

## **NEWS RELEASE**

Thursday October 8, 2009

### **Millions Owed in Unpaid Water Charges**

*Water watchdog calls for charging overhaul to help poorer Scottish families*

Scotland's water watchdog has branded the level of unpaid water charges as deeply worrying, suggesting too many people are being asked to pay water charges that they cannot afford.

Waterwatch Scotland (WWS) says the level of household water and sewerage charge debt went up by £6m over the last financial year, bringing the cumulative total owed for the years 1996 to 2008 to £288.5m.

WWS Chief Officer Gary Womersley says the numbers suggest something's badly wrong:

"Water charges have remained stable for some time and look to remain so, according to the Water Industry Commission for Scotland's plans, for the coming years. But the fact that so much is going unpaid must tell the regulator that too many people can't afford to pay them and need help."

WWS' comments are included in its response to the *Water Industry Commission for Scotland: The Strategic Review of Charges 2010-2014* which sets out the regulator's business plan for Scottish Water for the next four or five years.

Gary Womersley says it's not enough to set charges and expect every household to find them easy to pay.

"It needs to bear in mind that stable charges do not always mean affordable water charges. Waterwatch Scotland is concerned that there is still a lack of adequate support for low-income households who find it hard to pay their bills. The whole water industry in Scotland must make a greater effort to ensure the needs of all consumers are taken seriously or the level of unpaid debt will simply continue to ramp up."

The comment on household charging is one of a series of concerns raised by the watchdog which says it still sees room for improvement in tackling sewer flooding and complaint handling.

The organisation has meanwhile expressed concern at proposals to transfer some activities currently conducted by Scottish Water, such as trade effluent monitoring, to licensed providers which it believes would lead to deterioration in service levels.

WWS says that, while there are many areas of the long-term plans from the Commission that are to be welcomed, new approaches may introduce new risks for both household and business water customers which it looks forward to discussing with WICS in the coming months.

**-ENDS-**

### **Notes to Editors**

To seek an interview with Waterwatch Scotland, please contact John Macgill or Andrew Ritchie on 0131 556 0050 (including out of hours)

**Waterwatch Scotland (WWS)** is the national complaints handling authority for all domestic and non-domestic water customers and customer representative body for the water industry in Scotland.

WWS is independent of Scottish Water, government and other water/sewerage service providers. Its role is to:

- Investigate Complaints
- Represent Customers' Views & Interests
- Influence Policy
- Inform & Advise

WWS' responsibility for second-tier complaints handling means that WWS can take forward individual customer grievances against Scottish Water or other providers.

WWS can also make statutory recommendations to Scottish Ministers, Scottish Water and other service providers, and industry regulators: Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), Drinking Water Quality Regulator (DWQR) and the Water Industry Commission for Scotland (WICS).

From time to time, WWS receives complaints which are of such importance or have a public-interest impact beyond the specific complaint itself, that WWS will issue a formal report on the complaint and greater issues raised.

*In addition to the making of such formal reports and the findings and recommendations made, a key role of WWS is to continue to work to ensure that such recommendations are adopted in the interest of customers to mitigate and prevent future occurrences.*

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