

Dear,

I am writing to you as a member of The Scout Association to express my concern about proposals to charge community groups for surface water drainage.

At present, community groups and sports halls are not charged for disposal of the surface water that runs into sewers from their buildings. In 2003 the Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT) decided that this exemption should end and has given the water companies until 2010 to start charging all users for the disposal of water from their properties through public sewers.

These charges have already been levied by some water companies, and have an enormous impact on the running of Scout Groups. These new charges of up to £800-1000 can represent up to 33% of the annual budget for a Scout Group. To take just one example, 1st Weston and Weston Point Scout Group in Cheshire are now being charged £564 per annum by United Utilities, which, when added to their metered water charges, accounts for around one third of their total annual budget.

These additional costs will force Scout Groups to restrict the activities they can offer to young people, whether that means spending less weekends camping and taking part in outdoor projects, or having to limit the number that can attend canoeing sessions, for example. Furthermore, some Scout Groups may have to limit the support they provide to parents with the cost of uniform or subsidised activities. These charges will also affect local sports clubs and community buildings; Penrith RUFC has seen its annual water costs rise from almost £700 to over £4000 per annum, and St Luke's Church, North Thornaby will see costs soar from £70 to well over £600.

Scout Groups already undertake a great deal of fundraising in order to provide a fun and adventurous programme for young people to participate in and learn from. Groups will undoubtedly struggle to increase fundraising to meet these additional costs, especially with the current financial situation. We have explored with our Groups measures that could help to mitigate these costs, including digging a soakaway or installing a rainwater recycling system. However, these systems often have a high initial cost, and Scout Groups simply do not have the capital to be able to fund such a one-off payment.

We understand from DEFRA that they are currently reviewing this matter and the guidance given to OFWAT. Furthermore, the water companies themselves have indicated that they would be willing to continue to exempt charities and community groups from these charges if OFWAT revises its guidelines. We would therefore be grateful if you could raise this matter with Huw Irranca-Davies, the Minister for the Natural and Marine Environment, Wildlife and Rural Affairs within DEFRA, and urge her to overturn OFWAT's ruling which prevents water companies from offering an exemption to charities and community groups for their buildings. Should you require further information on this issue and the implications for Scouting please do contact our national Scout campaigns team via water@scout.org.uk or on 020 8433 7215.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our concerns and we hope we can count on your support to address this issue.

Kind regards