

# Research into incident response

## July 2023 Boil Water Notice in the Anglian Water region

Report for Ofwat/CCW – November 2023

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# Background, objectives and method



Blue Marble was commissioned by Ofwat and CCW to conduct research with customers to understand their experiences when incidents take place. The research is primarily focused on water or wastewater-related incidents that affect people in their homes or gardens or going about their daily lives. The programme will generate findings that:

- 1 Help to better establish what customers' expectations of companies are when incidents occur and how well these expectations are met
- 2 Can be used by Ofwat and CCW to improve companies' responses and management of incidents and people's experiences when they take place
- 3 Support Ofwat's wider regulatory work and inform CCW's wider work on behalf of consumers

**This report is the second within that programme of work. More information on the project is available at:**  
**<https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/customer-insights-when-things-go-wrong/>**



**In July 2023, Anglian Water instructed customers in parts of rural Lincolnshire to boil their water before drinking it. This is referred to as a Boil Water Notice (BWN). The BWN was in place for 72 hours. Ofwat and CCW commissioned research into customers' experience of this, as part of their incidents research programme.**

- Between the 14th and 17th July 2023, an estimated 2,900 households (c. 7000 residents) in Lincolnshire were issued with a BWN spanning 72 hours
- The area affected consisted largely of small settlements in rural areas
- Anglian Water communicated with local residents through various channels to raise awareness that their drinking water was not up to the usual standard
- Anglian Water did not share specific details about the potential contaminant in these communications
- Anglian Water told Ofwat and CCW about some issues they experienced getting certain communications (flyers and texts) through to customers

**N.B: Anglian Water did not tell customers the cause of the incident, and so the cause was not included in the research questions. However, some participants spontaneously raised the cause of the incident - either from an informed perspective (having heard from someone who works at Anglian Water) or speculatively (whilst wondering about the cause).**



BWN issued by Anglian Water

The objectives for this specific project (the second in the programme) are as follows:

- 1** Understand the views, experiences and expectations of affected Anglian Water household customers following the July 2023 Boil Water Notice (BWN), including views on Anglian Water's communication, support during and after the incident, compensation and overall resolution
- 2** Determine any differences in the expectations and experiences of different customer groups affected by the incident
- 3** Identify what parts of Anglian Water's response worked well and what could be improved

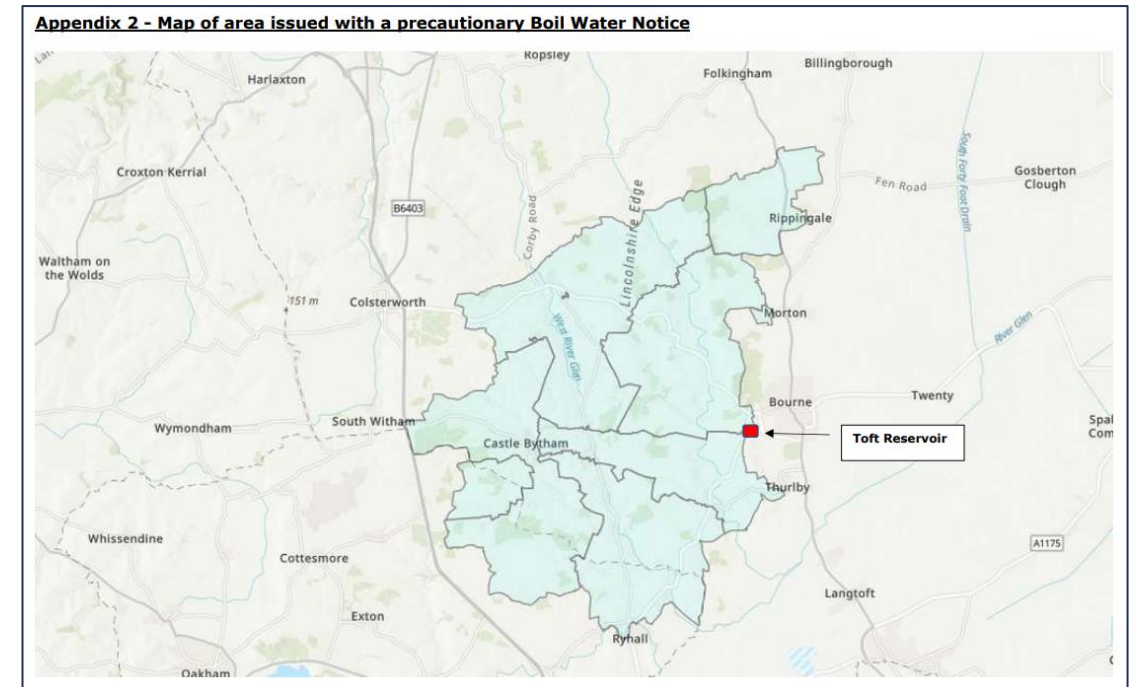


The BWN was issued to customers at 18:00 on 14 July 2023 and following satisfactory water sample test results the BWN was lifted for all customers at 18:00 on 17 July 2023.

## Anglian Water's summary of communication to customers

Friday 14 <sup>th</sup> July 18.00	BWN live BWN printed and delivered to Peterborough Sorting Office Priority Services Register (PSR) customer comms
18.20	Stakeholder organisations (including Parish Councils) alerted
18.49	Website and postcode checker updated
18.51	Email to affected customers
19.22	SMS notification: customers registered 'In Your Area'
21.00	Bottled Water deliveries to PSR addresses (all 389 had a delivery by 23.30)
Sunday 16 <sup>th</sup>	Further communication by SMS, website and social media channels to reiterate the need to keep boiling the water. Phone calls were made to all PSR customers to remind them to continue to boil their water and reassure them. Further deliveries of bottled water were made to PSR customers during the day and to the Willows Residential Care Home
Monday 17 <sup>th</sup> 18.00	BWN lifted: Telephone calls were made to all PSR customers, along with SMS, emails and updated information being provided on the company's website and social media channels

N.B: additional activity via social media, bespoke PSR comms and local employee emails  
On the 19<sup>th</sup> additional activity apologising for confusing/delayed comms



We conducted qualitative research with 26 people from affected areas within the Anglian Water region to understand their experiences. Fieldwork was conducted online and via telephone.

## Recruitment methods

- On the ground: e.g. visiting community hubs
- Social media: promoting the research via local FB groups
- Recruitment agency panel
- List of c.100 customers who had been in contact with Anglian Water (provided by Anglian Water to Ofwat)
- Snowballing through recruited participants

## Pre-task exercise

All were asked to complete 3 questions about their experiences of the incident. Participants were given the option to respond to this via video message, online survey or assisted telephone call.

### 3 x 90min focus groups (4-6 respondents per group)

### 10 x 45min depths

**1** Households with children aged 0-18

**2** Households without dependent children

**3** Vulnerable households

Vulnerable and contactors / complainants

**Fieldwork dates: 23<sup>rd</sup> August – 6<sup>th</sup> September**

Sample specification structured to provide a range of experiences / perspectives:

- Demographic mix: Socio economic grade; Life stage; Gender; Ethnicity; Range of vulnerabilities (health & economic)
- Compliance with the BWN
- Access to transport (to include customers with no access to a car)
- Billing status – including some who were not billed directly (e.g. water supply is in landlord's name)

*See detailed sample description in the appendix*



# Summary of findings



BLUE MARBLE

1

The incident was felt to be a major inconvenience for most households who found it hard to manage the practicalities of boiling and then cooling water. Many opted to use bottled water instead. Vulnerable households tended to find it harder to manage.

2

The key area of concern for affected residents was not knowing the cause of the BWN which they felt removed their autonomy to assess risk and manage their response. The tone and content of communications suggested minimal risk however those who heard from an informed person in their discussion group - or suspected - that it was E. coli were angry that information was withheld.

3

The majority of participants adopted a loose compliance to the instruction to boil water – with people accidentally or intentionally using unboiled water e.g. to brush teeth. Vulnerable customers tended to comply more strictly with a minority taking actions beyond the advice. On hearing (from others in the research groups) that E. coli was a potential cause, some said they would have complied more closely with the instruction to boil water.

4

Most people got the news about the BWN on the first evening however many perceived they were late to know as they heard first from a non-Anglian Water source – and were concerned if they had consumed water recently. When they did receive or see official notification it did not include a start time.

5

Priority Services Register (PSR) participants received prompt support via water deliveries. However, the communication and fulfilment of the water delivery operation left many other residents feeling confused. Unbranded vans and workers, not informing customers the water was there, the lack of accompanying information and seemingly random distribution of water were also noted by participants.

6

Vulnerable households were more likely to say that they had experienced significant emotional and financial impacts and had higher expectations of compensation.



# Participant experiences of the incident



# When and how participants heard the news about the BWN set the context for their whole experience

## WHEN?

- Communication of the BWN is vital, or people will carry on drinking the water as normal.
- Most of the sample heard about the BWN on Friday afternoon/evening.
- Only 1 in 'official' area did not hear until Saturday, via post: this caused the most concern.
- Those who heard from Sunday onwards either live in the outskirts of affected area (but showed up in postcode checker) or were away.

"I was looking at [the postcard] and thinking, that's 24 hours where we should have been boiling water, and you don't know what effect it's had...I was not happy about a 24 hour wait..." *Household without dependent children*

## HOW?

- PSR participants and a few others first heard directly from Anglian Water via text or email.
- However, a majority heard through the grapevine BEFORE receiving direct notification from the company. This gave a sense that they were late to hear about the incident, even if 'official' comms were received only a few hours later.

**Participants whose first notification of the incident was not from Anglian Water were left feeling on the back foot; confused as to how long the issues had been going for, concerned that they might have risked their health in the meantime and frustrated that others had heard before them.**



# Participants were unfamiliar with BWNs; limited information led to speculation and inaccurate assumptions

## Very few participants had experienced problems with their water supply before.

- The few who had experienced problems on their own properties reported positive service from Anglian Water
- There was no underlying feeling that their water services were prone to problems

## A few mentioned media reports about the water industry generally underperforming, which sometimes informed how they viewed the BWN.

- Most didn't have specific examples of this to draw on in their area
- One mentioned rumours that the water was contaminated by sewage during the BWN – this could be linked to awareness of media coverage of sewage overflow spills

## No-one recalled receiving a BWN previously.

- Participants were often unsure how to behave during an incident of this type and subsequently had lots of questions about what to do
- Most viewed the experience as a 'one off'
- Some felt that this meant they should give Anglian Water the 'benefit of the doubt' when considering the overall effectiveness of its response
- Others felt that a BWN was a serious emergency – due to the potential impact on public health of drinking contaminated water – and closely scrutinised Anglian Water's response

"Most consumers are very, very, attuned to water issues at the present time, and Anglian Water seem to be completely oblivious to this fact." *Household without dependent children*

"Kind of felt like the covid emergency." *Health vulnerable*

"There were rumours of raw sewage in the water." *Health and life stage vulnerable*



# While overall there was some dissatisfaction with the way Anglian Water dealt with the incident, many 14 could identify things done well as well as areas for improvement

When asked to rank how well Anglian Water handled the interruption on a scale from 0 to 10, **most participants gave a score of 6 or less**

Frustration expressed towards:

- Organisation of water deliveries - it seemed unclear who was eligible, water was left on doorstep and customers felt suspicious of unmarked vans
- Inconsistent communications (for some) - participants who received multiple text messages seeming to lift/reinstate the BWN were more likely to be dissatisfied

“Clarity with the messages, I did get on text message say it was okay then one that it wasn't okay... just clarity with communication.” *Health and life stage vulnerable*

When asked to name one thing that Anglian Water did well during the incident, **customers focused on the speed of their communications and support provision**

Participants felt the company did better on:

- The speed of PSR water deliveries
- Providing water for local schools
- Website information
- Using multiple forms of communication
- Getting the message out quickly

“[They did] some things well, like the level of detail of dos and don'ts e.g. how to boil the water. But [they] didn't really tell us what was going on.” *Customer with dependent children*

Most felt somewhat supported by Anglian during the incident – although they can list **areas for improvement**

Areas for improvement:

- The desire for more communication about what was in the water (and what to do if you consume it) and who was entitled to water deliveries
- More 'boots on the ground' /faster communication via flyers to reach the digitally disengaged

“There could have been more information why, more prompts when delivering the cards, all of those things - but equally it could have been handled much worse.” *Complainant*

**Seen as an unusual incident, participants hoped that Anglian Water will have better contingencies in place after experiencing it once**



## Time BWN came into effect

### Participants didn't know if they had been told not to drink the water soon enough

- This led to a sense of unease
- Worry exacerbated if they or a member of the household (esp. a child or vulnerable adult) had consumed/used water prior to hearing about the BWN
- Participants were also worried about the potential health impact on their pets
- A few were feeling unwell when the BWN was announced – and were unsure whether contaminated water was the cause

## Reason for BWN

### Participants didn't know how serious the risk to health was

- Most participants felt that they were denied the opportunity to assess the risks and manage the situation for themselves and their household as they saw fit
- Level of concern was especially acute amongst those feeling ill, and those with long term conditions
- Other participants were more trusting, believing that if the risk were really serious Anglian Water would have acted more urgently and shared information about the reason for the BWN

"I was worried, like, were the dogs going to get dysentery?". *Household without dependent children*

"Was it contaminated or was it just not up to full standard? What level of danger is it, you know?" *Health and life stage vulnerable*

"I was looking at it and thinking, that's 24 hours where we should have been boiling water, and you don't know what effect it's had." *Household without dependent children*





## Boil

Most boiled at least some water themselves

- Primarily used kettle, with hob as back-up or for greater volume – although some didn't have large enough pans. Hob deemed more cost efficient by a minority
- Cooling water was key practical issue:
  - Some had insufficient receptacles (pots, milk cartons, glass jars etc) or space to cool it down
  - Leaving boiling water around potentially dangerous: parents concerned kids would knock pans off; one young adult sustained severe burns from a bottle that shattered\*
  - Took long time to cool and had to plan ahead. One participant got home from work at 2am but unable to drink anything
  - Some unsure if refrigerating water to speed up process would mean boiling ineffectual, or if leaving water out for too long would cause it to become a health risk again



## Bottle

Most bought at least some bottled water

- More convenient option than boiling
- PSR customers provided with bottled water
- Given the rural area, many had to travel some distance to buy water when village shops ran out
- Carrying heavy bottles problematic for those with mobility issues (some of whom weren't on PSR)
- Those concerned about the upfront cost or wanting to avoid plastic waste persisted with boiling instead

"We had pots sitting everywhere because the water was too hot to wash up [with]." *Health vulnerable*

"What do I put it in to cool it down? And then how will I keep it in the fridge, how long am I allowed to keep it in the fridge?". *Health vulnerable*



## Bolt

A minority went elsewhere to use water

- One household went to the pub to eat/drink
- The child of one participant is autistic and struggled to adapt to the change; she showered at a relative's house due to fear of getting contaminated water in her mouth, and was still doing so several weeks after the event

"For her, the tap water is meant to be safe, and it's not safe, so she can't mentally now just trust that it's safe again... She prefers to go shower at my mum's even now, even though I've told her it's fine, it's been safe for ages" *Health and life stage vulnerable*

"Some [water] was available [but only] for PSR or vulnerable people in the middle of the village, so we went to town and bought our own." *Complainant*

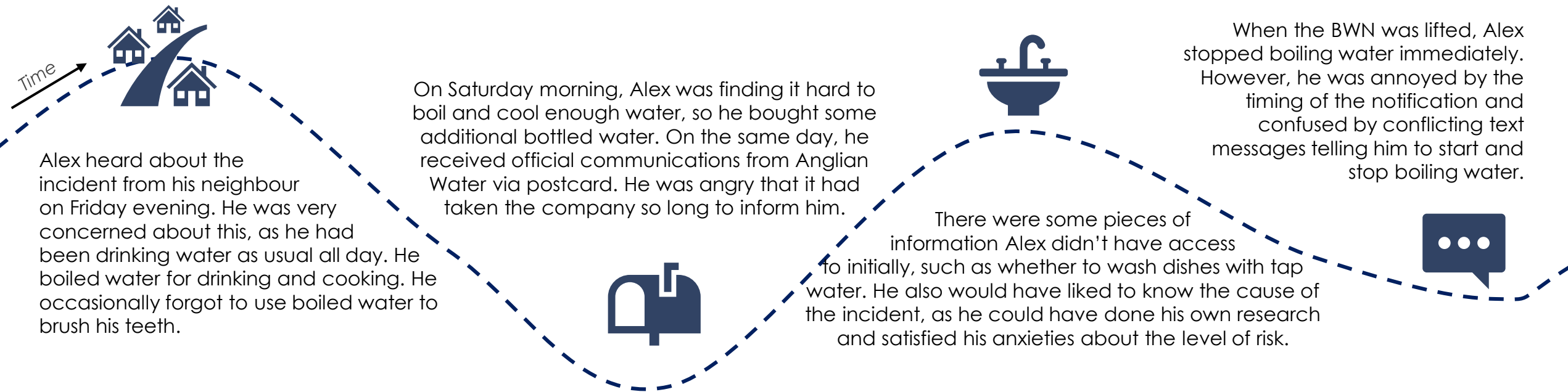
\* See case study





**Alex\* lives alone, though his son was visiting him during the BWN. He has atrial fibrillation, but only signed up to the PSR after the incident.**

**SEVERITY: MODERATE** Though Alex was upset about how long it took for Anglian Water to inform him of the BWN, his life wasn't significantly affected beyond this.



*"[My concern rating] was a 3 or 4, but a 7 or 8 on Friday evening when I heard about it because we had been drinking the water all day." Alex*

*"When I received the postcard I was incensed - it's not good enough to let people know they shouldn't be drinking the water the next day." Alex*

*"I thought it was a black and white issue - I thought that you would just boil it by kettle and that was it." Alex*



# Range of compliance with BWN: most loosely followed the guidance

**Key drivers of compliance:** perceived vulnerability to illness; nature of activity (whether water enters mouth); awareness of issue and how to respond; urgency relayed in communications received; time since start of incident in terms of fatigue; and confidence that slip ups haven't harmed.

## Non-compliance

- Two participants used tap water as usual
- One deemed his risk low: on edge of the area and had no direct comms from Anglian Water (also professed to 'laziness')\*
- One unaware of BWN

*Least common segment: not concerned or unaware*

## Loose compliance

- Mainly boiling/using bottled water
- May flex for certain elements due to calculated risk, laziness, forgetfulness, fatigue, interpretation of severity from company comms
- Compliance tended to decrease over time when realised they didn't get ill

*Majority of participants moderately concerned: reflects intangible nature of incident*

## Compliance

- Followed advice to the letter
- Some go beyond necessary actions until find answers to key questions e.g. safe to wash with tap water?

*Minority of participants, predominantly vulnerable households (immunocompromised, parents of infants and neurodivergent) felt more at risk & consequently more anxious*

## Beyond compliance

- Complied beyond the end of the BWN
- Used boiled water to wash hands
- Bathed baby in cooled boiled water
- Autistic child went elsewhere to shower

\*This scenario may be more common. If on boundary of affected area what should customers do? Should local customers who are not affected receive some form of comms to let them know not to worry?

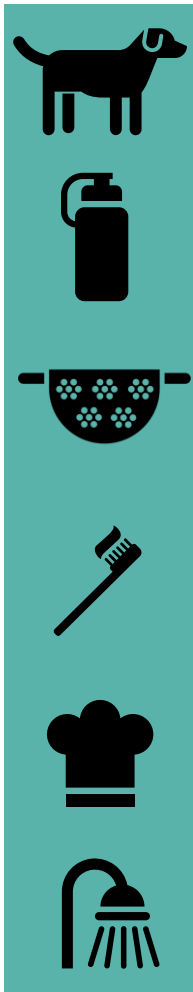


# Level of compliance relates to different activities

Most likely to use boiled / bottled water



Most likely not to use boiled / bottled water




## Non/Loose compliance

## Compliance/Beyond compliance


Strong compliance with drinking water for **pets** (dogs, cats, hens); sense contamination must be serious if it could make pets ill as the website specified


Most took care to **drink** water that was bottled/had been boiled – felt to be the biggest risk for health

Imperative that drinking water was bottled/boiled

 **Washing fruit/vegetables to be eaten raw** a common area for accidental slip ups/intentional flex (low consumption)

Used boiled/bottled for this activity

 **Brushing teeth** slip ups due to water use routine/not realising the requirement to boil. Intentional flex due to low amount consumed

 Some slips up even for most anxious (water routines deeply ingrained)

Normal water used as water would be heated for cooking anyway

Minority used boiled/bottled water to be safe

Normal water used as BWN specified customers could **bathe** as normal

Generally used normal water though most anxious washed with bottled/boiled water or went elsewhere to wash



# Company communications



# Response to communications sent directly from Anglian Water



## Text

- Positive response when received first communication from Anglian Water
- But generally gave limited information - and felt inadequate if the only direct communication from the company
- Included website links which some found useful **however can't rely on people to click on links**
- Text channel suggested immediacy of issue: fewer wondering when it started
- If text arrived after an email, this seemed less logical (most expect to see texts sooner)
- **Erroneous texts caused confusion.** Text saying water not safe to drink AFTER an email saying it was. Then an hour later another text saying safe to drink  
**N.B. some of this confusion relates to problems with phone company**



## Email

- Lacked detail that could have been included in an email:
  - what could/couldn't do and the cause
  - when the problem started
- Repeated over the incident – but said the same thing
- Isolated comments about the 'incident over' email which felt patronising
- Reports of contradictory texts and email messages

"Don't drink the water, not safe to drink, boil the water before you use it. Didn't say anything else, not anything about brushing your teeth I don't think"  
*Life stage vulnerable*



## Post (leaflet / postcard)

- Most received the postal communication – but not all
- Seen as a back-up to digital/other comms
- Level of information thought to be limited
- Easy to miss direction to go online for more info
- If the first communication, 'snail mail' felt very inappropriate for what's seen as an urgent public health issue
- Not all knew who it was from (e.g. thought a neighbour might have posted it)

"It was actually inadequate but at the time I accepted"  
*Digitally vulnerable*

- **Participants said that direct communication by SMS and email lacked key information which would have helped them to cope with the incident.**
- **Pertinent information needs to be delivered directly to residents - many don't seek it out themselves.**





## Word of mouth

- Neighbours, Parish Councillors, local friends and family quick to spread the news
- Communities shared information within WhatsApp groups
- Several reported calling local family and friends to spread the news themselves
- Word of mouth also acts as a rumour mill with reports of:
  - Sewage leak in the water
  - Spontaneous mentions of E.coli (understood to be from a legitimate Anglian Water source)

"Social networking is far more efficient than their communication strategies, whatever they may be."  
*Household without dependent children*



## Local social media

- Village Facebook and NextDoor groups very active – often reinforcing direct company comms where these were seen first
- Seen as legitimate as those who were posting often known in the community
- Rumour mill also observed on local social media with similar themes about sewage leaks

"Like any social media, you have to use your judgement on whether to believe it or take it seriously. Since it was everyone we knew, it was genuine."  
*Digitally vulnerable*



## Mainstream media

- Almost no recall of radio, press or TV reports

[Following communication with Anglian Water staff who are also residents] "We were under the impression that it was a false reading, and that we just had to wait until we got the right reading again."  
*Vulnerable group*



## Most unaware of what caused the BWN

- Most spontaneously mentioned the fact they did not know what the problem was – with negativity about this
- Some appeared to accept the BWN without giving too much thought to what the problem/contaminant might be
- However, not knowing led to speculation about the type of contaminant e.g. dead animal in the water; sewage spill
- Felt unable to assess the severity without knowing and being able to reassure themselves
- Not knowing created false reassurance: a really serious issue would trigger more ‘noise’ e.g. contact from GP
- Anticipate taking it more seriously if aware of the problem

## Participant response to suggestion that it might be E. coli\*

- It then became a much more serious incident in their minds
- Believed they would have complied more strictly (e.g. not brushed teeth with tap water)
- Believed they would have taken more steps to protect vulnerable neighbours

\*this possibility emerged in the groups as speculation rather than resulting from a specific research prompt

"Surely we learned that from the pandemic, when the instructions were clear, we all knew what to do."  
*Vulnerable group*

"I think the way it was handled and the communication being so deliberately vague, it leads you to think it's something they have done to contaminate this water, and so they're deliberately keeping it vague and high-level."  
*Household without dependent children*

"I had a stomach bug just before... it could have been the reason. I want to know."  
*Health and life stage vulnerable*

"It felt like Anglian Water were doing a damage limitation exercise. They didn't want to scare the horses, they didn't want the commercial ramifications of this, so they were downplaying it. If there was an elderly person with underlying health conditions, who got an E.coli infection..."  
*Vulnerable group*

"I think because we didn't actually know what the specific issue was, although we assumed it was a bacterial one, you are a bit concerned, because the vagueness of the description could be much more extreme."  
*Household without dependent children*

### Perceived impact of not knowing cause:

- Felt autonomy denied to protect themselves & others
- Some suspicion that it was deliberately downplayed
- Unnerving: ‘playing with people’s lives’
- Makes the post incident communication much more important (how did it occur? What measure to prevent a repeat occurrence)



Two examples shown to participants to explore tone and level of detail about cause of BWN and what to do.

## Example extract - Anglian Water

Please boil tap water as a precaution before using it for drinking or cooking. A routine test on Friday showed that the water in your area may not be up to our usual standards.

"I understand they're being vague because they don't want people to worry, but I'd look at that and think 'what aren't you telling us?'" *Health and life stage vulnerable*

Text extract taken from 'Submission from Anglian – DWI – 2023 9160 – 20 Day Event Report

## Example extract - DWI's website

What should I do if I am instructed to boil my tap water?

- Heating water is one of the best ways to kill or inactivate bacteria or viruses. Most bacteria and viruses are killed at temperatures well below 100 degrees Celsius. To be safe, bring water to the boil and keep it on a rolling boil for 2 minutes. Any bacteria or viruses that were in your water are killed or deactivated, making the water safe to drink.
- If you receive a notice to boil your water before drinking, it means that the water in your tap might contain bacteria or viruses which could be harmful to your health. You should boil it before you drink it, use it to brush your teeth, make ice cubes, prepare food, clean feeding equipment or give it to your pets.
- The water is still safe to shower and bathe in, but make sure it does not get into your mouth. It is also safe to wash dishes if you use hot water and dry the dishes thoroughly before use. You can continue to wash clothes and flush the toilet as normal.

"This message more useful; it actually mentions bacteria and viruses. The first doesn't even mention what's in the water. This is more reassuring as you feel you'll be fine if you do what it says."  
*Household without dependent children*

Text extract taken from <https://www.dwi.gov.uk/receiving-a-boil-water-notice/>

- Some spontaneously quoted back phrases they recalled from **Anglian Water's communications**: critical of phrases such as 'a precaution' and 'usual standards'
  - "Very, very low-key...virtually dismissive of there being any problem at all." *Vulnerable group*
  - "The water isn't up to the usual perfect standard, boil before use... general info, very vague." *Household without dependent children*
- The example wording makes it unclear whether a precaution – or imperative to act: sounds non urgent, non-specific: '**may not be up to our usual standards**'
- Tonally: asking not telling e.g. 'please...as a precaution' ... 'very polite, not scary'; '*Obscures the truth as it doesn't give a cause*'
- Greater detail about viruses and bacteria in the **DWI example** makes it tangible: participants felt able to assess and manage own risk
- More reassuring to have an explanation – and can see how personal actions (explained in detail, which respondents prefer) can keep you safe
- Some of the specific details about what to do or not do felt new to participants. They wanted to see this level of detail.







## What was received well?

- Receiving notification via more than one channel – gives certainty that the issue is 'real'
- For some, the tone seemed about right: take seriously but don't panic (N.B. but also criticism – see right)
- Website information was more detailed (do's and don'ts); clear map
- Clear and easy to understand (specifically referencing leaflet)
- N.B. participants unable to assess speed of communications while unaware of when the BWN started



## Areas for improvement

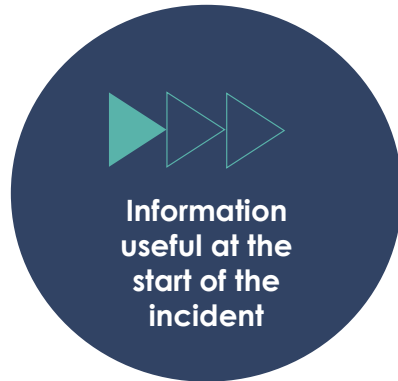
- Strongest criticism for the lack of pertinent information from the outset: clear start time, and cause
  - Emotions included frustration, and feeling rattled and patronised
  - Sense that Anglian Water withholding information (with real consequences)
- Lack of incident updates (instead, messages tended to repeat the need to boil water)
- Choice of comms: text felt most appropriate while postal comms perceived to have arrived late (potentially putting people at risk)
- Unsure how to act if the message said 'you are potentially' in the area
- Some unclear where the PSR notifications were coming from (e.g. energy company)
- Need to know what to do if drunk the water
- Mention of seeking hospital treatment if unwell created concern

"Once you went into the FAQs, that was really useful."  
Household without dependent children

"The social media was quite active about alerting people about the boil notice, the NextDoor app and the village social page."  
Complainant

"We got one email a day and they said the same things, so not particularly useful."  
Life stage vulnerable





- Multi-channel notification of BWN including start day/time inc. via Anglian Water social media
- Postal notification to include additional useful information
- Clear signposting to website
- Most want to know the cause / nature of contaminant
- Advice if consumed the water post BWN



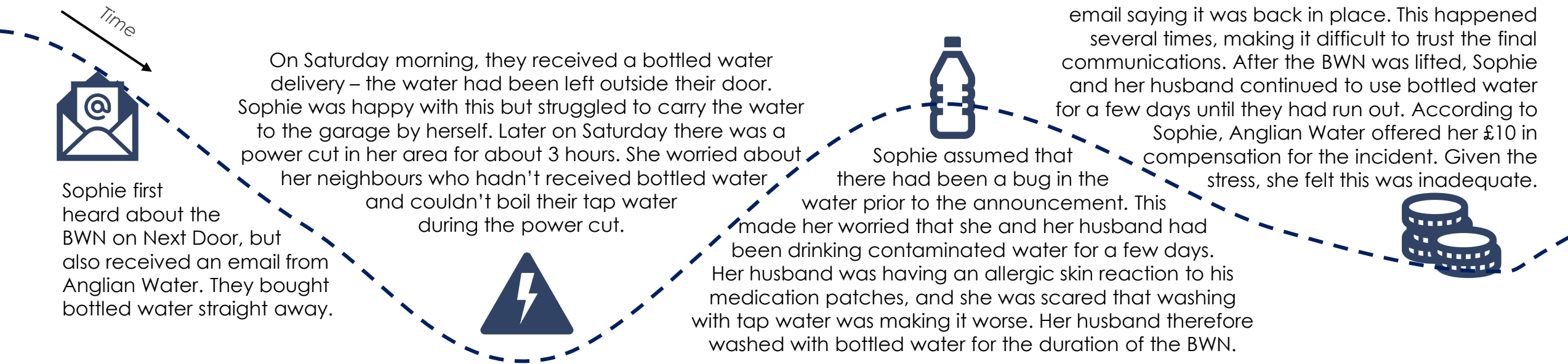
- Direct comms to include key info to illustrate extent of requirement: teeth cleaning; showering (also on website)
- Multi-channel service updates & reminders: including on water deliveries for households needing special assistance



- Do's and don'ts – and what to expect re water quality
- How it happened; new precautions to prevent it happening again
- Compensation
- Apology

**Sophie\* is retired and lives with her husband, who has Parkinson's and is recovering from prostate cancer. His mobility is limited and he uses a wheelchair. They are on the PSR.**

**SEVERITY: HIGH** Despite the water deliveries they received, Sophie and her husband were under considerable stress during the BWN.



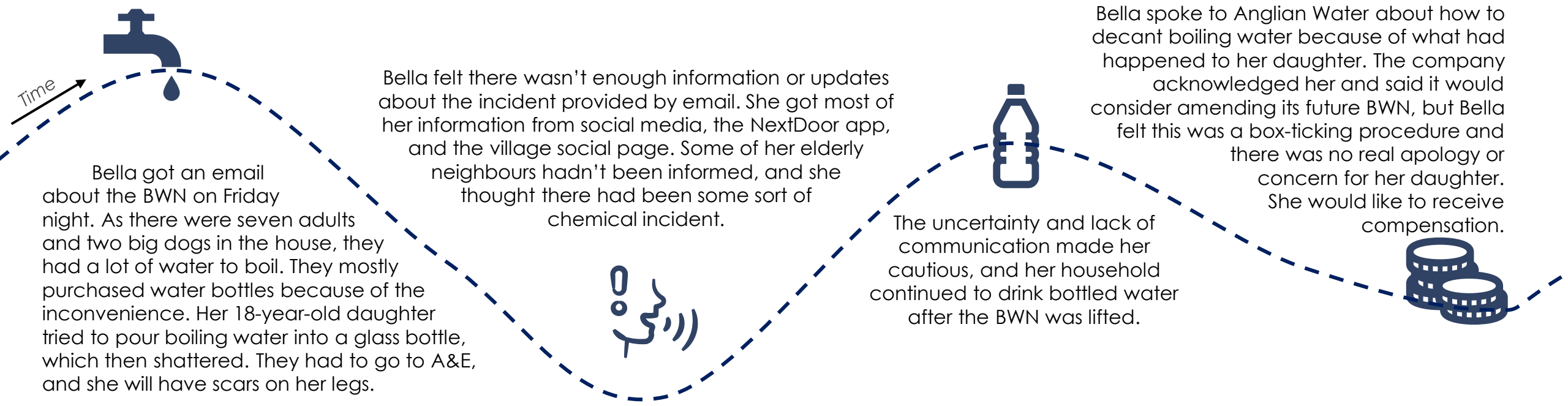
*"The thing that upset us most was not knowing what the issue was... We thought they'd found a nasty bug in the water... It added significantly to my stress... We were worried the water he was washing in was exacerbating the allergic reaction." Sophie*

*"I got on the phone to them and said this isn't going to affect me because we've got bottled water but I'm really concerned for my friends and neighbours who aren't on PSR - how the hell are they supposed to boil their water when they've got no electric?" Sophie*

*"That was absolute chaos, because we got the email to say it had been lifted, and then within a few hours, we had another boil water notice, and that happened two or three times." Sophie*

**Bella\* lives in a household of seven adults: her husband, three grown-up children, and 2 of their partners. Her daughter was left with permanent scars after boiling water during the BWN.**

**SEVERITY: HIGH** But became very high due to the impact of scalding during the incident.



*"It felt quite serious coming so late at night, made us a bit nervous." Bella*

*"What was the problem? There wasn't much information. They told us it was still okay to shower but we didn't know if it was some kind of chemical incident or something." Bella*

*"Their communication lacks, detail, clarity and frequency." Bella*

\*Names have been changed. Severity scores based on participant's perception of impact

# Support during incident





## Support for vulnerable customers: water deliveries

### Priority Services Register (PSR) participants received water deliveries, but there were some issues with communication:

- All 3 participants signed up to the PSR received water deliveries with prior notification
- They appreciated the speed of the response, with water delivered on Friday evening, and the amounts delivered were felt sufficient (in some cases excessive, leading to sharing with neighbours)
- Water often left at the end of paths, with some vulnerable participants then unable to move it inside; sometimes water assumed to be communal and taken by non-vulnerable neighbours
- After the initial drop, participants reportedly did not know if there would be more deliveries
  - One participant texted the PSR number for more information and was told there would be another drop - but could not confirm when or how much water would be delivered
  - To alleviate the stress of the uncertainty, some bought water themselves (see case study)
- Inconsistent approach to key distribution hubs such as village shops made it harder for vulnerable customers to supplement deliveries. One received a large delivery for anyone to use (one respondent wondered whether this was from unused water for PSR customers), but another shop in a larger neighbouring village ran out of stock and needed more but didn't receive an Anglian Water delivery

### Some respondents eligible for the PSR but not registered on it needed water but did not receive it

- Some saw vulnerable customers ask delivery staff for water but reportedly not get any because they were not on the PSR
- Several vulnerable households in the sample signed up to the PSR as a result of the incident – and received PSR comms immediately. A few who were eligible did not know about the PSR until they were told of it during the research, particularly those with small children in the household

"Other houses that weren't on the PSR were just going and taking bottled water." *Health vulnerable*

"We didn't need it much, on that issue it was over the top." *Life stage and digitally vulnerable*

"It was seamless, they just knew we needed it and brought it and left it at the right house." *Health vulnerable*

"One of my neighbours, she's got very bad arthritis, and I popped over to see her and they'd left these massive two litre bottles and she couldn't pick it up." *Household without dependent children*



## Issue

### **Delivery system appeared 'unofficial' & chaotic**

Participants not forewarned to expect deliveries, which happened late at night. Unmarked vans and drivers not in uniforms or hi-viz. Staff (incl. a water tester) reportedly unable to give further information on the incident and no explanatory leaflet. Water deliveries unnamed and often left on pathways.

### **Lack of clarity around reason for deliveries**

Awareness that some households have been singled out for water deliveries but no explanation as to why, as well as a belief that it could be a goodwill gesture available to all.

**Confusion created by PSR deliveries combined with lack of information about cause heightened focus on the incident and the perceived severity. As a result, it seems the line between necessity and goodwill became blurred in participants' minds, with many appearing to forget that they could boil water and instead seeing bottled water as a necessity or something that Anglian Water should be doing for all.**

**Overall, the speed of deliveries was received positively, and some small changes to the way that deliveries were carried out could significantly improve people's experiences.**

## Impact

### **Confusion and uneasiness**

Participants unnerved by the unexpected presence in their rural villages, and further worried at the lack of knowledge and openness. Surprise and in some cases alarm at finding water on doorsteps. Others unsure whether to take unnamed water.

### **Tension over perceived unequal treatment**

Confusion and grumblings amongst communities and on social media, and self-consciousness of those in receipt of water. Fear of 'missing out', reportedly leading some to help themselves from vans/unattended deliveries.

"In the rural areas that we all live in, unmarked white vans with two dodgy blokes coming out late at night, you're immediate assumption is that they're thieves, or they're dog-nappers... So, that's not going to inspire confidence."  
*Vulnerable group*

"It's trust, you don't know who these people are and what's going on. It's just not really been thought through."  
*Vulnerable group*

"If they're supplying to one section of the community they might as well supply it to all of them."  
*Household without dependent children*





## For PSR customers

- How much will be received – to avoid buying water
- When next delivery will be
- Clarity about who receives it

## For the general population

- Explaining who receives water and why
- Emphasising that boiling is suitable for purifying water and bottled water isn't necessary for those who are able to boil



## For PSR customers

- Support to physically move water to where it can be stored/used
- As a minimum, leave a leaflet with the water deliveries to answer questions (see left)
- Provide more water (in line with guidance)

## For non PSR but in need of water

- Enable easy access to PSR
- Or easy route to request water urgently



## For the general population

- Easy access to bottled water at community hubs (shops etc.)
- More 'boots on the ground' to manage local issues

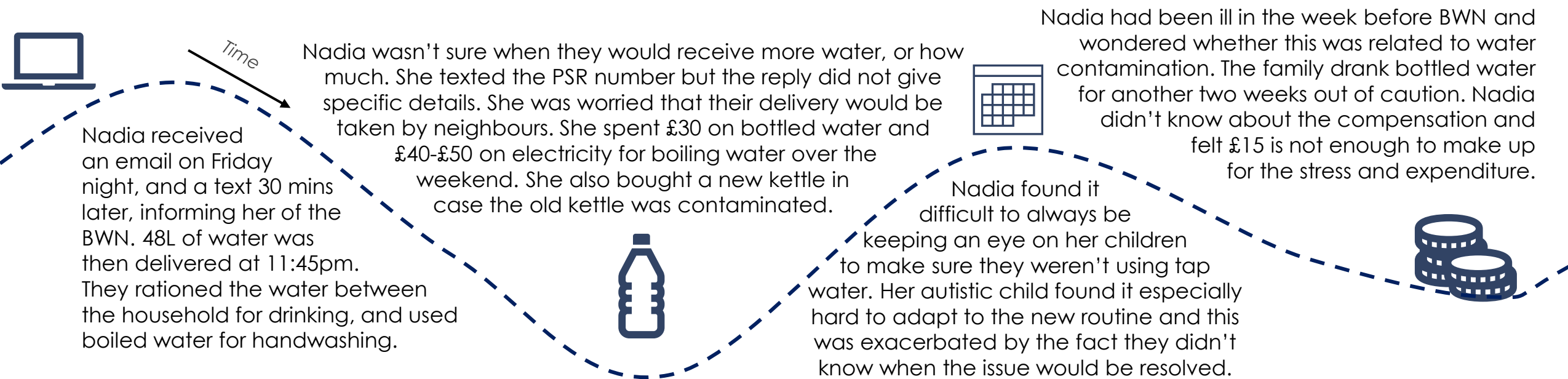




# Case study: problems with PSR water delivery, autistic child struggling to adapt to changes in routine

**Nadia\* lives in a remote village in Lincolnshire with her husband and three children aged 6, 9, and 13. One of her children is autistic, so their household is on the PSR.**

**SEVERITY: VERY HIGH** Due to practical issues with boiling/cooling, the stress caused to Nadia's disabled child, issues with the PSR water delivery, and the amount of money the family spent during the BWN.



*"Making sure the kids remember not to drink out the tap, or brush their teeth with it. Constantly on alert. One of my children is autistic so the change in his routine was astronomical, it had come out of nowhere. Spent a long time having to have the same conversation." Nadia*

*"It felt like a free for all... other houses that weren't on the PSR were just going and taking bottled water, helping themselves from the van." Nadia*

*"£15 doesn't even cover electricity used." Nadia*



# Support after incident



Some felt their experience could have been improved with more details about the BWN cause

## Sentiment towards speed of resolution

### Customers largely satisfied with speed of resolution

- Respondents told us that the incident was relatively short – but said it felt like it lasted for longer due to the inconvenience of boiling and cooling water
- Some said it was hard to judge how quickly Anglian had resolved the incident because they weren't informed about the cause and what action was required to address it
- A few health vulnerable respondents elongated the incident by continuing to use bottled water – they felt that information about the cause of the BWN would have reassured them and subsequently prevented this
- A few were unsure when the BWN ended due to contradictory texts received over 2-3 days, lifting and then reinstating it – this also impacted their confidence in water quality when the BWN was lifted for good

## Communication since resolution

### Company communications seen to be limited to details about compensation

- One customer could recall an apology via text, and another received a call-back from Anglian Water to discuss her daughter's injuries (experienced when cooling boiled water), but most could only remember receiving communications with details about compensation, or nothing at all)
- Customers would like to see an apology from Anglian Water and an acknowledgement of the disruption they experienced during the BWN

"It felt like a long time, but in reality it probably wasn't that long."  
*Health vulnerable with dependent child*

"When we got the final notice it had lifted, it was difficult to trust. It was days until we had used up our bottled water. The conflicting messages were hours apart, over 2 or 3 days."  
*Health and life stage vulnerable*

"An apology would have been nice, or an acknowledgement of the disturbance."  
*Household without dependent children*

"It's difficult to put into context because we don't know what caused it, it may have been a huge issue that actually they've resolved incredibly quickly, but because we didn't know, it just felt like a long time."  
*Child free household*



Affected customers received £15 from Anglian Water, as a credit on their bill

£15

## Sentiment towards amount and method of compensation

### Mixed response towards the amount of compensation

- Some were happy with £15, seeing it as an unexpected and welcome gesture, particularly once they realised that Anglian Water aren't obliged to give them anything
- Others, particularly those from vulnerable households, felt that £15 sounds low and would not cover the energy costs of boiling water, or purchasing bottled water and the associated travel costs. £50 seemed a more appropriate amount for many
- £15 compensation was viewed more negatively when compared to the GSS table, as people could see that it was at the bottom end of the scale, and less than promised for issues which were perceived as less impactful
- Some suggested the amount should vary according to the situation of the household, such as the number of occupants, or the level of the impact on that household and felt a % of their bill might work better

### Most were comfortable with the method of compensation

- Most were comfortable receiving money as a bill credit
- However, those in less well-off households would prefer an upfront payment to cover immediate costs

“£15, that's great, we weren't expecting anything.”  
*Customer with dependent children*

“I assumed it was a flat rate for everyone. Knowing other people's conditions though like old people, it may have been quite a considerable upset for them that we didn't really suffer. The offer didn't really reflect people's individual circumstances.”  
*Life stage vulnerable*

“£15 is a bit insulting to be honest.”  
*Health and life stage vulnerable*

“I think £50-100 bill reduction like some people in the past get when there's no water to the household. It's not as inconvenient but it is inconvenient and a failure to deliver safe service.”  
*Complainant*



## Views of Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) – and participant thoughts on BWN not being included

In the focus groups and depth interviews, we showed participants introductory information about the GSS (see appendix for show material). Most had no idea that GSS existed.

### Very few thought water customers have a legal right to compensation for service issues

- One participant was aware of the GSS but did not know any details; another assumed the bill credit they had received from Anglian Water was mandatory
- On reviewing the GSS information many believed BWNs should be covered, particularly given other outcomes with compensation appear less inconvenient and that dangerous water is of equal gravity to no water
- Regardless of the legalities, many felt that water companies should proactively provide compensation for incidents to avoid customers being out of pocket, and that doing so would make them feel positive towards the company
- A few were less supportive of service issues receiving compensation; one felt money should be invested in improving water services; others felt they should be covered only in certain circumstances, such as for businesses or after an extended period of disruption

### There was low awareness of the Anglian Water bill credit

- A few had noticed that they had received a bill credit and some others had been notified about it, but most did not know about it
- There was a positive reaction to the payment being made automatically as it required no effort from them

"I think compensation should be legally mandated. It's a 5-mile journey to the nearest supermarket to get bottled water. It adds to cost of living." *Health vulnerable*

"I don't accept there's a difference between no water or dangerous water." *Complainant*

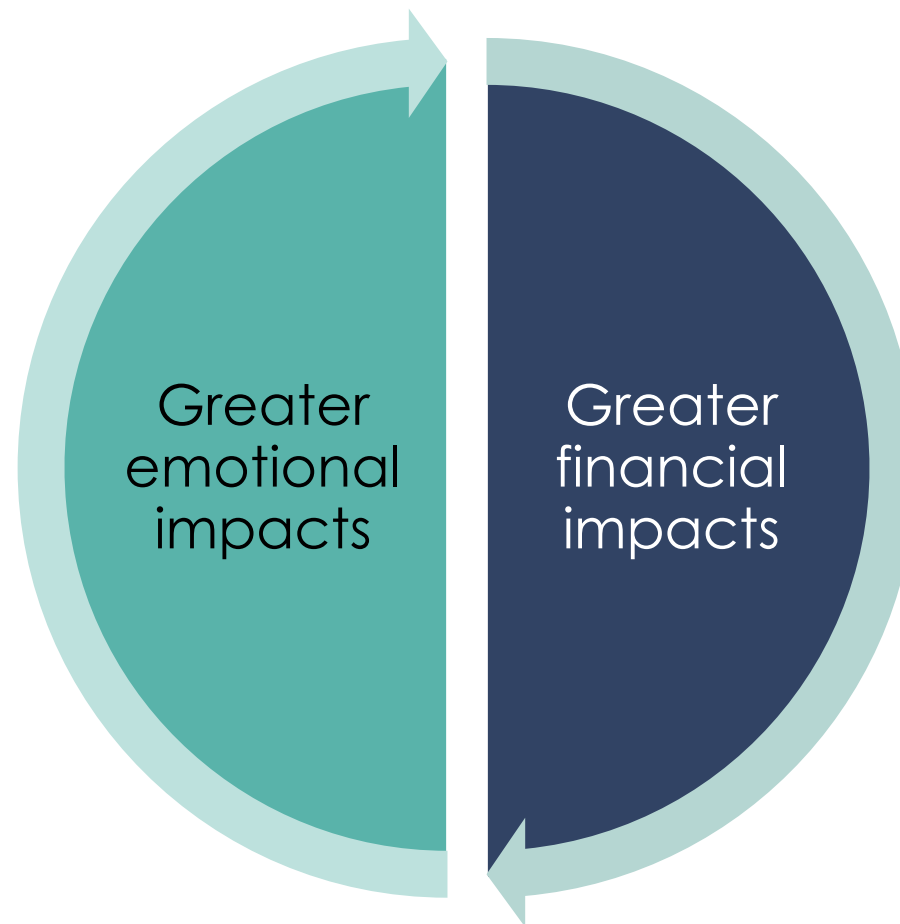
"I'm not in favour of everyone getting compensation unless it was something really culpable." *Life stage and digitally vulnerable*

"If they're not being forced by OFWAT, then a company that wants to appear to care about its customers should be offering compensation in their terms and conditions." *Life stage vulnerable*



## Those in vulnerable households tended to have higher expectations for compensation

- Greater degree of concern over protecting vulnerable – which can continue beyond the duration of the BWN
- Financially vulnerable more likely to notice tangible impact of expenditure
- Change to routines can cause distress for those with learning difficulties and/or mental health issues
- Adherence to rules more stressful for those with certain vulnerabilities (mobility issues, monitoring small children etc) or limited resources (equipment and space for boiling/cooling water etc)



- More likely to take adherence to the extreme in order to protect vulnerable e.g. buying new kettle to replace 'contaminated one', boiling water for handwashing, continuing to buy bottled water 'just in case'
- More likely to have pre-payment energy meter, with higher unit rates for energy used to boil water

"Considering there were two of us in the house who were equally mentally affected, plus extra electricity, I would've thought £25 or £30 would've been much more appropriate because there was significant mental and physical stress. Being able to have a lunch out to get over the stress doesn't seem extravagant." *Health vulnerable*

**Vulnerable households were more likely to perceive that they have experienced significant emotional and financial impacts and therefore often expect higher amounts to cover costs and as compensation for stress.**





- BWNs covered by the Guaranteed Services Scheme to provide compensation which reflects the amount of disruption they cause
- Steps to claim compensation made clear to customers – if not automatically taken off bill



- Compensation given with an explanation and apology – not instead of them
- Amounts given reflect cost and disruption of incident (£15 questioned as not enough)
- Immediate payments made for those most affected financially e.g. pre-payment energy meter users
- Customers notified when their compensation payment has been processed



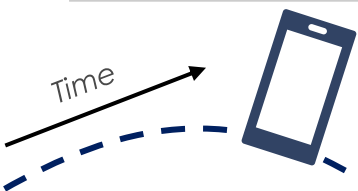
- Clear notification that water is safe to drink
- Explaining any temporary differences in water quality
- Contacting customers to apologise for the incident
- Explaining what happened and what steps the company has taken to rectify the situation



# Case study: health vulnerable energy prepayment meter customer concerned about cost

**Jack\* lives with his partner and 3-year-old daughter. He is disabled due to a leg operation that went wrong, and is on disability benefits but is not aware of being on the PSR. The family uses a pre-pay meter for their gas and electricity.**

**SEVERITY: HIGH** Due to combination of financial stress placed on the household and worry about the reason for being unwell.



Jack experienced gastroenteritis with severe pain just prior to the incident and wondered if the two were related. He found out about the BWN on Friday through text, but assumed he was finding out later than other people and the BWN had been in place for a while. The text didn't say anything about brushing teeth, so his household did this as normal.

Jack found a water delivery outside his house on Saturday morning, which didn't have a name or label. He took half and gave the other half to his neighbours, since he didn't know who it was meant for. However, he felt like the amount of water he'd been given wasn't enough.



The family are on a pre-paid electricity and gas meter and had to cut down on electricity usage during the incident to be able to boil water. They got £15 in compensation but spent a lot more than that on electric. They felt the compensation amount was insulting.

There were rumours of sewage in the water supply, which made Jack worried; he thought Anglian Water should've explained the real reason for the BWN. He got an email saying the it had been lifted, then a text saying the water was still unsafe. He called Anglian Water about the contradictory communications and was told it was safe to drink again.



*"It was just left on the path; it could have been the neighbour's. I just grabbed it and shared it out. No name on it or anything." Jack*

*"We're on a prepaid meter and running out of electricity with a 3-year-old [saying] 'why's the telly not working daddy?'" Jack*

*"We gave our daughter a squash from the tap the day they told it was safe to drink and then sent her to play school... then got a text that it WASN'T safe to drink." Jack*





# Lessons learnt



1

**Communication about a BWN is key to customers' experience of an incident, and informs how they should act**

- Direct communications from the company – ideally from more than one channel – underline the importance and urgency of the incident. Social media channels are important to encourage sharing. In rural areas, the community grapevine is a very effective means of getting the message out
- Companies should couch messages about a BWN within a 'tell your neighbours' strategy to demonstrate integration in the word-of-mouth process
- Communications should be as clear as possible about which customers are affected and reassure those who do not need to act – some may live in the affected area according to postcode checkers and/or hear about the BWN through word of mouth but do not need to follow it
- Messages need to be explicit about the start of the incident, so customers know how long the risk has been present. Including the time message is issued. This will avoid confusion where there are delays caused by the telecoms provider
- Communications need to inform and/or reassure people who have been drinking the water before they knew it should be boiled about the level of risk to their health, and any actions they need to take
- Where companies use a precautionary message, with tentative rather than urgent tone and language, customers adhere more loosely to the need to boil water. Where there is a risk to health, the message and tone of voice should be clear and assertive
- Not knowing the cause of the BWN caused concern. Evidence from this incident suggests transparency about the cause – and practical information about how to act - will improve customer compliance with the BWN
- Cooling water is not straightforward for many people: advice about this (including education about possible health and safety risks) is needed as part of the communication plan
- Companies need to ensure their website has clearly signposted information to support affected customers



2

**During an incident, companies should deliver high quality and consistent levels of support to customers**

- PSR water delivery operation, especially where outsourced, needs to be professionally handled e.g. providing support for those unable to carry water supplies, giving better information with water deliveries and using branded hi-viz uniforms and signage to reassure customers of the operator's legitimacy
- Non PSR affected residents who require assistance need easy and urgent access to support
- Better supporting communications about water deliveries – that they are for vulnerable households only - is needed to manage expectations of non-PSR households
- Potential for e.g. delivery tracking system via SMS/email to enhance experience for customers receiving water
- As when anything goes wrong, people need to be able to get in contact with their provider e.g. via a visible incidence response number

3

**Post-incident communications and compensation are expected to satisfy customers that the problem is over and future risks are being managed**

- End of incident communications should address specific information needs to reassure customers that they can resume using tap water; together with better explanation about how the company will mitigate against future occurrences
- Companies should take the opportunity in post-incident communications to raise awareness of their PSR and the additional practical assistance they can give to people in vulnerable circumstances
- Companies should explain to customers what they are doing to prevent any recurrence of the incident and offer a genuine apology for the disruption experienced



## 4

**A BWN is an inconvenience for households who want to see this incident added to the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS)**

- Companies should ensure that all affected customers receive suitable compensation in a reasonable timescale
- A more immediate compensation strategy is required for PSR and social tariff customers who may be on a pre-payment energy meter and financially buffeted by a BWN
- It appears anomalous to people that the BWN incident is not included for mandatory compensation in the GSS: customers' experiences suggest the emotional and practical impacts were at least as significant as other compensation events
- Companies should ensure their customers understand the process for compensation and what they are entitled to as part of the (GSS)
- Companies should provide clear information about any compensation including GSS on their website and other communications

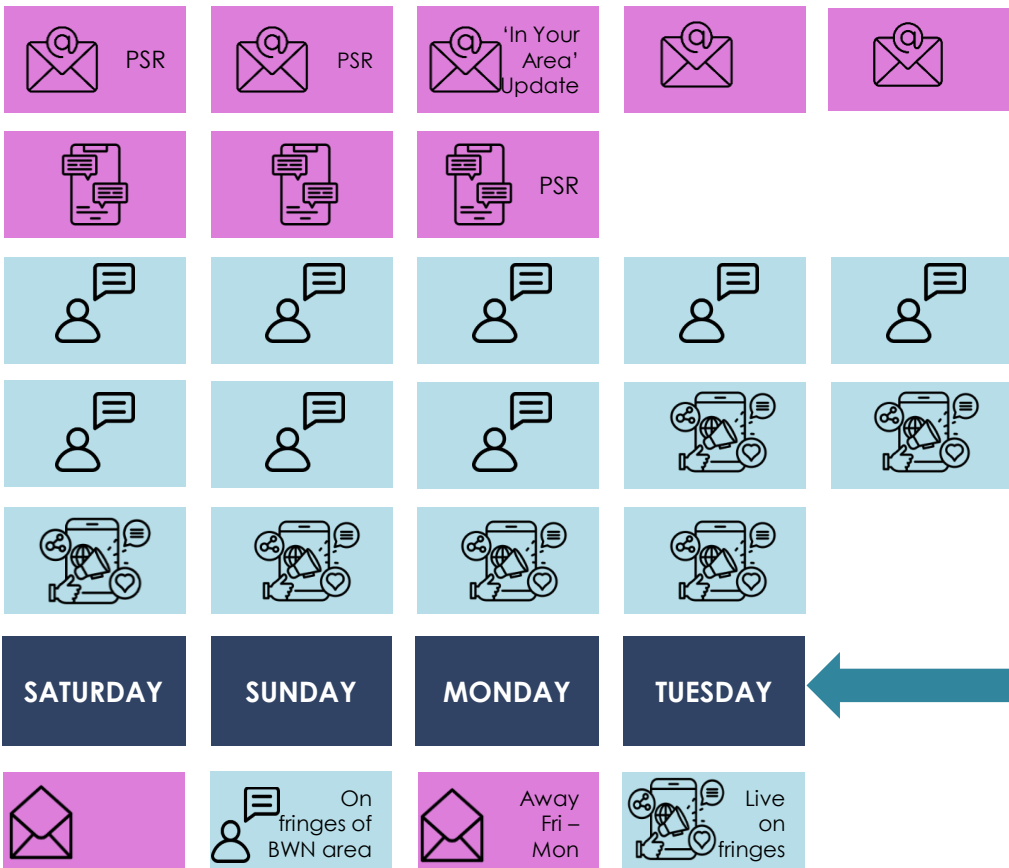


# Appendix



# Timeline: customers receiving notification of the BWN

FRIDAY AFTERNOON / EVENING (14<sup>th</sup> July)



**The vast majority heard on Friday afternoon/evening**

- But most heard through the grapevine BEFORE receiving direct notification from the company. This gave a sense that they were late to hear about the incident, even if 'official' comms were received only a few hours later
- PSR participants and a few others first heard directly from Anglian Water

**Participants whose first notification of the incident was not from Anglian Water were left feeling on the back foot**

- They were confused as to how long the issues had been going for, concerned that they might have risked their health in the meantime and frustrated that others had heard before them

**Those who heard from Sunday onwards either live in outskirts of affected area (but showed up in postcode checker) or were away**

- Only 1 in 'official' area did not hear until Saturday, via post: this caused the most concern

KEY:

First heard from Anglian Water directly

First heard from a non-Anglian Water source



Email



Text



Social media



Post



Word of mouth



## Methodology: additional detail

We conducted qualitative research with 26 customers from affected areas within the Anglian Water region, to understand participants' experiences first-hand. Fieldwork was conducted online and via telephone.

### Pre-task exercise

All asked to complete 3 questions about their experiences of the incident. Participants were given the option to respond to this via video message, online survey or assisted telephone call.

### 3 x 90min focus groups (4-6 respondents per group)

Households with dependent children aged 0-18

Households without dependent children

Vulnerable households

### 10 x 45min depths

Vulnerable and contactors / complainants

### Good mix of demographics across sample

- 19 x >60, 7 x 60+; 16 x ABC1, 10 x C2DE; 2 x non-white
- 13 contacted Anglian Water or complained on SM

Range of vulnerabilities:

- 11 x health condition impacting daily life; mental health condition; physical disability; immunocompromised
- 3 x on PSR
- 3 x households with children >5 – 1 of which newborn
- 4 x digitally excluded
- 4 x living alone
- 2 x financially vulnerable (Currently struggle to pay all or some household bills PLUS total household income > £21k per annum AND/OR in receipt of benefits)

N.B: Demographics not mutually exclusive

### Recruitment involved several methods

- On the ground: recruiter spent 20-21st August in the area visiting community hubs
- Social media: promoting the research via local FB groups
- Recruitment agency panel
- List of c.100 contactors (provided by Anglian Water to Ofwat)
- Snowballing through recruited participants

The sample specification was structured to provide a range of experiences and perspectives on the incident, including:

- Compliance with the BWN
- Access to transport (to include customers with no access to a car)
- Billing status – including some who were not billed directly (e.g. water supply is in landlord's name)

**Fieldwork dates: 23<sup>rd</sup> August – 6<sup>th</sup> September**



## Guaranteed Standards Scheme

### Standards of service

All customers of water and sewerage companies are entitled to guaranteed minimum standards of service, as laid down by the Government. These rights are known as the guaranteed standards scheme. Where a company fails to meet any of these standards of service then it is required to make a specified payment to the affected customer.

### Compensation

Details of payments water companies must make to household customers if it does not meet its service standards for water supply are summarised below. There are occasional circumstances when these payments do not apply. In particular, payments may not apply when severe or exceptional weather has prevented them from meeting their standards.

- Incidences of low water pressure = £25
- Supply not restored (initial period) = £20
- Supply not restored (each further 24hrs) = £10





**Physical disability**

**Blind or partial sight loss**

**Difficulty hearing or speaking**

**Health condition needing constant water supply**  
e.g. dialysis

**Memory loss**  
e.g. dementia, Alzheimer's

**Language other than English / literacy difficulties**

**Mental health condition**  
e.g. depression

**Older people**

**Unable to use internet**  
(digitally excluded)

**Developmental conditions**  
e.g. Autism

**Ill health**

**Children aged under 5 in household**





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