

News from the Northern Ireland Executive

April 2009



Financial Assistance for Water Main Requisitions to Existing Properties

On 18 March 2009, Minister for Regional Development Conor Murphy announced an increase in the allowance for householders requesting a water main extension to serve an existing property. 'Existing property' means a property built before 1 January 2000.

The increase from £6,500 to £10,000 per property follows an annual review of the level of financial assistance provided by the Department for Regional Development towards water main requisitions to serve properties built before 1 January 2000.

Gildernew Asks Farmers to Help Speed up the Single Farm Payment Process

On 11 March 2009, Minister Michelle Gildernew MP MLA, announced that farmers will receive their 2009 IACS/Single Application packs within the next few weeks. As a result of the recent Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check there are a number of changes to the Single Application this year. The main changes are highlighted in the IACS Guide contained in the information pack.

The Minister stressed the importance of completing the form correctly and returning these well before the closing date of 15 May 2009. She also reminded farmers of the availability of the on-line service and the advantages of completing applications on-line.

"From 2009, the Single Application includes Agri-environment Schemes. Those producers who hold agreements with a NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) or Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) starting on 1 January 2009, must claim their management payment by submitting a Single Application. This does not apply to those producers already in agri environment schemes or organic farming prior to 2009. To avoid penalties, applicants should clearly distinguish between leased land and land taken as conacre on their Field Data Sheets. Land taken as conacre is not eligible for NICMS and OFS".

Farmers must complete a 2009 IACS /Single Application form to apply for any of the following Schemes:-

- 2009 Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme
- 2009 Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS)
- 2009 Organic Farming Scheme (OFS)
- 2009 Aid for Energy Crops (ECS)
- 2009 Protein Crop Premium (PCP)
- 2010 Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances (LFACA) Scheme

Dodds Announces Review of Land and Property Services

On 10 March 2009, Finance Minister Nigel Dodds announced that he has commissioned a review of the government agency, Land & Property Services (LPS) which will assess the capacity of the agency to meet current and future challenges.

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Announcing the review, the minister said: "Land & Property Services undertakes a number of key roles, including the collection of rates from domestic and non-domestic properties across Northern Ireland. This means that the agency directly engages with all local households and businesses on an annual basis.

The objectives of the review are:-

- To examine the aims and objectives of the agency, and ensure they are aligned with the key targets, and broader legislative obligations on the agency;
- To ensure the appropriate organisational and management structures (and associated resourcing issues), and governance arrangements, necessary to facilitate achievement of the aims and objectives of the agency.
- To consider the staffing, organisational and technical capacity of the agency to address current and future challenges; and
- To identify recommendations arising from the above and devise an action plan and associated timetable to address the issues identified.

The review team has been asked to report back to the minister before the summer.

Land & Property Services was formed following the merger of the Valuation and Land Agency, the Rate Collection Agency, Ordnance Survey (NI) and Land Registers.

Gildernew Consults on Future Direction of LFA Support

Minister Michelle Gildernew MP MLA has announced a period of public consultation on future options for support arrangements for Less Favoured Areas (LFAs).

Currently, support is provided to farmers in the LFAs under the Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowances Scheme (LFACA) in recognition of the difficulties they face in farming and the role they play in maintaining the countryside and rural communities. The scheme, which is funded under the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, provides a budget of around £22million per annum for area based payments to approximately 13,500 recipients.

In announcing the consultation, the Minister said: "LFACA provides over £22million into the rural economy every year and we need to ensure that this money continues to meet a need and deliver value for money.

The full consultation document, an accompanying Easyread version and other relevant documents can be viewed at www.dardni.gov.uk/consultations.

The closing date for responses to the consultation 29 May 2009.

Minister Consults on Strategic Direction for Water and Sewerage Services

On 3 March 2009, Regional Development Minister launched a consultation on the future direction for Water and Sewerage services.

The Minister said: "I am consulting on the key investment priorities for Water and Sewerage services. This covers 2010 to 2013 and focuses on improving services to customers, promoting sustainability, making NI Water more efficient and meeting environmental obligations.

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"The draft Guidance I am issuing has been developed with statutory partners and benefited from extensive customer research carried out by the Consumer Council, telling us what customers want."

The draft Guidance has been published for a ten-week consultation period, ending on 8 May 2009.

Copies of the Consultation Document can be obtained, free of charge, by either contacting the Water Policy Division on 028 90542987 or downloaded from the water policy section of the Department for Regional Development's website, <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/>.

Dodds Confirms Freeze in Regional Rates for 2009/2010

On 3 March 2009, Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds confirmed the freeze in regional rates for domestic and non-domestic rate payers for 2009/2010.

From April 2009, the regional rate, expressed in terms of pence per pound will, for domestic properties, be 0.3608 pence and the non-domestic rate will be 29.89 pence (the same levels as applied for 2008/2009).

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 that fixes the figures for the regional rate is of a routine nature and simply implements the rate increases announced in the Budget.

The ratepayer in Northern Ireland has a combined rate bill consisting of regional and district rates. District rates are fixed by each district council to meet its net expenditure on such functions as leisure facilities, economic development and environmental matters. District rates vary from district council to district council reflecting the rateable resources and spending policies of individual councils.

The regional rate element is just over half of a typical rate bill. The regional and district rates are both collected by the Land & Property Services agency and the product of the district rates is paid over to each council.

Dodds Welcomes Assembly Support for Lower Rates Cap

On 2 March 2009, the assembly approved regulations to reduce the maximum capital value to £400,000 for rating purposes, from this April.

Following the debate, Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds, said: "I welcome the Assembly's decision to approve this measure today. It ensures that no one in Northern Ireland will pay more than the average council tax-payer in the highest band in England and so further moderates the effects of the rating system introduced under direct rule."

The Minister continued: "There is a limit to the benefit people derive from the use of regional and local services and to persevere with a local taxation system that can levy a bill equivalent to the absolute highest council tax bill in England is wrong. I am pleased that this measure has been passed in time to reduce relevant bills this year."

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