

**SPECIAL AGENDA III**  
**PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS**  
**CHURCH WATER BILLS**

**A background paper from Martin Dales - [mpd@martindales.me.uk](mailto:mpd@martindales.me.uk) - York (441)**

*'That this Synod, concerned about the effect on many parishes of sudden, massive rise in water charges for churches, request HM Government to remind OFWAT of its obligations to ensure that 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".'*

**Introduction**

Historically, churches and other non-household users have been treated by water companies on the basis of rateable value. In the case of churches and charities who have neither rateable values nor pay business rates they, have mostly received substantially rebated bills or none at all.

**Water Industry Act 1999**

Since the introduction of the Water Industry Act 1999, OFWAT, the regulator, following Government guidance, has been encouraging water companies to introduce new charging regimes for non-household users for the three main elements of drainage:

- (1) Foul water drainage: waste water from sinks, WCs, etc
- (2) Surface water drainage: rainwater run off from roofs and car parks into main drains
- (3) Highways water drainage: a contribution towards the cost of drainage to public roads

The general shift is towards charging for foul-water drainage in relation to metered supply (where fitted). Surface water drainage and highways water drainage is to be charged by reference to the footprint of building and drained car parks or hard standings on a site.

So far, these have been introduced by Northumbrian Water, United Utilities, Yorkshire Water and Severn Trent Water: OFWAT are encouraging all water companies to follow suit.

## **What effect is this having on churches?**

It is clear that the budgets of many hundreds of churches are being affected by these new bills with high percentage increases: one has seen its bill rise from £70 p.a. to £800 p.a.; another, £125 p.a. to £2,500 p.a.

Often ‘guestimates’ make up the water companies assessments of site surface area and, unless challenged, are billed accordingly. United Utilities in North-West England even asks customers to draw their own plans on their website if they don’t agree with the water company’s plan.

## **Is anyone else affected by these new charges?**

Scout huts, village halls, amateur sports clubs, other faith groups to name but a few: the Church of England is engaged with some of these in terms of joint action on the problem.

## **As well as this Private Member’s Motion, what is being done to try and change the situation?**

### **1. Downing Street Petition**

In April 2008, David Boddy, Churchwarden of North Thornaby, Teesside in the Diocese of York, faced with a huge bill, set up a petition on the Downing Street website. It has so far (9<sup>th</sup> January) attracted over 38,000 signatures, lies in 1<sup>st</sup> position out of over 4,500 petitions on the site, and its availability for support has recently been extended to 6<sup>th</sup> April 2009.

It can be found at <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/ChurchWaterBills/>

### **2. Churches’ Legislation Advisory Committee (CLAS)**

CLAS (formerly the Churches’ Main Committee) has met with OFWAT but the latter insists that it is fairer for all non-household users to share the charges and that this is cost neutral to the water companies in that, apparently, no extra revenue is raised.

### **3. Representations to Government**

The Chairman of CLAS (Bishop of Southwell & Nottingham) wrote to Lord Rooker, the Minister for Sustainable Farming and Food and Animal Welfare) but received a response supporting OFWAT’s policy.

Representations continue to be made at all levels including DEFRA and the Prime Minister’s office. Members of General Synod are encouraged to take up the issue with their MP.