

May 2022

Customer experiences of sewer flooding

A joint report by CCW and Ofwat

Ofwat

CCW

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Foreword

Being flooded with sewage is one of the most distressing things that can happen to you in your home, yet this is a very real experience for thousands of households every year. The lasting effects it leaves behind are not just limited to damaged property, but can extend to psychological and emotional damage, often leaving people in vulnerable circumstances.

To understand people's experiences of sewer flooding, either inside or outside of the home, CCW and Ofwat commissioned this qualitative research as part of a wider joint programme of work focused on customers.

The objective of this research was to identify the good and bad practices of wastewater companies, with the intention of learning from the good and identifying what needs to improve.

The research found that many participants reported a positive first interaction with water companies – a good starting point. But the research found few positive examples after that initial communication. Instead, for many participants, their wastewater company's overall response made a bad situation worse. This report shows:

- Companies' communication with customers is often unsatisfactory, with a lack of proactive updates, poor record-keeping, and poorly arranged visits.
- There were few instances of participants reporting a satisfactory resolution to an incident.
- Similarly, few participants reported receiving compensation from companies. Among the small number who did receive some compensation, there was a view that this was used as a way to avoid dealing with the cause of the issue.

This experience takes its toll on people. Participants reported feeling anxiety, anger, frustration and shame. They spoke of not being able to sleep at night. They told us about not being able to use parts of their property for extended periods of time. We heard from people who have experienced regular instances of sewer flooding over years.

People's physical and mental health should not be put at risk because of sewage in their homes or gardens. Nor should they find themselves in debt because of the costs associated with sewer flooding.

There are a number of actions that wastewater companies can take now to improve their responses to sewer flooding. This report sets out a range of steps that could – and should – be implemented without delay. CCW and Ofwat will be working with companies to encourage best practice to ensure the sector works harder to help customers who experience sewer flooding.



Emma Clancy,
Chief Executive, CCW



David Black
Chief Executive, Ofwat

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the findings from research with people who have experienced sewer flooding inside or outside their homes. The report sets out challenges faced by people when they experience sewer flooding and how wastewater companies can better support people in this situation.

Sewer flooding in this report refers to incidents of sewage in people's homes or on their property.

The findings are taken from research commissioned jointly by CCW and Ofwat and conducted by the research agency BritainThinks. The purpose of the research was to explore the range of experiences faced by household customers affected by sewer flooding, and how this impacted them practically, financially, and emotionally. It was also to examine the responses to sewer flooding by wastewater companies through the eyes of those affected, and identify good and bad practice.

The fieldwork for this research took place between 31 January and 7 March 2022. It included:

- 50 interviews with participants who had experienced sewer flooding; and
- six follow-up workshops with participants. In total, 26 interview participants took part in a workshop.

Participants were recruited to ensure a range of experiences were included in the research. These experiences included a mix of:

- sewer flooding inside homes (internal) and around the outside or in the garden of homes (external);
- single incidences and multiple incidences;
- low, medium, high and very high severity incidences;
- locations – with recruitment across ten wastewater companies in England and Wales;
- housing tenure and type; and
- socio-demographics – including age, gender, ethnicity, and inclusion on a priority services register.

More information on the research approach is set out in the appendix at the end of this report.

This report sets out key findings from the research. It looks at:

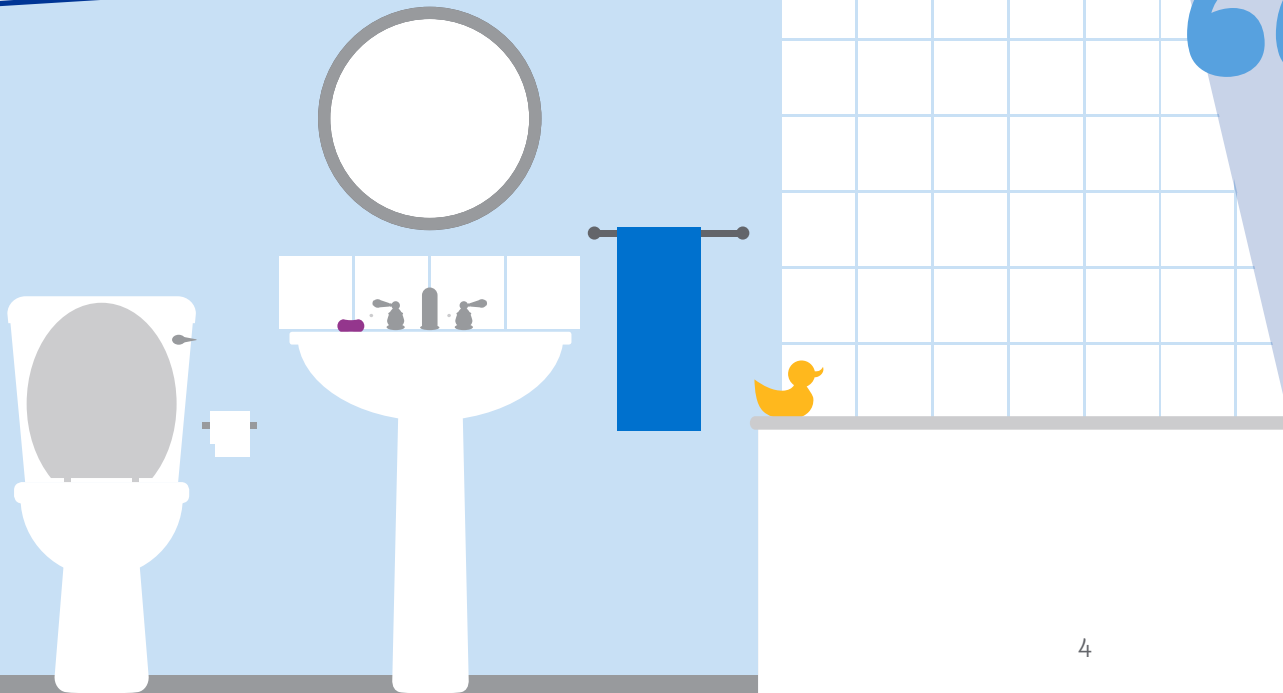
- the experience of sewer flooding;
- communication;
- resolution;
- compensation;
- positive interactions;
- actions for wastewater companies; and
- next steps for CCW and Ofwat.

The experience of sewer flooding

The research found that any type of sewer flooding has a significant negative impact on customers regardless of severity. Even incidents that may seem 'low severity' can cause a lot of inconvenience and stress, while 'high severity' events can lead to significant emotional trauma.

Low severity events include bad household smells, bathrooms, gardens or car parking spaces being out of use or sinks requiring regular unblocking, which can be unpleasant and stressful for customers to manage.

High severity events include ongoing and recurring problems, personal belongings or even entire rooms or floors of a home being destroyed. They can also include the individual coming into direct contact with sewage water, which can cause significant practical and emotional damage.



“

For two and a half years, not being able to use your kitchen and lower half of your property... it has impacted every aspect of our life. And our feelings have gone from being really angry to really, really sad to really, really frustrated. It's still very, very raw. It's coming up to three years in July... We still haven't got our house back now.”

– Internal, single incident, high severity

“

At the time I felt very on edge, very anxious, and just a bit emotionally fragile. It was quite tough. Obviously it's the place where I live, and sewage flowing out in a way that you can't really stop. You're just watching things getting worse.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

Participants shared feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration and shame. Participants mentioned not sleeping at night and feeling trapped. Some reported feelings of disempowerment or resignation, with the view that they have little power or control over the situation and have no choice but to accept it.

The nature of an incident, including level of severity, whether it is internal or external, the specific area of the property that is affected, and the frequency, can be an indication of the impact on a customer. Personal factors can exacerbate the impact, including disabilities, mental wellbeing, financial security and having children in the home.

For many participants, the distressing nature of sewer flooding is made worse by poor communication and the lack of a resolution. The next sections look at this in more detail.

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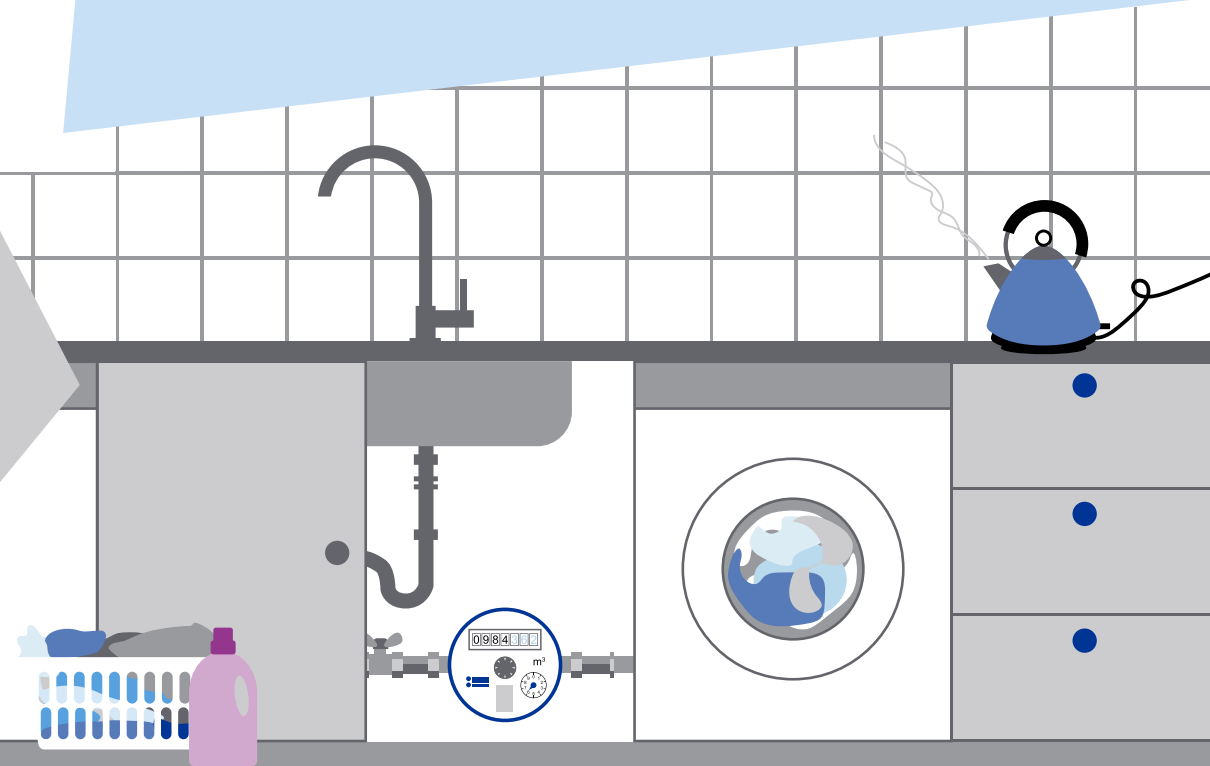
It meant I couldn't use the bathroom if I had guests round. It's pointless if you can't use it. You can't have a shower or use the toilet without it overflowing... My flat felt pretty gross, I don't want to invite people over and them ask 'why does your flat stink of eggs?'"

– Internal, single incident, low severity

“

You feel anxiety, you can't sleep at night, you feel trapped in the situation because there's no way out... You feel anger, you feel alone. This problem has been going on for decades. It's a regular occurrence."

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity



Communication

Participants reported mixed, but often unsatisfactory, communication with wastewater companies when sewer flooding occurred.

For some, it was difficult to know which organisation to contact when experiencing sewer flooding for the first time. However, the first interaction with someone at a wastewater company was often fairly positive. Customer service agents were often said to be empathetic, calm and professional in this first call. But this was not universal. A number of participants also commented on their wastewater company emphasising the customer's responsibility only. Some reported insensitivity from customer service agents or engineers.

This first engagement with the company is often the high point of communication. The research found frustration among many participants at what followed. Examples of this include:



A lack of proactive updates

Participants reported they frequently had to chase their wastewater company for information.



A lack of consistent record keeping

Wastewater companies not keeping notes or a log of ongoing issues. This meant some participants needed to start from scratch with each new interaction or event.



Poorly arranged visits

Delays, no shows or conversely engineers arriving unannounced.

“

They should change their attitude, to make sure their customer service is good and really try to understand their mistakes in that and learn from them.”

– External, multiple incidents, high severity

There has to be some mechanism where you can get through to customer services, and they understand or have a list of highly vulnerable areas that they respond to in a timely manner and consistently.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity





The workmen didn't care. I was soaking wet, and they laughed at me."

– Internal, single event, high severity

They've not categorically told us about what the cause is. The water company is not transparent about what is going on."

– Internal, multiple incidents, very high severity



Coming out four days after the event doesn't show any empathy!"

– Internal, single incident, very high severity

By the look of it, the pumping station is inadequate to cope, with climate change making things worse. But two years on, we've had no real feedback on what's going on."

– Internal, single incident, very high severity

Each element of poor communication placed added stress onto participants. It required them to spend even more time waiting on the phone, repeating information they had already shared, or waiting in for people that do not turn up.

Participants identified four communication approaches they would like to see from wastewater companies:



Accessible

Participants wanted quick and straightforward ways to report a problem.



Empathetic

Participants expected customer service agents to show compassion for their situation.



Proactive

Participants wanted companies to lead communications and keep them updated.



Transparent

Participants wanted companies to be open about the causes of the problem, what it would take to fix it, how long this would take and what they would do in the meantime to support people through repeated occurrences.

A key finding from the research is that participants consistently reported that wastewater companies were not meeting these communication expectations.

Resolution

Participants, unsurprisingly, reported that they wanted the cause of the sewer flooding to be fixed permanently. This was a key priority. But across the research, fewer than a quarter of participants felt that their wastewater company had given them a satisfactory resolution.

Some participants felt that wastewater companies used avoidance in relation to resolutions, with some reporting feeling pressured into accepting a resolution that was offered as they felt they had no other choice. A lack of transparency was also reported by participants, with some examples of companies not letting them know the outcome of investigations into incidents and doing what they could to avoid being seen as responsible for the sewer flooding. This included acknowledging verbally that the company was responsible but refusing to put this in writing.

“

The new resolution would be a new pipe... I've been told it's on a list of problems they review every five years.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

It's a level pipe [so sewage won't drain away]. They know the problem, and they won't sort it out.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

They just tell me they're doing something. But I don't know what. The customer service lady... doesn't seem to have any actual information... What do I actually expect to happen? That would be nothing. What do I hope will happen? They fix it.”

– External, multiple incidents, high severity

“

They were unconcerned. They were more bothered about not accepting liability, that is why they wouldn't provide compensation.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

If they had apologised and said 'it was a failure of our system', that would've been good.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

The research found that making progress towards resolution often required individuals to be determined, confident and knowledgeable (for example, with an engineering background or experience working in local councils). A resolution may require persistent phone calls, as well as requesting certain plans and documents.

“

Often there are inconsistencies in their measures; if you scream and shout your response can look different to someone who doesn't. I tend to kick up the greatest fuss and be the loudest in the area.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

But not all customers have the time and resources, the determination or the ability to continually chase wastewater companies for updates on progress. Some customers may have vulnerabilities prior to the sewer flooding, and some will become vulnerable because of the effect that sewer flooding has on them. Some customers who are older, are not fluent in English, who have mental health or cognitive conditions, or have less knowledge of their rights as a consumer may particularly struggle to make progress. This is very concerning, given how frequently participants mentioned the mental health impacts of these incidents, meaning that many people may find themselves in a vulnerable position when communicating with companies.

Participants identified three steps for achieving a satisfactory resolution:



Accepting responsibility

For participants, this was seen as a first step towards companies taking longer-term action to resolve the problem. While it may not be the wastewater company's responsibility in every instance of sewer flooding (see the appendix for more information on this), the research indicates a general reluctance on the part of companies to accept responsibility.



Initial fix and mitigation

Participants wanted companies to be proactive in preventing or minimising the impact of flooding and/or let them know when they know it is likely and to take steps to reduce the impact of flooding.



Long-term/permanent fix to the problem

This is ultimately what participants wanted. While they may understand this cannot necessarily happen immediately, as a minimum they would like to be told when to expect this so they can be reassured that action will be taken.

“

They need to be penalised for not fixing things. If damage is caused, fix it!”

– External, single incident incidents, low severity

Compensation

While for many participants, fixing and preventing sewer flooding from taking place is key, there was also concern about the financial costs of these incidents to individual customers.

Most participants said they did not receive compensation from companies. Further, among the small number who did receive some compensation, some held the view that this was used as a means to 'fob off' their concerns rather than dealing with the issue itself. Some participants said they had to argue with their wastewater company about the amount of compensation, but even then, they felt the offer was insufficient to cover the physical and/or emotional impact of the event.

Participants wanted companies to:



Reimburse physical damage to property and possessions.



Cover the cost of insurance excesses and/or the cost of higher insurance premiums following the event.



Address emotional impact some people experience.



Reimburse costs for their time spent chasing/managing the issue.



Pay a form of fine/deterrent for flooding events, including increasing amounts for repeat events.

It's a cheap fix, a few hundred quid for something that will take the value of your property down by thousands and thousands, plus your insurance premium over the years will be far more than they will ever compensate you."

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

“

The final offer of compensation from [company] was a joke. But my husband is fed up of arguing with them, fed up of me being upset about it. So, we settled under duress."

– Internal/external, multiple incidents, high severity

Personally I think more about like-for-like costs and cleaning up the mess afterwards."

– External, single incident, low severity

“

Compensation should be made based on the size of the flood, and the stress, inconvenience and trauma it's caused."

– Internal, single incident, low severity

Most participants said they were not aware of the guaranteed standards scheme (GSS). There were few instances of automatic payments being offered, usually in cases of repeat events or particularly severe single events. Participants also reported difficulties in receiving the GSS payments.

Looking at the guidelines, participants were concerned with what looked to them as loopholes that allow companies to avoid responsibility – for example, in relation to ‘extreme weather’ clauses. They also wanted more independent, third-party involvement to regulate and enforce payments.

Participants also felt the value of compensation offered by the GSS was too low. Benchmarking the compensation value against service charges did not feel right. If compensation is to be paid, they would prefer that the amount is based on, for example, the cost of clean up, physical or emotional damage incurred by the customer and to cover insurance premiums (although some customers do not have insurance).

“

I’ve sent off hundreds of these damn GSS forms, and never get a reply. My customer service contact made me do them all again – and nothing.”

– External, multiple incidents, high severity

“

They’ve got this clause that says ‘exceptional weather’ but at the end of the day we have rain, and sometimes it’s heavy, it shouldn’t be a problem really.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity



Positive interactions

For most participants in this research, dealing with their wastewater company was often frustrating and disappointing. However, there were some positives.

The most consistent positive interaction reported by participants was at the start of the process. Contact details were generally easy to find online, and participants often reported quick response times on the phone and, on first contact, a positive interaction with customer service agents.

“

I'm happy at the call centre, how they handled it. When I rung up, they were helpful and explained a lot. I think one of the managers called me 1-2 times, updating me on what they were going to do and what was happening.”

– External, single incident, low severity

It was okay, on a level of 1 to 10 I would say 8. They kept me informed all the time, the person I spoke to was quite sympathetic, there was lots of empathy expressed to me, and there was lots of conversation about what was required and how they were going to fix it. They sorted the issues out, I wasn't unhappy with the service.”

– External, single incident, low severity

The research also heard a few participants talk more favourably about the actions taken by their wastewater company. They felt listened to and were satisfied that the companies were responding in a reasonable way.

“

They seem knowledgeable, understand what I'm explaining to them. I never feel I'm being brushed off in anyway... Most of the times I'm on my own and not trying to make myself a priority.”

– External, multiple incidents, high severity

Within a couple of days I had an initial visit, they were pouring dye down sinks, plug holes and keeping an eye on the flooding water. They took a sample of the water that day as well. I didn't understand the practice, but it all seemed a reasonable course of action.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, high severity

I've got their number and know they will fix it quickly and easily if there is another problem. I am happy with how they've responded so far.”

– Internal, multiple incidents, low severity

Actions for wastewater companies

The research found that when people experience sewer flooding inside or outside of their homes, the response by wastewater companies often makes this experience even worse. This was a consistent finding from participants across England and Wales.

Wastewater companies need to do more to improve the service for customers when sewer flooding takes place. Companies can begin this process immediately – by reviewing their processes for support for customers. We set out below our expectations for wastewater companies.

Contact and communication

- Contact information is easy to find and people experiencing sewer flooding can quickly get in touch with their wastewater company.
- There is a named or single point of contact who can support the customer from incident to resolution.
- Good quality record keeping so that customers are not required to provide the same information repeatedly.
- There is clear information on what the company will do in response to an incident and when to expect engineers or clean up crews.
- A proactive approach to communication with customers – keeping them updated on progress and regularly checking in on customers to see how they are.
- All those in contact with customers show empathy and understanding towards the situation and treat customers with respect.

Prevention and response



- Where possible, those at risk are warned when they are likely to flood.
- Quick response to incidents, particularly when sewage is in people's home and there is a health risk. This includes an emergency response service for those at risk.
- Customer vulnerability is assessed and people are signposted to mental health support services.
- Transparency about the causes of incidents, sharing reports and information.
- The cause of sewer flooding is fixed as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- In the meantime, provide clear timescales for when the cause of the flooding will be fixed.

Compensation

- Clear information on, and payment of, compensation.
- Good quality record keeping and data collection to ensure that customers automatically receive GSS for each and every incident of sewer flooding they experience that qualifies for a GSS payment.
- An audit of GSS payments in relation to sewer flooding incidents, to ensure that, as a minimum, these payments have been, and are being, paid to all those eligible.



Next steps for CCW and Ofwat

We plan to repeat research with customers who have had internal or external sewer flooding. This will enable us to continue to capture people's views and experiences – so that we can assess the changes companies make in response to the findings in this report and what further actions may be needed.

Ofwat

Ofwat will consider whether and how a new customer-focused licence condition could support improvements in how wastewater companies respond to incidents, including sewer flooding.

For PR24, we will consider appropriate compensation for sewer flooding incidents, where companies fall short of their expected performance.

The full research findings can be read in the BritainThinks report, which can be found on [CCW](#) and [Ofwat's](#) websites.

CCW

CCW's campaign to end the misery caused by sewer flooding started in 2021. There has been progress in bringing the industry together and moving towards agreeing improved clean-up times, better compensation for victims of repeat sewer flooding, and an end to the 'exceptional' weather clause for those at risk. CCW will continue this campaign to deliver more support and compensation for those who suffer repeat sewer flooding by 2023. This will include standard on-site times by 2023 and a review of how compensation is offered.

CCW is committed to working collaboratively with wastewater companies to deliver a better experience for victims of sewer flooding. We will do this by continuing to identify and share best practice industry-wide.

Appendix – research sample

Fifty participants took part in qualitative interviews conducted by the research agency BritainThinks. Qualitative research shows the type and range of experiences that people may have – but findings cannot be quantified due to the size of the sample and the design of the research.

It may be the case that people who have had poorer experiences are more likely to respond to a request to take part in research. We sought to mitigate that risk in two ways. We set a range of criteria for participation in the research – to ensure a mix of, for example, types of incidents. We also offered participants a financial incentive to take part in the research. Financial incentives are typically used in recruitment for qualitative research and are recognised as an effective way of encouraging participation.

Participants in the research were recruited by BritainThinks via two routes. The majority of participants (45) were recruited from contact data collected by companies and provided to Ofwat for research purposes (primarily for the C-Mex survey). A small number of participants (5) were recruited using the contact details of customers who have been in contact with Ofwat about sewer flooding.

The range of sampling criteria for recruiting participants included wastewater company area, location of the sewer flooding (internal or external), severity of the incident, and a mix of socio-demographics (gender, age, ethnicity).

The sample sought to interview people who had a fairly recent experience of sewer flooding, but with enough time elapsed to allow a full response by companies. 47 of the interviews were with people who had a sewer flooding incident six to 18 months before the research. A limit was set on the number of interviews with people who experienced sewer flooding during particular periods of Covid-19 lockdowns due to the exceptional nature of those months.

The sample under-represents tenants compared to homeowners (particularly those in local authority and housing association properties). We expected this

might occur – because we could only reach customers who had personally been in contact with their wastewater company or with Ofwat – which excluded any tenants who were not the point of contact with the company.

We set a minimum quota of four interviews with participants who did not have insurance, to understand their experiences. A higher proportion of people than expected met this criteria (18).

The list of Hafren Dyfrdwy customer contacts was small, and we did not manage to recruit participants for this research. Instead, we increased the sample for Dŵr Cymru, to boost the number of interviews in Wales.

Number of interviews by category		
	Quota	Achieved
Anglian Water	4	5
Dŵr Cymru	6	7
Northumbrian Water	4	3
Severn Trent Water	4	6
Southern Water	4	3
South West Water	4	2
Thames Water	6	6
United Utilities	4	7
Wessex Water	4	5
Yorkshire Water	6	6
Internal	min. 26	28
External	min. 10	22
Multiple incidents	min. 20	33
Priority Services Register	min. 5	7
Child under 3	min. 4	8
Digitally disengaged	min. 4	1

Further information on sewer flooding

Wastewater companies are responsible for the public sewers. These are usually in roads or public open spaces, but may run through private gardens.

The drains and any private sewers which carry household waste are normally the householder's (or the landlord's) responsibility. This applies up to the point they connect with the public sewers. This is usually at the boundary of the property.

Local authorities function as landlords for council houses and are responsible for highways drainage, including gullies, on the roads they maintain.

In England, the Highways Agency is responsible for highways drainage on the trunk roads and motorways they maintain.

In 2020-21, wastewater companies recorded more than 6,000 incidents of sewer flooding in homes. Internal sewer flooding occurs when sewage enters a building due to a blockage or collapse of a sewer, a lack of capacity in a sewer or the failure of a sewage pumping station. Sewer flooding is extremely unpleasant and companies are expected to minimise incidents, even during heavy rainfall.

In 2020-21, more than 28,000 external sewer flooding incidents were recorded across nine wastewater companies. Data is not available for Thames Water and Hafren Dyfrdwy.

Number of sewer flooding incidents 2020-21 per 10,000 properties		
Company	Internal sewer flooding incidents	External sewer flooding incidents
Anglian Water	1.33	12.72
Dŵr Cymru	2.05	25.82
Hafren Dyfrdwy	2.81	
Northumbrian Water	1.89	29.95
Severn Trent Water	1.86	8.61
South West Water	1.34	19.49
Southern Water	1.96	21.94
Thames Water	2.31	
United Utilities	4.47	20.11
Wessex Water	1.41	19.35
Yorkshire Water	3.34	21.63

Guaranteed standards scheme

The guaranteed standards scheme sets out the following for sewer flooding:

Flooding from sewers – internal flooding

If effluent enters a customer's building from a sewerage company's asset (such as a sewer or lateral drain), the company must make an automatic GSS payment of the sum equal to the customer's annual sewerage charge up to a maximum of £1,000. If the amount the company is required to pay is less than £150, the company must pay the customer £150. This payment must be made for each incident.

There are exceptions to the requirement to make a payment if effluent enters a customer's building. These are if:

- the entry of the effluent was caused by:
 - exceptional weather conditions;
 - industrial action by the company's employees;
 - the actions of the customer;
 - a defect, inadequacy or blockage in the customer's drains or sewers; or
- it is impractical for the company to have identified the particular customer as being affected and the customer has not made a claim within three months of the effluent entering the customer's building.

Flooding from sewers – external flooding

If effluent enters a customer's land or property (including outbuildings) from a sewerage company's asset (such as a sewer or lateral drain), the company must make a GSS payment of a sum equal to 50% of the customer's annual sewerage charge up to a maximum of £500. The customer must claim the payment from the company within three months of the incident.

If the amount the company is required to make is less than £75, the company must pay the customer £75. This payment must be made for each incident.

There are exceptions to the requirement to make a payment if effluent enters a customer's land or property. These are if:

- the entry of the effluent was caused by:
 - exceptional weather conditions;
 - industrial action by the company's employees;
 - the actions of the customer;
 - a defect, inadequacy or blockage in the customer's drains or sewers;
- the company has made a payment to the same customer in respect of the same incident for internal sewer flooding; or
- the customer was not materially affected by the incident.

In deciding whether a customer has been materially affected by the incident companies must take into account:

- what parts of the customer's land or property the effluent entered;
- the duration of the flooding;
- whether the flooding restricted access to the land or property;
- whether the flooding restricted the use of the land or property; and
- any other relevant considerations of which the company is aware.

CCW provides information for customers on what to do in the event of sewer flooding.

Sewer flooding: what to do if your home is affected
(ccwater.org.uk)

CCW is the independent voice for water consumers in England and Wales. We help thousands of people resolve complaints against their water company, while providing free advice and support.

CCW
23 Stephenson Street
Birmingham
B2 4BH
Phone: 0300 034 2222

Ofwat (The Water Services Regulation Authority) is a non-ministerial government department. We regulate the water sector in England and Wales.

Ofwat
Centre City Tower
7 Hill Street
Birmingham B5 4UA
Phone: 0121 644 7500

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to and research@ccwater.org.uk and mailbox@ofwat.gov.uk

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