

## KEY FINDINGS

- Over half of systems failed inspection and 23% were a risk to human health or the environment.
- Three quarters of systems that failed inspection have been fixed. This is an area that requires increased engagement and enforcement by local authorities.

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic waste water treatment systems (DWWTS) are used by householders to treat sewage. There are nearly half a million systems in Ireland, mostly septic tanks.

DWWTS can contaminate household wells with harmful bacteria and viruses if not built and operated properly. Excessive releases of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus can cause pollution in receiving waters.

The National Inspection Plan is running since mid-2013. Local authorities inspect over 1,000 systems each year under the plan. This report presents the 2020 results.

Local authorities complete additional inspections as part of catchment assessments or in response to complaints.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

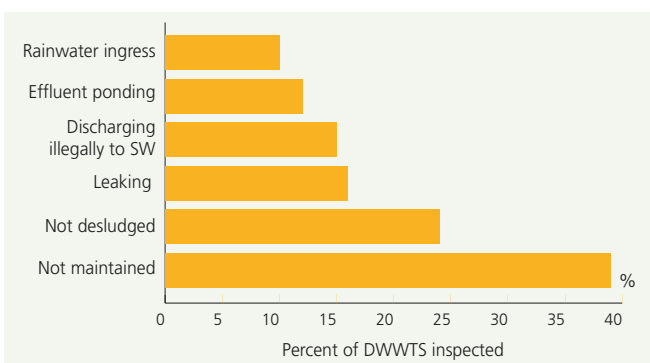
Local authorities completed 809 of the 1,000 inspections required by the National Inspection Plan in 2020, down on normal years reflecting the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. The 4,000 inspections provided for in the National Inspection Plan 2018-2021 remain on track.

54% of systems inspected failed (433). Since 2013, the failure rate has varied from 44% to 57%.

23% of systems inspected were a risk to human health or the environment (182).

Reasons for failures were in two categories (Figure 1):

- De-sludging and maintenance failures;
- Structural defects causing illegal discharges to ditches/streams, leaks, ponding and rainwater ingress.

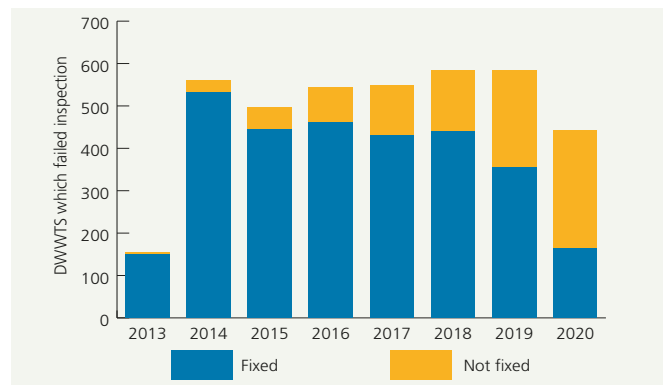


**FIGURE 1:** Reasons for DWWTS failures 2020 (individual DWWTS can fail for multiple reasons)

## LOCAL AUTHORITY ENFORCEMENT

Local authorities issue advisory notices requiring householders to fix systems that fail inspection.

76% of systems that failed during 2013–2020 have been fixed (2,972) (Table 1 and Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2:** Status of DWWTS which failed 2013-2020 (on 17/05/2021)

Failure to resolve older cases remains a concern. There were 468 advisory notices open more than two years at the end of 2020. These must be addressed as a matter of priority. The EPA has engaged with local authorities on progressing the resolution of these advisory notices. Local authorities must improve enforcement to ensure DWWTS are fixed by householders. Six local authorities have taken 34 legal proceedings for failure to fix DWWTS since the National Inspection Plan commenced.

## WHAT CAN HOUSEHOLDERS DO?

The failure rate shows that many systems pose a risk to people's health and the environment. This is especially concerning if DWWTS are near household wells or if effluent is ponding in the garden or being discharged to ditches/streams.

Householders should ensure their DWWTS are properly maintained and get their wells tested to protect the health of their family. You can get guidance on the EPA website if you are concerned about your [DWWTS](#) or [well](#).

## GRANT SCHEMES

Grants of up to €5,000 are available to fix DWWTS:

- that fail under the National Inspection Plan;
- in High Status Areas;
- in Priority Areas for Action;

and for improvements to household wells.

Details of the eligibility criteria and level of grant are available on the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage website at the links below and from your local authority who administers the grants:

[DWWTS grants](#)

[Household well grants](#)

## ENGAGEMENT

Local authorities carry out engagement activities with householders as part of the National Inspection Plan, providing information on maintenance of DWWTS. This informs householders how to correctly maintain their DWWTS and ensure that it doesn't pose a risk to human health or water quality. The level of reported engagement activity varies across local authorities. Cavan County Council's proactive engagement programme is detailed in the case study.

### CASE STUDY: ENGAGEMENT BY CAVAN COUNTY COUNCIL

Cavan County Council reported the following engagement activities in 2019-2020:

- Articles in newspapers.
- Posts on social media and website.
- Information stands at shows and festivals.
- Distribution of leaflets e.g. local authority front desks, libraries, doctors' surgeries and HSE primary care centres.
- School visits.

Cavan County Council's website has comprehensive and accessible information for the public on DWWTS registration, desludging, inspections, grants and standards.

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

Local authority	Inspections required 2020	Inspections done 2020	Failure rate 2020	Total systems failing 2013-2020	Percent fixed 2013-2020 (on 17/05/2021)
Carlow	15	10	20%	24	100%
Louth	8	10	0%	43	100%
South Dublin	2	0	n/a	22	96%
Wicklow	31	32	53%	88	96%
Fingal	6	9	33%	32	94%
Longford	9	12	50%	44	93%
Donegal	118	60	30%	231	89%
Cork	60	59	54%	352	88%
Kerry	52	1	100%	208	87%
Monaghan	26	0	n/a	70	86%
Clare	39	30	57%	150	84%
Kilkenny	27	24	79%	125	82%
Sligo	28	1	100%	112	82%
Wexford	65	111	66%	577	81%
Galway City	0	0	n/a	5	80%
Cavan	32	16	38%	115	79%
Limerick	33	36	44%	194	79%
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	1	1	100%	13	77%
Laois	24	15	47%	77	77%
Westmeath	20	19	11%	29	72%
Kildare	34	39	54%	84	68%
Mayo	70	93	75%	367	67%
Meath	63	73	68%	232	63%
Waterford	20	11	18%	30	63%
Galway County	101	102	36%	243	62%
Tipperary	41	0	n/a	110	62%
Offaly	17	8	63%	55	51%
Roscommon	35	20	85%	163	50%
Leitrim	23	17	59%	114	46%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1000</b>	<b>809</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>3909</b>	<b>76%</b>

#### TABLE KEY

High rate of DWWTS failures fixed
  Moderate rate of DWWTS failures fixed
  Low rate of DWWTS failures fixed