

# Reorganisation of water services in England and Wales\*)

## 1. Present Organisation

The existing water services in England and Wales are the responsibility of 3 types of body: Statutory Water Undertakers, Sewerage and Sewage Disposal Authorities, and River Authorities. There are just under 200 Statutory Water Undertakers which are under statutory obligations to provide supplies of piped water for domestic and non domestic consumers. The number of Sewerage and Sewage Disposal Authorities exceeds 1300, most of which are local authorities but in a few

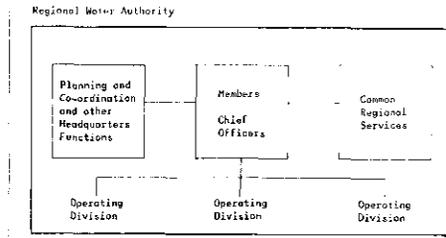


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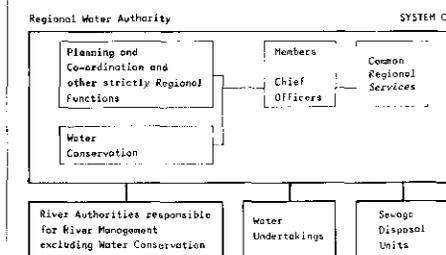
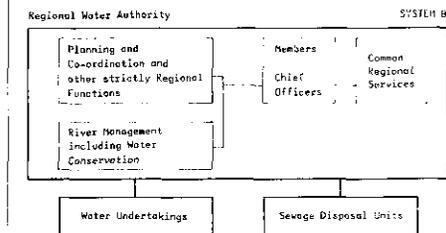
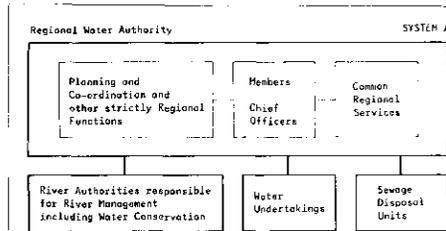
cases joint boards of local authorities. There are 29 River Authorities which are responsible for water conservation, land drainage, fisheries, the control of pollution and in some cases navigation. In addition to these 3 types of body there are a number of other public bodies which perform functions in relation to water. These include:

1. The Government Departments concerned with water i.e. The Department of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food.
2. The Water Resources Board, the Advisory Body established under the Water Resources Act 1963.
3. The British Waterways Board which owns most of the canals in Great Britain.
4. Internal Drainage Boards which are responsible for the drainage of certain low lying areas under the general supervision of the relevant River Authority.

Water research and development is at present the concern of a number of bodies. The Department of the Environment is concerned with research in relation to all aspects of water services and management, except land drainage and fisheries. The Department supports a major research and development programme both through its Directorate General Water Engineering (whose programme is currently running at



Multi-purpose authority.



Systems of organisation based on single-purpose authorities.

about £1M a year) and its research establishments: The Water Pollution Research Laboratory, the Hydraulics Research Station, the Building Research Establishment and the Transport & Road Research Laboratory, all of which are concerned with particular aspects. The other main bodies concerned with research relating to the water cycle or the use of water are the Water Resources Board (whose expenditure is borne on the Department's vote) and the Water Research Association which is grant aided by the Department. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food are responsible for ensuring that there is adequate research on land drainage and fisheries; the Natural Environment Research Council are involved at a number of points, and some research is also undertaken or commissioned by the Welsh Office, the Department of Health & Social Security and the Medical

Research Council. The total value of the research programmes for which all these bodies are responsible is over £5M a year. It will be apparent that there is need for effective co-ordination and control of the research programmes.

## 2. Weaknesses in the present water management system

The technological advance in recent years has brought into prominence the administrative problems involved in the more comprehensive management of water. The obstacles to success can be classified under 3 headings: Defects in the existing legislation; Inadequacy on the part of some of the various operating units; and Structural defects in the way in which water functions are organised and co-ordinated, leading to serious conflicts of interest.

A fundamental defect in the Water Resources Act 1963 was that the importance of the quality of water in rivers, streams and underground strata and its relationship to resource management were not fully appreciated. As a result, insufficient attention was given to the roles that the Water Resources Board and the River Authorities should play in taking positive action to improve the quality of effluents. The optimum size of a Water Authority is difficult to determine but it is undoubtedly true that very small operating units find it difficult to acquire staff of the right calibre and in the required numbers to cover their duties adequately. The number of River Authorities was arrived at as a result of a compromise prior to the 1963 Act. The number of Water Undertakings has been steadily reduced from about 1,000 in 1945 to the present figure of about 200 but it has been generally agreed for some time that the process of regrouping ought to continue in order to reduce the number to about 100 or less. The much larger number of Sewage Disposal Authorities (about 1300 operating units managing some 5,000 treatment works) represents excessive fragmentation and is generally accepted to be a major cause of weakness and consequent poor performance. The present division of responsibilities produces conflicts of interest between the various Authorities. These conflicts often have the advantage that the various bodies have to argue their cases cogently in order to secure agreement, but there is the serious disadvantage that it may not be possible to achieve the best overall solution. Indeed the conflicts may preclude any agreement being reached at all, so that the eventual solution has to be imposed from above, by Central Government. The way in which Central Government intervenes is

\*) Summary of a talk, given to the combined meeting of the Netherlands Waterworks Association (VEWIN) and the Netherlands Waterworks Engineers Association (VWN), 4 Jan. 1974, Utrecht.

either informally or through the use of a formal appeals procedure. The latter is a very necessary safeguard, especially for private abstractors and dischargers, but it should not be necessary for every dispute between public bodies to have to be referred to Central Government — a procedure which many Authorities regard as slow, cumbersome and frustrating.

### 3. The need for co-ordination and the alternatives considered

In recent years the growth of regional and national water planning has drawn attention to the need for the budgets of the river management, water supply and sewage disposal authorities to be properly co-ordinated and integrated. On account of their complex interrelationships and the wide variety of local circumstances, there is a strong case for the co-ordination being carried out on a regional basis such as a group of river basins.

The alternative organisations considered were those based on multipurpose authorities and on single purpose authorities. These are illustrated in the diagrams on page 24.

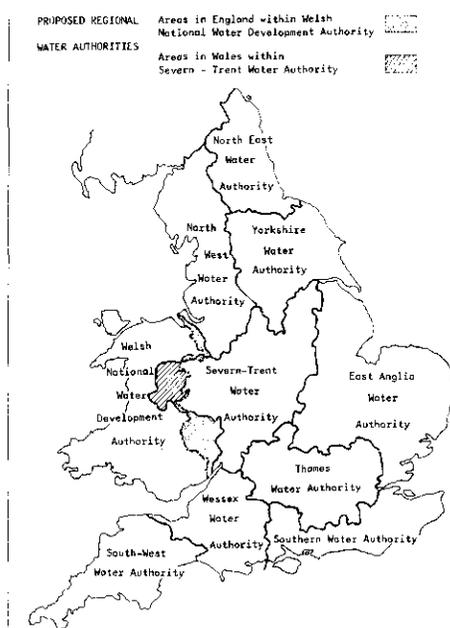
Multi-purpose bodies would be responsible for the 4 basic functions of water supply, sewage disposal, river management, and planning and co-ordination. Such a body would raise its revenue by making economic charges for its services with suitable safeguards to ensure public accountability.

A system based on single purpose authorities could be either:

- A. Creating Regional Water Authorities to carry out the planning and co-ordination function while retaining River Authorities, Water Undertakers and Sewage Disposal Authorities;
- B. enlarging the powers of the existing River Authorities to make them fully responsible for planning and co-ordination whilst retaining Water Undertakers and Sewage Disposal Authorities;
- C. retaining River Authorities, Water Undertakers and Sewage Disposal Authorities but transferring the water conservation and water quality functions of River Authorities to a new authority which would also be responsible for planning and co-ordination.

### 4. Water Act 1973

The Government's proposals for the reorganisation of water and sewage services were announced in a circular in December 1971 and arrangements were made for



Map of new Regional Water Authorities.

consultation. This consultation took the form of a series of papers which were distributed to all the Authorities concerned for comment by a specified date. The aim was to complete consultations by the late Spring of 1972 so as to leave adequate time for the drafting of legislation.

In order to minimise the upheaval caused by reorganisation, the Government stated that it wished to arrange for the proposed Regional Water Authorities to be in a position to take up their duties at the same time as the new Local Authorities which were the subject of separate legislation. A Water Bill was presented to Parliament in January 1973 'to make provision for a national policy for water, for the conferring and discharge of functions as to water (including sewerage and sewage disposal, fisheries and land drainage) and as to recreation and amenity in connection with water, for the making of charges by Water Authorities and other Statutory Water Undertakers, and for connected purposes'.

The Water Act, which received the Royal Assent on 18 July 1973, represents a radical restructuring of the management of water services in England and Wales. The Act sets up 9 Regional Water Authorities in England and a Welsh National Development Authority to be responsible for water and sewerage functions currently carried out by more than 1,500 Authorities. (A map showing the new Regional Water Authorities is printed above.)

The 10 new Authorities will be multi-

purpose, their activities regionally based on river basins or groups of basins.

They will be responsible for water resources and supply; sewerage and sewage disposal; the prevention of pollution; land drainage and flood protection; fisheries; and the recreation and amenity use of their water space, and in some cases, for navigation. Between them they will employ some 75,000 staff, their annual revenue will be about £350M and their investment budget about £300M a year.

At the national level there will be a National Water Council consisting of the Chairmen of the 10 Water Authorities and a Chairman and other members appointed by Ministers. The Council will be the main source of advice to the Government on national water policy. It will provide the Regional Water Authorities with a forum for the discussion of common problems, for forming a united view on matters of common interest, for the development and dissemination of uniform policy and practices and for the provision of common services.

The Act places a statutory duty on Water Authorities to make the best use of water space under their control for recreation and amenity. A Water Space Amenity Commission has been set up to advise the Secretary of State, the National Water Council and the Water Authorities on the exercise of these functions.

Each Water Authority is obliged to make arrangements for the carrying out of research into matters affecting the Authority's functions and, in order to ensure effective co-ordination of research work, a new Water Research Centre is to be formed from the existing Water Research Association, Water Pollution Research Laboratory and the relevant sections of the Water Resources Board. The remaining staff of the Board are to be divided between a Central Planning Unit and a Data Unit within the Department of the Environment.

The arrangements under the Water Act will come into effect from 1 April 1974, the date on which the new Local Authorities come into existence under the Local Government Act 1973.

