



National Federation of Group Water Schemes

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NFGWS Covid-19 Advice Note 4

The purpose of this advice note is to make group water schemes aware of the Government's most recent publications in relation to COVID-19 and their implications for employers and workers. It also aims to provide information on other relevant GWS updates.

Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business

On the 1st of May, the Government published its 'Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business', setting out a detailed phased plan on how the COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted. All group water schemes (GWSs) have continued to operate as an essential service during the restricted period, with only essential or emergency works being completed. Many schemes have used this as an opportunity to focus on the planning phases for capital projects, engaging with consultants or tendering to ensure, in so far as is possible, that projects are 'shovel ready' once restrictions are eased. While it is subject to change depending on emerging public health advice, the published roadmap allows construction works to commence under strict conditions from the 18th of May. It also sets out Ireland's plan for further lifting COVID-19 restrictions over 5 distinct phases. The key dates listed for these phases are as follows:

- Phase 1 – 18th of May
- Phase 2 – 8th of June
- Phase 3 – 29th of June
- Phase 4 – 20th of July
- Phase 5 – 10th of August

Based on the Public Health Framework Approach to advising Government on measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the roadmap sets out a phased plan for lifting covid-19 restrictions in the following areas:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Health Measures• Education & Childcare Measures• Health & Social Care Services Measures• Economic Activity (Work)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Retail, Personal Services and Commercial Activities• Cultural & Social Measures• Transport & Travel Measures
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*Note: Those highlighted in **bold** are of particular relevance to GWSs.*

Every GWS is encouraged to read the full text of the document which is available to download from the NFGWS website <https://nfgws.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business.pdf>.

Return to Work Safely Protocol

On the 8th of May, the Government published 'Return to Work Safely Protocol', which is the COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for employers and workers in Ireland. The GWS sector continues to be recognised as an essential service provider and many schemes have already implemented specific measures and contingency arrangements to protect workers and volunteers. However, it is important that each scheme now reviews its existing measures to ensure that they are in line with this protocol.

The protocol sets out the need for employers to ensure strong communication, a shared collaborative approach and regular engagement with workers in all matters relating to COVID-19 and the preventative measures being implemented.

Many schemes have only small numbers of full-time or part-time employees, with others reliant on volunteers to carry out specific duties. This guidance document aims to highlight a number of specific areas that must be implemented by schemes in both scenarios.

- at least one employee/GWS representative should be appointed to ensure that COVID-19 measures are strictly adhered to on the scheme.
- To be effective, the person(s) undertaking this role must receive the necessary training and have a structured framework to follow within the organisation. Online training supports are available to assist schemes, including:
 - The LASNTG - <https://www.lasntg.ie/>. The LASNTG has developed induction training courses for those returning to work and including operators and contractors.
 - ICOS Skillnet - <https://icoskillnet.ie/> - also has a range of online courses available, including COVID-19 related courses.

Key tasks that all employers must complete to effectively implement the protocol include:

- developing and/or updating the COVID-19 mitigation plans to take account of the protocol.
- developing or amending policies and procedures for prompt identification and isolation of workers who may have symptoms of COVID-19, as appropriate.
- developing, consulting, communicating and implementing workplace changes or policies.
- Implementing the COVID-19 prevention and control measures to minimise risk to workers.

Within the key areas and where applicable, employers are obliged to provide COVID-19 induction training and update safety plans to include measures relevant to COVID-19 (e.g. social distancing, the provision of hand sanitisers, tissues and clinical waste bags, clear procedures around handwashing and respiratory etiquette, and ensuring proper ventilation).

Employers must also keep a log of those working in groups to facilitate contact tracing should a worker become infected. Employers must also have a response plan in place, detailing how they will deal with a suspected case of COVID-19 in the workplace. If a worker displays any symptoms of the virus during working hours, specific actions need to be implemented by the employer to prevent the further spread of the virus and the health and safety of the worker and others. A full risk assessment of any incidents must be completed to ascertain if any further action needs to be taken.

Every scheme is encouraged to read the full document available at: <https://nfgws.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Return-to-Work-Safely-Protocol.pdf>.

Other Relevant GWS Updates/Advice

AGMs

As it is still not possible to hold public meetings, planned AGMs, SGMs and public information meeting must remain on hold for now. Earliest indications from the documentation as published indicate that public gatherings will only be permitted in the latter phases of the roadmap and will be subject to strict social distancing and other conditions. There are no specific details at this time.

Board Meetings/Committee meetings

GWSs are encouraged to use one of the many online platforms now available for video conferencing to facilitate board meetings. Your local development officer is available to assist your scheme with this process.

Annual Returns

The deadline for filing annual returns to the Register of Friendly Societies or the Companies Registration Office has been extended to the 30th June. In the meantime, GWSs are encouraged to prepare annual returns as normal and to have them approved by the GWS board.

Operational Subsidy Claims

Operational subsidy claims should be made to your Local Authority in the normal way. GWSs are encouraged to make their applications before the deadline of the 30th of June. It is accepted that it may not be possible for schemes to meet the requirement of conditions relating to approval of annual audited returns by members at the AGM and the inclusion of these returns as supporting documentation. Nonetheless, GWSs are encouraged to make their claims now, (to include audited accounts where relevant, available and approved by the scheme Board/Committee) referencing that any outstanding information will be provided as soon as possible once restrictions are lifted.

Capital Works

Capital works can and should be progressed from the 18th of May, in accordance with the conditions outlined in the above roadmap and protocols. GWSs should ensure that contractors and workers adhere to the necessary conditions when carrying out such works. Given the unavoidable delays to capital works under the Multi-annual Rural Water Programme due to Covid-19, GWSs are encouraged to make every effort to progress approved works over the coming weeks and months, where it is safe to do so.

Further Information Sources

Up-to-date information on COVID-19 continues to be available from:

- Latest Government Advice – <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/>
- Latest HSE Advice – <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/>
- NFGWS COVID-19 Advice – <https://nfgws.ie/nfgws-advice-on-continuing-spread-of-covid-19/>