

# **NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION'S RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT ON WATER AND SEWERAGE SERVICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

## **Summary**

1. In responding to the Department of the Environment document, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition believes that there are several important issues to address. These include:

1.1 **Public Ownership:** The N.I. Womens Coalition recommends that the water and sewerage service should remain in the public sector. That it should not become "Public/Private Partnership" nor should it be privatised.

This issue not only addresses the need to keep water as a public service, but also addresses the question of who should own the reservoirs, dams, rivers and the land associated with these natural resources: For example the Silent Valley reservoir and Spelga Dam.

1.2 **Environment and Education:** There is a need to educate the general public and commercial sector about the need to conserve water and the environment.

1.3 **Payment:** The N.I. Womens Coalition notes that there is a need to improve and update the water and sewerage service.

We recommend that:

- Payments remain under the present rates system
- Metering as standard means for charging for domestic water customs is not introduced in N. Ireland.

1.4 **Consultation:** Any major change should be publicly debated.

## **2. General Comments**

2.1 The N.I. Womens Coalition welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the future of the water and sewerage services in N. Ireland.

2.2 However the N.I. Womens Coalition expresses reservation at the timing of this document which will "require legislation to take it through the Assembly." Though the paper states that; "the time is right to consider which combination of structural regulations and funding arrangements is best to meet these challenges," the N.I. Womens Coalition believes that the time is not right. Most of the political parties are overburdened at present establishing the New Assembly and therefore do not have the time necessary to give this important issue their full attention.

2.3 Ideally the N.I. Womens Coalition would have preferred to have open public debate with the community in order to produce a policy.

2.4 However we wish to place on record our acknowledgement of the opposition to privatisation by a large section of the N. Ireland population, This opposition includes all Members of Parliament for N. Ireland. In considering the consultation document the N.I. Womens Coalition has applied its founding principle of human rights, inclusion and equality as a checklist criteria on evaluating the various options presented and on offering suggestions for consideration.

3 **Human Rights:** The N.I. Womens Coalition recognises the right of every individual to have access to the means of sustaining life, food and water, warmth and shelter. In an increasingly commercial and economy driven environment, the essentials for life are often overlooked. We are fundamentally opposed to any system that could de-bar people from accessing one of the main means of sustaining life, clean water and the safe disposal of waste. Consequently we are opposed in principle to any measure that might lead to the delivery of this essential service being based on ability to pay.

We recommend that a rebate system continue to operate for those in our society least able to pay.

3.1 The N.I. Womens Coalition recommends that the water service in N. Ireland remain under public control.

3.2 The provision of clean water is an essential human requirement and, for the most part, has been taken for granted in Britain and Ireland.

3.3 The privatisation of water in England and Wales has made many people realise the importance of having a public water service.

3.4 The consultation document states that, “ privatisation would require a robust regulatory system to control prices, to prevent excess profits and to ensure that levels of investment and operating efficiencies were delivered without reductions in quality” The N.I. Womens Coalition believes that the experiences of privatisation in England and Wales has resulted in the opposite effect. High profits are often the driving force behind privatisation.

3.5 In England and Wales, the effects of privatisation have been well documented by local councils, Citizens Advice Centres, trade unions and community organisations. These organisations have found:

- Water disconnection due to non-payment of bills has resulted in severe hardship. This has led to people “borrowing” water from neighbours, however not enough to bathe or wash clothes. Reports have been made of people in flats using lifts and balconies as toilets, because of disconnections.

- The Citizen Advice Bureau has received many reports of people in arrears; these range from £100 to £1,600. Most of these people are in receipt of benefit or on low paid income.
- Associated with the restriction or lack of water is the increase of water related diseases such as dysentery and hepatitis.
- The Water Industry Bill 1998 will remove the company's power to disconnect the supply of water from domestic dwellings for non-payment of bills. However, it will not remove the problem of having to pay high bills. (In one instance where a lone parent could not pay £800 to have her water reconnected, she was told that her children would have to be taken into care).
- Other Public Service such as hospitals, swimming facilities and the fire services have also been effected. In some areas in England water companies have saved water in poorly maintained pipes underground by reducing pressure, this has led to problems for fire-fighters in extinguishing fires. Improved maintenance of the pipes is an essential factor, as it is well known that there is a large loss of water through defective pipes.

3.6 The N.I. Womens Coalition therefore recommend that the organisation structure of the water and sewerage service should remain in the public sector.

3.7 The question of whether it should be under the existing arrangements or the creation of a public water authority should be discussed in more depth.

3.8 Indeed the consultation paper devotes just two paragraphs to public sector arrangements but devotes 13 paragraphs to the private options. The N.I. Women's Coalition considers that the 'public/private' option in reality is a first step to privatisation.

4 **INCLUSION:** The N.I. Womens Coalition views the provision of a quality water sewerage service as essential to the health and wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland. The service should be universally available and not based on the ability to pay. In order for all the people of Northern Ireland to be able to participate fully in society, it is essential that no further stumbling blocks be placed in their way. This could be the case if direct billing system on usage was introduced.

4.2 We note that many people are not aware of how the service is funded at present or what level of service they can expect. We recommend that the Water Service, in conjunction with the D.o.E. and the Department of the Education embark on a programme of public education to raise awareness of water as a resource, how it is funded, how it can be conserved and how it contributes to quality of life.

4.3 To advance this programme we further recommend that within the proposed new governing arrangements for Northern Ireland the Civic Forum be actively involved in participating in this education programme.

4.4 To facilitate increased awareness we recommend that the Water Service take positive steps to ensure that both transparency and accountability in its activities are not only done, but are seen to be done.

4.5 We recommend that the service detail its expenditure plans, both operational and capital, and explain that these are necessary.

4.6 We recommend that the service publish an asset condition report so that people are aware of the state of the service.

4.7 We recommend that the service continue to develop good relations with the public by publishing targets of service and means of achieving redress if the service is unsatisfactory.

4.8 We recommend that the Water Service take seriously its duty and responsibility to preserve, protect and enhance the natural environment and publish a policy document to that effect. The document should specify the measures it will take to reduce pollution from septic tanks, and harmful effluent discharged to marine waters, the cost involved and the time scale.

4.9 We recommend the appointment of an independent watchdog to monitor and oversee the delivery of the service in all aspects and, if necessary, to apply censure.

5. **EQUALITY:** The N.I. Women's Coalition acknowledges that The Water Service has provided an essential service to the people of N. Ireland through very difficult times. We recognise that the employees of the service have helped to maintain normal life for our people even when under extreme pressure. We support the right as citizens and as employees to full participation in the consultation and decision-making on the future of the Water Service. In considering reorganisation options we have addressed the issue of equality of treatment and the equality of outcome.

5.1 We recommend that the ratepayers be provided with itemised bills so that they can see the contribution they are making to the service. In circumstances where the rent and rates are charged as a single entity we suggest that the same information be given to tenants.

5.2 We recommend that the Water Service take immediate steps to include marginalised groups into the network of its services particularly those people who live in rural areas. This will have an effect of equality of treatment and a reduction of potential pollution from septic tanks.

5.3 We recommend that consideration be given to granting the Water Service with "Trading Fund" status so that it is removed from the artificial constraints of separating operating running costs from capital expenditure.