

Domestic Waste Water Treatment System Inspections 2023

KEY FINDINGS

- 1,189 Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (DWWTS) inspections were completed by local authorities in 2023. 45% of DWWTS failed inspection, with a significant number identified as a risk to human health and the environment.
- 80% of DWWTS that failed during 2013–2023 are fixed which is an improvement from 75% in 2021.
- Grants for DWWTS remediation increased from €5,000 to €12,000 from the start of 2024.

INTRODUCTION

DWWTS are used by householders to treat sewage. There are nearly half a million DWWTS in Ireland, mostly septic tanks.

Risk to human health is a key concern from faulty DWWTS. Faulty DWWTS can contaminate household drinking water wells with harmful bacteria and viruses. People may be exposed to sewage if it surfaces in gardens or runs off into ditches and streams.

Excessive releases of nitrogen and phosphorus can cause pollution in receiving waters. Domestic waste water is identified as a significant pressure on water quality in 148 (9%) at-risk water bodies in Ireland.

The National Inspection Plan (NIP) identifies the number of inspections to be completed by local authorities. It is now running 11 years with over 11,500 inspections completed. The NIP 2022-2026 has identified the number of inspections that need to be completed near rivers known to be at risk from DWWTS and in areas where DWWTS are co-located with household drinking water wells. Local authority annual inspections are focused on these areas requiring faulty DWWTS to be fixed. The NIP requires a minimum of 1,200 inspections to be completed annually.

Inspections under the NIP are separate to other DWWTS work by local authorities in relation to grant applications, catchment assessments, complaints, and planning/building control.

INSPECTIONS

Local authorities completed 1,189 inspections under the NIP in 2023 (Table 1). Galway County, Limerick, Wexford, Leitrim and Westmeath local authorities did not complete their full 2023 allocations and are required to make these up in 2024. All local authorities with a shortfall from 2022 made this up in 2023. The EPA can issue a legal direction to local authorities for failure to complete inspections under the NIP and has done this in two cases to date, to Waterford for a shortfall in 2022 and to Galway County for a shortfall in 2023.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

45% (532/1,189) of DWWTS inspected in 2023 failed, with a significant number identified as a risk to human health and the environment. The annual failure rate has varied between 44% and 57% since the NIP started in 2013. Reasons for failures were in two categories (Figure 1):

- Operational (de-sludging and maintenance).
- Structural defects (illegal discharges to ditches/streams, leaks, ponding and rainwater ingress).

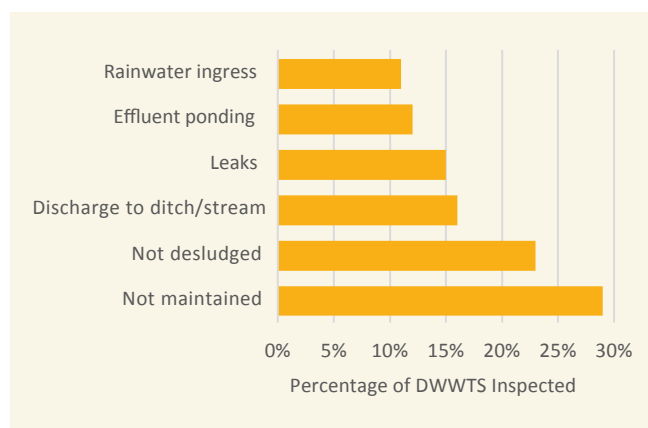


FIGURE 1: Reasons for DWWTS failures 2023 (individual DWWTS can fail for multiple reasons).

LOCAL AUTHORITY ENFORCEMENT

Local authorities issue advisory notices requiring householders to fix DWWTS that fail inspection. Failure to resolve some advisory notices and inconsistent enforcement has been highlighted for a number of years in these reports.

80% (4,454/5,584) of DWWTS that failed during 2013–2023 were fixed by the end of 2023 (Table 1). This represents an ongoing improvement from 75% in 2021 and 78% in 2022. The number of advisory notices open more than two years (576) has continued to increase, albeit at a slower rate since 2021, and remains a concern (Figure 2). To date, local authorities have taken 62 legal cases for failure by householders to resolve faulty DWWTS, with 8 cases taken in 2023.

Nonetheless, enforcement of advisory notices by local authorities is inconsistent. Counties with significant numbers of failures combined with a low level of resolution are Waterford, Roscommon and Kilkenny. 95% of legal actions were taken by just four local authorities: Wexford, Kerry, Mayo and Limerick. Local authorities need to increase enforcement, including prosecution where warranted, to resolve faulty DWWTS so that the environment and public health is protected.

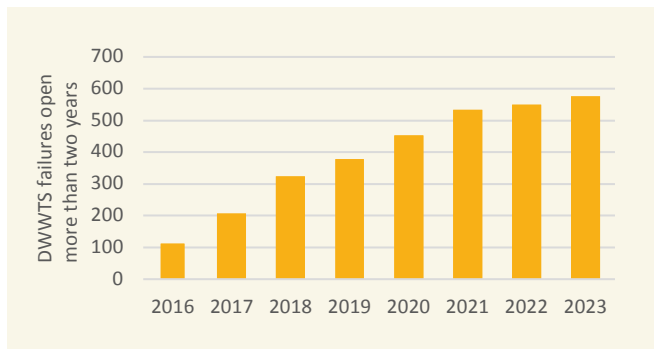


FIGURE 2: DWWTS failures open more than two years at the end of each year 2016 to 2023.

CHANGES TO THE GRANT SCHEMES

The DWWTS grant schemes were changed at the start of 2024 to increase the amount from €5,000 to €12,000 and remove the requirement to have registered the DWWTS in 2013. These changes to the grant schemes provide local authorities with a significant opportunity to promote the remediation of faulty DWWTS.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) had extensive engagement with the local authorities on the changes to the grant schemes. Local authorities are required to engage with all householders with open advisory notices in relation to the changes to the grants and to follow through on the enforcement of advisory notices. The EPA will monitor this work in 2024.

WHAT CAN HOUSEHOLDERS DO?

The failures detected in many DWWTS represent a risk to people's health and the environment. Householders should ensure their DWWTS are properly built and maintained, and their drinking water wells are tested to protect the health of their family. You can get guidance on the EPA website if you are concerned about your [DWWTS](#) or drinking water [well](#). Details of [DWWTS grants](#) and [household drinking water well grants](#) are available on the DHLGH website and from the local authorities who administer the grants.

TABLE 1: Inspection findings by local authority area (ranked by percent of systems fixed)

WATER SERVICE AUTHORITY	Inspections required 2023*	Inspections done 2023	Systems failing 2013-2023	Percent fixed at end 2023
Louth	12	12	50	98%
Fingal	13	13	37	97%
Wicklow	55	57	141	97%
Carlow	18	18	38	95%
South Dublin	4	4	31	94%
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	2	6	23	91%
Cork County	136	136	501	90%
Cavan	33	33	152	89%
Longford	4	10	60	88%
Wexford	130	123	787	88%
Sligo	7	13	143	87%
Kerry	59	65	307	87%
Offaly	23	23	66	86%
Limerick	64	17	239	84%
Meath	63	73	381	83%
Westmeath	7	2	38	82%
Donegal	107	113	360	81%
Kildare	25	37	149	78%
Clare	135	136	237	77%
Laois	10	11	93	75%
Mayo	53	56	506	73%
Tipperary	40	40	169	72%
Monaghan	44	44	126	71%
Galway City	2	2	6	67%
Galway County	105	27	329	66%
Leitrim	10	4	154	66%
Kilkenny	51	51	187	57%
Roscommon	13	13	217	57%**
Cork City	10	10	4	50%
Waterford	40	40	53	45%**
TOTAL	1275	1189	5584	80%

* Includes inspection shortfalls carried forward from 2022.

** Waterford and Roscommon also had a low rate of DWWTS failures fixed in 2022.

