

THE RURAL WATER AGENDA

14 MAY LUNCHTIME LEARNING EXCHANGE

Photo ©Pauline Dowling

Event Summary

Following a successful in-person gathering at World Water Day 2026 in Glasgow, the Rural Water Agenda network met again for an online lunchtime learning exchange in May. Over twenty participants logged in from all corners of Scotland, including homeowners, concerned neighbours, Community Councillors, researchers, and students, as well as representatives from various public bodies and local authorities.

The event aimed to continue growing a peer network of rural water and wastewater practitioners and experts, and to confirm action points and notes to shape the Rural Water Agenda project outputs including the Digital Hub website (ruralwater.scot), new policy briefs, and the next milestone event, planned for 18 November in Edinburgh.

Key Points from the Breakout Rooms

❖ Practical Discussion: Rural Wastewater

- Scottish building standards require certifications for certain septic tank alternatives. Grant funding should be available to **incentivise companies** to undergo the expensive certification process for the Scottish market.
- Property owners, where possible, should be incentivised to **share sewage treatment systems** instead of managing individual septic tanks.
- A cultural shift needs to happen: sewage and the full water cycle **needs to be talked about** in homes and Holyrood alike.

❖ Changing the Narrative: When Mains is not the Gold Standard

- Off-mains households should have the **right to choose** between a private or Scottish Water managed water supply.
- There are **decades of evidence** of homeowners unable to afford necessary PWS maintenance or improvement costs, even when their health and/or property value are at risk. *(By contrast, average water rates in 2026-27 are £532/year.)* The response from the public sector must stop being punitive, and start including means-based financial support.
- DWQR is currently the regulator for PWS but can only work from **incomplete data** requested by and submitted by local authorities; this process needs greater clarity and transparency.

❖ Practical Discussion: Private Water Supplies

- Regarding funding, installing, and maintaining PWS: **1)** it can be **difficult** to find out what a homeowner can and should do, especially as **2)** guidance can be **inconsistent** even within the same council team and **3)** contractors are **too busy** to help.
- The one-time £800/household grant is **not sufficient**, and many people do not have the means to pay up front and wait for reimbursement.
- Small exempt supplies which are **shared between multiple properties** are especially vulnerable.
- Bottled water provision during PWS emergencies is appreciated but usually not sufficient for the needs of businesses and livestock; **larger-scale support** must also be provided.

❖ Does Scotland need a Minister for Water?

- Appointing a Minister would be a statement that government positions water as a **national priority**.
- Scotland's **water system is already in crisis** and the changing climate will escalate this.
- The role could address the need for leadership in setting a **comprehensive strategy** which binds the current fragmented water policy landscape across education, contamination, river catchments, wastewater, scarcity, flooding, Hydro Nation etc.
- The role could also drive a **culture change** in government, addressing current misconceptions (e.g. perceived water abundance) and entrenched practice that prevent solutions from being found.