



# National Federation of Group Water Schemes

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## **NFGWS advice to group water schemes in light of the continuing spread of COVID-19 coronavirus**

This purpose of this advice note is to:

- Provide guidance on contingency planning for GWSs to ensure the continuity of supply and prevent further spread of the COVID-19 virus through community transmission,
- Highlight that traditional water treatment methods which utilise filtration and disinfection should inactivate COVID-19 virus.

As the number of reported cases of the Coronavirus COVID-19 (see Appendix 1) increases throughout the island of Ireland, Group Water Scheme boards and staff need to make sure that their scheme is properly prepared, that people working on behalf of a scheme are protected, and that necessary precautions are taken to prevent further spread of the virus. This basic guidance note for GWS boards and management aims to help prepare for the management of a scheme in the event of the continued spread of the virus. The note focuses on preventing community transmission, contingency planning for GWS management and protecting your water supply.

### **Preventing Community Transmission**

People working on GWSs are active within rural communities and can have dealings with many people on a daily basis. To prevent further spread of the virus through community transmission, frequent and proper hand hygiene must be adhered to. Regular washing of hands with soap and water is one of the most important prevention measures for COVID-19. GWSs should ensure that more frequent and regular hand hygiene is observed and that hand sanitiser/hand washing facilities are made available to those working on behalf of the scheme. When washing hands, you should adhere to the HSE guidance (see Appendix 2):

GWSs carry out operational monitoring regularly as part of Quality Assurance System implementation. This requires chlorine residual testing to be completed at consumers' taps at various locations on a scheme. In light of the spread of Covid-19, group water schemes are encouraged to continue undertaking operational monitoring to verify the efficiency of disinfection systems, but with samples taken from the distribution main, where possible. Entering the homes of consumers should be kept to a minimum.

All non-essential public meetings should be put on hold. Many GWSs normally hold Annual General Meetings at this time of the year. While schemes may, at present, hold such events, it is important that the government's advice note on mass gatherings is consulted when making a decision about whether or not to proceed. This advice note is at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid->

[19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/#mass-gathering-guidelines](https://www.nfgws.org.uk/19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/#mass-gathering-guidelines). As this Advice Note is likely to be updated regularly over the coming weeks, GWSs should update themselves before organising any meeting/event.

## Contingency Planning for GWSs

Every scheme should have a plan in place to deal with emergencies as part of its Quality Assurance System. While emergency planning to date has largely focused on dealing with potential water quality incidents, emergency plans should also address the issue of personnel back-up (i.e having a person/people available to take the place of those who have been infected and/or are unable to fulfil their duties).

In some instances, GWSs may have become reliant on one or two individuals to carry out all of the operational functions on their scheme. These people have considerable local knowledge and operational expertise, including the management of assets such as valves and fittings. GWSs should document this information in so far as possible and familiarise themselves with the Standard Operating Procedures outlined in the NFGWS Quality Assurance System.

In the event of further spread of COVID-19, schemes will need to be prepared for situations where GWS staff members or volunteers may no longer be able to perform their duties. Contingency plans should be put in place now rather than reacting to issues as they arise over the coming weeks. Each scheme should ask themselves the following questions:

- If the person responsible for operating and managing our scheme (operator, manger, caretaker, volunteer) fell ill suddenly, how would we continue to supply potable drinking water to our members?
- Have we discussed contingency planning with our contractors?
- Have we discussed contingency planning with our suppliers (particularly chemical suppliers)?

**The NFGWS is recommending that every scheme completes the following over the coming days, if it has not done so already:**

1. Hold a contingency planning meeting of the GWS Board/committee to
  - a. consider the questions raised above.
  - b. ensure that all GWS staff and board members are aware of the possible implications of the current outbreak for the group water scheme and that they have available to them the most up-to-date information and advice on containing the spread of the virus.
  - c. discuss contingency planning, with a view to ensuring continuity of supply to GWS members over the coming period.
2. GWS in Design Build and Operate contracts:
  - a. Speak to your Employer's Representative / DBO Operator in relation to their planning to ensure continuity of operations during the ongoing outbreak. (The NFGWS is making contact with all DBO operators in relation to same and will circulate any relevant information to schemes).
3. GWSs not in a Design Build and Operate contract:
  - a. Ensure arrangements are in place with private service providers/contractors should their services be required at short notice.
  - b. At least two other individuals should be trained and briefed on treatment plant operations including Health and Safety requirements.

4. All GWSs (including publicly sourced GWS):
  - a. Where possible GWSs should speak to neighbouring schemes about the possibility of working together to ensure continuity of supply and QA implementation and sharing resources such as expertise and staff if necessary. Amalgamation and rationalisation cluster groups have been established in a number of counties and these groups could facilitate such a process.
  - b. For operating and managing GWS networks, make sure that emergency contact details (e.g. contractors, LA, HSE) are documented and made available to all GWS officers and staff.
  - c. Have at least three GWS representatives trained and briefed on how to implement the schemes Quality Assurance System from source to tap, including operational monitoring roles.

GWSs are advised to document any contingency plan and update previous plans as necessary. NFGWS Development Officers are available to assist and advise GWSs on the above and training continues to be available now through the NFGWS (<https://nfgws.ie/training-water-awareness/>) and the Local Authorities Services National Training Group (<https://www.lasntg.ie/>).

## **Protecting water supplies**

The presence of the COVID-19 virus has not been detected in drinking-water supplies to date and based on current evidence, the risk to water supplies is estimated to be low according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Traditional water treatment methods which utilise filtration and disinfection should inactivate COVID-19 virus. It has been shown to be sensitive to chlorination and UV disinfection. It is, therefore, extremely important that hygiene standards are strictly observed and that disinfection systems are operated and maintained correctly. As always, the distribution network should be cleaned/scoured and a chlorine residual maintained at the consumer's tap.

All schemes have now completed Quality Assurance training and are widely implementing the system across the sector. The fundamental objective of the NFGWS Quality Assurance System is to ensure that water provided is compliant with the drinking water standards. As part of the recommended multi-barrier approach to protecting water from catchment to consumer, proper management of disinfection system is of paramount importance.

Many co-benefits will be realised by safely managing water and sanitation services and applying good hygiene practices. Such efforts will prevent many other infectious diseases, which cause millions of deaths each year.

## **Stay Up to date with Developments**

The latest government advice on the Coronavirus Covid-19 can be viewed at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/>. This is regularly updated.

# Coronavirus COVID-19



Coronavirus  
**COVID-19**  
Public Health  
Advice

## The Facts

### Most at Risk

- Anyone who has been to an affected region in the last 14 days  
**AND** is experiencing symptoms
- Anyone who has been in close contact with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) in the last 14 days  
**AND** is experiencing symptoms

### Prevention



**Wash**  
your hands well and  
often to avoid  
contamination



**Cover**  
your mouth and nose  
with a tissue or sleeve  
when coughing or  
sneezing and discard  
used tissue



**Avoid**  
touching eyes, nose,  
or mouth with  
unwashed hands



**Clean**  
and disinfect  
frequently touched  
objects and surfaces

### Symptoms

> A Cough > Shortness of Breath > Breathing Difficulties > Fever (High Temperature)

### Affected Regions

Check the list of affected regions on [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

### What to do if you are at risk

**I've been to an affected region  
in the last 14 days and**

**I HAVE symptoms**

1. Stay away from other people
2. Phone your GP without delay
3. If you do not have a GP  
Phone 112 or 999

**I DO NOT HAVE symptoms**  
For advice visit [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

**I've been in close contact with a confirmed or probable  
case of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) in the last 14 days and**

**I HAVE symptoms**

1. Stay away from other people
2. Phone your GP without delay
3. If you do not have a GP  
Phone 112 or 999

**I DO NOT HAVE symptoms**  
For advice visit [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

**For Daily Updates Visit**

[www.gov.ie/health-covid-19](http://www.gov.ie/health-covid-19)  
[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

Ireland is operating a containment strategy  
in line with WHO and ECDC advice



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

# Handwashing Technique

## Preparation



1. Remove hand and wrist jewellery (wedding band allowed) N.B. Keep nails short



2. Wet hands thoroughly under warm running water



3. Apply 5mls of soap/antiseptic soap to cupped hand by pressing dispenser with heel of hand (do not use finger tips on the dispenser)

## Handwashing – (process takes at least 15 seconds)



A. Rub palm to palm 5 times



B. Rub right palm over the back of left hand up to wrist level 5 times. Do the same with the other hand



C. With right hand over back of left hand rub fingers 5 times. Do same with the other hand



D. Rub palm to palm with the fingers interlaced



E. Wash thumbs of each hand separately using a rotating movement



F. Rub the tips of the fingers against the opposite palm using a circular motion. Also ensure nail beds are washed



G. Rinse hands thoroughly under running water to remove all traces of soap



H. Turn off taps using elbows



I. Dry hands completely using a disposable paper towel



J. Discard paper towel in waste bin. Open bin using foot pedal only to avoid contaminating clean hands

Supported by PEI  
Developed by Infection Control Team  
St. James's Hospital

 Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

A Partnership for  
Better Healthcare 

A Strategy for the Control of  
Antimicrobial Resistance in Ireland 

Clean your hands  
**Say no to infection**