

Drinking Water Quality in Private Group Schemes and Small Private Supplies - 2024

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KEY FINDINGS 2024

- The total number of small private supplies remains unknown as there is no legal obligation on small private suppliers to register. Unregistered supplies are not monitored by local authorities.
- Water quality in private water supplies is not as good as public water supplies.
- The number of private group schemes failing to meet the *E. coli* standard in 2024 was 24, up from 13 in 2022.
- 19 private group schemes failed to meet Trihalomethanes standards in 2024.

INTRODUCTION

Small Private Supplies (SPS) provide drinking water to the public through commercial and public activities. Examples of SPS includes schools, creches, nursing homes, self-catering accommodation, and sports clubs. This water is often sourced from a private well which may have little or no treatment. There almost 1,700 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 193,000 people.

Local authorities have responsibility for ensuring that private drinking water supplies are registered and monitored for compliance with drinking water standards. The results of monitoring undertaken in 2024 can be found on the EPA SAFER website¹.

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.

WATER QUALITY IN 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. Consuming water contaminated with *E. coli* can lead to serious gastrointestinal illness.

51 small private supplies failed to meet the *E. coli* standard resulting in a compliance rate of 96.9%. This is an improvement from 67 supplies in 2023 and a compliance rate of 95.21%, however it is still too high considering the health risks associated with *E. coli*.

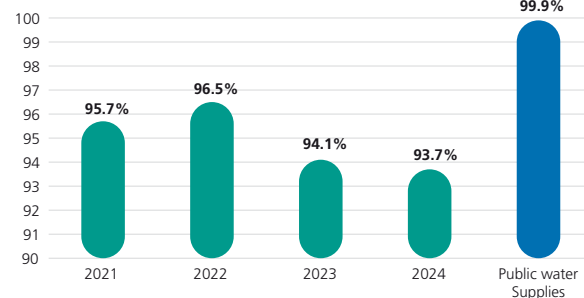
WATER QUALITY IN PRIVATE GROUP SCHEMES (PGS)

E. coli Compliance

Compliance with *E. coli* standards in private group water schemes reduced to 93.7%, compared to 94.1% in 2023 and 96.5% in 2022. This marks a continued year-on-year decline, as illustrated in Figure 1. Public water supplies have maintained a much higher compliance rate of 99.9% compliance over the last number of years. A total of 24 PGS supplying 4,085 people failed the standard for *E. coli* in 2024 compared to 13 schemes in 2022 supplying approximately 5,500 people.

Six schemes had repeat failures of *E. coli* in both 2023 and 2024. These schemes were Monreagh/Tubber crossing the border of Co. Clare and Co. Galway, Ballinakill (Loughrea) in Co. Galway, Curraunboy and Robeen in Co. Mayo and Brosna and Castlestrange in Co. Roscommon (See Figure 2). Most of these schemes are on long-term boil water notices to protect public health, but people should not be living without access to safe drinking water for extended periods of time.

Figure 1: *E. coli* Compliance in PRG

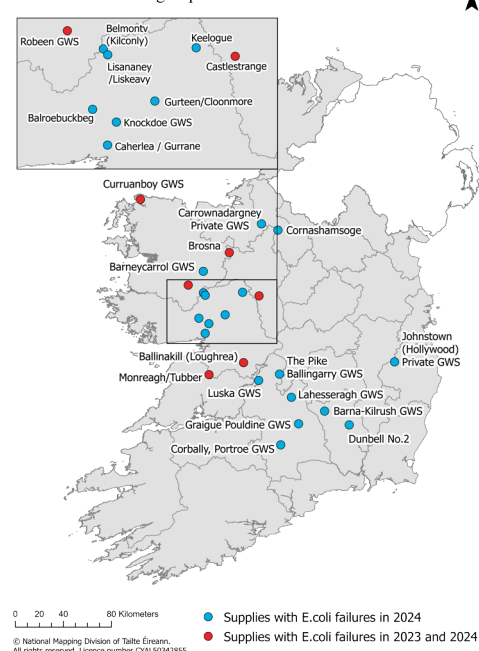


PGS operators and management committees need to take action to address *E. coli* failures and improve the quality of water for their communities. Some important actions include:

- Improving the protection of water sources,
- Installing suitable disinfection treatment systems, and
- Properly maintaining water treatment equipment.

The National Federation of Group Water Schemes offer technical support to schemes that want to make these improvements. Funding is also available from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).

FIGURE 2: Private group schemes with *E. coli* failures



Trihalomethanes Compliance

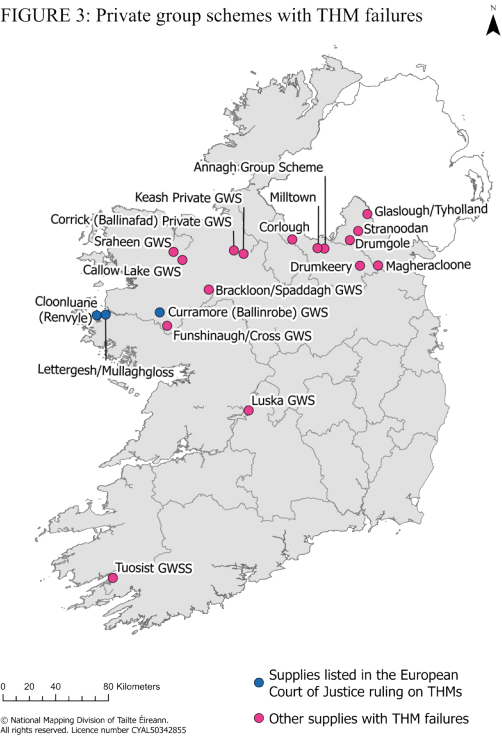
Trihalomethanes (THMs) can form when natural material like leaves or other organic matter in the water source, react with chlorine used to disinfect the drinking water. While disinfection is essential, THM levels should be kept as low as possible and in compliance with the drinking water standards. In 2024, 19 PGS serving 21,800 people failed to meet the THM standard (see Figure 3) compared to 21 PGS supplying 22,000 in 2023.

In January 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that Ireland had not done enough to ensure THM compliance in 9 PGS and enforcement actions were not given enough priority.

Three schemes that failed to meet the THM standard in 2024 are included in the European court ruling against Ireland for THM compliance.

Actions must be taken by PGS to achieve THM compliance, including investing in water treatment plant upgrades. Schemes can avail of the DHLGH funding to carry out upgrades.

FIGURE 3: Private group schemes with THM failures



LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Local authorities have responsibility for monitoring and maintaining a register of private drinking water supplies. Each year, the EPA audit a number of local authorities to assess how they are planning and delivering their monitoring responsibilities.

Key findings from these audits include:

- **Insufficient monitoring:** Some supplies are not being monitored as required by regulations.
- **Incomplete registers:** Many local authorities do not have complete registers of all private water supplies.

Registration of private supplies

Current drinking water regulations do not require private suppliers to register, which is a gap in the legislation, and this needs to be addressed. Because of this, the total number of small private supplies in the country remains unknown, as not all private suppliers are registered with their local authority. Unregistered supplies are not monitored by local authorities. Consumers may not be aware that they could be drinking water from an unmonitored supply, putting their health at risk.

Some local authorities have made notable progress in registering additional supplies. Waterford City and County Council increased their register of small private supplies from 16 in 2023 to 48 in 2024.

What needs to be done:

- Legislation must be amended to make it mandatory for private water suppliers to register with their local authority.
- DHLGH must implement measures to improve the governance of private supplies.
- Water suppliers must ensure water treatment systems are operated correctly to prevent *E. coli* failures.
- Local Authorities must monitor all private drinking water supplies and take necessary enforcement action where supplies fail to meet drinking water quality standards.

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

Table 1 Local Authorities with 40 or less SPS registered in 2024²

Local Authority	SPS Registered 2024
Donegal	38
Mayo	30
Clare	19
Longford	13
Roscommon	11
Louth	11
Monaghan	9
Sligo	8
Leitrim	6

Monitoring of private supplies

Local authorities monitored 91% (1,517) of the 1,663 registered SPS at least once during 2024. This is a significant improvement from 86% in 2023 and 75% in 2022. While Cork County Council increased the number of private supplies monitored in 2023, which is positive, they still failed to monitor almost 30% of their registered supplies.

Aside from Cork County Council, 15 other local authorities had a monitoring shortfall in 2024. All registered supplies must be monitored by local authorities annually as required by legislation, to protect public health.

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). The new cycle of the MARWP 2024-2026 was launched in January 2024. €45 million was awarded to group water schemes for improvements to treatment infrastructure in 2024 by DHLGH.

Review of the Rural Water Sector

A review of the rural water sector³ commissioned by the DHLGH was completed in January 2023. Several key issues were identified in the report including:

- 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 supplies.

The DHLGH established a Rural Water Review Group in 2023 to tackle the key issues identified in the rural water review, however progress towards implementing improvements has been slow. It is important that the DHLGH prioritise the work of this group and implement actions to strengthen the governance and oversight of supplies to address the decline in private drinking water quality.

2 This table excludes local Authorities that are predominately urban areas.
3 [research-and-information-on-the-rural-water-sector-output-report.pdf](#)