

Oral Question

5th February

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that this matter arises from a rather misguided decision by Ofwat, with which I have been in correspondence for well over six months, and that, as is clear from that correspondence, the individual water companies still have a degree of latitude that would enable them to exempt churches?

Sir Stuart Bell: The hon. Gentleman is right, in that the matter lies with Ofwat; and therein, I suspect, lies the dilemma of Ministers. How do they intervene with Ofwat? How do they intervene on behalf of the Church or in relation to the Scouts Association? How do they intervene on behalf of all the small concerns that are the lifeblood of our country and act in their interests? That is a dilemma for the Government to which they should respond and on which they should reach a conclusion that is favourable to the Church's interest and also robust. We want no tinkering with the system and no filibustering here or there; we want a clear decision that is in the interests of the organisations to which I have referred.

Oral Question

5th February

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): What estimate the Church Commissioners have made of the cost to English parishes of the new area charging regime introduced by water companies; and if he will make a statement.

Sir Stuart Bell: I estimate that the new charge—and, where applicable, highways drainage contributions—will cost Church of England churches and cathedrals about £15 million or more. Let me add by way of a statement that I consider the new charging regime to be unfair to the churches, small sports clubs and voluntary organisations that enrich our communities. Ministers are considering how to respond to these concerns, and we await their response with interest.

Robert Key: I think that the churches, charities and sports organisations await a ministerial announcement not just with interest but with anger. I wrote to the Minister responsible on 19 December, and his office has informed me today that I should receive a reply to my letter in the next few weeks. Would it not be better if the Second Church Estates Commissioner had a word with Ministers to ensure that they reach some conclusion about the need for new legislation—not just tinkering with guidance notes—before the Church of England debates the matter in our Synod next week?

Sir Stuart Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for writing to the Minister personally.

A great deal of pressure has been exerted on the Government, not only by the Church but by the Scout Association, which has campaigned on the issue. Only yesterday a petition from former sports stars Brian Moore and Mike Gatting outlining the impact on sports clubs was received by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The pressure is on the Government, and what we want is for the Government to respond. If I may use a biblical phrase, let me say: those who have ears, let them hear.

Early Day Motion 666 - United Utilities and Surface Water Charging

4th February

EDM 666 was first put down on 3rd February 2009 by Lindsay Hoyle

That this House welcomes the decision taken by United Utilities to introduce a moratorium on the implementation of its new system of charging for surface water and highway drainage for 2009-10 for three categories of customer, faith buildings, community amateur sports clubs and Guide and Scout Association properties; recognises the huge financial burden this has already placed on places of worship and voluntary organisations since its introduction in April 2008, threatening the future viability of these organisations; notes the huge amount of public opposition to the new charging

system; further notes that the new system of charging comes as a recommendation from OFWAT and is not compulsory; and calls on United Utilities to abolish this new form of charging permanently.

Signed by:

Prentice, Gordon

Heyes, David

Hopkins, Kelvin

Humble, Joan

Iddon, Brian

Key, Robert

McCafferty, Chris

Meale, Alan

Burgon, Colin

Campbell, Ronnie

Caton, Martin

Corbyn, Jeremy

Drew, David

Flynn, Paul

Vis, Rudi

Willis, Phil

Winterton, Ann

Winterton, Nicholas

Leech, John

Hunter, Mark

Mr Lindsay Hoyle

Jim Dobbin

Mr David Crausby

Mr Nigel Evans

Mr Andrew Pelling

Peter Bottomley

Bob Russell

David Taylor

Written answer

27th January

Francis Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs whether his Department or its agencies have carried out an assessment of the effect of the new system of water rates on (a) churches, (b) scout huts and girl guide huts and (c) sports clubs.

Anne McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what economic and financial impact assessments on the effects of the increase in charges for surface water management on (a) churches and (b) community sports clubs have been undertaken; and what conclusions such assessments reached;

(2) what consideration was given to alternative forms of charging for surface water management in respect of (a) churches, (b) voluntary groups and (c) charities; and what criteria were taken into account in determining the form of charges;

(3) if he will delay the introduction of amended charges for surface water management in order to assess the financial and economic effect of the charges on those less able to pay.

Huw Irranca-Davies: One of Ofwat's duties, as the economic regulator of the water and sewerage sector in England and Wales, is to approve water and sewerage company charging schemes. It is for the individual companies, as private bodies, to set their own charging policy. But these must adhere to company licensing agreements, which Ofwat checks and monitors.

In September 2003, Ofwat provided guidance to companies on charging non-households for surface water drainage by site-based area. It said that companies which are thinking of introducing site-area charging need to assess possible impacts on all customers' bills. In particular, companies will need to take into account the scale and speed of any bill changes to see if they are reasonable and acceptable to customers.

Written Answer

27th January

Dr. John Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the effect on community sports clubs of increased costs arising from the new system of surface water charges.

Huw Irranca-Davies: The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Written Answer

27th January

Peter Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will meet representatives of United Utilities to discuss the effects of their pricing policies on voluntary sports clubs; and if he will make a statement.

Huw Irranca-Davies: It is for Ofwat as independent economic regulator of the water industry to approve water company charges schemes. The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Early Day Motion 465 - New Water Charges and the Voluntary Sector

22nd January

EDM 465 was first put down on 15th January 2009 by Peter Ainsworth

That this House notes with concern that the imposition of new surface water drainage charges comes at the worst possible time for the voluntary sector, ranging from churches to sports clubs to local scout and guide huts, many of which are already suffering from a fall in donation income and investment income as a result of the crisis in the economy; regrets what is yet another sign of the Government's failure to appreciate the vital role of faith-based and voluntary sector organisations to our communities; and calls for the implementation of these new charges to be delayed until a proper assessment of their impact has been made.

Signed by:

Crispin Blunt

Mrs Eleanor Laing

Mr Oliver Heald
Michael Fabricant
Mr Brian Jenkins
Mrs Ann Cryer
Andrew Stunell
Bill Etherington
Andrew Rosindell
Jenny Willott
Christopher Fraser
Dr Alasdair McDonnell
Nick Harvey
John Pugh
Colin Breed
Mr Malcolm Moss
Alan Simpson
John Battle
Mr Nigel Evans
Dr William McCrea
Mark Durkan
David Simpson
Hon Nicholas Soames
Robert Key
Mr David Jones
Mr David Drew
Mr John Leech
Mr Gregory Campbell
Watkinson, Angela
Wiggin, Bill
Russell, Bob
Spink, Bob
Iddon, Brian
Loughton, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Gray, James
Hancock, Mike
Waterson, Nigel
Winterton, Nicholas
Davies, Philip
Mr Peter Ainsworth

Mr Jeremy Hunt

Greg Clark

Mr Eric Pickles

Miss Anne McIntosh

Hugh Robertson

Mr James Paice

Bill Wiggin

Angela Watkinson

Peter Bottomley

Written Answer

22nd January

Dr. John Pugh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what response his Department has made to representations made by sports clubs affected by increases in charges following the revision of the surface water charging element.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Ministers have received a range of representations from sports clubs about the move from charging based on rateable value to site area charging for surface water drainage. The Government are aware of the affordability issues faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging and are currently reviewing their position. While the issue is under consideration, letters will continue to be acknowledged, and I will respond in full in due course.

Written Answer

22nd January

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will commission research on the effects of the introduction of surface area water charges for churches, community and voluntary groups which own property used exclusively to further their causes.

Huw Irranca-Davies: The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and are looking at what can be done.

Early Day Motion 357 - United Utilities Charges for Places of Worship

21st January

EDM 357 was first put down on 17th December 2008 by Lindsay Hoyle

That this House expresses concern at the decision by United Utilities to introduce a new method of calculating surface water charges and highways drainage services, known as site area charging; recognises the negative impact this will have on churches and places of worship which, in some cases, will now face increases in their charges in excess of 1,000 per year as they are being treated in the same way as all other non-household customers; and calls on United Utilities to review the decision to impose site area charging on churches and places of worship which cannot afford such huge increases in their water bills.

Signed by:

John Leech

Rudi Vis

John Hemming

Mr David S. Borrow
Mrs Ann Cryer
Mr Greg Pope
Mr Edward O'Hara
Mr Ronnie Campbell
Mr Stephen Hepburn
Bill Etherington
Mr Elfyn Llwyd
Mr David Anderson
Mr Angus MacNeil
David Simpson
Mr David Drew
Mr Marsha Singh
Sir Nicholas Winterton
Colin Burgon
Ann Winterton
Jeremy Corbyn
David Heyes
Michael Jabez Foster
Mrs Betty Williams
David Taylor
Jim Dobbin
Bob Spink
Andrew Stunell
Mark Durkan
John McDonnell
Robert Key
Peter Bottomley
Mike Hancock
Philip Davies
Mr Colin Breed
Janet Anderson
Lynne Jones
Lindsay Hoyle

Written Answer

20th January

Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will discuss with United Utilities the effect on (a) Darwen Cricket Club and (b) other sports clubs of recent increases in water charges;

(2) what representations he has received on the increases in water charges being imposed by United Utilities on (a) sports and (b) other clubs in the north-west; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am aware of this issue and will- along with my hon. Friend the Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment- be seeking a meeting with Ofwat to establish what options are available to ensure community sports clubs are not disproportionately affected by these charges.

I have also asked Sport England to see whether there is any systematic help they can provide to ensure community sports clubs' water charges have been calculated correctly.

Written Answer

20th January

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will meet representatives of (a) churches, (b) voluntary and community groups and (c) charities to discuss surface area water charges; and if he will make a statement.

Huw Irranca-Davies: DEFRA is in contact with interested parties. The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Written Answer

19th January

Mr. David Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with Ofwat on its decision to encourage water companies to charge schools, places of worship and community buildings according to site area.

Huw Irranca-Davies: The Secretary of State meets Ofwat regularly to discuss a range of issues. The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Written Answer

19th January

David Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs how many hon. Members have written to (a) his Department and (b) Ofwat to complain about water companies charging schools, places of worship and community buildings based upon the surface water drainage use, compared to the previous system of flexible charges.

Huw Irranca-Davies: From 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008, DEFRA received correspondence from approximately 60 Members of Parliament on behalf of either schools, places of worship or community buildings regarding changes to charging for surface water drainage.

For the same period, Ofwat received correspondence from 33 Members of Parliament on the subject.

Written Answer

19th January

Bob Spink: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent representations he has had seeking an exemption for churches, charities and community groups from surface area water charges; and if he will make a statement.

Huw Irranca-Davies: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has received a range of representations from various groups regarding surface water drainage charges. The Government are aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Written Answer

19th January

Dr. Brian Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received on the impact on sports clubs of changes in the method of calculation of water rates.

Mr. Sutcliffe: The Department is aware of this issue and I will-along with my hon. Friend the Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment-be seeking a meeting with Ofwat to establish what options are available to ensure community sports clubs are not disproportionately affected by these charges.

I have also asked Sport England and the Central Council for Physical Recreation to see whether there is any systematic help they can provide to ensure community sports clubs' water charges have been calculated correctly.

Oral Question

19th January

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): May I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting two sports clubs in my constituency a few days ago, both of which offer cricket as one of their sports? Does he know from his constituency that such clubs are already under pressure as a result of reduced bar takings and three bad summers, which have meant reduced spectator takings? On top of that, very few of them are now able to employ a professional cricketer during the summer period, which has also resulted in fewer spectators and lower takings. If the surface water drainage charges are accepted, particularly in the way in which United Utilities is applying them to cricket clubs in my area of the north-west, it will be the last straw for cricket in many villages and many parts of Bolton.

Andy Burnham: I was pleased to visit the two cricket clubs, Darcy Lever and Bolton Indians, recently. It was not the first time that I had done so, because I used to play in the Bolton association league and was on the end of beatings handed out at both those grounds many times. I know the strength of cricket in my hon. Friend's local area.

I have two points. First, cricket is the largest beneficiary under the new whole sport plan process that my hon. Friend the sports Minister put in place with Sport England. More money is being directed to the development of cricket, in recognition of the fact that cricket has big needs and faces big costs for its facilities. Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) is right that water charges have a great impact on cricket clubs, given the surface area of most of them. It is important that we pursue the discussions that I mentioned and reach a good solution for cricket, recognising the particular needs of cricket clubs. I assure him that I will work diligently on all those things.

Written Answer

15th January

Mr. David Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what representations his Department has received on water drainage charges for places of worship; and if he will make a statement.

Huw Irranca-Davies: The Secretary of State has received a range of representations from various groups regarding surface water drainage charges. The Government are, however, very aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage and is looking at what can be done.

Oral Question

15th January

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): What recent representations he has received on the rate at which charges for water are applied to schools, churches and voluntary organisations; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): The Secretary of State has received a range of representations from various groups regarding surface water drainage charges. As I said in response to an earlier question, the Government are aware of the issue of affordability raised by the switch to site area charging, and we are actively considering what can be done.

Mr. Drew: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply—obviously, I heard the exchange on Question 3, from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). Strong representations are being made and it would be good to hear whether they are reaching the Minister's door. The problem has been around for 10 years—I read a debate from 1999 in which the current Home Secretary raised the issue of the potential fallout from changes in water charges. Is it not about time that we told Ofwat that its proposals are wrong, and that organisations should be properly protected from such excessive increases?

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend is right that the issue has been around for some time. I reiterated earlier the advice that the former Secretary of State gave in 2000, which is important to note. I reassure my hon. Friend that we will not leave the issue lying. We are aware of the concerns, and the Secretary of State and I are actively considering what can be done.

Oral Question

15th January

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the Government rightly applaud the work of faith-based and other voluntary sector groups such as sports clubs, the guides and the scouts. The gross increase in charges that the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) pointed out could not come to such volunteer-based organisations at a worse time than this time of economic hardship. Will the Minister intervene and ask what economic and financial impact assessment has been done and whether it was done during or before the economic crisis? May we please have a moratorium on the charges until such an assessment has been carried out?

Huw Irranca-Davies: I cannot offer the hon. Lady a moratorium on the charges, but I can assure her that as part of our examination of what is currently going on and our undertaking to review how the charges are rolled out, we will take into consideration the factors that she has mentioned, including the economic impact.

This is an opportune moment to say that Ofwat is encouraging churches and other customers to double-check their chargeable area, to ensure that those who are entitled to a lower bill by virtue of a small permeable area are receiving one. I have been made aware of instances where that has not happened, so I thank the hon. Lady for raising the matter.

Oral Question

15th January

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): At the risk of repeating what the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) said, may I focus on the application of the new surface water charges to ancient cathedrals and churches with huge roof spaces? They will be adversely affected, and some are already struggling. I had better declare an interest: I am an honorary lay canon of Bradford cathedral.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank my hon. Friend. I am more than happy, on the basis of the comments that have been made today and other representations that have been made, to examine individual cases. It is worth my saying also that if a customer is of the view that he or she has been charged for permeable areas, in the first instance they should raise the matter with the water company, bearing

in mind the guidance that is on record and has been reiterated today. Failing that, they should raise it with the Consumer Council for Water. I reassure Members that we are taking concerns seriously and actively considering what can be done.

Oral Question

15th January 2009

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I fully support every word uttered by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). Will the Minister go further than he so far has in dealing with this grotesquely unfair charge, which could put a number of social clubs, sporting clubs and—yes, I shall mention them—churches in grave financial difficulty? I hope he will indicate that he will approach Ofwat and ask it to review the whole basis of the charge. It is a licence for the water companies, particularly United Utilities, to print money, and we want to stop it. It is unfair. Will he give a firmer assurance about the action that the Government will take?

Huw Irranca-Davies: Once again, I thank all hon. Members who have raised this issue, which is vital for their constituents and for small organisations, churches, sports clubs and so on in their areas. I hope that I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman and others just how seriously we take this matter, and that we will examine what can be done. I cannot go further than that today, but we are actively considering it.

It is worth stating that Ofwat's approach is that in principle, site area-based charging is overall the fairest means of charging for surface water drainage. However, the charge relates only to areas draining into a public sewer from impermeable surfaces such as the roofs of buildings or car parks. Grassy areas such as sports fields, burial grounds and so on will not be liable to charges. Ofwat is making that clear to companies, and I glad to restate it today.

Oral Question

15th January

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effects of the new surface water drainage charges on sports and social clubs; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Huw Irranca-Davies): My hon. Friend will know that it is for Ofwat, as the independent economic regulator of the water industry, to approve water companies' charging schemes. However, to give him some reassurance, I can say that we are very aware of the problem of affordability faced by some customers as a result of the switch to site area charging for surface water drainage, and we are actively looking at what can be done.

Dr. Iddon: I am grateful for that answer. Throughout the north-west, sports and social clubs are receiving from United Utilities water rate bills that include a new surface area water drainage charge that is resulting in an increase of about 400 per cent. in the three-year transitional period. In discussing this matter with Ofwat, will my hon. Friend remind it of the guidance that was given following the passage of the Water Industry Act 1999? It said:

"It would be inappropriate to charge all customers as if they were businesses."

Huw Irranca-Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. It is worth reiterating the advice issued by the then Secretary of State in 2000, which said of that guidance:

"those making similar demands on services should be charged on the same basis... surface water drainage charges"

for non-household customers

"should be set in a way that is sensitive to the actual use of the service by different premises. Premises with large grounds, such as burial grounds, schools, hospitals"—

and playing fields—

“may have a large proportion of their land not draining to a public sewer. Companies should be prepared to set their charges...accordingly”.

It is worth reiterating that advice on the guidance. As I say, we are actively considering what may be done.

Written Answer

13th January

Mr. Eric Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) with reference to the answer to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst of 12 November 2008, Official Report, column 1229W, on religious buildings: fees and charges, whether an assessment of the effect on the voluntary sector of changes to charges on places of worship was made;

(2) what estimate his Department has made of the average water bill for church premises;

(3) what checks Ofwat undertakes; and what steps his Department is taking to ensure that water companies do not gain additional revenue from new methods of charging.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Neither DEFRA nor Ofwat, the independent economic regulator of the water industry, collects information on the increases in water bills for groups of customers of a particular funding or charitable status. Where a company makes a change to the way it charges for water or sewerage services, Ofwat challenges the company's proposals to make sure charges are not unduly preferential to one customer group over another. Groups of customers are defined by the costs they are likely to impose and are independent of the financial or charitable status of individual non-household customers. Ofwat's checks also ensure that the company gains no additional revenue from the new method of charging.

Part of Ofwat's duty is to approve companies' charges schemes. These schemes outline how water and sewerage companies will charge their customers. It is for the company to decide on its methods of charging. When a company introduces new tariffs, Ofwat check that these are consistent with price limits and company licence conditions.

Each year Ofwat checks water company charges principal statements to make sure the weighted average increase in all of the company's charges does not exceed the company's price limits, for customers using less than 50 mega-litres per annum.

Written Answer

12th January

Mr. Eric Pickles: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners what estimate the Church Commissioners have made of the aggregate effect of new water charges on the finances of Church of England churches.

Sir Stuart Bell: As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Ben Chapman) on 11 December 2008, Official Report, column 671, it is estimated that the new charges will cost Church of England churches and cathedrals around £5 million or more per annum. In addition, churches using the public sewers will also be liable for highways drainage contributions at an estimated cost of £10 million per annum.