

10 December 2020

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CCW's Affordability Review

Further to your call for evidence, please find below the responses from Portsmouth Water to the questions that you raise.

1. What works well in terms of the current arrangements for supporting households that struggle to pay their water bills.

Response: The last 10 years has seen a step change in the attitude towards, and support available for the financially vulnerable. As a Water Company, we now have a variety of support arrangements, dedicated resource and a clear focus, which works well internally. Externally, it is relationships and collaboration with support agencies and other utility providers that has really enabled us to identify and help those in financial distress.

2. In what ways could the approach to supporting financially vulnerable households in the water sector be improved.

Response: Consistency in the nature of support, especially in respect of Social Tariff eligibility criteria and the level of support. Whilst the current arrangements ensure engagement with, and support of, local customers, they do create a post-code lottery in terms of the nature and level of support given.

3. Are there gaps or limitations in the current arrangements, if so what? Which households in need of support are currently missing out on it? What evidence can you provide in relation to this? How could this be addressed?

Response: Households are most likely to miss out because we are not aware of their hardship.

Fundamentally, with a duty to supply and no application form to be completed for our services, we often do not really know our customer. Often occupier details are acquired from third parties such as landlords and often means that we do not even have a full name. Whilst, personal circumstances change over time, having a formal process that ensures that we know our customer well when they start to use our services would be very helpful.

Without knowing all our customers well, we struggle to always identify those that are most vulnerable, especially given that certain customer's may not be inclined to engage with us for a variety of reasons.

Other limitations are the availability and extent of support, as these are limited by other customers willingness to provide a cross subsidy. This could be overcome by moving from customer support driving availability to a legal requirement to provide support.

4. Are current arrangements sustainable and capable of meeting likely future needs in terms of supporting financially vulnerable households? If not, how should this be addressed.

Response: We need to define water poverty and then ensure support is both available and provided. If qualification is, for example, based on eligibility for certain benefits, then those on those benefits should be reported to Water Companies to ensure the support is provided. However, it should be noted that as a community based company we would not wish this to be a pure transactional activity – we want to engage with our customers and develop our wider service offering based on that relationship.

5. Are the current arrangements for funding Social Tariffs fit for purpose? If not, how should they change?

Response: An affordable bill should be provided to all customers regardless of where they live. The current arrangements do not guarantee that this is the case. Moreover, the array of different scheme designs makes it difficult for Support Agencies to be able to quickly and easily understand whether a client is eligible.

6. How could the sectors approach to promoting and delivering support (rather than the mechanisms they use) be improved. How could household awareness of assistance options be raised, including hard to reach households? How could the process for households to apply for financial support schemes be improved to make access easier.

Response: As above, if we know our customer and if eligibility criteria was aligned to benefits criteria then we could create a situation where eligibility is advised by government and applied quickly and efficiently to customers, who would not even have to apply for the support.