For personal hygiene, take a shower rather than a bath. An average shower uses about 10 litres of water per minute, so shower for as long as is necessary and no longer.
- Don't leave the tap flowing while brushing your teeth or shaving. By turning off the tap, you will save up to six litres of water per minute.

¹. To access the NFGWS 'Winter Ready' advice document, go to:
<https://nfgws.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Avoid-water-loss-this-winter.pdf>

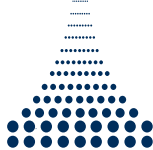
- Make sure that your washing machine and dishwasher are fully loaded before putting on a wash. [This will also save you money on energy bills.]
- Place a basin in the sink when washing dishes by hand or rinsing fruit and vegetables.
- Instead of running the cold tap to waste each time you need a drink, keep a vessel of drinking water in the fridge. An uncovered jug of water will absorb food smells, so a sealed container (such as a stainless steel flask) is preferable.
- Choose the correct pot or pan size for cooking, as well as the correct temperature. Keeping the lid on a pot or pan when cooking and reducing the temperature of the hob as soon as the water comes to the boil, will result in less evaporation so that you don't have to keep adding water. [This also saves money on energy bills.]

Tips for farmers:

- Check for overflowing troughs and incorrectly set or damaged ball-valves. Adjust the ball valves to lower the float, or replace faulty parts.
- On dairy farms, cooling water can be diverted to a tank and used for parlour washing.
- Use dry-cleaning techniques such as scrapers and brushes to remove solid waste from yards and pens before hosing, or use a small amount of water (e.g. one bucket) to pre-soak waste before cleaning.
- Inspect the ground above your farm distribution pipework for visible signs of leaks, such as unusually damp ground, lusher than expected vegetation (sign of recent leak), or reduced vegetation (consequence of a long-term leak).
- Carry out 'night flow' tests on water meters. Unusually high night-time water demand suggests that you may have a leak.

Tips for other businesses/social facilities:

- Upgrade urinals so that they are not leaking and to ensure that they flush only as needed.
- Where premises are closed for holidays, check the meter to ensure that the dial is not turning.



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