

Green Party Water Policy



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1. Policy

1.1. Introduction

Water is one of our most precious resources and every human has the right to sufficient, safe, and affordable water. In Ireland we are very fortunate to have access to such vast amounts of fresh water, however climate change is going to affect the quality and availability of water across the globe. The International Panel on Climate Change projects that climate change will reduce raw water quality due to increased sediment, nutrients and pollutants as a result of heavy rainfall, reduced dilution of pollutants during droughts and disruption to water services during floods. A reliable water service will not be guaranteed due to the increased variability of surface water available¹.

1.2. Water Ownership

The Green Party fears that the design of Irish Water leaves it open to privatisation. We would absolutely oppose any such attempt. To prevent this, we would seek to amend the constitution to insert a provision prohibiting the privatisation of public water supplies. A similar provision was inserted into the Constitution of Uruguay. A referendum in Italy in 2011 also saw the reversal of privatisation of water supplies in that country, which was subsequently upheld by the Italian Constitutional Court. We would propose the insertion of a new clause, Article 10.4, stating:

“The State shall treat drinking water as an essential resource and in the interests of the common good the State shall not provide for the privatisation or commercialisation of water services for the people”.

1.3. Water Infrastructure

We would support a complete overhaul of Irish Water, with much of the day to day operation of the water supply being run on a regional basis, based around river catchment districts.

1.4. Water Charges

The Green Party believes that every individual is entitled to a guaranteed free allocation of water. An extra free allocation could be sought for people with specific health needs. There

would be a charge for use and disposal of water over this amount. Further assistance should be given to low income households for the installation of water efficient appliances.

1.5. Water Conservation

Irish households can be encouraged to conserve water in a number of ways.

1. Appropriate billing structures
2. Building regulations
3. Education

1.5.1. Appropriate billing structure:

Any tariff system which involves a fixed charge is not an effective method of charging for water as it reduces the incentive to conserve water and a fixed charge disproportionately affects lower income households. Water metering is the most effective way to encourage water conservation. We would replace the current fixed charge with a metered charge which would only come into effect once an individual went above their free allocation. Additional allocations could be sought for those with specific health needs.

1.5.2. Building regulations:

New buildings should only be fitted with water efficient products. Low capacity flush toilets (4.8l), low volume taps and showers (9.5lpm), and efficient dishwashers and washing machines can cut water use by 20-30% in households and 50% or more in non-residential buildings.

We also support encouraging water reuse where appropriate: on-site absorption/disposal of water, and recycling rain water for washing and to water lawns.

Allow only water efficient products to be sold and building codes could be put in place to ensure that products are installed correctly and that custom made products still meet requirements (e.g. three shower heads in one shower)ⁱⁱ.

1.5.3. Education

Educating the population about water conservation can happen in a number of ways. School programmes for primary school children would give children an understanding of the importance of water conservation from a young age. Educating school children about water conservation has 3 benefits:

- Children learn methods to conserve water in their daily routines.
- They bring this knowledge home and influence water conservation behaviour of the family.
- It creates lasting habits which the child will carry into adulthood and improves the water using behaviour of the next generation.

Large scale print and TV ads would be a way to reach a broader audience and could potentially encourage a shift in behaviour.

1.6. Water Quality

The quality of our water has been steadily improving in recent years. However there are still a number of areas that need a lot of work. Agriculture and municipal sources are the two main causes of pollution in riversⁱⁱⁱ. Anticipated increases in population and agricultural growth could cause an increase in pressure that will need to be carefully managed^{iv}.

Up to 140,000 households across the country receive their water through lead pipes, and replacing them could take up to 10 years^v. Fixing leaks could likely occur simultaneously to replacing lead pipes in a number of cases, and should be the next step in upgrading infrastructure.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has a number of guidelines on drinking water, including recommendations for Irish Water. They are as follows:

- Remove boil water notices by improving disinfection standards.
- Implement a national lead removal strategy.
- Optimise chemical dosing and reduce THM exceedances. THMs are a group of chemicals that are formed when there is inadequate pre-treatment of water and/or poor control over the disinfection process.

- Create and prioritise Remedial Action Lists focusing attention on resolving the most serious deficiencies in public water supplies.
- Protect sources and abstraction points.
- Develop drinking water safety plans^{vi}.

The Green Party will ensure that these measures are implemented within a reasonable timeframe.

1.7. Waste Water Treatment

Waste water refers to industrial liquid waste and sewage waste from towns and urban areas as well as sewage from single houses in the countryside. Before waste water can be returned to the water cycle it must be treated to remove any harmful substances. If water is not properly treated it can pose a serious risk to public health and cause damage to the environment. Waste water is treated at urban waste water treatment plants or on-site by domestic waste water treatment systems. The EPA is responsible for the regulation of the urban waste water treatment plants operated by local authorities. The EPA must report on the performance of these plants on a bi-annual basis.

A 2013 report into urban waste water treatment found that only 77% of larger urban areas comply with the 1991 Urban Waste Water Treatment directive. The remaining 23% of areas need an improvement in quality^{vii}.

Under current legislation owners of domestic waste water treatment systems must register their systems. Inspections are carried out to ensure that they meet the required standard and that they do not pose any risk to human health or the environment. Grants are available should any repairs or upgrading work be necessary^{viii}.

The Green Party believes that the legislation currently in place is adequate but must be strictly enforced and reviewed periodically.

1.8. Infrastructure Going Forward

Access to clean drinking water is a fundamental human right and consequentially should be the top priority when evaluating whether current infrastructure is fit for purpose. Removing boil notices by upgrading treatment plants and reservoirs and replacing lead pipes are the most important improvements that need to be made to water services.

Increasing populations in urban areas and variations in water quality and availability due to climate change will put a huge strain on the system but if we can reduce the amount of water being lost through leaks this would alleviate some of the pressure.

ENDS

i

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iv

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