

Paying for water services 2010-14

Response of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities has welcomed the extensions to the current exemption scheme for small voluntary organisations, including many places of worship, announced by Ministers in 2004, and again in 2007. We urge that the exemption should be extended again, and indeed that it should be made permanent to enable such bodies to undertake financial planning with a greater degree of certainty.

We appreciate the Scottish Government's concern that the exemption should not place an undue burden on vulnerable domestic customers and small businesses. However, faith communities frequently support the most vulnerable people in society, thereby reducing the requirement for statutory service provision, and they often do so whilst struggling to find enough money for running costs, necessary maintenance, and, particularly in the case of the Jewish and Muslim communities, for security. Similarly, many small voluntary sector organisations provide vital services to their local community on a shoestring budget. The loss of the exemption may well prove the final straw for some, forcing them to close their doors, with a consequent loss of provision, or at best an increase in demand on other service providers.

This would have far-reaching consequences, both social and financial. "Faith in England's Northwest: Economic Impact Assessment"¹ indicates that "45,667 faith volunteers in the Northwest generate between £60.6 million and £64.4 million per annum." – i.e. they save the public purse that sum. (These figures exclude the work of national faith-based welfare organisations that operate in the area, such as the Children's Society, and NCH Action for Children, and also exclude the value of other services such as the provision of premises for community activities.)

No comparable research has been conducted in Scotland, but research for Volunteer Development Scotland indicates that more than 30% of the population in rural communities, and 15% in urban areas are involved in volunteering.² Since research also indicates that volunteering is higher among members of faith communities than among the general population³, and 67% of Scots identified themselves in the 2001 census as belonging to a religion, the value of faith volunteering to the Scottish economy is likely to be considerably higher than the above finding for the North West of England.

In addition, faith communities contribute to the economy, as well as to the social life of their local area, by providing vital facilities such as Church halls for the use of a wide range of community groups, which may have no connection with their own congregations. "Faith in England's Northwest: Economic Impact Assessment"¹ estimates that the local economic value of this facility is in the region of £800,000 per annum from a total of 1,385 venues. Given that there are considerably more places of worship than that throughout Scotland (at least 450 Roman Catholic and well over 1000 Church of Scotland churches alone), it is probable that the economic value is even higher, even if not all are actively involved in providing facilities for their local community.

It is therefore evident that only a very small percentage of such activity would require to cease in order for the resulting cost to the public purse significantly to exceed the £2.4m figure which the consultation paper gives as the annual cost of the exemption to Scottish Water. Since this loss would almost certainly have to be compensated by the provision of additional statutory services, it would appear that, in purely financial terms, the cost to the public purse of a Scottish Government commitment to reimburse Scottish Water for the full cost of a continued exemption would be less than the cost of withdrawal of the exemption. (This would be analogous to the situation with regard to Disclosure Scotland applications, whereby the fee for applications from volunteers working in the voluntary sector is paid by the Scottish Government, in order not to discourage volunteering, and thereby to ensure the continued provision of important services.)

It should be noted that this effect is likely to be greatest in rural areas, where, as noted above, volunteering is more common than in cities, where alternative facilities are nonexistent, and where isolation and alienation, especially of minority communities, is inevitably greater. Rural communities are perhaps also more vulnerable to a domino effect: if some organisations and facilities are forced to close by increased costs, then the costs to others rises, thereby increasing the danger that they in turn may be unable to meet costs and so have to close.

Consequently we urge the Scottish Government not only to extend the exemption from water charges for small voluntary organisations, but to make it permanent, in view of the negative impact that its loss would have on many of the poorest and most marginalised communities in Scotland, on public finances, and, consequently, on the taxpayer.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges.

In preparing this response, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities has consulted with members of synagogue management committees of all denominations throughout Scotland, as well as with representative communal bodies.

¹ DTZ Pidea Consulting, February 2005 for the Northwest Regional Development Agency
<http://www.faithnorthwest.org.uk/resources/142208/economicimpactassessment2005.pdf>

² Scotland's Volunteering Landscape: The Nature of Volunteering, June 2006
[http://www.vds.org.uk/Portals/0/Resource/1553/The%20Nature%20of%20Volunteering%20\(RFSNo9\).pdf](http://www.vds.org.uk/Portals/0/Resource/1553/The%20Nature%20of%20Volunteering%20(RFSNo9).pdf)

³ Who volunteers? Volunteering trends: 2000-2007
<http://www.nfpsynergy.net/reportdownload.php?pdf=VolunteeringtrendsJan08.pdf>