

water
Reform
Northern Ireland

Reform of Water and
Sewerage Services

**Report of Public
Consultation Meetings**



June 2003

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Sewerage Services

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Contents

	Page
Summary	1
1. Introduction	5
2. The Issues for Consultation	6
3. Consultation Findings	10
3.1 The Basis of the Consultation Process	10
3.2 Acceptability of Water Charging	12
3.3 Water Charging Options	15
3.4 Protection of Vulnerable Groups	21
3.5 Protecting Customer Interests through Regulation and Representation	23
3.6 The Future Structure of Water and Sewerage Services	24
3.7 Reform of Water Service and Proposed Job Losses	27
3.8 Environmental Issues	28
4. Next Steps	29
Appendix 1 - Panel Members and Officials	30
Appendix 2 - Meeting Dates	31
Appendix 3 - Evaluation of the Public Meetings	32

Community Technical Aid

June 2003

Summary

The public consultation on the proposed water and sewerage services in the region began in March 2003 with the launch of a consultation document “The Reform of Water and Sewerage Services in Northern Ireland” by Angela Smith MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State responsible for Regional Development. The document sought views on the basis on which domestic water and sewerage charges should be set; possible business models for a reformed Water Service; and how best to protect the consumer interest.

Community Technical Aid (CTA) was appointed to chair and facilitate six public meetings which formed one strand of the wider consultation process. This report has been prepared and edited by CTA and seeks to summarise the essence of what was extensive, passionate and sometimes heated debate at the meetings which were held in Omagh, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Belfast, Craigavon and Enniskillen during April, May and June 2003.

The meetings were well attended (with the exception of Omagh) with over 400 people taking part and were dominated by discussion of the decisions taken by the direct rule Ministers to introduce water charging, reform the structure of the Water Service and reduce the workforce by up to 600 jobs.

The range of issues and the main points made by participants under each topic is summarised below.

The Basis of the Consultation Process

The basis of the consultation was challenged and opposed by many of the participants primarily on the grounds that:

- the decisions on introducing charging, reforming the structure of the Service and reducing the workforce by up to 600 staff should not have been taken prior to the consultation process and rendered it meaningless;
- retaining the existing structure of the Service should have been presented as an option for consultation; and
- the consultation document was misleading, inaccurate and not conducive to meaningful consultation.

At four of the six meetings participants unanimously demanded the withdrawal of the reform proposals and in another of the meetings the majority of participants walked out after the first hour in protest at the decisions already taken by government.

Acceptability of Water Charges

The majority of participants were opposed to the principle of water

“Why is the meeting about ‘how’ we should charge and not ‘whether’ we should have charging.”

charges and angered that there had been no consultation on whether charges should be introduced.

The main points made were:

- the Minister is hurrying these proposals through in order to avoid democratic debate by the Northern Ireland Assembly;
- the Northern Ireland Assembly should decide the future of the Service;
- water is a right not a commodity and should be available to all regardless of ability to pay;
- water and sewerage services are already paid for through domestic rates;
- the consultation document is misleading and ambiguous;
- vulnerable groups will be most affected by charges yet the consultation document contains no proposals for protecting them;
- the revenue needed for investment should be raised through income tax;
- the reform is preparing the way for privatisation;
- consumers should not have to pay for past government mistakes; and
- there is disparity between water reform processes in Northern Ireland and other regions.

Water Charging Options

Given the predominance of discussion of the acceptability issue, participants had little time to discuss the options for charging. Of those who referred to it, most favoured some form of metering and rejected a flat rate charge and one based on property values on the grounds of equity and fairness. Alternative funding sources were suggested including raising income tax levels. This was seen by some as the best method of circumventing the unfairness of everyone paying charges and ensuring that those who can afford to pay will do so.

Protection of Vulnerable Groups

The protection of vulnerable groups caused participants a lot of concern with reference particularly made to the lack of protection currently afforded to vulnerable groups in England, Scotland and Wales. Participants urged the Department to recognise that poverty levels and living costs are higher here than in other regions. Reference was made to the number of people who will not be able to pay water charges. Suggestions for measures to protect vulnerable groups included one or more of the following: discounts; capped rates; tariffs; rebates; and exemptions.

“This is indirect taxation.”

Regulation and Representation

Few participants commented on these issues. Those who did so said that the rights of consumers need adequate protection in any new, reformed Water Service. Some suggested enhancing the role of the General Consumer Council. Others said a new representative body could be established. In terms of regulation some said OFWAT’s powers could be extended to water and sewerage services here. Others asked if Scottish Water could enhance its remit to cover Northern Ireland. Beyond these comments, there was little discussion on the exact nature of a new or revised representative body and/or regulator.

Future Structure

Many participants said that the status quo should remain and that a reformed Service would eventually lead to privatisation with the quality of the Service suffering as a result.

Options one, two and three (privatisation, a not-for-dividend company and a public private partnership) were said by some to be different forms of privatisation and therefore unacceptable. While the statutory corporation and government-owned company models were discussed in more detail, there was a degree of confusion over how these models would work. Some participants said these two options would prepare the Service for privatisation later while others said they did not have enough or adequate information to debate this topic.

Of those participants who mentioned it, all said that they want a fair, accountable and democratic Service. Many said this is best delivered by a government-based system and that the Water Service structure should not be changed.

Reform of Water Service and Proposed Job Losses

The reform and proposed job cuts were angrily opposed by many participants, including trade union officials and Water Service employees. They were angry that the Minister had made this announcement prior to the commencement of the consultation process and questioned her commitment to listening to the views of the public.

Many participants challenged the view that Water Service staff are not operating efficiently enough and demanded evidence to substantiate the decision to reduce staffing levels by up to 600 jobs. They asserted that it was nonsensical to plan a major programme of investment while reducing the workforce by up to 30% and that the real intention was to contract this work out to private contractors at the expense of Service employees.

Environmental Issues

Environmental issues mentioned related to inefficiencies in the current system (especially leakage); ways of using water more efficiently; the need for a rethink over whether all the water supplied to domestic properties needs to be of the highest quality; and the need for more education and awareness of environmental and sustainability issues.

Other Issues

Other issues referred to included the potential of developers' contributions to alleviate the financial burden placed on households; the exact requirements of European Union Water Directive in terms of self-financing; and whether the additional revenue generated by water charges will mean released funds will be ringfenced for other public services within the region.

I. Introduction

On 11 March 2003 the Department for Regional Development published a consultation document on the future of Water and Sewerage Services in Northern Ireland. Launching the document Angela Smith MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State responsible for Regional Development, explained that a decision to move the services on to a self-financing basis had been taken. This, she said, requires the introduction of domestic water and sewerage charges. She also said that changes in the way the services are managed and delivered are required in order to ensure that charges are “fair and affordable.”

On 26 March 2003 the Minister announced that, as part of the consultation process, a series of public meetings would be held across the region. Morrow Communications and Community Technical Aid were appointed to facilitate and report on these meetings which were held in Omagh, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Belfast, Craigavon and Enniskillen from April to June 2003.

This report has been prepared and independently edited by Community Technical Aid. It seeks to summarise the essence of and main issues raised at the meetings in two sections. Section two describes the structure and format of the meetings and outlines the issues for discussion presented by the Department for Regional Development at the meetings. Section three is a presentation of the consultation findings. The issues raised and comments made at the public meetings are categorised under several headings ranging from acceptability of water charging and charging options, to the future structure of the Water Service and protection of vulnerable groups.

The public meetings formed one strand of the consultation process. Other elements included a household leaflet and website both inviting comments by telephone and letter, afternoon drop-in information sessions at the venues used for the public meetings and a series of focus group meetings in rural areas. This report does not cover these elements of the process. The Department for Regional Development has committed to analysing the views expressed during all strands of the consultation and reporting on the entire process in October 2003.

This report was submitted to DRD on 12 June 2003. Following design and printing copies were sent to all those participants who attended the public meetings and requested a copy.



2. The Issues for Consultation

“Is there any point in you taking back our views”

This section of the report outlines the issues presented by the Department for Regional Development for discussion at the public meetings.

2.1 Format and Structure of the Meetings

Each meeting opened with a welcome and introductions to the meeting by the independent chairperson from CTA. He reminded people of the purpose of the meeting and explained the programme. This was followed by introductions from a panel. At each meeting this panel consisted of three or four people who were interested in the issues but were independent of the Department for Regional Development and had not been involved in the preparation of the Department’s consultation document (see Appendix 1 for the panel composition at each meeting). The panel at each meeting also included officials from each of the Department for Regional Development, the Water Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel (except for the Enniskillen meeting).

Following opening remarks a representative of the Department for Regional Development made a presentation at four of the six meetings on the key issues for consultation. The chairperson then invited questions and comments from the floor.

At the meetings in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry the people attending objected to a presentation being made. In both cases the meetings went straight into the expression of views and comments by those attending and at the Derry/Londonderry meeting the majority of people walked out after about an hour in protest at the decision to introduce water charges and the absence of consultation prior to this decision.

With the aim of maximising opportunities for participation people were offered the option of joining a smaller discussion group rather than remaining in the public meeting. This option was provided for anyone who preferred to give their views or discuss the issues in a smaller and less formal setting. This option was taken up by a small number of people at the Belfast meeting.

2.2 Presentation by DRD

This section outlines the main points of the presentation which was amended after each meeting to take account of issues raised at previous meetings.

The presentation began with the three main issues open for debate:

“This is not a consultation process. You’re looking for a rubber stamp.”

- the best way to charge for water and sewerage services;
- the protection of consumer interests; and
- the best way to deliver water and sewerage services.

It was made clear that the consultation exercise had parameters and that some decisions had already been taken by the direct rule Ministers. These decisions are that households will begin to pay for water and sewerage services from 1 April 2006 and that services will no longer be provided by central government which will inevitably lead to changes in the way water and sewerage services are currently delivered. The DRD representative said that the public already pays for water through rates and taxation but said that Northern Ireland is unique in terms of not having a direct water charge. The water and sewerage service is currently funded from the Northern Ireland block grant, which, he explained is essentially made up of the region’s share of income from taxation across the United Kingdom, income from the rates paid by people in Northern Ireland and a smaller sum which is borrowed. The total block grant is £7.4 billion for this financial year and the Water and Sewerage Service has been allocated £250 million of this.

The DRD representative stressed that clean water supplies and effective sewerage services are important to our daily lives in terms of public health, a clean environment, and a sustainable economy. He said however it is also something we take for granted and reform is now necessary to ensure that these services continue at a standard compliant with European Directives. In order to finance the improvements necessary to provide water and sewerage services and to accommodate the projected 250,000 new dwellings in Northern Ireland in the next 20 years all households are required to contribute towards these services in accordance with the European Water Framework Directive.

The DRD representative explained that Ian Pearson, MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Finance, said in December 2002 that:

“The Secretary of State [for Northern Ireland] has decided ...to make the Water Service self-financing. This will require major reforms in the service... and in principle will mean the introduction of separate domestic water charges.... The only alternative would be substantial cuts... in other essential public services.”

Further it was noted that a statement from the Northern Ireland Executive in May 2002 on the funding need for the Service said:



“Why is the government so afraid of raising income tax... there has been a drive in the last 20 years to lower direct taxation and to increase hidden taxation. Why don't they go back and look at direct taxation as this is the best means of getting the necessary finance from people who can afford to pay more.”

“There is no realistic prospect that the [£3 billion] funding requirement will be met from the Executive's ... budget, because that would imply unacceptable constraints on other public services such as health, education and transport. Nor is it realistic to expect the Treasury to provide expenditure on this scale...”

The DRD representative highlighted the need for the £3 billion investment. He stated that the investment would address a legacy of under-investment and allow the repair and upgrading of sewers, pipes, treatment works and facilities. This would result in greater protection of public health and the environment and cater for new developments.

The participants were told that there are a number of changes required as part of the reform of the Service. These include household charges, new mechanisms to protect consumers, new arrangements for the delivery of services, investment in technology and infrastructure and new ways of working with fewer staff. The presentation suggested that without reform and restructuring the average water charge would be £400.

The purpose of the consultation the DRD representative said was to gather information on the three main issues referred to earlier. The first relates to the best way to charge for water and sewerage services. He outlined three possible charging options:

- **a flat charge** - everyone pays the same. This option it was explained raises questions of equality and fairness.
- **a charge based on property value** - those with more valuable properties pay more. This option also raises questions of fairness particularly for example for a single person living in a large, valuable house.
- **a charge based on the metering of domestic watering supplies** - the Executive specifically ruled out this option in the Rating Policy Review. However the DRD representative said the Minister, Angela Smith MP, considers it is still worthy of debate as an option.

The Department representative said that any one or combination of these options would not be introduced before 1 April 2006 and are likely to be phased in.

The presentation raised the question of protecting vulnerable groups such as low income households, pensioners and households using large volumes of water on health grounds. It was stated that although there are safeguards in operation for people on low incomes in England and Wales, there has been a relatively low

uptake of discounts. Further, it was stated that if discounts are awarded this would mean water users would have to meet the cost.

The second issue for consultation was how consumer interests should be protected. Three options for economic and consumer regulation were presented. The first was to appoint a Regulator for all of Northern Ireland utilities including water, electricity and gas. The second was to set up a separate Water Regulator for Northern Ireland and the third was to use an existing Water Industry Regulator currently operating in Scotland or England.

Two suggested options for customer representation were presented. One option was to establish a new customer regulation body on water issues. Another was to strengthen the role of existing water interest groups (such as the Water Council) or customer representative bodies (such as the General Consumer Council).

The third main issue presented for discussion was the best business model. Each option, it was said, will be assessed in terms of best value for money, affordability, high quality services and EU compliance, accountability of the Service, ownership of assets and impact on existing staff.

Five possible models for a new Water Service were presented:

- A private company (for example in parts of England where shareholders own the assets).
- A not-for-dividend company (for example in Wales where profits are invested back into the company).
- A Public Private Partnership (where management of the company is franchised).
- A statutory corporation (similar, for example, to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive).
- A government-owned company (similar, for example, to the Post Office). This is further removed from government than a statutory corporation with its operation governed by company legislation.

The DRD representative stated that none of these decisions can be taken without considering equality and other issues and without assessing the impacts on for example the rural community, the business community, health, sustainable development, the environment, human rights and targeting social need.



3. Consultation Findings

“You’ve posed the questions that you want answers to. This is not consultation.”

3.1 The Basis of the Consultation Process

Many participants at several of the public meetings expressed opposition to the basis of the consultation process. They were angry at the approach taken by the Water Reform Unit and were critical of the consultation document, questioning many of its facts and figures. Many said that the document is fundamentally flawed, misleading in terms of the information it presents and not conducive to effective consultation. It was argued that the document is ambiguous for example on how water and sewerage services are paid for at present and lacks reference or detail on poverty levels in the region, the size of families, average income levels and comparative living costs between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Several participants suggested that the consultation should not proceed on the basis that the consultation document is inadequate and that the process is thus null and void. Furthermore many said that the consultation was meaningless given that the introduction of water charging, job losses and reform of the Water Service structure had already been announced.

It was suggested that the consultation deadline should be extended and a new and more meaningful document be prepared with a redesigned consultation process to be held in the near future. In Belfast and Craigavon motions demanding that the consultation document be withdrawn were unanimously carried, at the meeting in Derry/Londonderry the majority of participants registered their protest at the decisions already taken and the basis of the consultation process by walking out of the meeting after the first hour and in Enniskillen participants unanimously supported a proposal that the Water Service remain as it is and be properly funded by government.

Comments were often made about the approach used and how the questions posed by the Water Reform Unit were, in the opinion of participants, the wrong questions. Many believed that all the decisions had already been taken and therefore challenged the Minister’s commitment to consultation.

On many occasions the consultation document was criticised. Some said it was written in a format which is insulting to Northern Ireland people insofar as it omits to say that English and Welsh water companies were heavily subsidised by government prior to privatisation, that the European Water Directive does not require “self financing” and that this is a political desire on Westminster’s part and has nothing to do with Europe. It

“You take back to the Minister that we do not want water charges, we reject water charges and you put her on notice that if she dares to bring in these charges undemocratically she will be faced with a mass campaign of refusal to pay and a campaign to defend the jobs”

was also asked by how much the average domestic rates bill is expected to increase following completion of the current rates review. Participants said this type of information is necessary for individuals to make informed responses to the consultation questions.

The basis of the consultation was also criticised for not including a sixth business model in the consultation. Many believed that retention of the Water Service existing structure should have been discussed alongside the presented five business models.

Participants were angry, especially those present at the Belfast meeting, at the composition of the panel. It was asked how the composition of the panel had been decided and why community and/or trade union representatives had been denied a place on the panel. Additionally the background of several of the panel members was queried - some participants asked who the members of the Water Reform Unit were and what their role was in the process; why representatives from Scotland and England were on the panel and why specific requests from trade unions to have one of their representatives on the panel were ignored by the Minister.

Many people present at the Belfast meeting did not even want to hear comments from panel members and were enraged at their presence. It was suggested on one occasion that participants at the Belfast meeting discuss the issues and ignore the panel completely.

There was support at the majority of the meetings for the view that politicians should have been at the meetings - the Minister and (former) MLAs. Many said that as Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) will potentially have a pivotal role to play in making the final decisions on water charging, politicians should have played an active part in the consultation process.

The promotion of the public meetings by DRD was criticised with participants at the Craigavon meeting highlighting the low key approach adopted and the fact that only one of the six meetings was held in the south of the region. Several times it was mentioned that members of the public did not generally know about the meetings and that this was reflected in the lower than average attendance levels at some of the meetings. This was a particular issue in Enniskillen, Omagh and Craigavon. Furthermore it was suggested that if and when the Northern Ireland Executive comes out of suspension, the public consultation process should recommence with a new and revised programme of public meetings.



“It’s unbelievable that the Water Reform Unit initially overlooked Fermanagh.”

A participant summarised the views of many at one meeting when he suggested that the consultation should have been based on a different set of questions: why £3 billion is needed; who is responsible for this deficit in funding in the water and sewerage system; where the proportion of the regional rates revenue allocated to water and sewerage services has gone in recent years and what has it been spent on if such a deficit remains; why did government not recognise this problem sooner; why should the public now have to pay for mistakes made by government; and why (former) MLAs are not present to explain how they will approach the problem when back in a devolved system.

3.2 Acceptability of Water Charging

There was widespread opposition to the principle of introducing water charges at all of the meetings. The majority of participants were angered at the approach taken by the Minister and DRD particularly given the lack of consultation on whether water charges should be introduced.

This opposition to the principle of charges dominated the discussion at all of the meetings. Most of the time was therefore taken up with these discussions and most of the comments and contributions made, as well as the anger and frustration expressed, centred on this issue.

The main points made were:

- **The direct rule Minister is trying to hurry the reform proposals through.**

Participants were angry at what they perceived to be a forced and hurried approach to the consultation. They were opposed to such important decisions being taken by a direct rule administration and suspected that this was a deliberate step to avoid democratic debate within the Assembly.

- **The Northern Ireland Assembly should decide.**

Given the importance of the proposals and the implications for householders especially in terms of affordability, many participants said that the process should be postponed until the Northern Ireland Assembly is back in power.

- **Water is a right not a commodity.**

References were made to the essential need for water and how access to clean, safe water is a basic human right that everyone should have and not a commodity to be sold. Participants at all of the meetings said that water is essential for health and should be available to everyone regardless of ability to pay.



“In a civilised society we should be protecting our poor.”

- **Householders already pay for water and sewerage services.**
It was believed that the water charges when introduced will amount to a form of double taxation. Many said that ratepayers in Northern Ireland pay for water indirectly through domestic regional rates. They therefore stressed that they do not want to pay twice. To support their claim, reference was made to a recent Water Service Business Plan which, it was said, states that 78% of funding for water and sewerage services comes from the regional rate revenue.
- **The consultation document is misleading.**
On several occasions at all of the meetings reference was made to the ambiguity of the consultation document. Participants said that they cannot accept the consultation process because of misleading statements in the document, particularly on the issues of double taxation, whether ratepayers already pay for water and what is required by the European Union Water Directive.
- **Water charges will affect vulnerable groups most.**
Many believed that the most vulnerable groups in the community will be most seriously affected by the introduction of charges. Some warned of the public health problems that will result if a metered system is introduced and the amount of water is limited by those who cannot afford to pay. The introduction of charges was therefore rejected by many on the grounds of poverty and low incomes. Reference was made to 38% of children in the region living in poverty with fuel costs here 11% higher than the rest of the United Kingdom and food costs 20% higher. Affordability was said to be the central issue and that water charges will worsen the situation for those households who will find it difficult to pay.
- **Investment needed should be met through income tax.**
Hidden or direct taxation was the label given to the planned water charges. There was anger and rejection at this on the basis that deriving the revenue needed through an increase in income tax levels would be a more comprehensive and equitable means of reform. It was said that this would have a lesser effect on the more vulnerable members of society and many were suspicious and critical of government’s unwillingness to raise income tax levels for fear of losing middle class votes in Britain.
- **Reform is preparation for privatisation.**
There was some suspicion that the planned reform is preparing the way for privatisation of the water and sewerage system at a later date. Some participants said that the system is being



*This is only the start of it
[the campaign] ... we'll
go to the streets.”*

modified, heavily invested in and made more efficient now with a view to selling it to the private sector in the near future for a substantial profit.

- **Consumers should not have to pay for past government mistakes.**

It was argued very strongly that Northern Ireland householders should not have to now pay to address the legacy of problems in the water and sewerage system caused by 30 years of under-investment. This under-investment was said to be the mistake of successive governments in the past and participants stressed that they will not pay for those mistakes.

Participants queried government's approach at a national level to public service expenditure and asked why these problems in the water and sewerage system had not been foreseen. They emphasised the unacceptability of informing householders that they will have to pay charges in a bid to meet the £3 billion deficit in the system. When participants were told that this under-investment had resulted from years of difficult decisions being taken by national government and the Assembly over expenditure on competing priorities, the principle of charging was still rejected. The issue of competing priorities was difficult for many to accept who said this news only worsened a bad situation and amounted to emotional blackmail.

- **Disparity between Northern Ireland and other water reform processes.**

There was a lot of discussion at most of the meetings over the “green dowry” issue. High levels of investment had been made in the English and Welsh water systems prior to privatisation. Participants argued that the region's water and sewerage system should receive the same level of investment from government before reforms take place.

There was such opposition to the principle of water reform and charging that over 70% of the participants at the Derry/Londonderry meeting walked out following a proposal that the Water Reform Unit informs the Minister that the consultation will not work and that people do not want water charges and will not pay water charges.

At the Belfast meeting there were three voted proposals from the floor. The first was “withdraw the consultation document.” This was unanimously carried. The second was “no additional water charges” which was again unanimously carried. The third was “withdraw the consultation document and let no decisions be taken until a devolved administration returns.” There were 20

“This [water charging] will destroy some people’s lives.”

votes in favour of this proposal and ten against with the rest of the participants abstaining.

At the Craigavon meeting it was proposed that the consultation document should be withdrawn and the process re-thought. Again this was unanimously carried.

In Enniskillen a motion was put forward that: “the Water Service should remain as it is and be properly funded by central government.” This was unanimously carried.

3.3 Water Charging Options

The options for water charging were discussed at each meeting after the majority of participants had voiced their opposition to water reform. Given that this left limited time to discuss the various options in detail no general agreement was reached on the options presented.

The discussion on water charging and metering and the type of system that should be introduced in the region was prefaced with a discussion on the equity of introducing a system comparable to other regions when the water and sewerage service is different from others in the rest of the UK. There was considerable debate on whether water and sewerage services are already paid for by Northern Ireland householders, either directly or indirectly, and a number of people queried whether we already pay the same for our local services as people in England. Others stated that in Northern Ireland average income levels are less so water charges should be less.

Participants queried why the illustrative figures quoted for water charges in Northern Ireland appeared to be so high in comparison to England and what the government would do if all householders refused to pay. The Departmental representatives explained that the finance would be taken from budgets such as education or health and these services would suffer as a result. Some participants said that as water is a natural resource communities should not have to pay for it while a few stated that as we pay for electricity and gas, which are commodities, we should also pay for water.

Many people expressed the view that there should be government investment in the infrastructure to alleviate the proposed burden on the public to find the necessary money to upgrade the water and sewerage system. In response the panel said that in Northern Ireland other services such as health and education have succeeded in attracting funding in the past whereas water and sewerage



“You’re building the cherry up so that the cherry can be picked.”

services infrastructure was much less successful. The panel was asked if the Treasury had refused to fund the £3 billion infrastructural improvements needed in Northern Ireland. In response, participants were told that members of the Assembly had not asked the Treasury for £3 billion as they knew they would not be allocated the money. This caused concern as participants said that if households in Northern Ireland had to fund the £3 billion needed each household would be liable to pay as much as £4,000. Low income families would not be able to afford this, or even a small percentage of this, it was said, and many people could be pushed further into the poverty trap.

Others suggested that if the directives forcing households to pay for services come from the European Union, then the investment needed to improve the infrastructure should also come from the European Union. It was explained by Water Service representatives on the panel that the Water Service currently spends £250 million per year (£125 million on day-to-day services and £125 million on investments and future programmes to upgrade the infrastructure to European Union standards). To cover investment costs in the future, it was said, households will have to pay for water and sewerage services. In response participants agreed that investment is needed but not at the expense of the Water Service staff who might lose their jobs and definitely not at the expense of those members of the community who cannot afford to pay water charges.

Some participants had tried to estimate how much they would be expected to pay on average for their water and sewerage services based on Water Service expenditure figures and information in the consultation document. Some believed it would be as high as £600 to £700 given the comparative figures for England. The estimated figures caused concern to many as these coupled with the potential increase in rates bills resulting from the rates review, could, they said put a considerable burden on households in April 2006. There was a call therefore for a reduction in local rates to take account of the planned separate water charge and for charges to be phased in over a ten year period. Information from some independent members of the panel confirmed that the initial estimate of £400 for water bills could rise steadily over the following years until infrastructural improvements have been carried out and the Water Service has been reformed. Water charges in England and Scotland were estimated by a participant to have risen by between 80% and 95% in the early years following the introduction of charges. Some participants queried if the Water Reform Unit had calculated its figures using all the information available or if it was

“We’ve got an answer before we’ve even got the question.”

trying to disguise the burden of payments to sell the issue of water charging to the public.

An additional point was made regarding the revenue accruing from water charges. Participants asked for a guarantee that this revenue will be ringfenced and that the amount of money allocated to Northern Ireland (in the block grant) would not diminish as a result. Some were suspicious that this would happen.

3.3.1 Flat Rate Charge

There was significant opposition to the introduction of a flat rate charge for every household. It was considered that this would not be equitable or fair as it could place an unbalanced burden on households using relatively little water.

Others said that a flat charge could be included in household rates but stressed that there should be government investment for the necessary improvements before the burden for payment is placed upon the public. Participants were told by the panel that paying increased income tax would not necessarily solve the problem of finding finance for water and sewerage services as Northern Ireland would not necessarily get an increased grant from central government. Some independent panel representatives explained that this is one of the key reasons why an urgent need exists to find an acceptable, workable but local solution to water charging for the region.

3.3.2 Property Value Based Charge

Of those participants who spoke about this option most were concerned about water charges being linked to property values. It was said that there are many people on relatively low incomes living in houses which have increased in value considerably over the years. These people, it was argued, could not be expected to pay water charges based on property values. Furthermore, many agreed that the capital value of properties differs greatly from area to area which would bring an element of unfairness into a charging system based on property values.

A small number of people said that they would be prepared to pay increased rates to fund improvements but only if it was matched by support from the government. It was noted that in parts of England water charges were initially high to cover the cost of infrastructural improvements, but once the investment was complete the water charges were reduced. Participants hoped that any charging levels in Northern Ireland would follow the same pattern.



3.3.3 Metering Based Charge

There was discussion on the fairness of installing meters in all domestic properties in the region. Some people considered that the introduction of metering could be a fair system and it could also result in more efficient use of water. The drawback, the panel said, is that householders would have to pay for the installation of meters, (although in England installation is now free) this charge may not be means tested and may therefore be too expensive for some people.

A number of participants said that metering provides a fair way of measuring how much water an individual property uses, insofar as a household with a number of children would use more than a single person household. Some participants also believed that metering would ensure more efficient use of water. It was however explained that water only accounts for approximately 27% of the cost of the service. The other 73%, including sewerage and drainage, would have to be financed through a flat charge. It was acknowledged by many participants that this would need to be means tested and vulnerable groups would need to be given discounts. A number of people argued, however, that more affluent households should not be expected to subsidise those who are not able to pay their rates or water charges and that small households should not have to subsidise larger ones - they said metering should solve this issue.

The issue of public health was raised several times with a number of participants voicing concern that if low income households are metered they may use less water. Members of the panel representing consumer interests and protection of vulnerable groups, stated that they have evidence to show the hygiene and health risks associated with low water use as well as higher levels of debt amongst people who have metered water supplies. They therefore urged caution over the introduction of water meters here.

Some participants stated that a system of charges based solely on metering would not be fair. Families with young children or people with disabilities who need to use larger volumes of water, it was said, would be disadvantaged by this type of charging.

Some participants who accepted that meters would be advantageous suggested that all households are given a minimum amount of water free of charge necessary for health and basic survival.

“We’re being told it’s not credible to ask the Treasury to pay for the £3 billion investment... we would say it’s the only credible option.”

Participants queried why the Assembly had discounted the idea of meters and were told that the Northern Ireland Executive believed that installing meters would be unfair to the most disadvantaged groups in society. It was noted by some participants that it would cost £130 million to put meters in all households in Northern Ireland but they queried inefficiencies in government departments and quoted the example of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) losing £125 million through fraudulent claims in recent years. If there was a tighter control on government expenditure, it was said, there would be enough money to pay for necessary improvements. Some participants suggested that all new houses are equipped with meters during construction (although it was queried how the Water Service would be able to install meters in every household if there are 600 fewer employees). Others suggested that payments for installation could be made over 20 years for example to keep charges manageable. On a practical note, it was suggested that electricity and water meters could be read together thereby reducing the level of staffing needed.

3.3.4 Alternative Charging Options

Some participants suggested a sliding scale of income taxes to pay for water rates. Others developed this further by saying that individuals in paid employment should each pay on the basis of affordability rather than each household paying the same rate.

3.3.5 Exemptions

On the issue of exemptions participants queried whether people with their own private water supplies would have to pay a water charge. In response Water Service representatives said that they would not although they have a choice to connect to mains water to ensure a constant supply in times of drought. They also said that at present yearly emptying of septic tanks is free of charge for people who have hard standing but that this is currently under review. A few of those participants whose properties are linked to the mains water supply but have septic tanks said that they would be prepared to pay for water if metered but would not be prepared to pay a flat charge for sewerage infrastructure. The Water Reform Unit was urged to consider introducing separate charges for water and sewerage services to take account of the septic tank issue.



“There was no consultation on the job losses before the Minister’s announcement just like there is no consultation on the charging issue.”

3.3.6 Business Charges

The issue of business charges featured in the workshop which was attended by a small number of people during the meeting in Belfast. It was acknowledged that small businesses and offices currently pay water charges based on meter readings and it was suggested that this system needs to be reviewed and updated. Participants suggested therefore that a revised commercial charging system could provide a considerable alternative source of income. It was said that as farmers also pay water charges through metering it would not be unreasonable to expect all households to pay in the same way.

There was some concern over the recent increases in water charges for businesses. The question was asked if, as a result of the reform, business charges will increase and if businesses will lose their current water allowances. A representative of DRD responded that when domestic charges are introduced small businesses will lose their allowances and as a result their bills will increase. There was a call to ensure that small businesses are not unduly burdened with excessive water bills as a result of Water Reform.

3.3.7 Alternative Sources of Revenue

Non-domestic alternative sources of revenue for water and sewerage services were suggested. These included road users or the Roads Service paying for, or contributing to, the treatment of surface water from roads. The imposition of greater charges and fines on businesses and individuals for waste disposal and breaches of pollution control was also suggested. It was highlighted by participants that recent research had shown that seven out of ten of the worst water polluters in Britain were water companies. It was said that water companies should be leading by example but also paying pollution fines when necessary.

In terms of equity and fairness several questions at every meeting centred on concerns over how vulnerable groups and the poorer members of society will be protected. At the Ballymena meeting, Paddy Hillyard said that technically a system could be devised in Northern Ireland which would be fairer. This could involve the introduction of a local income tax system here (if the Assembly is in place and MLAs lobby government for these changes) with progressive charges that would be fairer for all members of the community. Participants emphasised the importance of protecting consumer interests, given these concerns.

“We don’t have the same income levels here as in England and Wales ... it’s not feasible for us to have to pay extra.”

The issue of developers’ contributions was raised as a way to alleviate the burden on the public to pay for new infrastructure. However, a number of participants expressed the concern that in urban areas or in large developments, developers’ contributions could be achievable but in smaller or rural developments this could put an unnecessary strain on developers. It was suggested therefore that any new funding or investment through this means should have a degree of flexibility built in to take account of the rural dimension.

3.3.8 Efficient Use of Water

Participants discussed how to use water more efficiently as a way of ensuring charges are kept to a minimum. Some suggested that people should be able to collect rainwater for use in the garden, to wash cars or to flush toilets. It was also suggested by the panel that people should try to find ways to reduce the amount of water used to flush toilets for example by using water efficiency devices in their cisterns. It was also suggested that households recycling water should have this reflected in any water charges.

3.4 Protection of Vulnerable Groups

There were widespread comments made on how to protect vulnerable groups and people on lower incomes from the burden of paying water charges. There was particular concern that the consultation document does not identify vulnerable groups and more importantly how they will be protected. Participants expressed the view that the voice of vulnerable groups could be lost amongst the others in the consultation process but urged that mechanisms to protect vulnerable groups are put in place before the Water Service is reformed in any way. Members of the panel with experience of water charging in England, Wales and Scotland also urged the Water Reform Unit to ensure these mechanisms are fair and that any scheme is easily accessible to vulnerable groups given that in England, it was stated, only 1,500 customers to date have availed of a capped tariff scheme introduced to protect vulnerable groups from high water bills.

A few participants said that it is unacceptable to expect the poorer members of society to pay water charges especially in the interests of protecting the rights of vulnerable groups and those on lower incomes to have safe, clean water and not to be financially penalised for having this service.

Statistics and figures were often quoted to illustrate the extent



*“No to double taxation,
no to water charges ...
this may fit in with the
rest of the UK but it
doesn't fit here.”*

of the needs of vulnerable groups. At the Craigavon and Belfast meetings especially a number of older people said that they felt significantly disadvantaged by government policies and that an increasing number of older people will be forced into the poverty trap. At the Derry/Londonderry meeting it was said that 38% of children in Northern Ireland are currently living in poverty, which is a higher percentage than in England. Some said that the average bill of £400 per year, as presented by the DRD representative, will equate to £12.00 per week and that many people do not have this.

It was said that 16% of Northern Ireland's population is claiming unemployment benefit which is a high proportion of households with a low disposable income. It was also estimated that 50% of households in Northern Ireland would have difficulties paying water charges. Reference was made to some households already depending on instant lottery winnings to pay electricity and other bills. To further illustrate this point panel member Paddy Hillyard explained that in 1997 - 1998 it was calculated that 18% (4.3 million people) suffered water poverty in England and Wales as a result of high water charges. This, he said, is untenable and cannot be allowed to happen in Northern Ireland.

It was suggested by many participants that the definition of vulnerable groups could include families with a high number of young children, older people, people on low incomes and people with health problems or disabilities. There was no overall agreement on how these vulnerable groups should be protected but it was suggested that individual groups should be identified and mechanisms to protect them put in place in advance of any reforms to the Water Service. The fear was that without protection households who are already in arrears with other payments may have their water supply disconnected. Many expressed the view that this would result in unacceptable public health risks where a re-emergence of diseases associated with a lack of clean water would occur. The impact of this would be particularly severe on children and older people they said, with the Health Service being put under more pressure to deal with the potential consequences. Participants were told however by some panel representatives that it is now illegal to disconnect residential properties from the water supply in England, Wales and Scotland.

A number of participants at each of the meetings suggested that households could be means tested and discounts or general rebates given to those unable to pay the full level of charges. This was said to be necessary as many households have grown up children in paid employment, while others have children still dependent on their parents.

“We’re already paying once, we won’t pay twice.”

Some participants suggested that the Department for Social Development or other government departments should subsidise vulnerable groups to help them pay their water charges. It was said that financial aid could be provided through housing benefits or the capping of water charges to prevent excessive bills. Others expressed the view that charges could be linked to income tax in the same way as child tax credits. This form of means testing could then be used as a “passport” to discounts for some households. However attention was also drawn to the shortcomings of means testing and the bureaucratic administration required. Professor McLaughlin reminded participants that the system in England and Wales introduced to protect vulnerable groups did not work. She said that it is in everyone’s interests to construct a better system for Northern Ireland. A benefit voucher scheme could be introduced here or perhaps the definition of rates should be expanded to include a payment directly for water and sewerage, she suggested.

Some were concerned that the assistance needed for individuals and families on low incomes or no income would not be readily available. Some went further by saying that they would (if they have to) pay more provided that a fair system which tackles TSN issues is designed and put in place.

At the Enniskillen meeting an assurance was sought that the potential rural disparity issue is tackled at an early stage and that dispersed households are not faced with higher bills.

One participant questioned the panel over the risks if TSN and parity issues are breached in Northern Ireland. The panel representative from one of the consumer bodies in Scotland said that a capped charging scheme has been in operation in Scotland but that it has not been very effective in tackling issues of affordability. Paddy Hillyard, like Professor McLaughlin, said there is a need to devise a better system here for both protection of vulnerable groups and effective representative and regulation of a reformed Water Service.



3.5 Protecting Customer Interests through Regulation and Representation

Opposition to the principle of water charges and job losses dominated the meetings. Participants therefore had little time to discuss the issue of regulation and representation. Of those participants who did they were all keen to ensure that consumer interests are protected and that regulation of a reformed water and sewerage system will protect consumer interests. The debate

“The service we have is an excellent one already. All the efficiency exercises carried out... did not find anything wrong with the current service.”

on consumer rights was particularly dominated by a discussion on how to protect vulnerable groups and members of society on low incomes. Fears were expressed that poorer people in Northern Ireland will not have enough protection. Comments were made, both by participants and panel members, that there is a substantial proportion of the region’s population who are very wealthy and can afford to pay water rates. Professor McLaughlin for example said that while approximately 50% of the region’s population will find it difficult to pay, the other 50% will not.

It was stressed that regulation of a reformed water and sewerage service and effective representation of consumers is very important. Some mentioned the need for democratic accountability in a new system as a replacement for the perceived lack of democracy which some said exists in the Water Service at present. Several participants nonetheless highlighted their belief that the present system and structure of the Service allows for public accountability and direct political representation. They insisted that this remain the case.

Specifically on the issue of regulation, some participants suggested using existing regulators in the interests of economic efficiency and common sense. Some participants asked if the existing electricity regulator could be used for regulation of the reformed water and sewerage service as OFWAT has in their opinion influenced cost and service delivery. It was asked if the Scottish regulator powers could extend to Northern Ireland. Others urged that a consumer regulator be put in place before water charging commences so that regulation of the potential profits to be made through privatisation can take place at an early stage.

When members for a new regulator and/or representative body are selected participants stressed the need for fairness and transparency in the process.

Overall it was stressed that a sturdy framework for regulation of consumer interests is needed. Some suggested that the role of the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland is enhanced to cover water and sewerage services.

3.6 The Future Structure of Water and Sewerage Services

A number of participants requested a “green dowry” for Northern Ireland to carry out the infrastructural improvements needed before any reform of the water and sewerage service takes place. They said that water authorities in England and Wales benefited

“Public consultation in the true sense of the word does not exist in this process.”

from £50 billion of investment before they were privatised, so to ensure parity, Northern Ireland should receive the same benefits. Participants said that without government investment it is unfair to compare the position in England with Northern Ireland as levels of funding and investment are very different.

The DRD representative outlined five options for the future structure of the Water Service. These are: privatisation; a not-for-dividend company; a public private partnership; a statutory corporation; or a government-owned company. Participants argued that options one, two and three are all basically variations on the one theme of privatisation and are all concerned with making profits. DRD explained that a statutory corporation operates under the direction of a Minister. A government-owned company (for example Ulsterbus) has a board and a Minister can give direction but cannot intervene. This type of company can borrow money from government at competitive rates.

In response to this information, some participants stressed that profits should not be for private gain and that they should be reinvested into the water and sewerage companies. Some panel members replied that privatisation in England has brought benefits to customers such as reduced charges and better services. Some participants said that the choice to privatise the Water Service is an ethical choice and the future structure should be sorted out before funding solutions are found and charges introduced.

Many participants were concerned that private companies, in whatever form, would not be accountable to the public. In response Alan Alexander said that Scottish Water is accountable because it is a public sector corporation and as such he is accountable to the Scottish Parliament. He also said accountability stems from how the system is run and the level of service the customers receive and does not stem from whether it is a private or public provider. Other participants queried whether existing water service providers, including Scottish Water, were interested in becoming the providers in Northern Ireland and as a result were interested in being on the panel of experts. Panel representatives said that this was not the case.

Some participants expressed the opinion that the Water Reform Unit is promoting the statutory corporation option more than the others. They said that they are aggrieved that members of the public are being expected to pay for past inadequate policies and under-investment in order to potentially enable a quasi-government organisation to take over water and sewerage services.



It was explained by the panel that there are examples of government departments operating as business models. An example quoted was the Driver and Vehicle and Testing Agency which charges a fee but is in the public sector. It was suggested that the future structure of the Water Service could be loosely based on this type of system. Some panel representatives said that the new water and sewerage service could be a variation of a not-for-dividend company. Many participants countered these suggested business models by arguing that each eventually leads to a privatised service.

Some participants criticised the government-owned company business model (GoCo). Reference was made to the Post Office having no competition and making little or no profit. Others said that a GoCo is similar to privatisation in that the Water Service could be made “attractive” as a GoCo and then sold on to the private sector.

After much debate many participants returned to the question of maintaining the current Water Service. The consultation process was criticised for not including this sixth option and allowing participants to discuss it alongside the other five options.

In response the Departmental representatives stressed that maintaining the status quo is not an option as the level of investment needed for infrastructural improvements is so great that it cannot be achieved through existing sources. It was repeated that more investment in the Water Service without a water charge would result in less money being available for other services such as hospitals and schools. They explained that the government is keen for future water providers to have the opportunity to have greater commercial freedom to borrow money and to provide a better quality of service.

There was no overall view from the participants on what the preferred future structure of the water and sewerage system should be, based on the five presented models. Most did however favour the status quo option not tabled for discussion. Some participants were concerned that while publicly run water services have strict health and safety guidelines, privately owned companies may not be as stringent. Many queried if a public body would have responsibility for monitoring private contractors to ensure conformity and consistently high standards.

“There should be consultation first and then decisions - this is the other way around.”

3.7 Reform of Water Service and Proposed Job Losses

There was widespread opposition at all of the meetings to the proposed job cuts and reform of Water Service announced by the Minister prior to the commencement of the public meetings. Many trade union officials were present at the meetings as were employees. They were angry and frustrated at the methodology employed by the Water Reform Unit in the design and implementation of the consultation process and expressed vehement opposition to the announcement to reduce Water Service staffing levels by 600 people.

Many participants queried the logic of downsizing with a simultaneous upgrading and investment programme. They highlighted what they perceive to be an obvious need for retention of staffing levels if the required investment is to take place and asked what objective measurements had been used to arrive at this decision.

The Water Service representative responded by saying that internal performance indicators, which are prepared every year, show that the unit cost per property of providing water and sewerage services is higher in the region than anywhere in England and Wales.

In contrast to this participants quoted from recent external evaluation and benchmarking exercises which show that Water Service is operating efficiently and said that no report states that Water Service is operating with 30% too many staff (30% equating to the planned 600 job losses). In response Water Service representatives said that while the Service is operating efficiently it is not operating efficiently enough. Savings they said have therefore to be made, hence the proposed job losses.

In addition it was queried if the 600 announced redundancies have been accurately calculated because in Wales after re-organisation water staffing levels fell from over 3,000 to about 150. A representative from the Water Service tried to reassure participants that staff reductions would come from returning temporary staff, redeploying personnel to other Civil Service departments, early or normal retirement, retraining and voluntary redundancy.

One participant said that the information on job losses and efficiency, as presented, reads like Water Service management (and the Chief Executive in particular) do not value their employees.



3.8 Environmental Issues

Many of the participants were concerned about issues of protecting the environment and best use of valuable resources like water. They were keen therefore to discuss how to use water more efficiently in order to keep wastage to a minimum. There was concern over the estimated figure of 37% of water which is currently lost through leakage in the system. Participants urged the Water Service to deal with the inadequate infrastructure and this wastage issue first before reform and introduction of charges.

Many participants suggested ways to use water more efficiently. This issue is covered earlier in this report in the context of the linkage between efficiency and charging. Efficiency was however also raised on several occasions from an environmental perspective. For example it was suggested that it is unnecessary to have a single supply of water purified to the highest standard for use in washing machines, toilets and in the garden. It is only necessary for drinking water it was said. Some suggested that domestic properties could have different water supplies for different uses. Others were keen to see the re-use of recycled water in the home. Rain water, it was said, could be used in the garden or for washing cars. A number of simple mechanisms were also suggested such as using a “a hippo bag” in toilet cisterns to reduce the volume of water used during each flush. It was also suggested that members of the public should consider the use of reed bed filtration systems and compost toilets in order to save water. There was a call for the Water Service to issue guidelines to all households on how to promote water efficiency and ideas on recycling.

A number of participants queried the sustainability of the proposals. The panel was asked if the proposals had been tested beyond a 20 year period and what the long-term environmental impacts would be. It was suggested that radical financial encouragement be granted to all households who are responsible users of water.

4. Next Steps

The six public consultation meetings detailed in this report make up one strand of the consultation process. A representative from DRD outlined the timetable for this process. He said it would run from March 2003 until October 2004 and would involve consultation on three main issues. These are:

- reform options - the consultation period for reform options will end on 20 June 2003. The public meetings are an integral part of this process;
- equality impact and detailed reform proposals - the consultation period will run from November 2003 until February 2004; and
- Water Reform Bill - the consultation period will run from July to October 2004.

It is expected that legislation will be passed in June 2005, possibly through the local Assembly, if reinstated. During 2005 and 2006 new mechanisms and organisations will be put in place to run and monitor the reformed water and sewerage service and in April 2006 domestic charges will be introduced.



Appendix I - Panel Members and Officials

Independent Members	Meeting
• Professor Eithne McLaughlin (Chair in Social Policy, Queen's University, Belfast)	Craigavon, Omagh, Derry/Londonderry
• Mike Smith (Senior Lecturer, School of Economics and Politics, University of Ulster)	Craigavon, Omagh, Ballymena
• Ian Smith (Convenor of Water Customer Consultation Panels in Scotland)	Craigavon, Ballymena
• Professor Alan Alexander (Chair of Scottish Water)	Craigavon, Derry/Londonderry, Belfast
• Andrea Cook (Chairman of WaterVoice Northumbria)	Omagh, Belfast
• Brian Hanna (Chief Executive and Town Clerk of Belfast City Council 1994-2002)	Derry/Londonderry, Belfast, Enniskillen
• Alan Walker (General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland)	Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen
• Paddy Hillyard (Professor of Social Administration and Policy, University of Ulster)	Ballymena, Enniskillen
• Dr Patrick A McNutt (Professional Economist)	Belfast

Departmental Officials	Meeting
• David Thomson (Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance and Personnel)	Craigavon, Omagh, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Belfast
• David Sterling (Deputy Secretary, Department for Regional Development)	Craigavon, Omagh, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Belfast, Enniskillen
• John Kelly (Acting Chief Executive, Water Service)	Craigavon, Omagh, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Belfast, Enniskillen

Appendix 2 - Meeting Dates

- 16 April 2003 - Omagh Leisure Centre, Omagh
- 29 April 2003 - Tower Hotel, Derry/Londonderry
- 7 May 2003 - Town Hall, Ballymena
- 13 May 2003 - Grosvenor Hall, Belfast
- 14 May 2003 - Civic Centre, Craigavon
- 3 June 2003 - Killyhelvin Hotel, Enniskillen

Appendix 3 - Evaluation of the Public Meetings

Evaluation forms were returned by 63 participants.

Participants' Opinion of the Meeting

	Number
Informative	15
Confusing	10
Useful	19
Useless	6
Didn't Answer	14

Opportunity to Express Views at the Meeting

	Number
Yes	42
No	7
Not Sure	5
Didn't Answer	9

Gender of Participants

	Number
Male	37
Female	20
Didn't Answer	6

Age of Participants

	Number
Under 18	-
19 - 25	1
26 - 45	26
46 - 60	17
60+	4
Didn't Answer	5

Community Background of Participants

	Number
Catholic	20
Protestant	18
Neither	19
Didn't Answer	6

Ethnic Background of Participants

	Number
White	53
Chinese	-
Indian	-
Pakistani	-
Traveller	-
Black/African Carriibbean	-
Other	1
Didn't Answer	9

Participants who considered themselves to have a Disability

	Number
Yes	10
No	53
Didn't Answer	0

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Community Technical Aid is the only region-wide voluntary organisation which provides professional planning and architectural services for community and voluntary groups. We facilitate community participation in planning and support community development by assisting groups to develop the skills, knowledge and infrastructure needed to regenerate disadvantaged urban and rural areas.