

## KEY FINDINGS IN 2023

- Only 1,665 small private supplies are registered with local authorities across the country. Consumers may not be aware that they could be drinking water from an unmonitored supply, potentially putting their health at risk.
- Water quality in private supplies is not as good as public supplies with 1 in 20 small private supplies and private group schemes failing to meet *E. coli* standards in 2023.
- The number of private group schemes with *E. coli* failures increased from 13 supplies in 2022 to 22 supplies in 2023, impacting approximately 4,600 people.
- €38.5 million of government funding that could have been invested in improvements to private supplies between 2019-2023 was not used.

## INTRODUCTION

**Small Private Supplies (SPS)** provide drinking water to the public through commercial and public activities. Examples of SPS include hotels, B&Bs, schools, nursing homes, creches, as well as food and drink businesses. This water is often sourced from a private well which may have little or no treatment. There are 1,665 SPS registered with local authorities but there are many more that have not registered. SPS do not include private household wells. Household wells are exempt from drinking water regulation.

**Private Group Schemes (PGS)** are set up by community groups. PGS source, treat and distribute drinking water to their scheme members. There are around 370 private group schemes serving over 190,000 people.

The National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) represents and works with the community-owned rural water services sector in Ireland. The NFGWS assists both local authorities and group schemes to identify and address water quality issues and risks.

**Local authorities** have responsibility for ensuring that private drinking water supplies are monitored for compliance with drinking water standards. The results of monitoring undertaken in 2023 can be found on the EPA SAFER website<sup>1</sup>.

The **water supplier** (PGS or SPS) is legally responsible for ensuring that all water supplied to the public by them does not present a risk to human health and meets the requirements of the Drinking Water Regulations 2023. Failure by a water supplier to provide wholesome and clean water is an offence.

## SMALL PRIVATE SUPPLIES (SPS)

### *E. coli* Compliance

The presence of *E. coli* bacteria indicates that a supply has been contaminated and the drinking water has not been fully disinfected. Drinking water supplies must be protected, and the raw water adequately treated, as drinking water contaminated with *E. coli* can cause serious gastrointestinal illness. The 2023 monitoring results for small private supplies (SPS) show drinking water quality is at 95.1% compliance which is below the 99.9% compliance seen in public water supplies. Compliance levels have not improved from 2022 and actions must be taken by suppliers to resolve these issues.

**TABLE 1.** Small private supplies *E. coli* compliance levels.

<i>E. coli</i> – Supplies compliant	2022	2023
	95.5%	95.1%

## Registration of private supplies

The total number of SPS in the country remains unknown as not all private suppliers are registered with their local authority. Current drinking water regulations do not require private suppliers to register

which is an obvious gap, and this requires legislative change to be initiated by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Unregistered supplies are not being monitored by the local authorities. Consumers may not be aware that they could be drinking water from an unmonitored supply, potentially putting their health at risk. Some councils have made good efforts to register SPS in their counties. For example, Cork County Council has been very proactive in registering 369 SPS, while Wexford, Meath and Kilkenny County Councils each have over 130 SPS registered. The number of local authorities with less than 40 small private supplies registered are listed in Table 2 below.

All private suppliers should register with their local authority so their supplies can be monitored annually. Local authorities should take proactive steps to register all private supplies in their functional areas.

**TABLE 2.** Local Authorities with 40 or less SPS registered.<sup>2</sup>

Local Authority	SPS Registered
Limerick City & County	40
Donegal	37
Westmeath	36
Offaly	32
Mayo	31
Clare	20
Waterford City & County	16
Longford	15
Monaghan	10
Roscommon	10
Louth	10
Sligo	9
Leitrim	1

## Monitoring of private supplies

In 2023, local authorities monitored 86% (1,423) of the 1,665 registered SPS. While the level of monitoring has improved in recent years, up from 84% in 2022 and 75% in 2021, it still falls well short of what is required to protect public health. All registered supplies must be monitored by local authorities annually as required by legislation to protect public health.

## PRIVATE GROUP SCHEMES (PGS)

### *E. coli* Compliance

The 2023 monitoring results for private group schemes (PGS) show drinking water quality is at 94.1% compliance down from 96.5% in 2022, and well below the 99.9% compliance seen in public water supplies. In 2023, 22 supplies, supplying approximately 4,600 people, failed the standard for *E. coli* (see Figure 1). This is a worrying increase from the 13 supplies that failed the *E. coli* standard in 2022.

**TABLE 3.** *E. coli* Compliance in private group schemes.

<i>E. coli</i> – Supplies compliant	2022	2023
	96.5%	94.1%

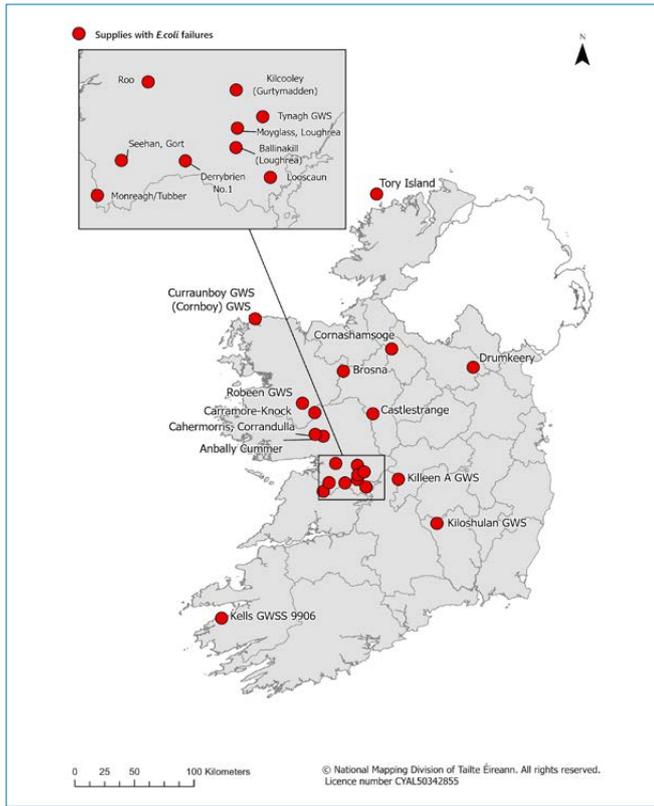
To improve their disinfection treatment systems and prevent *E. coli* failures, a PGS can seek technical assistance from the National Federation of Group Water Schemes. Financial assistance for upgrading

<sup>1</sup> <https://eparesearch.epa.ie/safer/>

<sup>2</sup> This table excludes local Authorities that are predominately urban areas.

disinfection infrastructure can be applied for through the local authority and provided for by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

**FIGURE 1:** Private group schemes with *E. coli* failures in 2023.



### Trihalomethanes

Trihalomethanes (THMs) are formed when natural organic matter in the water source, such as vegetation, reacts with chlorine used in the disinfection treatment process. In 2023, 21 PGS supplying 22,000 people failed the standard for THMs (see Figure 2). This is an increase from the 16 supplies serving 14,000 people in 2022. A factor that is contributing to increased number of THM failures is the heavier rainfall events experienced in recent years, associated with climate change.

**TABLE 4.** THM Compliance in private group schemes.

THM - Supplies compliant	2022	2023
	94.7%	94.4%

In January 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that Ireland had failed to take the measures necessary to ensure THM compliance in 9 PGS and failed to give priority to enforcement actions. Five supplies that failed the THM standard in 2023 are listed in the European court ruling. Actions must be taken by PGS to achieve THM compliance, including investing in and delivering water treatment plant upgrades. Local authorities should take the necessary enforcement actions to achieve compliance.

## DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HERITAGE (DHLGH)

The DHLGH is responsible for water policy and making funding available for improvements to private supplies through the Multi-Annual Rural Water Programme (MARWP).

Of the €81 million allocated to improving drinking water quality in the MARWP 2019 – 2023 cycle, there was an underspend of €38.5 million that could have been invested in improvements to private supplies.

Following this significant underspend, the DHLGH updated the MARWP framework and application process. The new cycle of the MARWP 2024-2026 was launched in January 2024. Improvements in the application process should make it easier for group water schemes to access funding and deliver improved drinking water quality. The success of these improvements will be determined in subsequent years.

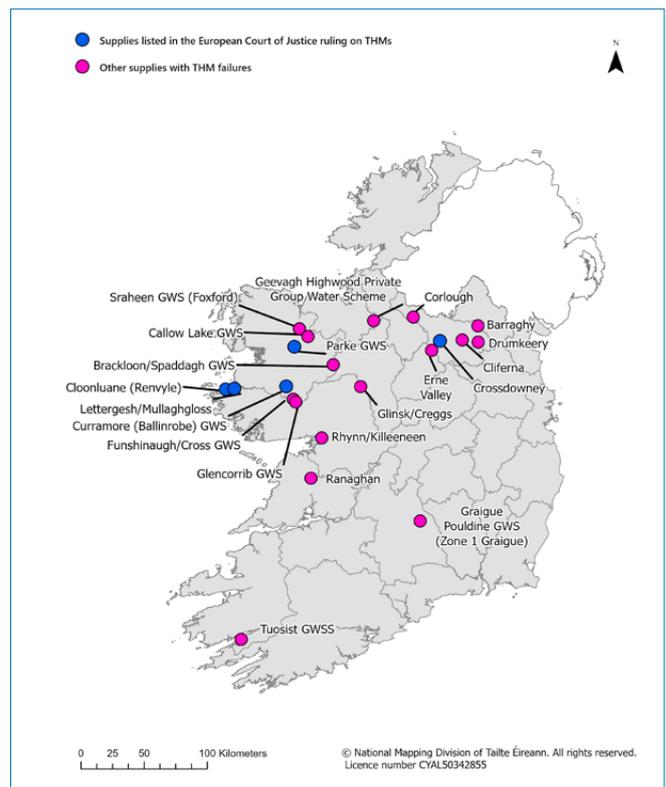
### Review of the Rural Water Sector

A review of the rural water sector was completed on behalf of the DHLGH in January 2023. DHLGH must address the key issues identified in the review to improve drinking water quality in private group schemes and small private supplies. While some of the issues were progressed in 2023, much work remains to be done in particular:

- Making it a legal requirement for private water suppliers to register supplies with the local authority.
- Implementing measures to improve the management and oversight of underperforming supplies.

The implementation of these actions should improve drinking water quality and the resilience of supplies.

**FIGURE 2:** Private group schemes with THM failures in 2023.



### What needs to be done:

Water suppliers must:	Local authorities must:	Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage must:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Register their supply with the local authority.</li> <li>◆ Ensure disinfection is operating correctly, to prevent E.coli failures.</li> <li>◆ Carry out infrastructural upgrades where required, to comply with drinking water quality standards.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Register all private drinking water supplies.</li> <li>◆ Monitor all private drinking water supplies.</li> <li>◆ Investigate supplies that fail to meet drinking water quality standards and take necessary enforcement action.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Amend legislation to obligate suppliers to register.</li> <li>◆ Address the issues highlighted in the rural water review report, to improve water quality.</li> <li>◆ Allocate MARWP funding to deliver drinking water quality improvements.</li> </ul>