

# Bishop's Water Warning for Parliament on St Swithun's Day

16th Jul 2009

The Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, Rt Revd George Cassidy, today joined representatives from the faith, community and voluntary sectors in lobbying Parliament for a fairer deal on water charges.

The meeting, organised by the Scouts, heard evidence about the adverse impact of increases in surface water drainage charges on community and church buildings, from national and local Scout leaders, and from representatives of the Rugby Football Union and the Church of England.

Bishop George Cassidy, who chairs the cross-denominational Churches' Legislation Advisory Service, said:

“Some water companies have already begun to move to so called ‘site area charging’ and this has really hit local churches hard, especially in the north and north-west of England. If this is rolled out across the country by the other water companies, the Church of England has estimated that it will cost us an extra £15 million – and the total sum facing all faith communities in the country could be around £40 million. This is a major cause for concern and we are calling on Government and Ofwat to step in.”

The meeting today in Portcullis House, Westminster, follows an announcement on the issue earlier this week by Nick Herbert, Conservative Shadow Environment Secretary. Mr Herbert called upon the government to bring about a change in the law to allow water companies to treat voluntary and faith organisations more fairly by reducing their charges.

Welcoming this intervention, Bishop George said:

“Parliament has been reminded many times over the impact this new charging regime is having on local faith and voluntary groups. At a time when all political parties are quick to applaud the good work carried out by churches and faith groups in promoting community cohesion and voluntary action, such increases in water charges risk diverting scarce resources away from good works in the community towards basic building maintenance. While we have been assured that the Government does not wish to see churches, scout groups and sports clubs hit hard by these increases, the time has come to move beyond such welcome sentiments towards definitive action. One welcome step would be for Government to commit to new legislation and I hope that they will use the opportunity of the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill to write some meaningful exemptions into law.”

Reflecting on the date of the parliamentary lobby, Bishop George said:

“Tradition holds that if it rains on July 15th – St Swithun’s Day – then we should look forward to 40 more days of rain. Unless Parliament listens and acts on our message on this St Swithun’s Day then churches, voluntary and community groups can look forward to a lot more than 40 days of stormy weather ahead.”

The Church of England has been actively campaigning for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs and the water industry regulator Ofwat, to agree new guidance for water companies on the issue of 'site area charging' for surface water drainage and highways drainage. Such guidance would enable water companies to treat churches and voluntary sector organisations differently from other non-domestic customers (such as businesses and factories) on the way they are charged and would better reflect the duty upon Ofwat to "protect vulnerable groups".

As well as official level contact between the Church of England and Whitehall, a number of local campaigns have also been initiated by Church members concerned about the impact in their regions. A petition on the Number 10 Downing Street website, calling upon government "to instruct water companies to return to charging churches as charities rather than as business premises" was set up by David Boddy, a Churchwarden from North Thornaby on Teesside, and received more than 45,000 signatures. Martin Dales, a member of the Church of England's General Synod, also brought forward a private member's motion to Synod in February 2009, which called upon government to "remind Ofwat of its obligations...that "there are many non-household users who are not businesses... including places of worship... and it would be inappropriate to charge all non-household customers as if they were businesses".

Mr Dales, who is also spokesman for [www.DontDrainUs.org](http://www.DontDrainUs.org), the loose coalition of affected bodies campaigning against the new system of charging said,

"The Conservatives' announcement that they will change the law and introduce social tariffs for those affected is to be welcomed. The lobby of Parliament is a good opportunity for all those involved to press home to the Government that this issue needs addressing by action not just words. It will be interesting to see if the political parties take this issue seriously enough to include it in their manifestos - if it has not already been dealt with in the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill."

ends

For more information, please call Louis Henderson at the Church of England Communications Office on 020 7898 1326.

Notes for editors:

More information on the Scout Association's campaign to 'Stop the Rain Tax' can be found here: <http://scouts.org.uk/water>.

Martin Dales from the Don't Drain Us campaign ([www.dontdrainus.org](http://www.dontdrainus.org)) can be reached for comment on 07764 985009.

The full text of Martin Dales's motion, which was carried by the February General Synod by 282 votes (with no votes against and 3 abstentions) is: 'That this Synod, concerned about the effect on many parishes of sudden, massive rises in water charges for churches, request, HM Government to remind OFWAT of its obligations to ensure that the water companies adhere to the clear guidance given by the Secretary of State for the Environment in 2000, which states that "there are many non-household users who are not businesses... including places of worship... and it would be inappropriate to charge all non-household customers as if they were businesses".'

More information on the Churches' Legislation Advisory Service can be found at: [www.churcheslegislation.org.uk/home](http://www.churcheslegislation.org.uk/home)

The text of the parliamentary Early Day Motion put down by Nick Herbert MP reads: "That this House notes the impact of increased charges by some water companies for surface water drainage on places of worship, scout and guide associations and community amateur sports clubs; is concerned that the new charging method based on site area is unaffordable for these groups; is concerned that Ofwat is requiring companies to set out their charging structures by 2010; calls on the Government to use the forthcoming Flood and Water Management Bill to grant Ofwat the authority to allow water companies to charge for drainage in a way they consider to be fair and proportionate for these customers; and further calls on water companies to recognise

the value of the voluntary sector and their corporate social responsibility to ensure that customers are protected from disproportionately large price increases.”

Church of England Communications Office  
Church House  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3AZ

Direct Dial Telephone: 020 7898 1326  
Out-of-hours Telephone: 07774 800212

Keep up to date with the latest news from the Church of England, delivered direct to your inbox in a monthly summary. To find out more and sign up today, visit: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/commsupdate.html/>

Follow the Church of England on Twitter, [http://twitter.com/c\\_of\\_e](http://twitter.com/c_of_e)