



National Federation of Group Water Schemes

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NFGWS Advice Note to Group Water Schemes on Managing the Potential Environmental Impact of Capital Works

This advice note aims to build awareness among GWSs of the potential adverse impact that capital works can have on the natural environment and to provide guidance on the steps that should be adopted to avoid or minimise such impacts and to compensate the environment where damage cannot be avoided.

Providing wholesome drinking water services to ensure the protection of the health of its members is the core objective of a GWS. However, this objective is very much linked to - and impacts on - the environment and biodiversity of which we are part. Protecting and, where practically possible, improving the long-term quality of the environment local to the GWS is fundamental to the way a group water scheme should go about its activities.

It is important for GWSs to actively protect and enhance their local environment, including the natural character of the countryside such as lakes, streams, turloughs, limestone pavement, heaths and peatlands, but also the broader environment and its ecosystems.

Most local authorities have informative pages on their websites on local biodiversity and natural diversity. Several local authorities have a heritage officer whose role is to promote and build community awareness of the importance of our cultural, landscape, built and natural heritage. If your local authority does not have a designated heritage office to assist your scheme, your Rural Water Liaison Officer should be able to put you in contact with a competent advisor within the local authority.

Protecting and improving the environment has been recognised in a number of European Directives that afford special protection to identified areas that are important for drinking water supply, nature conservation, fisheries and bathing.

Every GWS has multiple environmental obligations that regulate its water supply function, operation and development. Many of these obligations arise from Ireland's membership of the European Union. Particular examples include the Birds Directive, Habitats Directive, Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, Bathing Water Directive and the Water Framework Directive (WFD), all of which all been transposed into national legislation. The WFD is the overarching Directive within which all matters impacting on the water environment are managed.

The aim of every GWS should be to:

- Ensure that its water supply activities are delivered in a sustainable manner that contributes to the protection of drinking water sources and the wider environment,
- Operate its water services infrastructure in a manner that fully supports the objectives under the WFD and obligations under the Birds and Habitats and EIA Directives.
- Show empathy to scheme surroundings, taking care of the common environment for the benefit of future generations.

By their very nature, GWSs operations – in particular capital works – will impact on the environment and on local biodiversity, especially where those works involve hard engineering solutions such as the construction of treatment facilities and reservoirs and the laying of pipework or drainage systems.

Disruption of habitat is sometimes unavoidable (e.g. where there is construction on a greenfield site or a hedgerow has to be removed). In some cases, if not properly managed, damage can be done that may have very serious and long-term environmental consequences. This can be the case particularly where the works are being carried out in an environmentally-sensitive location, or where there is insufficient prior planning and ongoing liaison with a contractor to ensure that care is taken to avoid damage to natural vegetation that doesn't need to be interfered with as part of a contract. Long-term damage to the aquatic environment can result also (e.g. through the badly thought out positioning of scour valves and drainage pipes).

Even where the impact may be limited, it must be recognised that multiple capital projects across Ireland have contributed to an alarming decline in biodiversity and to degradation of the overall rural landscape.

Environmental assessment in advance of capital projects and appropriate management during construction should be part of a group water scheme's commitment to enhancing biodiversity. Every effort should be made to minimise damage to the natural environment where possible (e.g. by ensuring that newly constructed drains and scour valves do not flow directly into water bodies but are intercepted with vegetated sediment traps). In addition, schemes should positively consider actions to compensate the environment for damage caused. For example, where a hedgerow must be removed, is it possible to lay a new ditch and hedge? The timing of such work is also critical (e.g. hedgerow removal during the nesting season is an offence and can only occur in cases of emergency and with the approval of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)).

GWSs should ensure that the work completed complies with the various statutory environmental legislation. By considering the checklist overleaf, schemes can approach the issue of environmental protection and enhancement in a structured manner, availing of the expertise that exists in various statutory bodies (including local authorities, the National Biodiversity Centre, Inland Fisheries etc.) as well as in voluntary bodies (such as Birdwatch Ireland, the Native Woodlands Trust and many more besides). All of these organisations will be happy to work with communities to reduce damage to our fragile environment and protect and enhance biodiversity.

For assistance in making contact with statutory agencies and voluntary environmental organisations, schemes should consult with their local NFGWS development officer.

Further information is available from:

- Local Authorities Heritage/Biodiversity or environmental awareness officer.
- National Parks and Wildlife Service (<https://www.npws.ie/>)
- Citizen's information (<https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/>)
- Local Authority Water Programme (LAWPRO) (<http://watersandcommunities.ie/>)
- The All Ireland Pollinator Plan (www.pollinators.ie)

Group Water Scheme Environmental-proofing Checklist for Proposed Capital Projects

Completion of the following checklist and actions will assist GWS management in environmental assessment and management of capital works projects.

About the Project	Action required	Tick as completed
<p>Is planning permission required for the proposed works? http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/si/29/made/en/pdf</p>	<p>Consult the local authority planners in advance of submitting any application for permission to proceed with works. Consultation prior to works will assist with the later assessment of the planning application as will early involvement by the heritage/biodiversity officer.</p> <p><i>If a GWS needs to know if proposed capital works require planning permission, a section 5 referral can be made to the planning authority. A section 5 declaration will assess whether or not the proposed works are exempted from planning permission.</i></p>	
<p>Screening for appropriate assessment https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS_2009_AA_Guidance.pdf</p>	<p>An appropriate assessment (AA) is an assessment of the potential adverse effects of a plan or project (in combination with other plans or projects) on Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas. These sites are protected by National and European Law.</p>	
<p>Is an environmental impact assessment (EIA) required? https://www.epa.ie/monitoring/assessment/assessment/eia/</p>	<p>Should an assessment be required, the local authority will advise on how to proceed with this. Any assessment will include reference to the Wildlife Act 1976, amendment 2000 and European Communities (Birds & Habitats) regulations 2011. An EIS (Environmental Impact Screening) report may be required.</p>	
<p>Have scheme members in the affected area been informed of the proposed works and of planned mitigation/compensatory measures?</p>	<p>Advance consultation with the local community is always advisable where significant landscape impacts are likely during construction works. This helps address local concerns, especially where the scheme explains its mitigation measures and its plan to compensate the environment for any damage done.</p>	
<p>Can the works be completed with minimal disturbance to the landscape and how can environmental impacts be minimised (e.g. how much hedgerow and other ecosystems can be retained)? Possible disturbance to sites of archaeological interest should also be considered.</p>	<p>Following a general assessment, the GWS and its consulting engineer should engage with the local authority or other competent statutory or voluntary body to assess likely damage to flora/fauna, watercourses, means of mitigating damage and ways in which the environment might be compensated for unavoidable damage.</p> <p>Where present, the heritage/biodiversity officer will be able to advise on whether or not the proposed works fall within a designated protection area (e.g. SAC, Natura 200 site, SPA, NHA, raised bog, etc.) or if it is in conflict with any statutory environmental legislation, including archaeological designations.</p>	

<p>Has the importance of minimising environmental impact or damage during construction been addressed in the tender and contract documents and discussed with the successful contractor?</p>	<p>The scheme should liaise with the contractor in advance to urge caution in the use of heavy machinery near trees etc. and should visit the construction works on a regular basis to ensure that everything that can be done to minimise damage done. Any measures to protect the environment should form part of the contract documents. The onus should be on the contractor to ensure those measures are carried out. It is important to include environmental mitigation measures (such as the construction of silt traps). These will require ongoing maintenance and will need to be monitored by the GWS to protect water quality in local water bodies.</p>	
<p>What mitigation/compensatory measures are proposed?</p>	<p>Where a hedgerow must be removed, is it possible to lay a new ditch and hedge as per guidance published as part of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan? Can nest boxes be provided to compensate for loss of destroyed nesting areas if their removal cannot be avoided? Measures to protect watercourses should be implemented, maintained and monitored.</p>	