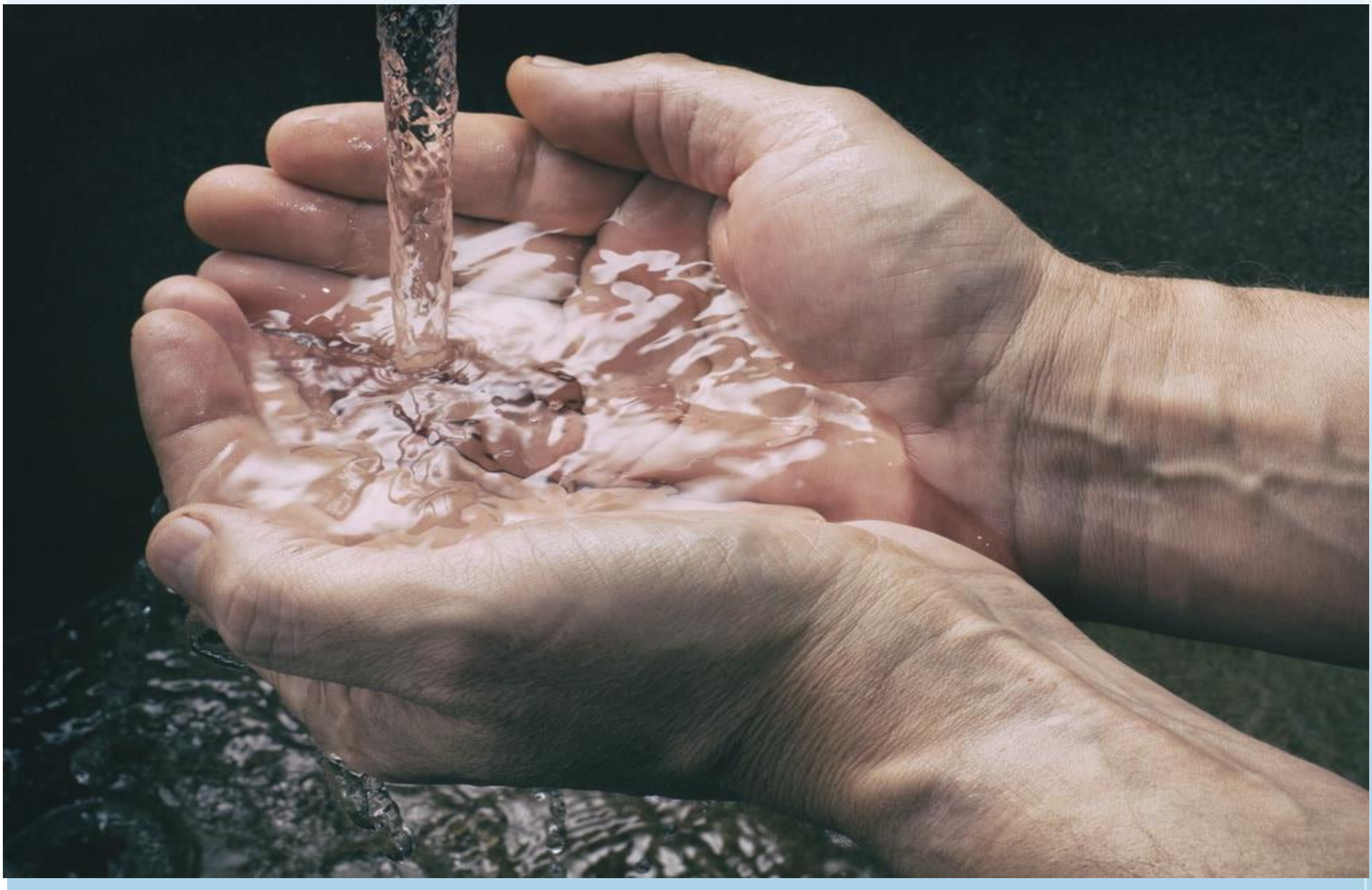
Consumer Expectations & Priorities

Report



blue marble

On behalf of CCWater

April 2019

Contents

1. Foreword

This research report, produced by Blue Marble and commissioned by the Consumer Council for Water (CCWater), reflects the views of water consumers in England and Wales who took part in qualitative research. The research found out two things: firstly, what consumers think their water watchdog should be doing for them; and secondly what needs and expectations they have of a consumer body; something which can be applied across the sectors.

To ensure we heard from all key consumer groups, our researchers spoke to a broad cross-section of household consumers; consumers in vulnerable circumstances (non-financial); business customers and younger consumers who were not yet paying a water bill – to ensure we heard the 'future customer' voice.

The feedback from this research has provided very useful food for thought. We need to reflect on this to make sure we deliver for consumers on the issues that they think should be our priorities, in addition to our statutory duties, and on the areas where our data tells us that consumers experience problems. While there are no big surprises in terms of what consumers expect us to do, we do need to think about whether we are focusing sufficient resource on the key areas they've highlighted. What was perhaps surprising, given the recent media interest, was that consumers didn't highlight re-nationalisation, water company profits or Chief Executive salaries as key areas for consideration.

We also need to focus on the language we use, when reviewing our strategic priorities, as consumers were unimpressed by our use of words like 'challenge', 'press' and 'shaping'. They wanted stronger, more authoritative words. The water industry has previously complained that these words were too strong, so we have an interesting job ahead to make sure we meet consumers' expectations on this!

Another really useful outcome of this work is that it identified what people need from a consumer organisation. We believe we live up to consumers' expectations on this, but we'll use this feedback to appraise ourselves and make sure we continue to deliver what consumers need from us. These 'consumer needs' and wishes apply across other sectors too, and we've already started to share this with other consumer organisations. You'll find a helpful graphic that we are using to share these findings at 6.3 of the report.

I hope you'll find the report as interesting as I did. It isn't only about CCWater; it also provides great insight into consumers' thoughts on consumer bodies in general and on the water sector; something which all stakeholders in the water sector should reflect on as they think about the future.

Philip Marshall
Deputy Chief Executive Consumer Council for Water
May 2019

2. Executive Summary

2.1. Context

Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) is the independent 'water watchdog', championing the interests of water consumers in England and Wales. Established in 2005, CCWater is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), and a statutory body. Its aim is to secure the best outcomes for all water consumers, present and future. It provides consumers with advice and information on water matters and investigates complaints where water customers have tried and failed to resolve issues directly with their water companies and retailers.

This research set out to investigate two distinct areas:

- Objective 1: to establish what issues people want to see CCWater prioritise in its Business Plan
- Objective 2: to identify what people need and want from a consumer body – and specifically a consumer body relating to water and sewerage services.

The first objective replicates research conducted in 2012 and before that in 2005 when CCWater was launched. When considering the second objective, research participants drew on their personal experiences of dealing with an issue with an organisation in any sphere of their lives.

Importantly, this recent research also sought to understand two issues that were topical for the industry: whether either or both the open retail market for non-household customers[1] and the political debate or heightened awareness about company profits and CEO salaries had changed views on the priorities of CCWater. Specifically, in relation to the latter, it sought to understand whether CCWater should take a position on industry profits on consumers' behalf.

The sample comprised six extended (three hour) workshops with 20 household consumers representing bill payers, non-bill payers and future customers. These events were supplemented with 15 in-depth interviews with a cross section of non-household organisations (micro, SME and large); and 14 paired depth interviews conducted in the homes of people in a variety of vulnerable circumstances (economic, physical and mental health and in a time of crisis or 'transient' vulnerability).

OBJECTIVE 1 – CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR WATER PRIORITIES

2.2. Consumer Council for Water's priorities – the consumer context

As is well documented in other research, consumers generally know very little about the water sector. Widespread experience of reasonable bills and a trouble-free service – and a lack of choice of provider - underpins the lack of engagement. Very few consumers ever consider how the water market is regulated; and in a sample of c.140 respondents there were no spontaneous mentions of company profits or the question of renationalisation of the sector.

[1] In 2017, the non-household water market was opened up to competition allowing all eligible customers in England to choose their water retailer. https://www.open-water.org.uk/

Water industry reputation was explored through various research exercises designed to allow perceptions to emerge spontaneously and therefore establish any areas where respondents lack confidence in their water and sewerage services. We learned:

- Water companies and what they do remains largely unfamiliar to their customers
- A lack of direct experience or beliefs about a water company's reputation leads to generic and uninformed assumptions likely to be driven by negative perceptions of large corporations generally
- There is very little that is controversial in the idea that water companies make profits – provided it is fair and proportionate to prices, and not at the expense of investment in the infrastructure. Profits were not spontaneously raised as an issue by anyone in this research.

Non-household customers tend to be more engaged with their bills and the cost of water than households, however their appreciation of the open market was limited. Over half of organisations based in England were completely unaware that they were free to choose their water retailer – and some of these were unhappy with their current service and therefore missing out on the opportunity to switch or renegotiate. Very few of those who were aware had taken any action: they had heard on the grapevine rather than via an official source; or there had been no real trigger (e.g. dissatisfaction, or unacceptably high bills) to investigate options.

2.3. Identifying the priorities for Consumer Council for Water

Respondents were informed about the water industry via a short presentation. The following areas emerged as priorities for CCWater from the discussions that followed which also included prompt cards headlining various activities:

Bills and affordability: very important across all parts of the sample. For non-household customers it reflects their need to monitor costs and drive efficiency. They also raise the importance of bill accuracy and cost analysis. Vulnerable consumers particularly want clearer bills and are frustrated when they cannot understand what they are paying. All customers want to know bills are fair (especially when they were informed that different regions pay different amounts for their water - something they were not previously aware of).

Metering: often a polarising subject, consumers want to understand who stands to lose or gain from metered water – and what are the wider benefits. Those who are economically vulnerable are particularly fearful that metered bills will cause (more) financial stress and need reassurance or practical strategies to mitigate bill increases. Unmetered customers want to understand all the implications before opting for a meter.

Sustainability: issues including improving water efficiency; enabling water recycling; educating people about better water behaviour; and reducing pollution in the environment are frequently raised spontaneously by consumers. Non-household customers agree and are often pursuing more sustainable behaviours within their own organisations and sectors both for environmental and cost benefits.

Future planning: linked to sustainability, consumers prioritise meeting the demand for future populations in the uncertain context of climate change. This might include promoting new technological advances to meet future needs; or managing existing environmental problems such as flooding. The younger customers and future customers in the sample are consistent in their views on the importance of future-proofing – but this issue is also raised across the age and socio-demographic spectrum.

Reliability and infrastructure maintenance: for household consumers, this was expressed as reducing leaks and mending pipes; for many non-household customers, the need for security of supply reflects the critical nature of water in operational processes.

Informing: non-household customers in England want to know about the open market and any services that protect organisations from rogue retailers or other unexpected costs. Similarly, vulnerable customers, all of whom were unaware of social tariffs – and mostly unaware of Priority Service Registers – want these assistance services to be better promoted.

Meeting the needs of vulnerable people: when prompted, consumers (household and non-household) endorse this as a priority area especially as water is a basic human need.

Complaint handling: less top of mind, reflecting good service and very low incidents of disputes, complaint handling increases in importance as a priority issue when prompted. This is an area performed by CCWater which further increases its importance.

Water quality: often taken for granted (and therefore mentioned less frequently until prompted) water quality is seen as very important and therefore a priority area for CCWater

Monitor company performance: important but not front of mind for most, reflecting widespread acceptance of the water sector. However, when prompted, this is seen as a priority area for a consumer body to ensure companies are operating efficiently and consumer issues – such as the availability of social tariffs – are being upheld.

2.4. How have priorities changed since 2012?

Many of the themes reported in 2012[2] remain pertinent today. Consumer engagement in the water sector remains low despite some media scrutiny during and since the 2016 General Election campaign and the opening of the non-household retail market in England in 2017. Consumers continue to prioritise areas that are most relevant to them or where they have a touchpoint: the bills and affordability; maintaining infrastructure to reduce service problems and leaks (although leaks do appear to be becoming less prevalent in consumers' minds); and ways to be more water efficient. Also reflecting priorities raised in 2012, consumers argue strongly that to be effective in its role, CCWater requires a higher profile with the general public.

There are two areas where consumer views have shifted and this is reflected in their priorities for CCWater.

- There is a greater emphasis on prioritising the needs of vulnerable consumers and ensuring support is provided. Contextualised by a decade of squeezed living costs, the austerity agenda and most tangibly, the rise in food banks; this is a theme seen across the household, non-household and Vulnerable sample groups. Considering the interests of individuals who are disabled or chronically sick; of pensionable age; with low incomes and residing in rural areas are particularly highlighted as one of CCWater's responsibilities and they have a good

[2] *'Expectations of the Consumer Council for Water'*: SPA Future Thinking - 2012

footprint in this area, but respondents didn't recognise their work in the way the strategic priorities are currently drafted.

- Prioritising issues pertaining to sustainability, future planning and the health of the environment are voiced more loudly in 2019. In comparing the data, it is clear that there is less scepticism about environmental threats today than seven years ago and the fast-moving reduction of single-use plastics in people's daily lives provides an example of how behaviours can change. Some anticipate water will become a 'hot' environmental project.

One final issue appears to be less urgent for consumers in 2019: leakage. Leaks are still mentioned frequently but with less certainty about whether water companies do have high leakage levels. Perhaps the reduction of visible leaks across the industry – and improved response times – is changing perceptions, certainly with younger age groups for whom leaks are not a strong industry association.

2.5. Recommendations for refreshing Consumer Council for Water's existing priorities

Research stimulus was used to show respondents CCWater's current priority areas, using the text found in its Forward Work Programme[3] (which is written with stakeholders in mind rather than a general public audience).

While CCWater's four current strategic priorities[4] are generally supported, they do not serve to inspire consumers that CCWater is representing their views. This is in part because there are important gaps that should be reflected more overtly in a refreshed set of priorities: namely relating to the themes of future sustainability and a stronger environmental remit. It is also apparent that customer service and water quality – priorities that feature in two of the four statements – are largely expected and could be termed 'hygiene' factors.

The process of sharing CCWater's current priorities with participants also revealed the importance of articulating a renewed set – or indeed any priorities - in the consumers' voice. Currently, the language within the statements plays down the role and status of CCWater. Consumers want, for example, its authority and expertise to come to the fore whereas the language of 'pressing the industry' and 'shaping the sector' suggest a lack of power.

There is an opportunity when refreshing the priorities to:

- Create a sense of how CCWater represents water consumers customers within the language and framing, reflecting some of the eight 'needs' developed in this research (see below)
- Be more specific about what lies within each priority highlighting the consumer angle where there is ambiguity between the roles of other regulatory bodies
- Develop a public-facing expression of the priorities – in the consumers' voice – so that those who do encounter CCWater are clearer about its role.

[3] https://www.ccwater.org.uk/aboutus/publications/fwp/
[4] CCWater's current priorities are listed in Section 2: Introduction and project objectives

OBJECTIVE 2 – CONSUMER NEEDS FOR REPRESENTATION

2.6. Experience of consumer representative bodies

Most people have experienced some kind of dispute or intractable problem with an organisation, with frequent examples relating to telecoms, financial services and utilities sectors. The issues typically relate to poor service (such as broadband problems); billing or contract disputes; and feeling (or being) mis-sold e.g. a tariff that turns out to be more – not less – expensive.

The experience of trying to get redress directly from an organisation is often fraught and respondents describe:

- Feeling unjustly treated and/or taken advantage of
- Feeling confused by the jargon or the process imposed by the organisation
- Feeling powerless in the face of the corporate machine
- Feeling vulnerable or threatened – particularly where any financial loss will be felt acutely
- Feeling ignored or not believed
- Feeling frustrated by impersonal, slow or convoluted response.

Some are prompted to seek third-party help to overcome the problem, but many do not. Sometimes this is because they feel able to handle the problem themselves – or that the problem does not warrant third-party support. However, for most who have not sought help this is because they are unaware that help is available. It was noticeable that respondents in the vulnerable sample were less likely to have sought or received help; and conversely that a greater proportion of non-household customers had done so.

Generally, the experience of those who have used an Ombudsman or other third-party is very positive and their involvement had been pivotal in reaching a solution or settlement.

Those driven to seek help turn to organisations such as Citizens Advice, Trading Standards, the Ombudsman of e.g. the financial services or energy sectors. Alternatively, individuals such as an expert in the area in question, or a solicitor – or even their MP are consulted. Some also turn to social media in a bid to be taken seriously in the dispute. Finding these organisations is often haphazard and specifically in relation to Ombudsmen organisations, users are generally unable to recall the name or other detail about their function and remit. Non-household consumers belonging to industry bodies usually turn to these first – often in relation to employee disputes – as well as seeking legal support and contacting Ombudsmen.

Overall, the research indicates that those benefiting from the support of third-party bodies are often people with higher levels of knowledge, skills and confidence (often developed through their working lives).

2.7. What do people want and need from a consumer representative body?

Eight needs emerge through discussions about experiences of being in a dispute and for some, of using third-party representative bodies. The needs can be summarised as:

Impartiality: a body that is independent, that will provide an honest, unbiased opinion on where fault lies (even when this is with the consumer)

Expertise: a body that knows the relevant field/industry and can assess the situation, determine the legal position and give next steps

Representation: a body that can even the playing field between the consumer (who can feel like the minnow in the relationship) and organisation (often seen as the corporate giant). Acting on the consumers' behalf or empowering the consumer to act for themselves. Also acting as a voice for all consumers

Authority: a body with the power to act and enforce; and/or with the 'clout' to make an organisation play fairly

Support: a body that will be non-judgemental and take consumers seriously; listen with empathy; reliable in sticking with the consumer until a conclusion is reached

Advice: a body that can explain the situation and give options, guidance and tools to help consumers

Investigation: a body that is focused on the evidence; acting swiftly to find out what has happened

Accessibility: a body that is freely available; easy to access via multiple channels which reflect how people typically like to engage

The research tested these generic needs against water-related scenarios to ensure CCWater can use this as a framework to act in consumers' best interests in the water sector.

- The full set of needs can be applied to situations where CCWater is acting to assist in dispute-resolution: indeed, the needs were developed through discussions which largely focused on the complaints of individuals with large organisations.
- Holding water companies to account in relation to poor performance affecting many customers (using as an example the mixed experiences during 2018's Beast from the East) places emphasis on particular needs: *investigating* why performance varied; having the *expertise* to understand the issue fully; *representing* all consumers to set industry standards; to have the *authority* to penalise companies who do not improve.
- The issue of metering was used as an example of where industry policy could both disadvantage and benefit consumers. In representing all consumers, respondents highlight needs including: *investigate* how mandatory metering will affect customers; be the *expert* on the policy implications; *represent* the views of those potentially disadvantaged; give *advice* on mitigating the impact of a meter through water saving; remain *impartial* and independent from water companies; have *authority* so that campaigning for consumers creates change.

2.8. Consumer Council for Water's profile

This report also touches on the issue of public awareness of CCWater as this was a consistent and dominant theme throughout the research. None in the sample had heard of CCWater, which is promoted in places they perceive to be increasingly invisible in an online age (on the back of bills and the Yellow Pages). The name itself is hard to recall, as was observed in the research, with respondents struggling to refer to it accurately (or at all). Internet searches of commonly asked water industry questions lead to Citizens Advice and not CCWater – and some non-household customers who visited www.ccwater.org.uk concluded that its main role was a comparison site.

In conclusion, consumers believe CCWater will achieve more on their behalf if it has the name and clout of e.g. Trading Standards, and the profile of e.g. Citizens Advice so that it can be more accessible to people when they need help.

3. Introduction and project objectives

The Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) represents the interests of household and non-household consumers in the water industry in England and Wales and came into operation on 1 October 2005. It operates through four committees in England and a committee for Wales.

CCWater's aim is to provide a strong voice for the consumers it represents in England and Wales. It wants consumers to get (and be able to recognise that they are getting) high standards and good value for money in water and sewerage services, comparing well with the best of other service sectors, now and in the future.

CCWater's Forward Work Programme focuses on the issues that matter to consumers within water and sewerage services. When CCWater was first established, two consumer research projects were carried out (in 2004 and 2005) to identify their priorities for water and sewerage services and what they thought the then new consumer council should do on their behalf. This research was updated in 2012 to determine if CCWater's policies and strategies were still in line with these expectations. It asked for consumers' spontaneous views as to what CCWater's priorities should be before informing them as to what they were (at that time). It found that whilst the economic situation and concerns about sustainability had changed since 2004-5, CCWater's existing priorities were largely endorsed, but there was a wish for a focus on informing consumers. There was no concerted demand for additional focus on financial issues beyond what was already being done. While some wanted sustainability issues to be part of CCWater's focus or even its main focus, many were sceptical as to whether it should seek to play a major role in this area.

Its four key strategic priorities, at the time of the research were as follows:

- Advocate for affordable charges that all current and future customers see as fair and value for money
- Challenge companies to provide their service right first time, protect household and business consumers when things go wrong and provide an easy to access service for all
- Press companies for safe, reliable water and waste water services that all consumers can trust now, and in the long term
- Shape the water sector by informing and engaging all consumers so that consumers' voices are acted upon by decision makers and the industry.

Research was commissioned in January 2019 with a view to updating CCWater's strategic priorities based on up to date consumer evidence. It was designed to meet the following objectives:

- Objective 1: to establish what issues people want to see CCWater prioritise in its Business Plan

- Objective 2: to identify what people need and want from a consumer body – and specifically a consumer body relating to water and sewerage services.
- Additional elements: Find out how the following affect views on needs, priorities and any other aspects of their needs for representation:
    - the opening of the retail water market for non-household customers in England, and for non-household customers using more than 50,000m³ of water a year in Wales
    - perceptions and views on water company profits, dividends and CEO salaries

4. Methodology and respondent profile

Blue Marble Research adopted a qualitative approach to the research. This comprised six extended three-hour workshop events with 110 household respondents in total. These were supplemented by 14 paired depth interviews where the lead respondent had indicated that they were in vulnerable circumstances, and an additional 15 telephone interviews with a range of non-household customers.

Research was conducted in each of the 5 CCWater regions, with specific locations chosen to include the following features:

- An area that is water stressed
- An area that has had a major weather event, affecting services
- An area that has had a recent major service failure
- An area with highest quartile water bills
- Both rural and urban areas.

Overview of fieldwork

<table>
<tr><th>LOCATION</th><th>Water region & features</th><th>Household Sample</th><th>Non- household Sample</th></tr>
<tr><td>Pilot –
MANCHESTER</td><td>United Utilities
Publicity to warn of potential hosepipe ban</td><td>Pilot workshop</td><td rowspan="6">15 skype/tel depths nationally spread</td></tr>
<tr><td>CAMBRIDGE</td><td>Anglian/Cambridge
Water stressed</td><td>HH Workshop
3 x Vulnerable in-home depths</td></tr>
<tr><td>CRAWLEY</td><td>Thames/ Southern border
Compulsory metering
Water stressed</td><td>HH Workshop
3 x Vulnerable in-home depths</td></tr>
<tr><td>Wales
SWANSEA</td><td>Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
Coastal
Higher than average bills</td><td>HH Workshop
2 x Vulnerable in-home depths</td></tr>
<tr><td>BIRMINGHAM</td><td>Severn Trent Water
Urban</td><td>HH Workshop
3 x Vulnerable in-home depths</td></tr>
<tr><td>EXETER</td><td>South West Water
Higher than average bills
Rural
Coastal
Recent severe weather</td><td>HH Workshop
3 x Vulnerable in-home depths</td></tr>
</table>

Household sample

The workshops were designed to provide broad representation of household customers, consumers and future customers:

- Full range of ages, genders and socio-demographic groups
- A mix of metered customers in line with current metering level in each region
- Inclusion of two in every ten respondents who had made contact with their water company in the last 12 months
- Inclusion of 30 future customers and non-bill payers (i.e. consumers, not customers) across the sample

The following outlines the detailed sampling approach for the 5 workshop events. Each workshop comprised 14 bill payers and 6 non-bill payers (future customers and consumers). Quotas were set for socio-demographic grade to be broadly proportionate to the profile for England and Wales. At recruitment, the research topic (i.e. water and waste services) was not revealed in order to achieve spontaneous views later on about what matters to people in terms of how they are represented. Therefore, the recruitment questionnaire hid the water-related quotas, such as ownership of a meter, within more general questions about utilities and household arrangements. The full sample screener can be found in the appendix.

Sample quotas were set for each workshop, as follows.

<table>
<tr><th>Customers
(all joint/solely responsible for paying water bills)
14 per group</th><th>Consumers
(none responsible for water bill payment)
6 per group</th></tr>
<tr><td>4 x AB[5]
7 x C1C2
3 x DE</td><td>2 x AB
2 x C1C2
2 x DE</td></tr>
<tr><td>4 x < 35yrs
5 x 36-55yrs
5 x > 56yrs</td><td>3 x < 30yrs future bill payers3 x >30yrs</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">20 participants per workshop</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">• Minimum of 4 customers per workshop to have had direct experience of /contact with their water company within the last 12 months
• Gender: even split per group
• Metered: to reflect meter penetration at each location
• 2 per group to be digitally excluded/no internet at home
• Minimum of 5 per group to have equity investments to allow potential for wide thinking around industry and profits
• Spread of environmental views (using Blue Marble's 'green' scale denoting both attitudes and effort to environmental issues)
• Future bill payers: under 30 years, never been a customer of water company (water bill paid by parent or landlord)</td></tr>
</table>

[5] Socio-economic grade is a classification system based on occupation. Classification AB signify higher managerial and professional people, C1 and C2 relate to supervisory, junior managerial and skilled manual workers, codes D and E relate to the semi-skilled, unskilled and unemployed/on state benefits. Please see www.mrs.org.uk/resources/social-grade for more information

Vulnerable Sample

The sample of people in vulnerable circumstances was designed to reflect:

- Economic and non-economic vulnerability: people face different issues depending on whether their circumstances are largely about financial hardship, or more about other circumstances including physical and mental health, communication challenges and/or household context (being isolated in some way).
- Primary vulnerability or combination of factors: vulnerability is often the result of several things colliding – but not always. In our recruitment approach, we included people whose vulnerability was the result of a single (primary) factor e.g. a severe health issue; frailty, low mobility or in crisis. We also include people with a combination of two or three factors.

A greater proportion of the sample was made up of non-financial vulnerabilities for two reasons: a high proportion of people with non-financial vulnerabilities are also on lower incomes and/or reliant on benefits – so issues relating to financial vulnerability are also present in this sample. Additionally, the 'mainstream' consumer sample workshop events included low income respondents (socio-economic group DE).

The following sets out the vulnerable sample structure:

<table>
<tr><th>Economic vulnerability – bill payers</th><th>Non-economic vulnerability – customers & consumers</th></tr>
<tr><td>6 in-home paired depths (with family member or friend) 1 hour</td><td>8 in-home paired depths (with family, friend or carer) 1 hour</td></tr>
<tr><td>• Low income/unemployed (household income under £15k)
• In receipt of means tested benefits
• May include other (non-financial) vulnerability factors</td><td>Primary factors – in need of additional care:
• Life limiting mental or physical health condition; Limited/no mobility; Frail/very elderly; Crisis (transient)
Combination factors which alone do not necessarily make someone vulnerable but which in combination can do
• Sight/hearing loss; Mental illness/anxiety; Digital exclusion/no internet at home; Literacy/numeracy/learning difficulties; Addiction; Carer; Over 80; Live alone; Live in rural/remote area (with poor transport links)</td></tr>
<tr><td>• 3 x < 40yrs; 3 x >40yrs
• Mixed gender
• 2-3 on social tariff</td><td>• 3 x primary vulnerability factors
• 6 x combination of vulnerability factors
• Mixed gender
• 2-3 to be on PSR
• 2 under 40 years</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">14 in-home interviews</td></tr>
</table>

To illuminate the types of vulnerability that are included in this research, included here is a selection of brief pen portraits of respondents:

The person	*Vulnerability*	*Support*
Female, in her 20s	*Cerebral Palsy, mobility scooter & wheelchair user, cognitive issues, lives alone*	*Not working, on benefits* *Dad helps with bills etc.* *Not on social tariff*[6]*, on Priority Services Register (PSR)*
Female, single mum, 2 primary age children	*Crohn's Disease; consequently, high water user*	*Latterly unable to work; benefits, not on social tariff*
Male, 50s, lives alone, social housing	*Psoriasis; mental health; unable to work*	*Isolated; just avoided homelessness; benefits, not on social tariffs or PSR*
Male, married, 70s	*Parkinson's, low mobility*	*Well supported by wife and son; Not on PSR*
Male, single, late 30s	*Transient: redundant in November; death of brother in October; lost both parents at 16*	-
Female, 80s, lives alone	*Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis – but an optimist 'I'm lucky…'*	*Pension Credit, not on social tariff*
Female, elderly, widow	*Osteoarthritis, lymphoedema, registered disabled, PIP*	*PIP benefit; state pension, daughter comes in daily. On PSR, not on social tariff*

Non-household sample

The following grid sets out the non-household sample structure. The sample put emphasis on businesses who say their water supply is critical: either vital for their processes and/or because they have staff and offices that could not function without water for any time at all.

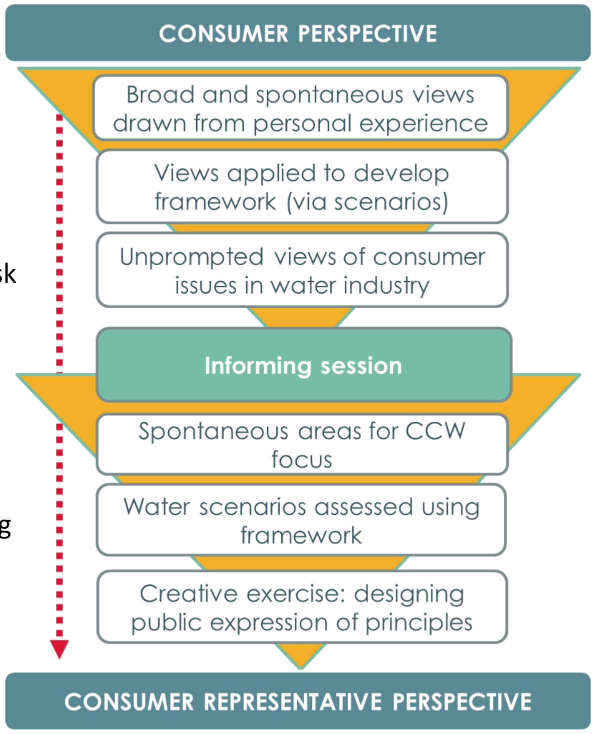
The sample was broadly representative of different business types in terms of size and sector. Ofwat's 'state of the market' report revealed that around 10% of non-household customers had engaged in the open market, either by switching, renegotiating, or considering switching at the time of this research[7]. Hence quotas for a minimum of 4 organisations were included that fall into this description of 'engaged' to ensure that discussions could take place about the role and priorities of CCWater with organisations who were aware of the open water market.

[6] Researchers observed that none of the low-income respondents in the Vulnerable sample was on (or aware they were on) a social tariff.
[7] https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/State-of-the-market-report-2017-18-FINAL.pdf

Micro (1-9 employees)	SME (9-250 employees)	Large (Over 250 employees)
• 4 x water critical to business • 3 x water as per domestic use • Range of water spend from £500 - £5,000 pa	• 4 x water critical • Range of water spend from £2000 - £25,000 pa	• 3 x water critical • Water spend £25,000+ pa
7	4	3
To include: manufacturing; wholesale & retail; public sector; hospitality & leisure; business services		
15 x 45-minute Skype interviews		

Content design

The adjacent diagram is an overview of the approach to engagement with the main customer/consumer sample. The design allowed respondents to consider both the idea of consumer representation and how this is best done generally - and the consumer issues that are most important to them concerning water.



Discussions involved initial exercises that were firmly rooted in the consumers' world. This included a pre-task exercise designed to generate lots of anecdotes that relate to circumstances where some form of representation was needed or experienced. These real-life examples were used as a reference point throughout the group.

A set of pre-agreed scenarios were developed reflecting different needs for representation e.g. an example of miss-selling; a contested fine/penalty; a personal difficulty etc. This stimulus was used to provide a benchmark across the different locations.

The conversation then narrowed towards the water industry with 'unmoderated' discussions to achieve a spontaneous view of the industry.

Reflecting the level and type of information used in the 2012 research, respondents were informed about the industry and specifically CCWater's role within it. A set of water-related scenarios were used to generate the values and behaviours needs from an organisation like CCWater.

An important consideration was the need to keep the research focused on spontaneous and personal views rather than hothousing the political debates about the water sector that had been in play in the media. The design accommodated this in the following ways:

- Respondents were not aware that the research was about water industry matters to ensure a clear read on whether this issue was raised spontaneously
- Initial conversations about the water sector were run as unmoderated group exercises using a projective exercise to unpack the different perceptions of the industry – and to see how much prominence was given to the issue of company ownership and profits
- Water industry related scenarios were used to anchor the conversation on a broad set of topics and as a means to move away from political avenues if the conversation were to become heated
- A probe about the role of CCWater in relation to monitoring company profits was only included at the final stages of the groups to avoid framing respondent views.

Interpreting qualitative data

Qualitative research is used when research objectives call for an exploratory and in-depth investigation of the complexities of attitudes and behaviour. Qualitative research results in a great deal of rich and detailed data about a relatively small number of individuals, which is in turn used to generate insights around customer needs and the policies and actions that can be designed to meet them.

Respondents in this study were selected to represent a cross section of customers and consumers – including future customers. However, due to the limited sample sizes used in qualitative research, the study does not purport to represent the overall population in a statistically representative way. The ultimate theory and recommendations are borne out of rigorous and robust analysis and interpretation of the qualitative evidence, making reference to the weight and strength of opinion observed across the sample where relevant, but without quantifying these.

5. Main findings: Objective 1 – Consumer Council for Water Priorities

4.1 The consumer context – direct experience

Lack of consumer engagement with the water sector was evident in the research. Most customers were able to name their water company but could not recall having any contact with them beyond receiving and paying their bill. The vast majority had never experienced any issues with their provider and were content with the level of service received, and most of those who had cause to contact them were satisfied with how the situation had been resolved. Bills were generally seen as reasonable, particularly compared with those from other utilities – although the issue of metering did provoke a split in opinions (explored later). Bill shock was mentioned only in the context of leaking pipes on metered properties.

Most household consumers were aware that it was not possible to change provider, although understandably this was new information for some future customers. This lack of power over choice of company appeared to result in a sense of resignation amongst customers, particularly when combined with their experience of adequate service and reasonable bills. Those customers who were not aware that it was not possible to switch had never contemplated looking into doing so – a clear indication of satisfaction (or neutrality).

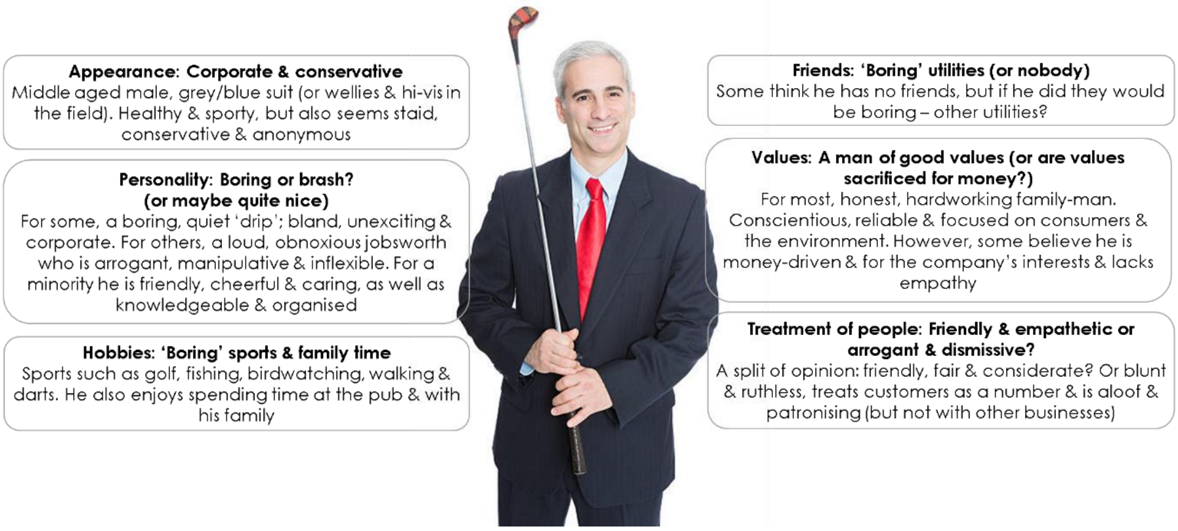
Household customers in vulnerable circumstances were equally disengaged, for similar reasons. Those who relied on others (for example family, carers, housing association) to manage their life admin were more disengaged, given their reduced (or total lack of) contact with their provider.

This lack of engagement was reflected in responses to a projective exercise to reveal conscious and subconscious attitudes towards water companies. Household respondents were asked to imagine that their water or sewerage company had come to life and to describe what type of person they would be. They were given written prompts to help them consider a range of aspects, but the task was otherwise unmoderated to enable them to record their spontaneous perceptions.

In the absence of any direct experience with their water company, the pen portraits drawn by consumers were largely shaped by generic assumptions and dominated by two themes; bland but fair and effective (symbolic of their current neutral experience), or exaggeratedly ruthless and unpleasant (reflecting stereotypical perceptions of large corporations):

- Most responses featured a stereotypical middle-aged businessman with a boring personality carrying out boring hobbies with boring friends (who were other utilities). Despite the dull exterior, this person was seen as having good values and generally treating people well.
- A significant minority instead saw a loud, brash 'fat cat' whose primary interest was money and who was ruthless in his pursuit of it. He was seen as manipulative, arrogant and duplicitous, treating customers poorly but adapting his behaviour to appeal to other businesses.

Personification of 'a water company'



Non-household customers were also relatively disengaged with the water sector for similar reasons, although some relayed more interest in their bills and the cost of water than households due to the impact this could have on their livelihoods. Perhaps unsurprisingly, awareness of and engagement with the open market was low amongst the non-household sample:

- Five customers were unaware of the open market, but were satisfied with their current service and had no reason to explore the possibility of switching. These tended to be smaller organisations.

"I've never had an issue with Yorkshire Water so never thought about switching…I'm not sure you can switch; we've always been with them. Plus, we just don't have time to look into it, the day-to-day takes over."
Non-household

- Three customers were unhappy with their current water service but were unaware that they were free to choose their retailer, and were therefore missing out on the opportunity to switch or renegotiate. For example, one large multi-site company had experienced mixed service and inconsistent billing and would prefer to try a different provider. Another felt powerless to protest against a new 'dispersal' charge on their bill.

- Four customers were fully aware of the open market and a further three had some awareness but were vague about the full details, having heard about it 'on the grapevine'. Very few of these companies had taken any action; one company was trying to switch but was finding the lack of consistency in quotes problematic; another was with Water Plus, but had no recollection of ever switching. One company had switched to Flow2, which they thought was another water provider, but which turned out to be a 'middle man' and led to an increase in bills (please see case study in section 4.4). The other companies did not feel the need to investigate other options.

"No, not aware of the open market. I had heard it might be happening but didn't realise it was in force."
Non-household

4.2 The consumer context – understanding of and attitudes towards the sector

Beyond their direct experience with water companies, consumers had limited awareness of how the water sector works and how it is regulated. A minority had heard of Ofwat, but were unclear what it did, and there was universal lack of awareness of CCWater and its role.

Respondents were asked to consider a number of fictional quotes relating to the political landscape around water.

- *"It's unfair we can't choose our water / sewerage company"*
  This was by far the most relevant issue for consumers, with many questioning why they could not switch water provider when it was a possibility for other utilities. Having the option to switch appeared to be a matter of *principle* rather than something that was actually *desired* and would be acted on – some of those who talked about wanting the option were those who were unaware that it was not possible and had never looked into doing so. Some perceived that it resulted in uncompetitive pricing and less effective service,

but most acknowledged that their direct experience was of acceptable pricing and customer service and were therefore untroubled by not being able to switch.

- *"Since water companies were privatised, standards have improved"*
  Reactions to this statement were muted. It was agreed that standards are good now, but that privatisation was a long time ago, making comparison difficult. It is telling that in a sample of c.140 consumers, renationalisation was mentioned only three times and did not inspire any meaningful level of debate.

"I don't know, how would we know that. All I know is that standards are good now."
Household, Cambridge

- *"Water companies make a profit from a natural resource that falls from the sky"*
  This statement was largely dismissed, with the vast majority of respondents appreciating that water must go through a process to make it safe to drink and to transport it to and from customers.

"It doesn't just fall from the sky!"
Household, Exeter

- *"Water companies provide a good reliable service; I don't mind that they make a profit"*
  It was generally accepted that companies should make profit, and indeed, it was seen as a good thing by many, creating a positive attitude for employees which would lead to good service for customers. Non-household customers in particular appreciated that businesses should expect to make money for providing a service. Many mentioned that profits must be 'fair' and in proportion to prices, with a certain amount reinvested into infrastructure and other initiatives – although none could verbalise what this would look like in practice. Again, in a sample of c.140 respondents there were no spontaneous mentions of company profits.

"I don't mind that they make a profit, they've got running costs and don't have millions in the bank stored offshore – although if they did, I'd have a problem. I think they should be monitoring water company profits because if they start making too much of a profit where is it coming from and what have they cut in order to make that profit?"
Household, Crawley

"So long as I'm happy with my water and they're doing what they say I don't care if they make profit."
Household, Manchester

"At the end of the day it is a business."
Household, Exeter

"I'm a business woman, everyone needs to make profit. But I've never thought about water companies making a profit."
Non-household

- *"Shareholders and CEOs of water companies earn too much money"*
  There were no direct mentions of this issue prior to it being explored, but the visualisation exercise did suggest that some customers held a generic view that all CEOs were fat cats. Once explored, most of these respondents admitted that they did not know how much water company CEOs earned and that they assumed it was the case given things they had read in the press about other sectors, such as energy and finance. A minority were negative about the foreign ownership of some companies.

"I don't know if they make too much money or if they don't – I think it's just a generalisation taken from the energy sector."
Household, Cambridge

"As they are privatised there will always be a tension between serving the needs of the shareholders and returning a profit – and serving the needs of the customers. The watchdog can act as a go between to make sure that the balance is right. It's so easy for a company to make profit at the expense of customer service"
Household, Exeter

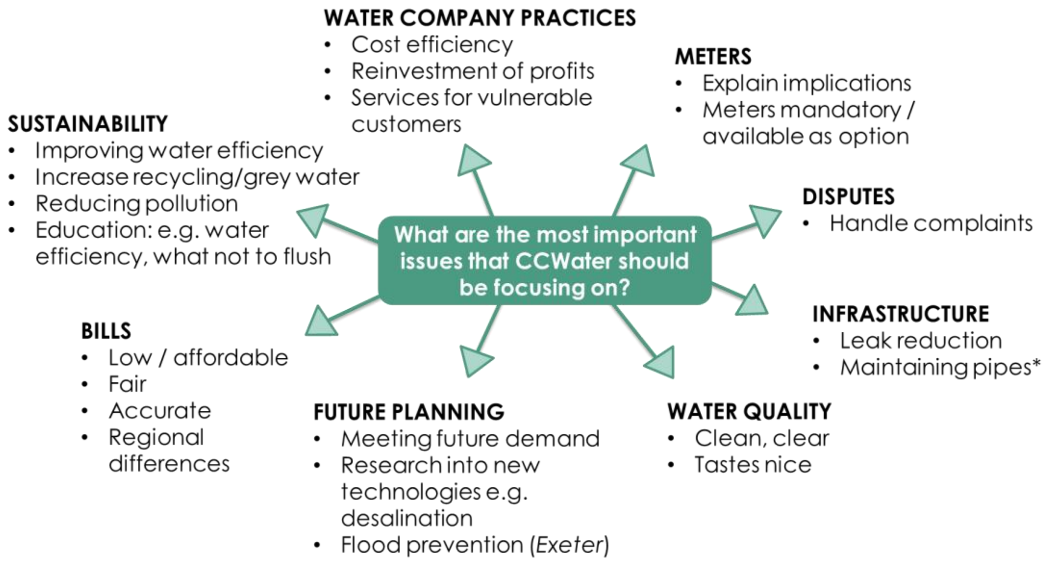
4.3 Spontaneous priorities for Consumer Council for Water

It was anticipated that customers would have a limited understanding of the water industry. For this reason, they were given a 10-minute presentation which provided an overview of the process to get water to and from consumers, the structure of the water sector in terms of regional monopolies, a summary of the different bodies which monitor and regulate the industry and some statistics around the cost of water in different parts of the UK. It closed with an introduction to CCWater and its role in the water sector.

It was explained that as a representative of water consumers, it was essential for CCWater to focus its efforts and limited budget on the issues, themes, areas, topics and problems which are most important to customers. Respondents were then asked to consider what they thought CCWater should be doing for water consumers, what specific issues it should be focusing on and what they should be campaigning for on behalf of water consumers.

There were a number of spontaneous suggestions for areas that CCWater should be focusing on which were reflected across the household sample:

Overview of spontaneous priorities for CCWater



- **Billing** was the most prevalent theme across all parts of the sample. Customers felt that a consumer body should focus on keeping water costs affordable (which consumers generally expressed as bills as low as possible, but whilst maintaining the expected level of service), with companies making a 'fair' amount of profit. The concept of fairness was also prompted by the presentation, which highlighted regional differences in water costs. Although consumers would not generally be exposed to this kind of information, it did uncover a desire in some to have more information should the issue become known about more widely.

"They should review water charges constantly. They act on our behalf to make sure we are not charged extortionate amounts. Review how much [water companies] *are spending and charging."*
Household, Swansea

- **Metering** was an issue that divided opinion. Some wanted to have a meter because they perceived that they were currently paying more than they would if it was based on their low usage. Others anticipated that their bills would go up as a result of having a meter (and some had experienced this in practice). A few wanted all properties to have a meter because they perceived that it would make for fairer bills, with people paying for how much they had used, and would also encourage water-saving behaviours. The general expectation from CCWater was to campaign for meters to be *optional* in all areas, and to provide consumers with more information; the financial implications (either positive or negative) and the wider benefits in terms of water usage and environmental impact.

- **Sustainability** issues were frequently raised by customers. Education to promote good water behaviours was the most prevalent desire amongst consumers, particularly that which focused on informing children, with many respondents recognising that they had adapted their own actions as a result of being informed by their own offspring. Also discussed was a desire for CCWater to campaign for water companies to increase water recycling and reduce pollution in the environment – although there was some confusion over whether this was the role of Defra, the Environment Agency or Natural England instead. Sustainability was a key area of interest for non-household customers, with many pursuing more sustainable behaviours within their own organisations and sectors both for environmental and cost benefits.

“Be forward thinking by educating people and preventing problems.”
Household, Swansea

- **Future planning** was a topic closely linked to sustainability. For many consumers, ensuring that water supply meets demand in the long-term was a critical issue in the uncertain context of climate change. Some considered it far more important to ensure water provision for future populations than focus on ‘selfish’ short-term issues such as bills and customer disputes. Although younger customers were more consistent in their views about meeting future demand, they were not alone in desiring it, and not alone in raising it as an issue. The topic gained momentum during discussion, particularly amongst parents (or grandparents) contemplating their children’s futures. Other ideas around planning for the future included promoting new technological advances to meet needs; or managing existing environmental problems such as flooding (although again, people were not clear whose responsibility this would be.)

- Again, linked to sustainability and future planning was a desire for CCWater to press for improvements to the water **infrastructure**, reducing leaks and mending pipes – although there was low understanding of the current condition of the infrastructure and what improvements were required.

“We are lucky in this country. I’ve got nothing to say on the pipe situation.”
Household, Swansea

- **Water quality** was seen as critically important, but given the easily accessible supply of clean, safe and good-tasting water in the UK, it was taken for granted and therefore not front of mind. There was again some confusion over whether ensuring water quality would be the responsibility of DWI rather than CCWater.

- **Monitoring water company practices** was regarded as relatively important, but given low knowledge and understanding of the sector it was not front of mind for most. Many respondents were keen that companies operate efficiently, perceiving that it would result in cheaper bills (or at least prevent bill increases). Linked to the theme of fairness, a minority also mentioned pressing for reinvestment of profit, although this was not front of mind for the vast majority, in an exercise which focused on *consumer* issues. Again, respondents were not clear whether Ofwat would monitor company practices rather than CCWater.

“Make sure companies are cost efficient.”
Household, Swansea

- Similarly, **complaint handling** was not a front-of-mind issue for most, reflecting good service and very low incidents of disputes. Only a few consumers mentioned it spontaneously, and understandably, it was of greater importance for those who had experienced an issue in other sectors.

The below diagram reflects how important each of the above issues was deemed by respondents and how prevalent the issue was within the household sample:

Relative importance and prevalence of spontaneous priorities

Vulnerable sample: additional priorities

Customers in vulnerable circumstances expressed a desire for CCWater to focus on some additional areas which reflected an increased prevalence of day to day challenges revolving around affordability, comprehension and a requirement for additional support.

- **Promotion of vulnerable services**, for example of social tariffs and the Priority Services Register was understandably of key interest to these customers, with most unaware of the services that they may be entitled to.
- **Clearer bills** would alleviate the frustration caused for some when they cannot understand what they are paying or if the amounts are correct.
- Heightened needs were expressed around those issues which may impact vulnerable customers financially, specifically **keeping bills low** and understanding the **implications of metering**, where they were seeking reassurance and practical strategies to mitigate against bill increases.
- **Complaint handling**, specifically assisting and representing customers who are less able to do so themselves, also emerged as important for some.

Non-household sample: additional priorities

Non-household customers also suggested some areas which they saw as priorities for CCWater.

- **Affordable bills** were of heightened importance for non-household customers, driven by the potential impact on their livelihoods. They also raised the importance of **bill accuracy** and the need for **clarity** and better breakdown of figures, reflecting their need to monitor costs and drive efficiency.

"Keep costs as low and possible, it's all about money and saving in business."
Non-household

- Ensuring **infrastructure maintenance** was of heightened importance for many non-household customers because it was equated with security of supply and prevention of water stoppages, reflecting the critical nature of water in operational processes.

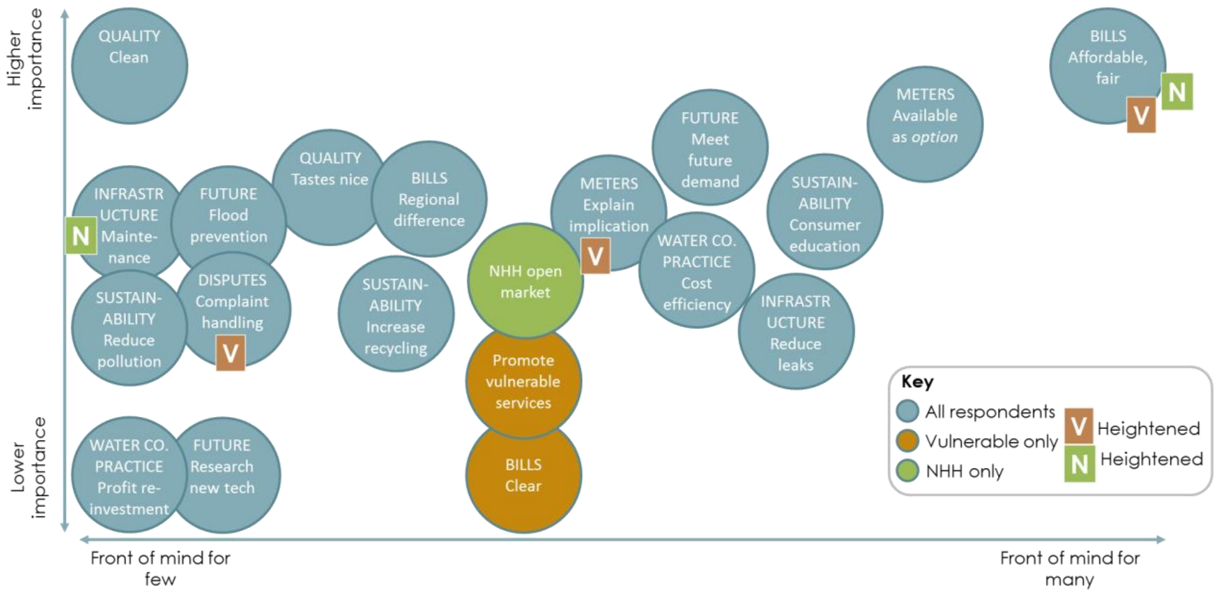
"Maintenance of old pipe works – water companies should proactively identify old parts of the network that require work before problems occur."
Non-household

- **Providing information about the open market** was raised by many as a key role of the consumer watchdog, and in particular protecting organisations from rogue retailers or other unexpected costs associated with switching.

"Both CCWater and water companies should be getting the word out there to tell businesses that they can change to get the most competitive rate for water."
Non-household

The diagram below includes those priorities which were mentioned by vulnerable and non-household customers, as well as highlighting which priorities were of increased importance for these groups:

Additional spontaneous priorities of vulnerable and non-household customers



4.1 Prompted reaction to Consumer Council for Water priorities

Having captured respondents' spontaneous suggestions, groups were shown a number of cards which featured a range of activities that CCWater could focus on. They were asked to consider which CCWater, as the water watchdog, should prioritise.

- **Campaign & lobby on issues that matter most to customers**
  Customers felt that this was of high importance because it was an overarching statement which encompassed all of the issues discussed. However, it was felt to be too vague to serve as a standalone priority: respondents wanted the specific issues to be articulated.

"Campaigning and lobbying go above all of these, it's an umbrella for everything."
Household, Cambridge

- **Handle complaints / disputes between water companies & customers**
  Although not front of mind and considered of medium importance when allowed to arise spontaneously, this activity became a higher priority when prompted. Customers mentioned that this appeared to be the core purpose of CCWater, as described in the introductory presentation, and perhaps prompted by the focus on consumer issues in exercises earlier in the research session. Upon reflection, this priority appeared relevant to CCWater because it pertained to *consumer* issues and although the majority of respondents had not experienced a dispute with their water company, they appreciated the need to have a body to assist them should one arise. As sole provider of this support, this activity was therefore felt to be of high importance for CCWater.

"This is CCWater's main priority, they are the only ones that handle complaints"
Household, Exeter

- **Environmental issues e.g. scrutinise impact water companies have on environment**
  As seen in the spontaneous exercise, environmental issues were of high importance across the sample, perhaps driven by increased consciousness of environmental issues. Crucially, customers wanted CCWater to express the c*onsumer* angle in this priority, with increased specificity of what issues they would focus on.

"They need to look after consumers now and in the future."
Household, Crawley

- **Campaign for affordable bills & monitor cost of customer bills**
  As a relatable issue for all respondents, ensuring affordable bills was understandably of high importance, particularly in a sector where regional monopolies govern a vital commodity. Tempering these feelings was acknowledgement that bills were felt to be reasonable at present and perhaps other issues should take precedence. There was also some confusion over whether this would instead be the role of Ofwat.

- **Meet needs of vulnerable customers e.g. disabled**
  This issue was not spontaneously raised by household customers, although it was understandably important to vulnerable customers. During the discussion, most agreed that because water is a basic need it was important to take steps to protect the most vulnerable. A few questioned whether it was acceptable to prioritise a few people over the majority, and whether it was a role that should instead be adopted by the government. While respondents did not overtly say that prioritising the needs of vulnerable consumers was of increasing importance, this research was contextualised by a decade of squeezed living costs, the austerity agenda and most tangibly, the rise in food banks all of which saw the needs of vulnerable consumers as a relevant theme across the household, non-household and Vulnerable sample. There are two further observations about why the needs of vulnerable customers were of greater importance in 2019:
    - Respondents in 2019 were researched in mixed socio-economic groups (rather than in groups comprising only their own social strata) which had the effect of consumers considering the needs of others as well as their own
    - Some issues that were not top of mind were nevertheless of high importance once raised. As well as meeting the needs of vulnerable customers, providing high quality water was the other example

"It should play a key role in ensuring bills are fair and those who are vulnerable should get reduced rates."
Household, Manchester

- **Ensure provision of safe / reliable water**
  As seen in the spontaneous exercise, safe, reliable and good-tasting water is taken for granted in the UK, but is seen to be of critical importance. However, some questioned whether ensuring this should be the role of a consumer body, and suggested that it may be better suited to the activities of DWI (who had been mentioned as part of the informing session). The importance of safeguarding supply in the future was raised by a few, but this issue was predominantly discussed in the context of the environmental priority.

"Water is top of the safety issues; that safety has to come first, and no one should be without water."
Household, Birmingham

"I'd rather have to pay a few more pence than sacrifice the cleanliness."
Vulnerable, Crawley

"It speaks volumes that no one has ever heard of them [CCWater] and that's because we don't have any issues with our water."
Household, Exeter

- **Ensure water companies are providing good customer service**
  This activity was deemed important, particularly in a monopolised industry, but it was seen as a hygiene factor, particularly as few service issues had been experienced across the sample. There was a sense that respondents rated customer service highly because it was a

topic that was easy to relate to, rather than because they had any strong feelings about it. In addition, some respondents again raised the fact that customer service was a temporal concern that felt less important than longer term issues such as ensuring water supply in the long term.

"Because it's a monopoly CCW is more important – as customers can't go elsewhere then their customer service might not be as good so more important for the watchdog to protect customer rights."
Household, Birmingham

"I don't care about the service they provide; I think it's ample."
Household, Crawley

"Customer service is important – but then my mindset is also customer-focused, I don't have any experience in the other priorities, customer service is more relatable to my life."
Vulnerable, Swansea

- **Campaign for reduction in leaks**
  As seen in the spontaneous exercise, this topic was felt to be important from an environmental point of view and for the perceived impact on consumer bills. However, customer understanding of this area was low. People did not know whether there was an issue with leaks currently, or what would be required to fix it if there was – or how much it would cost to do so. Some were therefore concerned that prioritising this issue would lead to unquantifiable bill increases. There was some confusion over whether this would be the role of CCWater or perhaps the Environment Agency.

- **Monitor how water companies are performing**
  This was felt to be important if activities were *consumer* focused, but the statement itself was felt to be too vague to relay what these may be and respondents considered that anything relevant was covered by other statements. Respondents also suggested that some activities may be carried out by Ofwat.

"It would be nice to know how your water company in your area is performing and they could publish that information."
Household, Manchester

- **Inform / educate consumers about wide range of water issues**
  The statement itself was considered vague. Respondents remarked that they did not desire information about water unless it was relevant to their lives and interests. One area in which respondents wanted increased education (for themselves and others) was in how to limit environmental impact, which for many equated to future-proofing the water supply and reducing pollution or blockages, for example from wet wipes.

- **Make sure metering meets needs of customers**
  As seen in the spontaneous exercise, this topic was strongly polarising, with some consumers perceiving that meters would enable accurate and fair bills and encourage water efficiency,

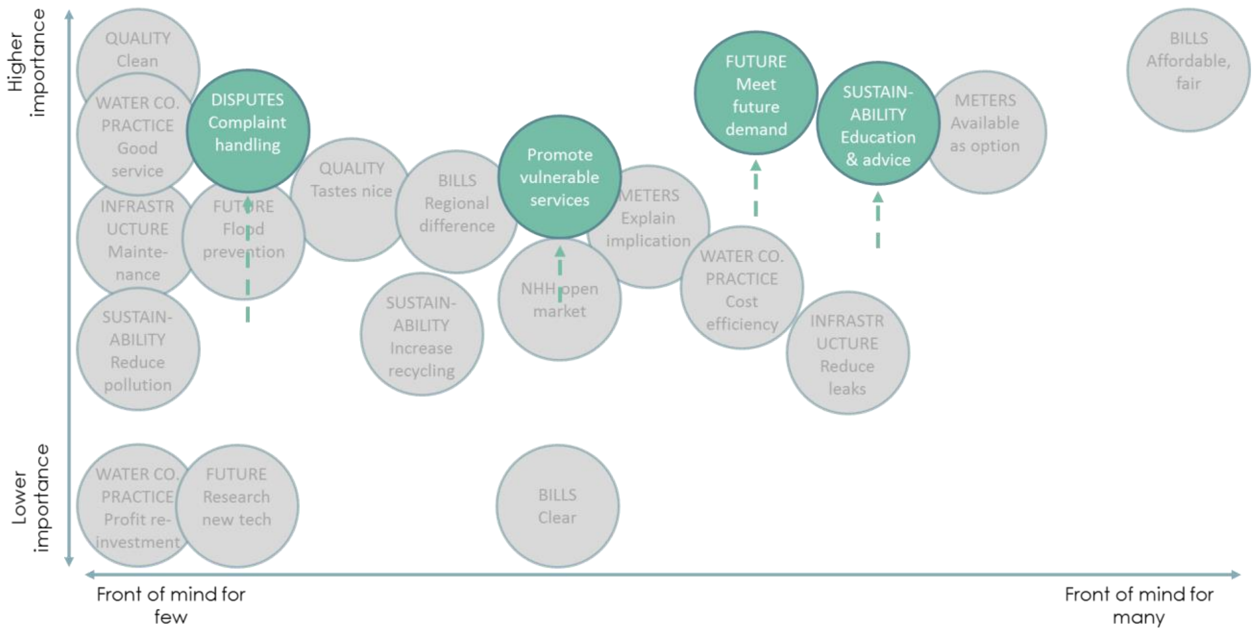
but others were resistant to something they felt would lead to higher and unpredictable bills. In the absence of consensus over whether they were pro or anti meters, respondents felt that CCWater should focus on educating consumers about the implications of meters, how to mitigate bill increases with water efficiency, representing the full spectrum of views to decision-makers and above all, ensuring that meters are optional rather than compulsory.

"Inform consumers about meters, especially where people can save money – such as small households."
Household, Swansea

"A lot of people living in older houses don't know about metering, they should be given the opportunity to have one. CCWater should give people more information about metering."
Household, Exeter

The diagram below includes the new priority around water companies providing good service, which was only mentioned after prompting. It also reflects the increased importance of some priorities after prompting:

Relative importance and prevalence of priorities after prompting



4.2 Reaction to Consumer Council for Water's existing priorities

Having captured respondents' spontaneous suggestions for CCWater priorities and further explored them with a number of prompts, customers were then asked to consider CCWater's existing priorities and determine whether they are still relevant or should be amended.

- **Advocate for affordable charges that all current and future customers see as fair and value for money**

  This priority was well-understood and accepted, and chimed with those desires expressed in the previous exercise, but it was felt that bill clarity and accuracy could be emphasised. In particular respondents appreciated the reference to value for money i.e. what they get for the price (including the level of investment in maintaining and future proofing the infrastructure). 'Advocate' was seen as a 'soft' action and made respondents question the level of power held by CCWater to effect change.

- **Challenge companies to provide their service right first time, protect household and business consumers when things go wrong and provide an easy to access service for all**

  Although customers agreed that 'protecting consumers' by providing a support service in the event of a dispute should be a priority, many questioned whether there was a need to 'challenge' companies given few had experienced issues with service. The word 'challenge' also seemed 'soft'. Every group pointed out that CCWater are not providing an 'easy to access service' due to their low visibility, with not one respondent having heard of them previously (please see Section 4.3 for further information.)

"I work in accounts and I handle bills all day every day and I'm telling you; I've never heard of them."
Household, Crawley

- **Press companies for safe, reliable water and waste water services that all consumers can trust now, and in the long term**

  Respondents appeared to understand the word 'reliable' to mean 'safe', rather than relating it to security of supply. When probed, consumers agreed that this should be a priority but that the articulation should be adjusted to emphasise future-proofing – 'in the long term' was felt to be too vague. In terms of the language used, 'press' was seen as 'soft'.

- **Shape the water sector by informing and engaging all consumers so that consumers' voices are acted upon by decision makers and the industry**

  This priority was considered to be too vague and to cover too broad a topic. Respondents wanted to clarity on what issues were being prioritised. There was widespread rejection of 'engaging all consumers', with low visibility and awareness perceived as inhibiting CCWater's role in shaping the industry. In terms of the language used, 'shape' was seen as too 'soft' an expression to convey its authority in the industry.

"How can they do this if nobody knows they exist?! How are they engaging and informing us at the moment? Yellow Pages? Ridiculous!"
Household, Crawley

Overall, customers felt that the existing priorities had the potential to cover the majority of the issues they wanted them to, but that the articulation needed to be amended to be more specific. One area in particular that they felt was not being sufficiently addressed was future sustainability of the water supply and a focus on environmental issues to avoid water becoming the 'next plastic'.

"To bring them [priorities] up to date they should have something about the environment – or is this Environment Agency or Natural England?"
Household, Birmingham

4.3 The importance of awareness

As previously explained, there was no awareness of CCWater throughout the household and non-household sample – not one person had heard of it prior to the research. Customers did not recognise its logo and could not recall seeing it on bills – even those who worked with utility bills on a day to day basis. It was felt that CCWater's current awareness channels were ineffective because consumers often do not read their bills in detail, and Yellow Pages was considered obsolete. If respondents required advice in dealing with a water company many anticipated they would 'Google' their query to find it. When Blue Marble Research typed some relevant water queries into Google, however, CCWater appeared below the more familiar Citizen's Advice in the listings – and sometimes not on the first page.

Throughout the research, consumers had difficulty recalling or repeating the name, even when prompted, and it is telling that the one customer who had actually contacted CCWater still did not recall hearing their name, referring instead to 'the water Ombudsman.' It appeared that respondents misunderstood the name itself, questioning whether CCWater was a council, a water company or a comparison website.

This lack of profile was considered a major issue by respondents across the sample. They perceived that it undermined the ***credibility*** of CCWater as a consumer protector because they considered that if they were doing a good job then they would have heard of them. For some it also suggested a lack of transparency in a service funded by bill payers.

"Because we're all paying for them, they have a responsibility to advertise that they exist."
Household, Birmingham

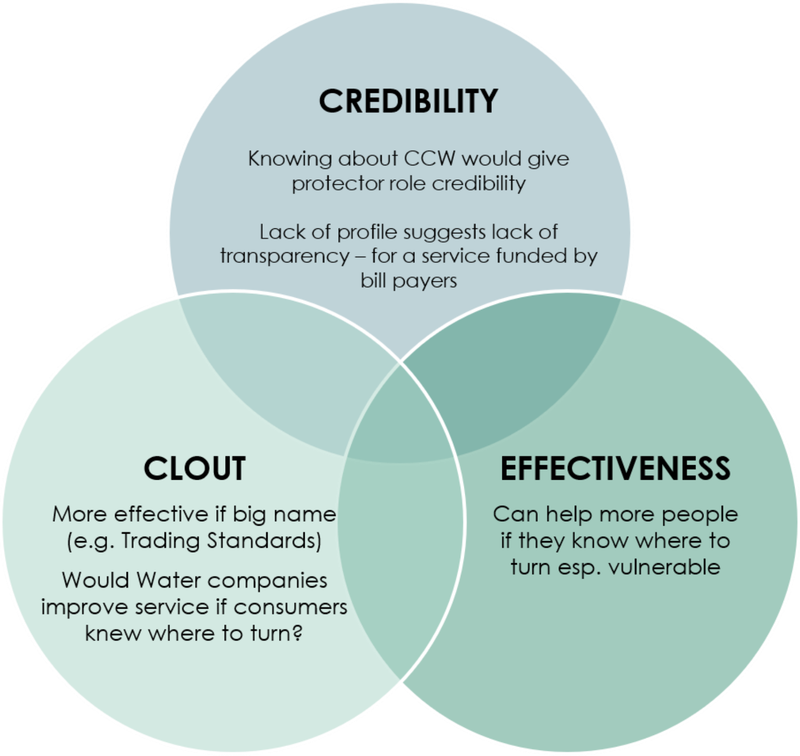
"If they're doing all this great work then why haven't we heard of them?"
Household Swansea

Respondents also perceived that CCWater could be more ***effective*** in its role if consumers knew where to turn for help and advice – this was especially pertinent to vulnerable customers.

"Push more advertising – definitely more advertising, the more people that know the better, otherwise people don't know where to turn and the companies don't get challenged."
Vulnerable, Swansea

Finally, customers considered that a big name, such as Trading Standards, would have more ***'clout'***, commanding greater levels of respect from water companies. Respondents perceived that the companies would therefore be more likely to treat customers well, for fear of reprisal if they did not.

Consumer views of the benefits of CCWater having a higher profile



5 Main findings: Objective 2 – Consumer needs for representation

5.1 Experiences of contacting a consumer body

In order to explore the generic needs of consumers when contacting a consumer body, respondents were asked to give examples of when they had experienced an issue with a service provider and had sought help from a third-party organisation in order to resolve it. Generally, the experiences of those using an Ombudsman or other third-party were very positive and their involvement had been pivotal in reaching a solution or settlement:

- A man complained to Virgin Media that his internet hadn't been working for over a month. When Virgin refused to solve the problem, he contacted Ofcom, who pressured Virgin to abide by repair timescale regulations. They then fixed the issue within a week.

- A woman received a high bill but SSE didn't believe it was incorrect – she was challenged, found liable & sent threatening letters. She went to the (Energy) Ombudsman, who listened to her case & contacted SSE. The issue was resolved promptly with no payment due from the customer.

"The company was clearly frightened of the Ombudsman as they responded the next day & all was sorted out."
Household, Cambridge

- A woman bought a sofa from John Lewis. It deteriorated significantly within a couple of months but the store didn't acknowledge the issue. She went to Trading Standards, who led her through a simple & straightforward process for escalating the complaint.

- A man believed he was entitled to compensation over mis-sold PPI, but Lloyds would not engage with him. He contacted Resolver, who explained his consumer rights & used his information to construct a letter for him to send. Lloyds agreed to pay him compensation.

"Resolver was an independent party who could help build my case – I felt I wouldn't get anywhere with Lloyds; I feel like you have to push the right buttons to get anywhere."
Household, Crawley

Household customers

Most household respondents had experienced some kind of service issue, and experiences spanned a wide range of industries. Citizen's Advice was by far the most consulted third-party, followed by consumer rights websites and forums, and also Trading Standards.

Overview of consumer issues leading to consultation of a third-party

Industry	Issues	Third-parties consulted
Telecoms	• Poor connection • Contract/billing issues • Misleading sales	• **Citizens' Advice (most consulted)** • **Consumer rights websites/forums** • **Trading Standards** • Ombudsman (finance, energy, retail) • Resolver (via Money Saving Expert) • ACAS - Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service • Lawyer/solicitor/court • Local newspaper • Local MP • In-store rep (not customer services) • Product expert (e.g. bike specialist) • Twitter/social media
Finance	• Mis-sold PPI	
Energy	• Billing issues • Misleading tariffs	
Retail	• Faulty/dangerous goods	
Leisure	• Personal injury	
Local government	• Poor public services	

Around half of those household customers who had experienced some kind of dispute had not consulted a third-party, including a few who had experienced issues with their water provider. For many, this was because they didn't know that there was anybody to contact, or who they were. Some felt too intimidated by the company to pursue the issue, whilst others felt confident enough to handle it on their own. Many considered their issue not serious enough to warrant help.

Vulnerable customers

This low level of contact with third-party support sources was reflected in the vulnerable sample, where only 5 out of 14 respondents had contacted one in response to a service issue. As in the household sample, the most frequently consulted third-party was Citizen's Advice, with some customers also contacting ACAS, an employee union or Trading Standards. Those who had good support in their everyday life were more likely to consult a third-party, but some would rely on others to do this, for example expecting their social housing provider or social worker to address issues on their behalf. Those who were isolated or unsupported were more passive and unlikely to seek additional support for service issues, leading to them being further disadvantaged. Examples of issues that had resulted in a vulnerable customer contacting a third party included:

- Debt on a prepayment energy account when the customer moved into their flat
- Anticipating difficulty in paying utility bills due to a change in circumstances
- Employment dispute relating to sick absence
- Purchase of faulty goods
- Bank letter in error.

Although none had experienced a water-related issue, it was noted during the research that these customers were more susceptible to experiencing financial difficulties with water, such as not understanding whether their bill was correct, bill shock or bill increases having gone onto a meter without grasping the implications.

Non-household customers

Most non-household customers had also experienced issues which had led them to contact a third-party for assistance. Reasons for such contact included:

- Employee disputes
- Billing or contract discrepancy
- Faulty product purchased
- Damage to premises caused by service provider

Levels of seeking third-party support were higher amongst these customers, with 10 out of 15 reporting having done so. Those belonging to industry bodies usually turned to those first, particularly in relation to employee disputes. Other organisations contacted included the Ombudsman for the relevant industry, the Intellectual Property Office and solicitors. As with household customers, some also turned to Twitter and other forms of social media in a bid to draw attention to the dispute and be taken seriously.

Only one water-related issue was reported, and the customer explained that although they had contacted 'the water governing body' the issue had not been resolved by them. Having looked through previous correspondence, the customer confirmed that this third-party was in fact CCWater.

- **CASE STUDY:**
  A non-household customer was contacted by Flow2, which presented itself as a water retailer. Flow2 offered a 5% reduction on their bills if they signed up ahead of the market opening, but instead their bills increased from £10k to £25k per annum, with Flow2 acting as a middleman and water still being supplied by the customer's original provider. After contacting CCWater, the customer was informed they were unable to help because Flow2 are not a registered water retailer. The customer instead resolved the dispute via the use of a solicitor.

"I tried to complain to the water Ombudsman but they said they couldn't help because the water company was not registered with them and said to go to Trading Standards. I can't remember who I went to – it was some sort of water governing body."
Non-household

5.2 Generic needs of consumers contacting a consumer body

Consumers were asked to think about their own and others' experiences of contacting a consumer body and to consider what characteristics that third party should display. Their spontaneous suggestions were then further developed using projective questioning techniques to explore two additional case studies.

Jeff is having problems with his internet connection at home. For the last several months, his internet has regularly stopped working for hours at a time. Jeff has contacted his broadband provider on many occasions but they have still not fixed the issue. He's feeling at a dead-end, frustrated and unsure how to rectify the problem. He decides to contact Ofcom for help.

Case Study 1

Chloe, a student living in a shared flat, has recently been given a County Court Judgement because one of her flatmates failed to pay their share of the energy bill. She's explained the situation to her energy provider but this has not made a difference and she still has a County Court Judgement. Chloe has paid her share of the energy bill so feels she shouldn't be liable for this. She's feeling unfairly treated. Chloe turns to Citizens Advice for help.

Case study 2

From the discussions around the case studies – and drawing on respondents' own experiences - there were a number of themes that characterised consumer experiences of the issues and their resulting desires from the third-party, summarised below:

Themes characterising consumer experiences and related needs

Consumer experiences of issues	Desires from 3rd party	Heightened Need
Feeling unjustly treated: let down & taken advantage of by the company	Somebody who is independent, fair & impartial & will provide an honest, unbiased opinion on who is at fault	
Lack of comprehension: of jargon, consumer rights, processes	Somebody with the knowledge & industry expertise to accurately assess the situation, determine the legal position & give advice on next steps	V N
Powerlessness: little man vs bully/big machine	Somebody to even the playing field between consumer & company by acting on the consumer's behalf, or empowering the customer to act for themselves	N
Vulnerability: feeling threatened & panicked (event driven for HH customers, mindset-based for vulnerable audience)	Somebody with the 'clout' to intimidate the company into playing fairly	V
Lack of validation: being ignored, not believed, effects on consumer not acknowledged	Somebody who will take consumers seriously, listening to complaints with empathy & committing themselves to fully investigating the situation	V
Frustration: impersonal, slow & convoluted service	Somebody who is solution-focused & dedicated to achieving a swift resolution for individual consumers	N

It was evident that some feelings were more pronounced for vulnerable customers; in particular, these customers reported sometimes feeling vulnerable, ignored and disrespected as a result of their circumstances.

"When I spoke to the water people to set up a payment plan, they were pretty cool about it, completely understanding and we weren't made to feel it was going to be a problem. They were empathetic. But when we contacted Utilita to request the same type of plan for our energy we just got a smack in the face. There was no understanding, I felt they were questioning my integrity by asking for proof of circumstances."
Vulnerable, Crawley

They desired support in the form of reassurance that the issue would be resolved and also increased empathy, patience and respect from the assisting body. Some also reported being less able to understand situations, conversations and documents and therefore had an increased need for advice and information around their rights – or even for the issue to be taken off their hands completely and resolved on their behalf.

"It's very easy for somebody to say 'I'll give you the info, now it's for you to do it' but sometimes it's helpful for somebody to just do it for you – give people the choice."
Vulnerable, Cambridge

Non-household customers also had heightened requirements in some areas, although these tended to be rational needs related to achieving a swift and favourable outcome, rather than the often more emotional needs of vulnerable customers. For many, the decision for whether to pursue a dispute depended on how much money was at stake and whether they deemed it worth sacrificing time in their already business work schedules. For this reason, non-household customers in particular desired advice as to whether the issue was a case or not, if they would win it and how much they stood to gain (or lose) and were keen to understand the laws in their industry and the dispute process. In order to make the process as efficient as possible, they had an increased need for practical support in the form of tools, such as letter templates and process maps. Some smaller businesses also felt that they needed the presence of a bigger organisation to bolster their argument if in dispute with a larger company.

"I want clear guidelines, management of expectations so both sides understand what to expect and what levels of service are reasonable. Problems often arise when misunderstanding about what is reasonable and who is responsible for what (especially in terms of leakage from water pipes)."
Non-household

Having explored the experiences and desires of all customers, it was possible to draw up a framework outlining what all customers need from Ombudsmen when contacting them in relation to a dispute. It is important to note that the importance of each need would depend on the specifics of each situation – both in terms of the type of dispute and the type of customer.

Summary of what customers need from an Ombudsman

These needs were further illustrated by comments made by respondents during the research:

Advice

"I want them to be able to view problems objectively and offer creative and effective solutions."
Household, Swansea

"Provide the customer with templates to make a complaint or claim. To give you the words and phrases that will result in action."
Household, Birmingham

"Be straightforward. Provide you with information in a way you can understand. Don't use over-complicated language, use layman's terms."
Household, Birmingham

Expertise

"You can't be a representative unless you know more than the person you're representing."
Household, Swansea

"I want them to be an expert."
Household, Manchester

Investigation

"They need to be able to build a case and gather the relevant information, know what is relevant."

Household, Exeter

"They have to make a decision based on the facts, not just what the customer says."
Household, Birmingham

"It's like a judge, they have to weigh up the facts of the case."
Household, Birmingham

"I'm not looking for magic wand."
Vulnerable Crawley

Impartiality

"I don't want to be treated unfairly; I don't want to feel like the underdog against the corporate giants."
Household Swansea

"They need to be independent – not making money from it, no vested interests."
Household, Birmingham

"They need to sit on the fence, they can't bad mouth a certain company, they need to be independent."
Household, Birmingham

"To feel that you've got the might behind you of someone who is independent"
Household, Manchester

Authority

"I want them to have the leverage to get things done."
Household, Crawley

"There's an expectation when you go a higher power that they'll be knowledgeable and have the credentials and authority to make a difference."
Household, Swansea

"It's an invisible company at the end of the phone: we're right, you're wrong."
Household, Cambridge

"They are the big company so they make up the rules and stick to them."
Household, Swansea

"A watch dog can sometimes fall more on the company side; if they are without teeth, they support the industry."
Household, Exeter

Support

"A third-party helps you steel yourself for battle."
Household, *Cambridge*

"The Citizen's Advice Bureau was there to reassure me that I was taking the right approach."
Household, Cambridge

"I want them to sit and listen without judging, even if you've been silly."
Household, Swansea

Representation

"They should communicate on your behalf so that your explanation is taken seriously."
Household, Swansea

"Having a representative gives your complaint more weight."
Household, Swansea

"They should act as liaison between company and customer – they have extensive experience with companies, know how they work, know the processes and policies whereas customer won't."

Vulnerable, Swansea

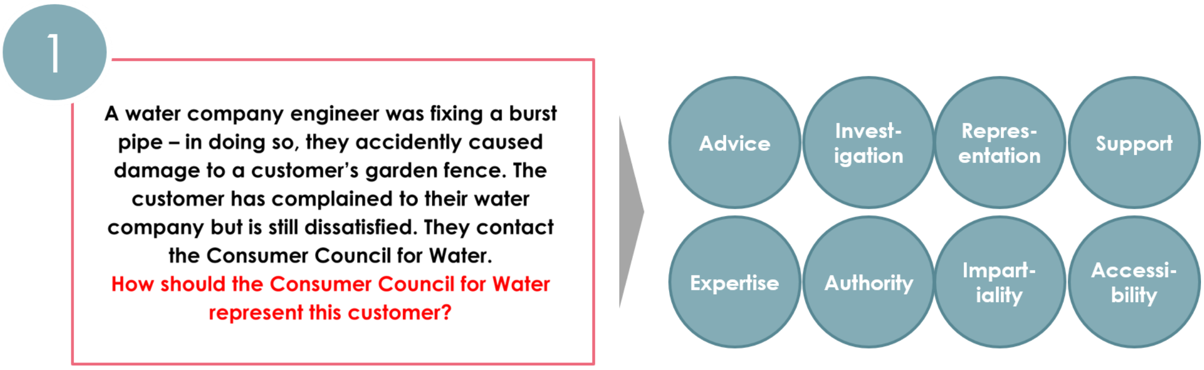
Accessibility

"The more people that know [about them] the better, otherwise people don't know where to turn and the companies don't get challenged."
Vulnerable, Swansea

5.3 What consumers need from CCWater

The generic needs identified by respondents were tested against a number of water-related scenarios. For each case study, respondents were asked to consider how CCWater should approach the situation in order to represent the voice and best interests of consumers. They were then asked to compare what they wanted from CCWater in the case studies with the needs already identified, to assess which needs were most important in each scenario, and if any were missing from the list. The exercise confirmed that the needs framework was applicable to CCWater's role within the water industry, with no apparent gaps.

Water case study 1



The key question arising from this scenario was "Am I being treated fairly?" and consumers felt that CCWater's role was that of Ombudsman; investigating complaints on behalf of individual consumers. Respondents considered that the customer would want clarity on the dispute process and the best approach to take, as well as guidance on how to get their voice heard. They felt that investigation was a key part of CCWater's role, to explore what had happened, establish the facts and achieve an understanding of both sides of the story. Respondents also wanted CCWater to act as mediator, anticipating that their status would ensure a better result if they contacted the company to settle the issue on the customer's behalf.

"Having a representative gives your complaint more weight."
Household, Swansea

"They should act as liaison between company and customer – they have extensive experience with companies, know how they work, know the processes and policies whereas the customer won't."
Vulnerable Swansea

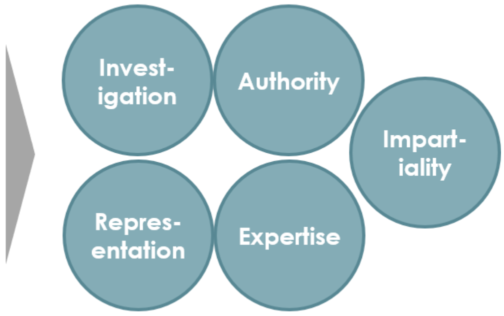
All of the needs identified in the earlier part of the research were felt to be relevant to this situation, which is understandable given that they were developed through examination of generic disputes similar to the one described in this case study.

Water case study 2

2

The BEAST from the East (recent bad weather) caused customers in some areas to lose their water supply for up to 3 days. We can now see that some water companies didn't cope as well with the severe weather as other companies.

How should the Consumer Council for Water represent the interests of many consumers?



The key question arising from this scenario was "Is everyone being treated fairly?" and consumers felt that CCWater's role was that of watchdog; ensuring that companies adhere to standards and the law in order to protect the whole body of consumers, rather than one individual. Investigation was again a key activity in this situation, with respondents wanting CCWater to determine why performance varied and use their industry expertise to determine best practice. Respondents felt that CCWater should act to prevent discrepancies in service, for example campaigning to fine companies who don't perform, using their profile to drive through policy changes.

"They have to look after what is morally right."
Household, Birmingham

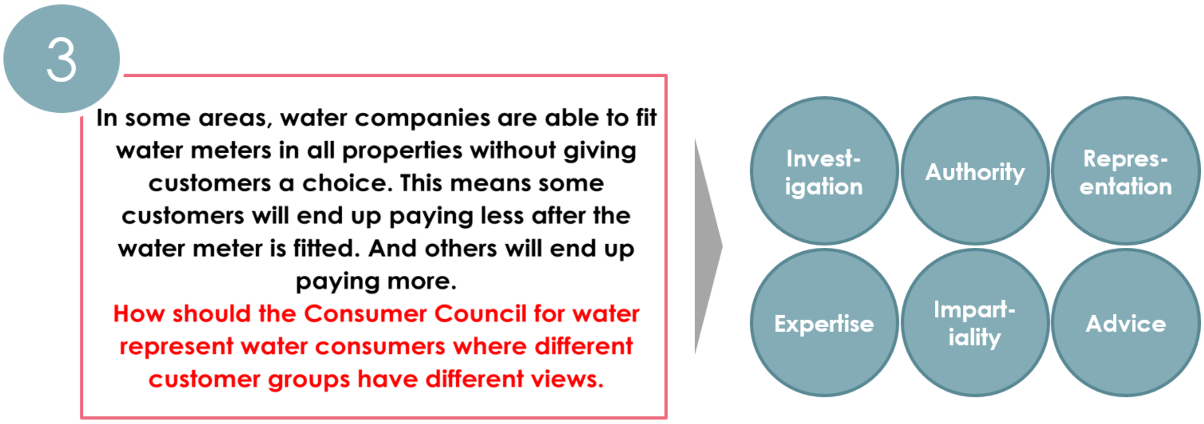
"Make sure some safeguards are in place - we don't live in tropical climate so companies should have to plan for this kind of event."
Vulnerable, Crawley

"They have to be investigators to see what the facts are."
Household, Birmingham

"They've got to be strong-minded. They need to be stern."
Household, Manchester

"I don't want them in the pocket of water companies. The have to be independent."
Household, Birmingham

Water case study 3



The key question arising from this scenario was "What is fair?" and consumers felt that CCWater's role was that of consumer champion, representing views from across the full spectrum and using their knowledge and profile to effect change which was in the best interests of all customers. Crucially, respondents wanted CCWater to act to prevent consumers being disadvantaged by policy or structural changes – such as compulsory metering. Advice was deemed a key part of their role, providing information on the implications of metering for individual customers and advising them on water-saving strategies to help keep bills in check.

"You can't be a representative unless you know more than the person you are representing."
Household, Swansea

"Give me advice. Should I have one or not?"
Household, Birmingham

6 Follow up exercise

All respondents were re-contacted three weeks after the fieldwork as a means to check and challenge the analysis of the eight consumer needs identified in the research. A very short online survey was sent to all who had agreed to take part, and 36 responses were received.

The exercise served to give feedback to participants on some of the research outputs as well as verifying the analysis.

The first question was as follows:

Q1. Here is a summary of all of the things that we heard people want from an organisation like Consumer Council for Water: overall how well does this reflect what you would need? Please score out of 10 (where 10 is 'reflects needs very well' and 0 is 'does not reflect needs at all').

The average score across the sample of 36 was 9 out of 10. The majority had given a score of 8-10 with just 5 respondents scoring 7 or lower. Some respondents elaborated on their reasoning:

Because I feel that these were the points that I directly talked about and am glad to see that I was listened too

These were all the ideas that we discussed on the evening and I consider them to be important and reflective of my needs as a consumer

They are on the consumers' side and have my interests at heart

It provides an accurate reflection, of contributors' views, about what they need as consumers from the CCWater Watchdog.

The follow-up question was as follows:

Q2a. Which two/three would be the most important for you?

Advice, support and expertise received the most mentions. A further question asked if anything was missing from the list: the sample was unanimous in thinking everything was covered. Again, a number of respondents elaborated on their responses.

	Number of mentions (respondents could code up to 3)
Advice	21
Support	19
Expertise	17
Representation	13
Impartiality	9
Authority	9
Accessibility	8
Investigation	5

If I was having issues that I felt I couldn’t solve myself or had already tried to solve myself, I would want to feel that the organisation would be able to act on my behalf. I would also want to feel they have the expertise to make me feel that they know and understand my issues and that they have the authority to enforce what is required.

Effective support and knowledge required to help when people cannot resolve issues themselves.

Advice is so important, as consumers are not experts in the workings of the water industry. They need advice from a body that is. Support is also essential, as the consumer needs to feel they have the individuals - and an organisation with the right credentials - to 'steer them' through managing any issues re the water industry. Representation is also extremely important, as individual water users don't have the skills, knowledge or expertise, to take on large corporations. It is crucial that they feel 'someone is on their side.

7 Conclusions

6.1 Have consumer priorities changed?

This research has identified what matters to customers most when thinking about the water and waste water services – and in terms of being represented by the industry's consumer body. Many issues are considered to be high in importance (see diagram below), however the issues that are most front of mind are the more tangible consumer touchpoints: bill levels and meters; as well as more future focused areas - meeting future demand and using education to achieve a more sustainable system.

Relative importance and prevalence of customer priorities for CCWater

The findings from the 2019 study were reviewed against the 2012 report by SPA Future Thinking: 'Expectations of the Consumer Council for Water.'[8] It is important to note that although similar, the approach taken for these projects was not identical therefore the comparative analysis took a holistic view.

It appeared that many of the themes uncovered in the 2012 research remained pertinent in 2019. Understanding of the industry was equally vague and consumer engagement with water remained low despite some media scrutiny during and since the 2016 General Election campaign and opening of the non-household retail market in 2017.

Priority activities remained largely similar, with consumers focusing on the areas that were most familiar or relevant to them, or where they had had a touchpoint; billing and affordability; maintaining infrastructure to reduce service problems and leaks (although leaks do appear to be becoming less prevalent in consumers' minds); and ways to be more water efficient. Respondents in both studies saw a role for CCWater in 'creating a better-informed population of water users' but argued that lack of awareness of its existence amongst the general public was impacting its

[8] *'Expectations of the Consumer Council for Water'*: SPA Future Thinking - 2012

effectiveness in doing so and that it should take steps to raise its profile. As in 2012, water quality was taken for granted and ensuring quality remained consistent was rarely mentioned as a spontaneous priority for CCWater, but when prompted, it emerged as an important activity (although perhaps one to be taken on by a different regulatory body?)

There were some areas where consumer views had shifted since 2012 and these were reflected in their priorities for CCWater:

- Firstly, there was a greater emphasis on prioritising the needs of vulnerable consumers and ensuring support is provided. Contextualised by a decade of squeezed living costs, the austerity agenda and most tangibly, the rise in food banks, the need to protect the most vulnerable was a theme seen across all sample groups. In particular, informing potentially eligible customers about available assistance and social tariffs was deemed high priority. CCWater has a good track record of work with customers in this area, but respondents didn't recognise their work in the way the strategic priorities were currently articulated. This increased emphasis may also be in part because the discussion groups comprised people from all social grades and respondents were more readily able to empathise with needs of other people
- Prioritising issues pertaining to sustainability, future planning and the health of the environment was voiced more loudly in 2019. In comparing the data, it was clear that there was less scepticism about environmental threats in 2019 than 7 years ago and the fast-moving reduction of single-use plastics in people's daily lives provides an example of how behaviours can change. Some anticipated water will become a 'hot' environmental topic.

One final issue appeared to be less urgent for consumers in 2019: leakage. Leaks were still mentioned frequently but with less certainty about whether water companies did have high leakage levels. Perhaps the reduction of visible leaks across the industry – and improved response times – was changing perceptions, certainly with younger age groups for whom leaks are not a strong industry association.

6.2 Recommendations for refreshing Consumer Council for Water's existing priorities

While CCWater's four current strategic priorities[9] were generally supported, they do not serve to inspire consumers that CCWater is representing their views. This is in part because there are important gaps that should be reflected more overtly in a refreshed set of priorities: namely relating to the themes of future sustainability and a stronger environmental remit. It is also apparent that customer service and water quality – priorities that feature in two of the four statements – are largely expected and could be termed 'hygiene' factors.

The process of sharing the current priorities with the public also reveals the importance of articulating a renewed set of priorities in the consumers' voice. Currently, the language within the statements plays down the role and status of CCWater. Consumers want, for example, its authority

[9] Detailed in Section 2.1

and expertise to come to the fore whereas the language of 'pressing the industry' and 'shaping the sector' suggest a lack of power.

There is an opportunity when refreshing the priorities to:

- Create a sense of how CCWater represents customers within the language and framing, reflecting some of the 8 'needs' developed in this research (see below)
- Be more specific about what lies within each priority highlighting the consumer angle where there is ambiguity between the roles of other regulatory bodies
- Develop a public-facing expression of the priorities – in the customers' voice – so that those who do encounter CCWater are clearer about its role.

6.3 What do people want and need from a consumer representative body?

Eight needs emerge through discussions about experiences of being in a dispute and for some, of using third-party representative bodies. The needs can be summarised as:

Impartiality: a body that is independent, that will provide an honest, unbiased opinion on where fault lies (even when this is with the consumer)

Expertise: a body that knows the relevant field/industry and can assess the situation, determine the legal position and give next steps

Representation: a body that can even the playing field between the consumer (who can feel like the minnow in the relationship) and organisation (often seen as the corporate giant). Acting on the consumers' behalf or empowering the consumer to act for themselves. Also acting as a voice for all consumers

Authority: a body with the power to act and enforce; and/or with the 'clout' to make an organisation play fairly

Support: a body that will be non-judgemental and take consumers seriously; listen with empathy; reliable in sticking with the consumer until a conclusion is reached

Advice: a body that can explain the situation and give options, guidance and tools to help consumers

Investigation: a body that is focused on the evidence; acting swiftly to find out what has happened

Accessibility: a body that is freely available; easy to access via multiple channels which reflect how people typically like to engage

Testing these generic needs against water-related scenarios demonstrated that CCWater can use this as a framework to act in consumers' best interests in the water sector.

- The full set of needs can be applied to situations where CCWater is acting to assist in dispute-resolution: indeed, the needs were developed through discussions which largely focused on the complaints of individuals with large organisations.
- Holding water companies to account in relation to subpar performance affecting many customers (using as an example the mixed experiences during 2018's Beast from the East)

places emphasis on particular needs: *investigating* why performance varied; having the *expertise* to understand the issue fully; *representing* all consumers to set industry standards; to have the *authority* to penalise companies who do not improve.

- Metering was used as an example of an issue where industry policy could both disadvantage and benefit consumers. In representing all consumers, respondents highlight needs including: *investigate* how mandatory metering will affect customers; be the *expert* on the policy implications; *represent* the views of those potentially disadvantaged; give *advice* on mitigating the impact of a meter through water saving; remain *impartial* and independent from water companies; have *authority* so that campaigning for consumers creates change.

These needs can be used by CCWater to develop a framework for knowing that its work is reflecting what water customers and consumers want from it, as illustrated below.

Overview of customer needs from CCWater

6.4 Consumer Council for Water's profile

This report also touches on the issue of public awareness of CCWater as this was a consistent and dominant theme throughout the research. None in the sample had heard of CCWater, which is promoted in places they perceive to be increasingly invisible in an online age (on the back of bills and the Yellow Pages). The name itself is hard to recall, as was observed in the research, with respondents struggling to refer to it accurately (or at all). Internet searches of commonly asked water industry questions lead to Citizens Advice and not CCWater – and a number of Non-household customers who visited www.ccwater.org.uk concluded that its main role was a comparison site – though others did not draw this conclusion.

In conclusion, consumers believe CCWater will achieve more on their behalf if it has the name and clout of e.g. Trading Standards, and the profile of e.g. Citizens Advice so that it can be more accessible to people when they need help.

CONSUMER COUNCIL FOR Water CYNGOR DEFNYDDWYR Dŵr

The Consumer Council for Water

1st Floor, Victoria Square House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B2 4AJ
Visit our website: www.ccwater.org.uk
Follow us @WaterWatchdog

Contact: Senior Policy Manager: Jenny Suggate
jennifer.suggate@ccwater.org.uk