



## **Don't Pay Twice - the future of water in Northern Ireland**

*Frances Dowds, development worker with the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network and a member of the Anti Water Tax Coalition, explains why the proposed water charges will spell disaster for low income households.*

Did you know that within our existing, non-itemised rates bills, we all pay roughly 37% toward water and sewerage provision? The Minister has recently announced what the proposed additional water and sewerage charges will be based on the value of a persons' house. This is very worrying for low income households, as well as for those living on benefits and those in receipt of pensions.

A man, at one of many recent Anti-Water Tax meetings, held in the Ormeau area of Belfast, stated that he had worked out what these charges would mean to him in real terms. Currently he pays around £400. each year for rates but these proposals will mean that he will face a bill of almost a £1000. each year. The value of his house has increased over the years but he has not had any rise in earnings. His simple question was; where was he expected to get this extra money from?

On average people earn 20% less in Northern Ireland that they do in the rest of the UK and we have a higher cost of living. So many people are simply struggling to get by. We already have worse poverty figures that anywhere else in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

These proposed charges will affect most, those groups and communities least able to pay, driving 150,000 families deeper into poverty and debt. It is ironic that Government is currently consulting on an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland while at the same time proposing charges that will significantly increase poverty levels.

The relief system that has been adopted is similar to what exists in England, a proposed 25% reduction in your bill for older people and those living on

benefits. However, under current proposals, the full bill must be paid up front and the relief claimed back.

Everyone who has spoken to us about this issue has asked, 'will we get a reduced rates bill?' The simple answer is no, your rates are also being increased.

This seems to fly in the face of the most recent Northern Ireland report, from the Department of Regional Development, which reaffirmed the government's commitment to effective protection for those on low incomes, fair payment from those who can afford to pay, a self financing service from 2006 and an admission that the regional rate does pay towards water provision although the government says it is not enough. The frequently quoted excuse for ever rising costs is the 'need for increased investment in infrastructure.' Since privatization in England and Wales the Victorian infrastructure has continued to crumble, leaks and water wastage continues at alarming rates. It is no secret that a private company's priority is to represent the interests of their shareholders, to ensure they get a return on their investment. The only way to guarantee this is to continue to increase charges.

Should water and sewerage provision be effectively privatised all Northern Ireland householders and tenants will face growing charges. Whatever the form of privatisation offered, how will the public know that private tenders and contract services are value for money? How will pricing be regulated? What is to stop such a consortium, from raising prices as it wishes? The recent increases in prices from Phoenix Natural Gas-Centrica shows what the future could hold with private companies in charge of water in Northern Ireland.

Many people in Northern Ireland are asking about meters as though it will help them keep the cost of water and sewerage down. But if you look at the information that came through your door recently, it is obvious that a standard charge applies. So meters will do nothing to save on cost and the current proposals do nothing to encourage the conservation of water.

We at the NI Anti-Poverty Network are also concerned about this debate. What if meters were introduced? What would they do for large families living on low incomes? What would they do for families with caring responsibilities? For families with say a disabled child or an ill elderly relative? Access to water for washing, bathing etc is essential and we are already paying for it. If meters were introduced can you imagine the choices a family would be faced with? To flush the toilet or wash the bed clothes?

Since water and sewerage charges have been introduced in England and Wales there have been real increases in illnesses not seen since Victorian times, such as dysentery and hepatitis. The health implications are particularly worrying.

Right across Northern Ireland communities are coming together to discuss these issues and to look at what they can do to let the Government know how strongly they oppose their introduction. This is an issue that will affect us all and its time now to do something about it.

Northern Ireland has special circumstances from lower wage levels, higher levels of child and family poverty, to higher levels of inequality, disability and illness. Water should not be treated like any other utility such as coal or gas, for like the air you breathe, it is a basic human need. Responsibility for provision of this critical service lies fair and square with the government to whom we pay our rates.

If you want to join the Coalition Against the Water Tax and resist the introduction of a double form of taxation, or get some support to hold a local meeting to discuss these issues contact us at NIAPN, phone: 0845 120 3771 or email: [info@niapn.org](mailto:info@niapn.org)