The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Complaints Charter Insights Report

November 2026

ccw.org.uk

Background and methodology



Foreword

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As the independent consumer representative, one of CCW's most important functions is to take up complaints on behalf of water consumers where their initial complaint to the water company has not been resolved to their satisfaction. We also work with the water companies to review their complaint handling processes. Ideally water companies would resolve all complaints first time, and there would be no need for complaints to be escalated to CCW.

Therefore, CCW welcomes the launch of the 'Make it matter – customer complaints charter' by several water companies, with others to follow. This independent CCW research has helped to inform the Charter. It looks at consumer views on the proposal including its wording and language, ease of understanding, the intentions behind the Charter and how it can be delivered most effectively for consumers.

The Charter sets out a process for water companies to follow to help ensure that people who complain feel listened to and receive a responsive service. The areas covered include important aspects of complaint handling for consumers, such as timescales, dedicated case ownership and communications.

Our research found that broadly, consumers welcome this initiative and see it as a positive reflection on companies. If delivered effectively, it is a chance to help rebuild trust among consumers following significant negative media attention around the water industry. Personal experience is important to help balance this, meaning that complaint handling is an essential part of the business to get right.

Helen Brown

Director of Consumer Relations

Research objectives

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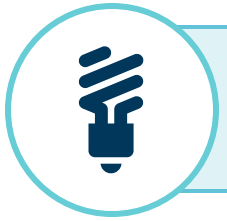
CCW aims to understand how information in a draft complaints charter for the water sector could be best conveyed to consumers, including consumer responses regarding clarity, tone and any takeaways or nuances for specific groups.



How do consumers perceive complaints processes in the utilities sector including water, and what are their expectations around complaints charters?



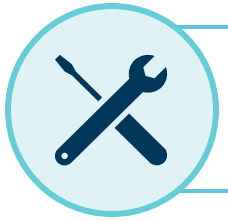
What is the most useful information to include within a water complaints charter to help consumers understand the process and manage expectations?



For those with previous complaint experience (e.g., in adjacent sectors like telecommunications and energy) what can we learn in terms of best practice?



How does the draft Complaints Charter come across to consumers in terms of clarity, tone and relevance of information?



From a customer perspective, when is the best time to introduce and integrate the complaints charter within the customer journey?



How can the impact of the charter be maximised to ensure accountability of water companies? What metrics are important to report on and publish?

An overview of our approach – Qualitative Element:

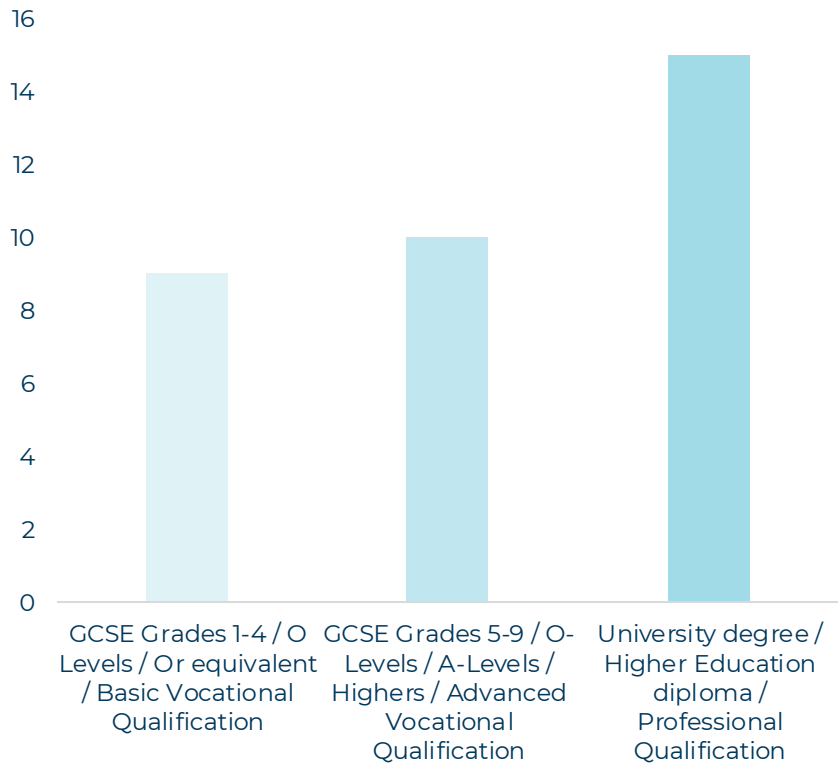
6 x 90-minute online focus groups with a mix of people across England (n=29) and Wales (n=5) covering a spread of respondents from different regions, who are all responsible for their household water bill.

People aged 20-75, across life stages and household compositions: those living alone, living with other adults, living with children or empty nesters.

Respondents were recruited from a mix of water providers in England and Wales: Affinity Water, Anglian Water, Bristol Water, Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water), Severn Trent Water, South West Water, Southern Water, Thames Water, United Utilities, Wessex Water, Yorkshire Water.

We spoke to people across a range of education levels and our sample included three neurodiverse respondents with a diagnosed condition that influences their ability to process information, or read or write e.g., ADHD, dyslexia.

Education levels across the sample



An overview of our approach – Quantitative Element:

Yonder conducted an online survey between 20 and 21 August 2025, speaking to a nationally representative sample of **1,844** adults across **England and Wales.**

In the survey, respondents were allocated one of two routes. Half of the sample answered the survey questions in the **context of the water industry**, and the **other half answered about a non-water route**. These respondents were asked instead to consider the questions in relation to utilities more broadly such as broadband or energy providers.



Sample breakdown:

Route Type	
Water	50%
Non-water	50%

Gender	
Male	48%
Female	52%

Children under 18	
No	73%
Yes	27%

Social Grade	
NET: ABC1	56%
NET: C2DE	44%

Ethnicity	
White	83%
NET: Minority	16%

Age	
NET: 18-34	28%
NET: 35-54	33%
NET: 55+	39%

Region	
North East	4%
North West	12%
Yorkshire & Humberside	9%
West Midlands	10%
East Midlands	8%
Wales	5%
Eastern	11%
London	15%
South East	16%
South West	10%

Executive summary



The Complaints Charter represents a major promise to give water consumers agency when things go wrong.

What matters most goes beyond just success rates but visibility and follow-through...



Executive summary

How consumers feel about complaints charters and the water industry:

★☆☆ Having a complaints charter is **important to most** consumers but is particularly important to those who have **made a complaint in the past.**

Having had negative experiences making complaints in the utilities sector in the past, consumers **recognise the importance of having something in writing to protect their own interests.**

This is also **more important** among those who were looking at a **complaints charter for the water industry** (versus those who viewed the charter blind within the survey) – due to a **lack of trust**, where negative sentiment towards water companies can be compounded by **negative press** and **inability to choose their provider.**

Although consumers recognise the value of a complaints charter in theory, they do **voice concerns** as to **whether water companies will fulfil their promises** in practice.

Complaints charter feedback

- The charter tests well across education levels and is seen as **easy to understand** due to the **simple language and formatting** used (headers, bullet points, chunking of sections).
- The charter is also seen as **comprehensive in its coverage;** however, some sections are seen as more important than others, with **practical basics taking priority: timelines, resolution** they can expect and **how best to get in touch/complain.**
- Wording where there is **room for interpretation or ambiguity**, or which **comes across as vague, did not resonate with consumers – in these instances**, consumers can often assume the worst, assuming **vague phrasing has been chosen deliberately** to mislead and protect the water company's own interests.
- Examples include where there is mention of **directing consumers to a third party** (can be seen as shirking responsibility), **mention of the GSS** (which consumers had low awareness of), and **referral to a right to appeal to a stage 2** (without elaboration on what a stage 2 is).



Maximising impact of the charter

Integrating commitments across the customer journey and raising awareness of these public promises is itself a step towards accountability and an investment worth making if companies are serious about shifting the trust dial.



Increasing awareness of the charter could start to shift the dial on perceptions - although they may not read it at the time, consumers want to be notified of its existence upon publication, as this shows goodwill and transparency.



Consumers want to be notified via email/app if using digital channels; for those who use paper, on the back of a bill or letter is suitable.



Retain aspects which make the charter easy to read: using headings, bolding and bullet points, and considering adding a process overview and drop-down options where consumers can navigate to sections of interest to increase usability.



Consumers ideally would see the charter when moving home or starting with a new water provider and be reminded of the charter at key points where the charter could be most useful (e.g. during a service disruption, when making a complaint).



If displaying the charter online, it needs to be **easy to find** (on a **homepage** or on higher traffic site areas, e.g. FAQs, complaints, contact pages).



Publishing a single statistic on the percentage of complaints resolved is a simple, effective way to evidence accountability for consumers, though they want to see numbers in perspective (e.g. compared to base sizes / totals) for added transparency.

How to navigate this report

This is an integrated report, drawing from both qualitative and quantitative research. To make it simple to understand which insights have been derived from which methodology, a key is included at the bottom of each slide.

Complaints charter feedback key

These symbols will help to quickly convey which phase findings refer to within the report:

QRE

This symbol used throughout the deck will be used to refer to insights derived from the **quantitative survey.**

QUAL

This symbol and any **quotes** throughout the deck will be used to refer to insights derived from the **qualitative focus groups**.

QRE QUAL

These symbols combined will be used to refer to insights derived from both the **quantitative survey and qualitative focus groups.**

For example:



Consumer attitudes towards complaints, and perceptions of water companies

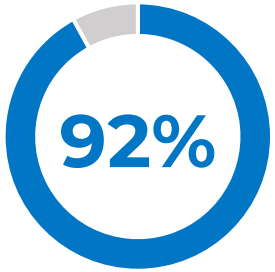


Having a Complaints Charter is important to the vast majority of consumers

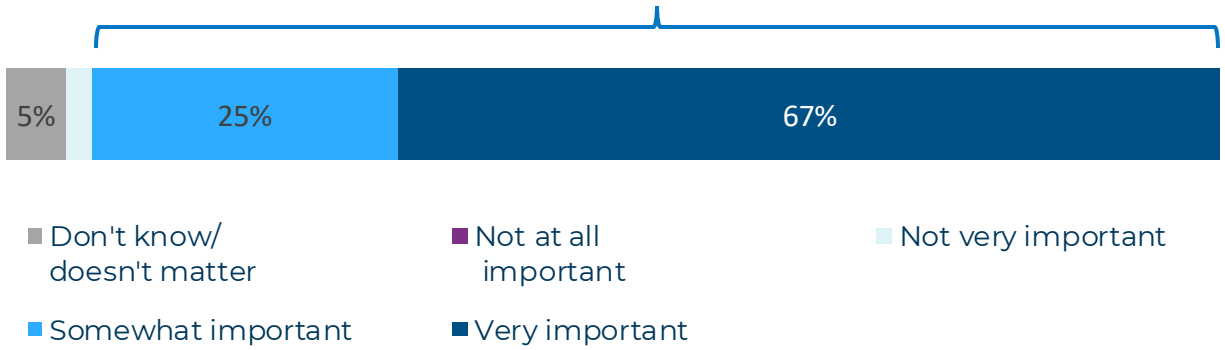
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Importance of Customer Complaints Charter:

QRE



...of respondents agree that it is important for an organisation to have a complaints charter



Q. A complaints charter is a public document which sets out how an organisation handles customer complaints and the standards they follow. How important or unimportant is it for an organisation to have a Customer Complaints Charter(s)?
Base: All respondents (1,844)

What consumers find important to include in a complaints charter:

QUAL

*"I would want it to include **clear and concise instructions** on how to make the complaint process **simple and easy to navigate,** and that you will be allocated **one single person to deal with the situation**, an email address and a telephone number, so you don't have to search everywhere."* ***Female, 20-49, Wales***

*"If one of my household utility providers had a complaints charter, I would want it to be "**human and clear**" about how long things will take, when I am definitely going to get a reply (not an indicative time!) and when I 'will' get a resolution. I would also want a **named contact**, so I do not feel like I am being passed around."*
Male, 20-49, Central & North England

*"**How the complaint is being handled clearly** – **e.g. step-by-step instructions** and maybe the different ways I can complain, phone, email, live chat. I'd also like to know **if the complaint is being handled by one person** or if multiple people jump on the replies."*
Female, 20-49, London & Home Counties

*"In terms of what is important to me is **setting expectations** and **keeping customer in the loop**, so it is clear what stage the complaint is at."*
Male, 20-49, Central & North England



QRE QUAL

Trust in utilities companies to resolve complaints is low and consumers recognise the value of documents which can be used to protect their rights

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A Complaints Charter is considered more important by those who have made a complaint in the past.
Experiences of making a complaint in the utilities sector, including water, are often negative, leading to increased caution and scepticism:

Difficulties reaching a human complaints handler

- Contact details are 'hidden', only being able to speak to chatbots
- Difficulty explaining circumstances to automated systems – generic 'computer says no' responses or a lack of accountability.
- Complex call centre dialling systems and long call wait times

Technology integration issues within complaints process

- Being cut off on the phone or having poor call signal
- Complaints being 'ignored' or lost through the complaints handling process

Perceived inefficiencies by human complaints handlers

- Being passed between multiple departments, having to repeat the complaint
- Lack of knowledge or ability to make decisions among staff
- Failure to follow through on promises (e.g. refunds, escalation to manager)

"It is so frustrating not to have a direct phone number that you can actually speak to a human being." ***Female, 50-75, South England***
"It's a never-ending vicious cycle to, one, try and find a customer service number." ***Male, 20-49, Central & North England.***
"I would struggle with understanding why it needs to have multiple people involved in the communication trail." ***Male, 50-75, Central & North England***

This is particularly the case for **older generations,** who tend to have accumulated **more negative experiences over time**, making them more cynical.

This can be exacerbated by the perception that **companies value and respect their consumers less** these days and their feeling '**left behind' due to technological advances.**

"It can be hard if you're not young and tech savvy to find a way sometimes. If I'm struggling now, I can't begin to imagine what it'll be like 10 years on". ***Male, 50-75, Wales***

Trust in companies to resolve complaints is low, and consumers recognise the **value of a Complaints Charter as a form of insurance** which they can refer to protect their rights and give them more leverage to hold companies accountable.

Q. A complaints charter is a public document which sets out how an organisation handles customer complaints and the standards they follow. How important or unimportant is it for an organisation to have a Customer Complaints Charter(s)? Base: All respondents (1,844)

QRE QUAL

Water is held in similar disregard to other utilities; however, high levels of media coverage and inability to switch provider can lead to even greater frustration with water companies

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Having a complaints charter was seen as more important to those:

Answering specifically about the **water industry** (95%)

And those based in **London** (96%)

But mistrust is not unique to the water industry: consumers can hold similar attitudes towards energy and broadband providers, seeing them as self-serving and profit-driven.

There is a lack of trust in water companies stemming from:

- **Service disruption** and lack of resolution, e.g. leaks, being without water for longer periods of time.
- **Bill increases**, without seeing where the money is going or that it is making a positive difference.

Negative sentiment towards water companies is compounded by:

- **Recent and repeated negative news coverage**, e.g. dumping sewage, executive salaries.
- **The fact that you cannot choose your water provider.**
- **Consumers can feel 'trapped'** and the fact that they have no other options can increase frustration when things go wrong or they see evidence of perceived malpractice.

Quantitatively, attitudes were **broadly consistent whether respondents were told the charter related to water or not**.

- For example, they were similarly likely to see a charter as **making the organisation feel more:**
  - **trustworthy** (70% water/69% non-water),
  - **responsive** (72% water/72% non-water)
  - and **credible** (75% water/73% non-water).
- Reactions to the charter document itself and how clear the text was also showed little variation.

"It's so sad, having been a hostage of Southern Water for some time now, I think where we are, you can't go anywhere else, you can't switch provider, you're kind of stuffed" ***Male, 50-75, South England***

Q. A complaints charter is a public document which sets out how an organisation handles customer complaints and the standards they follow. How important or unimportant is it for an organisation to have a Customer Complaints Charter(s)? Base: All respondents (1,844)

QRE

Complaints charter deep dive



The charter tests well with consumers across education levels; it is seen as clear, simple, easy to understand and comprehensive

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The complaints charter was received positively; **however**, **most consumers saw it as ambitious enough for water companies to meet the commitments already outlined**. There was no real desire for the charter to go beyond that, as it might risk feeling disingenuous.



- **The use of simple, jargon-free language** aids understanding of points made.
- **Content was felt to be comprehensive: the charter included all key sections that consumers would expect to find**, many appreciated its thoroughness and struggled to think of information that was 'missing'.

Consumers also appreciated other aspects of ***how*** **the charter was presented, including:**

✓ **Use of headers, bullet points and bolding** of key information.

✓ **Chunking of information** into numbered sections.

"This charter has a ***great a detailed structure*** *which can make it* ***easier for people to understand*** *of how to go about filing a complaint.*
The bullet points help to section each part *individually which makes the overall appearance easier to the eye."*
Female, 20-49, Wales



First impressions of the charter - verbatim:

QUAL

"My initial impression is somewhat positive. I feel like the company is **trying to demonstrate that they take complaints seriously** and really trying to treat consumers well.
It is written in a way that feels almost balanced and relatively easy to follow."
Male, 50-75, Wales

"I think this feels really thorough and comprehensive. I like that it lays out when consumers can expect to receive contact and how they can escalate the process if they are still not satisfied."
Female, 20-49, London & Home Counties

"I think it works very well. Reads **friendly and professional Information very clear & easy to understand**. I can't fault it - it's clear, professional and friendly, outlining boundaries to protect staff as well."
Female, 50-75, South England

"In terms of what is important to me is **setting expectations** and keeping customer in the loop, so it is clear what stage the complaint is at."
Male, 20-49, Central & North England

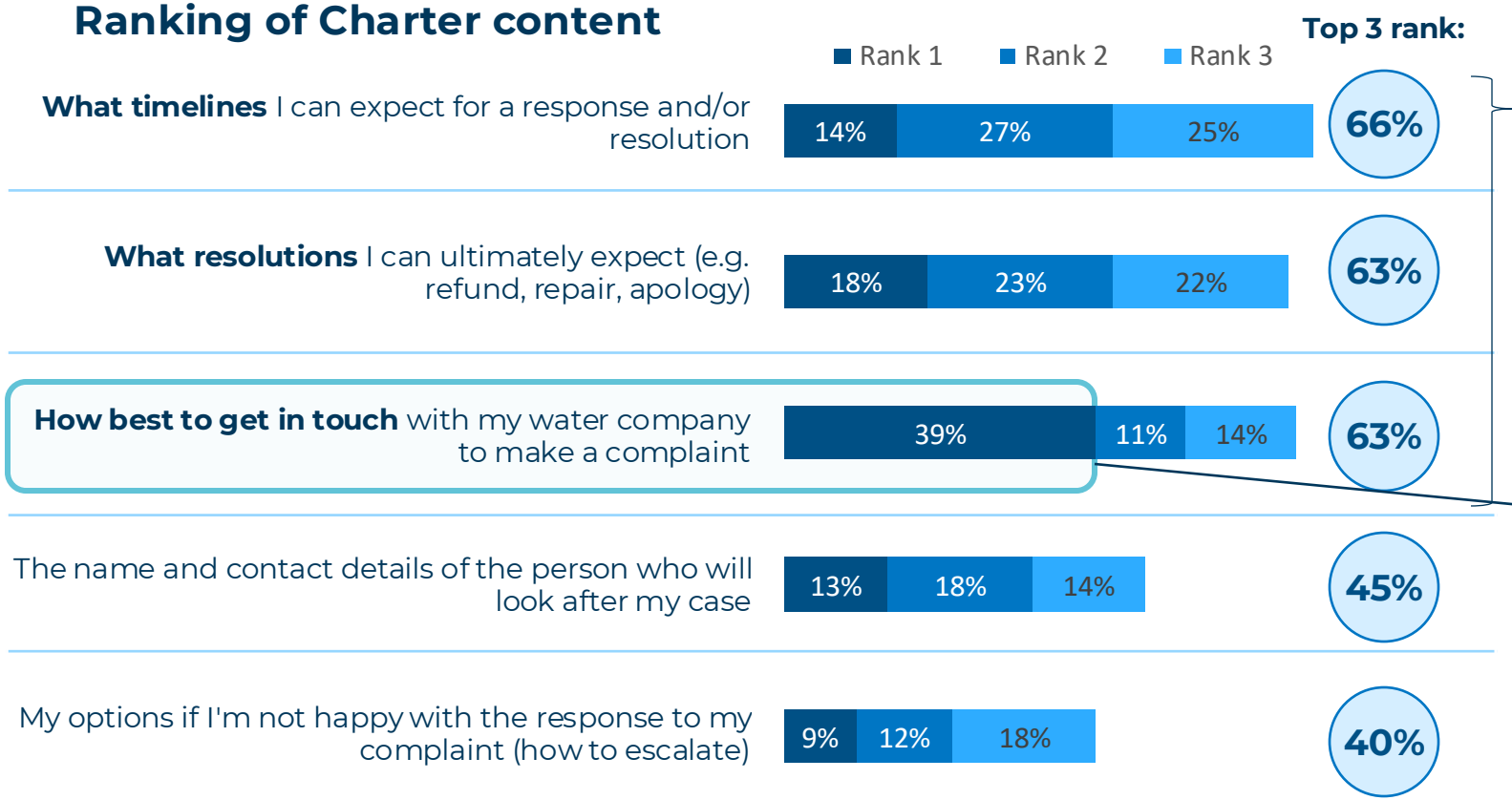


QRE QUAL

When it comes to a complaints charter, consumers want the practical basics first: clear routes to complain and certainty on timelines and outcomes

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Ranking of Charter content



Q. What are the key areas you think a Customer Complaints Charter should cover? Base: All respondents (1,844)

What consumers want to know:

Timelines **Resolutions** **How to complain**

The top three highest ranking sections of the charter all ladder up to complaints being handled quickly and effectively.

Ultimately, providing clear timelines and getting the complaint handled is more important than having a dedicated case handler.

'How best to get in touch' with their water company was ranked **the most important area that the charter should cover** by the highest proportion of those surveyed. Therefore, consider **recommending the most efficient way to log a complaint** to provide consumers reassurance, reduce wait time, and accelerate resolution timelines.

For most content areas, complainers and non-complainers show similar priorities and levels of importance (ranking). However, **people who have complained before place slightly less importance on knowing the best way to get in touch** (61% vs. 63% overall in top 3 rankings).

By contrast, they place more importance on having options if unhappy with the response (44% vs. 40% overall in top 3), driven by more people ranking it third (+3%).

QRE

The commitments make a positive first impression in terms of tone used and points raised; however, consumers remain sceptical of whether water companies will follow through

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What's working well:

- ✓ **The introductory paragraph to the charter is received positively and communicates the right attitude to complaint handling.** Consumers appreciate the admission that '**sometimes things can go wrong**', followed by the commitment to finding a resolution. This signals openness, honesty and accountability, setting the tone for the rest of the charter.
- ✓ **Consumers like the clarity within the commitments outlined in the 'our commitment to you' section.** Ensuring complaint handlers are trained to listen and respond to concerns with empathy and respect, and demonstrate understanding, is key for customer service, especially as a common frustration is consumers feeling misunderstood and dismissed by employees or chatbots, whether that is intentional or not.

What's working less well:

- Whilst the commitments outlined are viewed positively in theory, they are perceived more as a 'wish list' than a realistic set of standards for water companies to uphold, given their reputation.

What this means:

- Consider signposting how water companies will be held accountable alongside these commitments (e.g. reporting on performance) to increase credibility.

Make it Matter – Our commitment as a sector

Our Customer Complaints Charter

At [Your Organisation Name], we are committed to delivering excellent service. However, we recognise that sometimes things can go wrong. When they do, we want to make it easy for you to tell us, and for us to put things right quickly and fairly.

Our Commitment to You

We are committed to:

- Listening to your concerns with empathy and respect.
- Being open, honest and transparent
- Taking ownership of the issue and resolving it quickly
- Giving you a dedicated case owner as a single point of contact
- Learning from your feedback to improve our service across the sector

"I like the introduction. Honest, open and transparent communication." **Male, 50-75, Central & North England**

QRE QUAL

For most, timings around initial contact and resolution feel appropriate; however, this may depend on the nature of the complaint

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Timescales were seen as crucial information to provide within the complaints charter as they offer consumers objective and realistic timeframes to adjust their expectations around how their complaint will be handled.

What's working well:

- ✓ **Consumers appreciated the clarity around when they could expect to hear back regarding their complaint and the commitment to providing a 'clear plan of next steps',** given that complaints can often be 'lost' or unanswered.
- ✓ **The 48-hour initial contact window** and resolution timelines **sounded reasonable** to most consumers, and for some, were quicker than anticipated. However, many stated this would be context dependent and **expected this to be faster in the case of an emergency** (e.g. a leak or unexpected water service disruption).

What's working less well:

- '**Empowered**' came off as **unclear, 'buzzwordy' corporate jargon**, lacking in concrete meaning and was unwelcome by most. People would **prefer a more objective or meaningful adjective,** e.g. professional, or qualified.

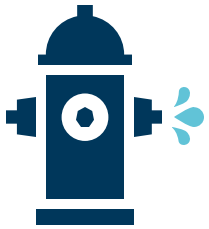
What this means:

- **Avoid wording that can be open to interpretation**. People feel reassured by clear and simple language with a meaning that is easily understood – words that feel subjective can come across as unclear, unhelpful and can even be perceived as intentionally confusing.

1. Timescales

- **Initial Contact**: You will receive contact within **48 hours** from a trained and empowered team member to listen and understand your concern.
- **Resolution Timeline**: We aim to resolve your complaint within **5 working days** or provide a clear plan of next steps if more time is needed.
- **Preferred Contact Method**: Where possible, we will resolve your complaint by **telephone**, if that is your preferred method.

"Within 48 hours is a fairly reasonable...I mean, it depends what it is though. If you've got a water main burst outside the front of your house, 48 hours is a very long time to wait."
Male, 50-75, South England



QRE QUAL

Having a dedicated case owner signals accountability and reassures consumers who may otherwise feel dismissed

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What's working well:

- ✓ **Single point of contact:** Having a single POC provides consistency, signals accountability and directly tackles the issue of consumers feeling 'shuttled' between team members when making complaints. However, they also raised the need for a contingency plan in case your contact is away (e.g., sickness, annual leave) and want written records to provide transparency – even if the complaint was taken via an alternative communication method (e.g. phone call).
- ✓ **'Consistency', 'accountability' and promises of keeping consumers informed and updated were appreciated** as consumers often report feeling in the dark when it comes to making complaints, given the absence of communication from service providers in the past.

What's working less well:

- **The word empowered was unpopular** (for the same reasons stated on the previous slide).
- **The notion of customer service representatives challenging what has happened.** For some consumers, this came across as employees questioning their experience, not accepting their account as fact (instead of proactively working towards issue resolution).
- **Consumers want clear information as to *how regularly* their case owner will keep them informed.**

What this means:

- **To increase reassurance of resolution and accountability, provide a contingency plan** for the single point of contact in addition to a record of what has been discussed.
- **Clarify the role of the customer representative**, removing reference to their 'challenging what has happened' and specifying how they will keep consumers informed in more detail to help manage expectations.

2. Dedicated Case Ownership

- **Single Point of Contact**: From the moment your complaint is received, a dedicated case owner will be assigned to manage your case from start to finish.
- **Our people are empowered to make decisions and challenge** what has happened to help resolve your issue.
- **Consistency and Accountability**: Your case owner will be responsible for keeping you informed, coordinating any necessary actions, and ensuring a timely and satisfactory resolution.
- **Direct Communication**: You will have direct contact details for your case owner, making it easier to stay updated and ask questions.

"I like the consistency of having a caseworker who's the same person without having to go through everything again each time, which can be so deeply annoying and frustrating."
Female, 20-49, Wales

QRE QUAL

Whilst the Resolution Approach aims for clear outcomes, there are certain parts that remain unclear to most – including the reference to GSS

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What's working well:

- ✓ **People like the commitment to providing clarity around how an issue will be resolved** and what steps are being taken, they appreciate being kept in the loop regardless of whether a resolution has been reached or is yet to be reached.
- ✓ Stating 'we will apologise' signals taking accountability and conveys humility, which appeals to consumers.

What's working less well:

- **Signposting may come off as jargon**, and some perceive this section as potentially dismissive and as water companies pushing responsibility or blame elsewhere.
- **The GSS has low awareness among the public** and, therefore, when mentioned without a definition or further explanation, causes confusion.
- The terminology 'without quibble' and the vagueness around 'go further where necessary' are felt to be subjective and unclear.

What this means:

- **Care should be taken when signposting to third-party organisations for further support** and how this is framed can help the message feel more supportive instead of customers feeling 'fobbed off'.
- **Clarify the role of the GSS vs the complaints charter:** Consider providing information in the form of hyperlinks to relevant documents around the GSS or interactive features if offered online (e.g. definition presented when hovering over mention of the GSS) or even visuals illustrating that the Charter is in effect before the GSS.



3. Resolution Approach

- **Clear Outcomes:** We will either resolve the issue or clearly explain the steps we are taking to reach a resolution.
- **Signposting**: If your issue is outside our responsibility, we will direct you to the appropriate organisation for support.
- **Accountability**: If we haven't got it right, we will apologise and where appropriate we will apply the **Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) without quibble** and go further where necessary.

"They're saying we have our timescales, but then the GSS might say something different that would involve them giving compensation. It feels a bit confusing." **Female, 20-49, London & Home Counties**

"I take that as, it's not our problem, and we'll fob you off. They've just worded it nice and polite, but really, what it's saying is, if it's not our problem. We'll just send you someone else." **Male, 20-49, North England**

QRE QUAL

Communication Standards tested well due to its customer-centric outlook

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What's working well:

- ✓ **Consumers appreciated the commitment to communicating in a 'helpful, friendly, clear, respectful and jargon-free manner'** using preferred methods of communication (though some acknowledged slightly fewer words could be used here). This signalled companies' efforts to be transparent.
- ✓ **Regular progress updates and written follow-ups are appreciated**: for many who have trust issues with utilities companies and complaints processes in general, having written accounts of conversations helps provide 'evidence' of what was discussed and much needed reassurance.

What's working less well:

- In principle, receiving 'regular updates' is positive, but for most, **more detail around timeframes and objectives, and absolute figures, would help** provide reassurance and manage expectations.
- The message of being kept informed throughout the process is welcome but is also repeated / implied in other sections of the charter (i.e. "responsible for keeping you informed", "easier to stay updated"), so this could be streamlined.

What this means:

- When making statements and commitments on actions, provide absolute timings and communicate with well-defined and understood terms as already covered in the timescales section (i.e. remove duplication).



4. Communication Standards

- We will communicate with you in a **helpful, friendly, clear, respectful**, and **jargon-free** manner.
- You will be **kept informed** throughout the process, with **regular updates** on progress and a written follow up where required.
- We will ensure **your preferred method of communication** is respected.

"They're saying jargon-free, and then they've just put guaranteed standard scheme randomly in the middle of a sentence. [...] I do also think that they've used too many words to say how they're going to communicate."
Female, 20-49, London & Home Counties

"I like that you can choose your preferred method of communication, and they'll run with that, because I might be at work. [...] Sometimes I don't want a phone call at 8am" **Female, 20-49, North England**

QRE QUAL

Learning and improvement are of lower importance to consumers, as this is often seen as internal and lacking immediate impact for consumers when making a complaint

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What's working well:

- ✓ **Consumers appreciated the notion of monthly reporting and complaints being reviewed at a higher level**. This gave the impression that their complaint, in aggregate with others, could make a difference and would be used to improve service delivery at a wider scale. However, there were concerns about what would be published specifically (e.g. metrics used, robustness of methodology used to report findings), with some raising concerns of data manipulation in reporting.
- ✓ **Using complaints insights to improve overall service** was appreciated as consumers felt that all staff should be trained to provide a consistent level of customer service and act in accordance with wider commitments (e.g. communication standards, follow Standard Operating Procedure).

What's working less well:

- **There was some confusion around mentions of 'Executive Oversight' and 'executive' level, with what this meant and entailed being less clear**.
- **Industry complaints learning**: consumers felt this was not important to include within a complaints charter, reflecting that it does not seem to move the dial in terms of actions that would build customer trust. For many, this felt like an unnecessary event that would not help to improve the complaints handling process and ranks low on the list of priorities that water companies should be actioning (e.g., infrastructure improvements, responsible waste disposal, leaks, etc.).

What this means:

- **Streamline this section to focus on aspects which consumers think will genuinely impact them:** Executive oversight and training and development and not multiple wider data points.

5. Learning and Improvement

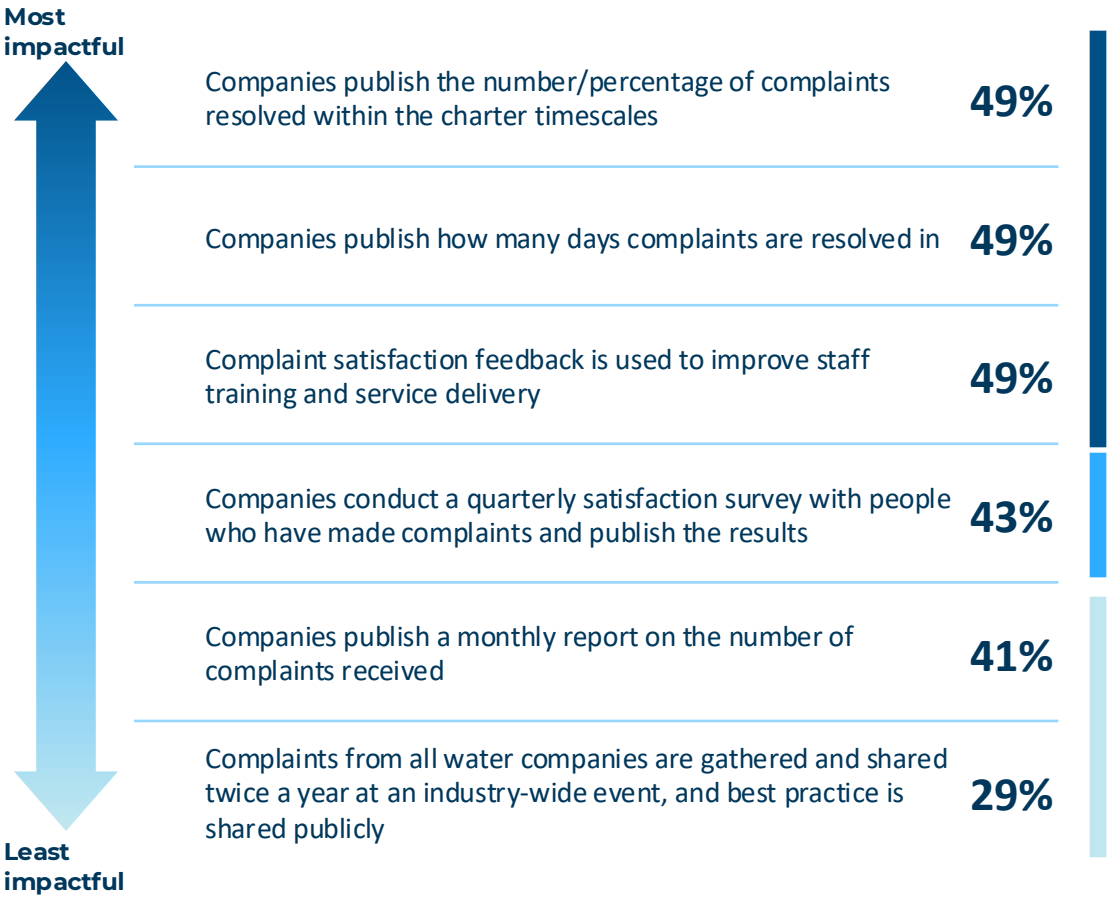
- **Customer Feedback:** We will ask for your opinion to understand your experience and identify areas for improvement.
- **Executive Oversight:** Complaints are reviewed at the executive level, with **monthly reporting** to ensure accountability and continuous learning.
- **Training and Development:** Insights from complaints will be used to improve staff training and service delivery.
- **Industry complaints learning** – we will share our learning across the sector so we all improve and build customer trust, coming together twice a year to set out best practice.

"There're more points on the complaints process that you need to be aware of to make a complaint, and know how it's going to be dealt with before you worry about a manager reviewing them at the end of the month."
Female, 20-49, London & Home Counties

QRE QUAL

Percentage of complaints resolved is a simple, effective way to evidence accountability; other factors lack impact and leave room for bias

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Llais defnyddwyr dŵr



In the survey three things came out as equally important at 49%; the discussions added nuance to this with the publication of the number/percentage of complaints resolved within charter timescales being preferred overall.

- Publishing the percentage of complaints resolved and/or within the timeframes is seen as the most impactful by consumers because it provides one simple figure which is easy to comprehend, and feels more objective / less room for interpretation (though they want to see base sizes for added transparency).
- Consumers want to see this publicised across water companies so they can compare their performance. It also provides an added reason for water companies to do better if their figures compare poorly to others.
- Improving staff training and service delivery was seen as a positive, but this felt more like something water companies would do internally and was not something consumers felt they needed to see evidence of (as this should be self-evident in the experience they have when making a complaint).

Other factors are less important because consumers don't see how they benefit the customer.

- Publishing customer feedback, surveys or reports does not guarantee they will action the feedback and there is low appetite to read detailed published information.
- They also leave room for interpretation and bias: an industry consortium, in particular, was seen as an internal event where companies would be patting themselves on the back or not taking the purpose of the event seriously.

Q. If your [water/broadband/energy] supplier had a Customer Complaints Charter, what would be the best way(s) of showing how they are performing and how the Charter can be used to improve things for customers? Base: All respondents (1,844)

QRE QUAL

Offering multiple communication channels resonated with consumers; however, more information on what to include in a complaint is desired

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What's working well:

- ✓ **Consumers appreciate that there are multiple channels offered**, which feels inclusive and accessible for those who are tech-savvy, and those who are digitally disadvantaged, though some mentioned that 'app' was missing as a main channel.

What's working less well:

- **Notes: Scepticism remains regarding response times stated when consumers think about more traditional channels:** receiving a complaint response within 48 hours after sending a complaint via post feels unrealistic. Consumers also want to see when 'live' communication channels are open to them (e.g. phone line opening hours).

What this means:

- **Signpost essential information consumers need to provide** when making a complaint (if not included in the remit of the charter or already covered elsewhere, provide a link to this information).
- **Consider providing the 'most efficient' way to log a complaint** or the most efficient channel, in addition to a wide range of channels to suit those with different needs and preferences.
- **When providing phone and 'live' options of communication, show the hours the line is open for communication,** e.g. 9:00 am – 5:00 pm Monday to Friday and consider how this could be tailored to more urgent complaints.



6. How to Make a Complaint

- You can make a complaint via a variety of channels:
- Phone: [Insert phone number]
- Email: [Insert email address]
- WhatsApp [Insert phone number]
- Online: [Insert link to complaints form]
- Post: [Insert postal address]
- Note: companies to include the channels they have available.

"It's kind of wild, because you're not going to hear back within 48 hours if you've posted them a complaint."
Female, 50-75, London & Home Counties

"There's other options than just doing it online, on, like, the live chats, like, you've got different options, and I think that's good. I quite like that."
Female, 20-49, Wales

QRE QUAL

The option to escalate one's complaint and have an independent review is appreciated but more clarity is needed on how this process would work

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What's working well:

- ✓ **People like the idea of having an independent body (CCW) – this helps** provide reassurance that there is someone else to go to if needed, especially considering not being able to switch providers. The contact details listed provide added convenience.
- ✓ **The right of appeal is appreciated** – people like being made aware of their rights as a customer; it shows that the company is being transparent, and it feels like helpful information to have, given the low trust in the sector.

What's working less well:

- **Consumers are unclear what stage 2** is, and when they have the right for their case to be escalated to this stage.
- **Consumers are unclear as to what a 'further company independent review' is**, whether that be independent from the dedicated case owner or independent of their water provider.
- **Referencing their issue being six/eight weeks old makes consumers feel uneasy** - they assume that this means water companies will not comply with the shorter timeframes for resolution provided.

What this means:

- **Consider using visuals to help illustrate the stages**, including what happens at each, i.e. stages that sit within the complaints charter and those that sit within the GSS, but ensure the complaints charter remains the focus, so its impact is not diluted.

7. Escalation and Independent Review

- If you are not satisfied with progress, you have a right of appeal to **a stage 2** for a further company independent review,
- If you are not happy with the final resolution, or your issue is over **six/eight** weeks old, or you just want some free, trusted, independent advice, you can **contact the Consumer Council for Water (CCW), the independent voice** for water consumers in England and Wales by calling 0300 034 2222 or by using the online form here.

"It doesn't set out what a Stage 2 is at all."
Female, 20-49, Central & North England

"I quite like that it gives you the independence of the CCW there. It does say a further company review, so I'm assuming that's internal to the water company and it'd be people that haven't been involved necessarily from the beginning…It's not that clear though."
Male, 20-49, South England

QRE QUAL

People stand by ‘Service with Respect’ and it reflects favourably on water companies to include – but the section could be more concise

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

What’s working well:

- ✓ **As it stands, the message is clear and consumers agree that water companies should set their standards around how consumers treat their staff**, especially in the case of dissatisfaction and complaints handling, where emotions can run high.
- ✓ **The zero-tolerance policy was seen as an essential element to include**, as it shows water companies taking a firm stand against inappropriate behaviour. ‘Zero tolerance’ is also language they are used to coming across in these circumstances.

What’s working less well:

- **Consumers note that repetition of points which convey the same sentiment can dilute the impact of the message** and make the section more effortful to read.
- **Some note this section could also be combined with the Communications Standards section** to further streamline.

What this means:

- Streamline this section to make it easier to read; retain the core message of having a zero-tolerance policy and the expectation that staff should be treated with respect.

8. Service with Respect

- We want to do our part, and we kindly ask that you do the same.
- Our team is here to support you—please treat them with the respect they deserve.
- We welcome your feedback, but we ask that all conversations remain respectful.
- Join us in creating a positive experience for everyone—speak kindly, act respectfully.
- We have a zero-tolerance policy for abuse. Let’s keep our spaces safe for all.
- We are one of xxx companies that have signed up and are committed to the Institute of Customer Service’s Service with Respect campaign.

“Maybe for the company, it gives them the opportunity to put the phone down if a situation manifests itself. […] I think it needs to be written. I think it's clear, it's concise, there's no ambiguity about it.”
Male, 50-75, Central & North England

QRE QUAL

Maximising impact of the Complaints Charter

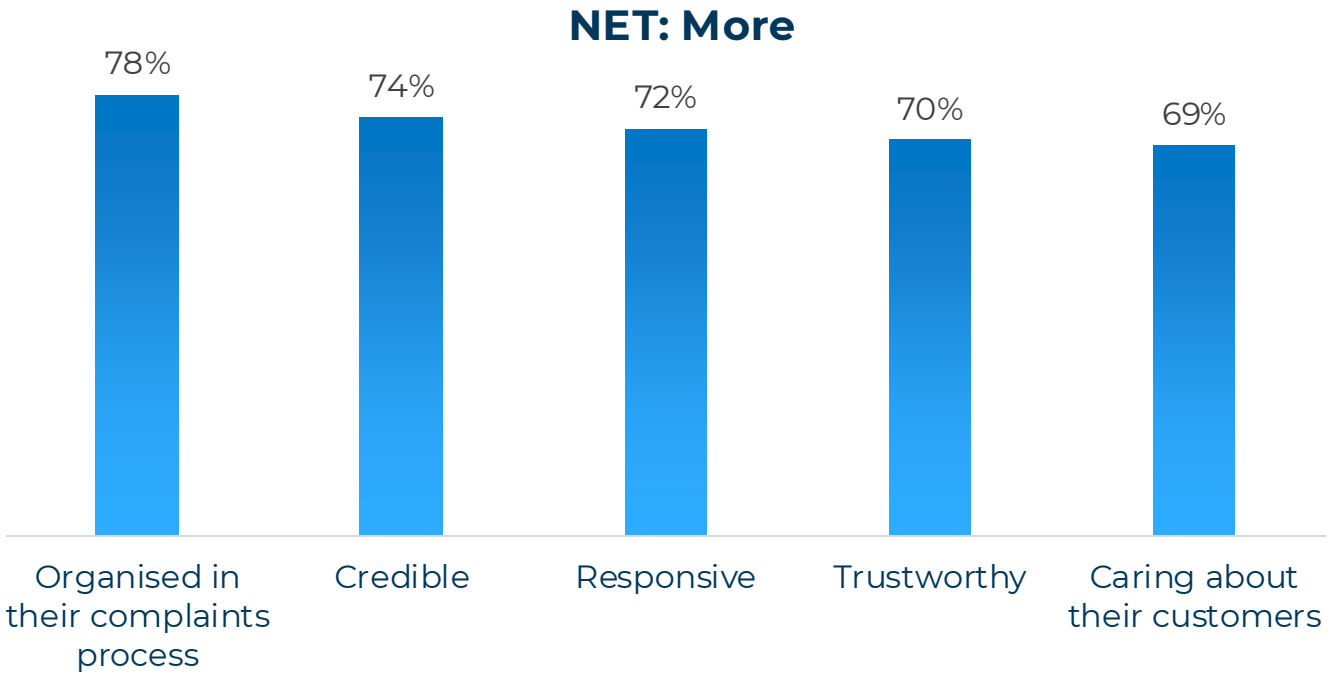


In general, a Complaints Charter helps to encourage positive perceptions, though there are some groups who may be less receptive overall

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Impact of Customer Complaints Charter:

If you had to make a complaint about your water/broadband/energy supplier - Would them having a Customer Complaints Charter make you think they were more, or less...



Q. Imagine you need to make a complaint about your [water/broadband/energy] supplier. Would them having a Customer Complaints Charter make you think they were more, or less...? Base: All respondents (1,844)

There are some groups that are consistently more likely to claim a complaints charter would have **no impact** on their perceptions of the company:

- Older age groups
- Those who haven't complained in the past
- Those who don't consider a complaints charter important
- Lower socio-economic grades*

*Lower SEG audiences claiming less impact may reflect limited headspace for this type of information or lower engagement with supplier processes. This is consistent with wider research patterns, where lower SEG audiences often show lower engagement with initiatives of this kind.

QRE

The positive response to the Charter highlights an opportunity to build awareness and raise its profile where possible throughout the customer journey – inspiring consumer confidence in the complaints handling process

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When consumers want to be notified:

Signing up with a new water provider → Experiencing service disruption → Making a complaint → At other times

Consumers want to be notified of its existence as soon as it is published as a show of goodwill and transparency from water companies.

Messaging this correctly will be key: the charter could be introduced as a first step in rectifying issues of the past and how they treat consumers going forward.

Without this acknowledgment, the charter can be seen as disingenuous and tokenistic in nature.

Consumers also want to be reminded of the charter during service disruption and when making a complaint.

Highlighting the charter at these times, when consumers are likely to need it most, is seen as the responsible thing to do.

"If there is disruption, or when you've made a complaint, I'd want sort of like a reminder that, okay, this is how we deal with it, and these are the steps that we take." ***Female, 20-49, London Home Counties***

How consumers want to be notified:

- Email with a link to the website and/or a link within the app for the majority
- On the back of their bill/letter for those less digitally savvy
- Direct outreach (excluding texts) / phone calls feel invasive and unnecessary to consumers

"Some people might not be comfortable picking up the phone to make a complaint, ...whereas if a document was sent out with all those different options of how you can get in touch to make a complaint." ***Male, 20-49, Central & North England***



QUAL

If presented on a website or app, the Charter needs to be easy to find and to read

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If the Charter proves difficult to find, this can give the impression of trying to deliberately withhold information, increasing scepticism.

To generate goodwill, ensure the charter is easily accessible across multiple touch points and stages of the customer journey (e.g. FAQ, complaints or contact us sections on the website/app).

"You don't want to be searching around and reading endless pages of information, whereas maybe an FAQ with regards to compensation could be useful." ***Male, 20-49, Central & North England***





How the charter is displayed visually is also important in aiding reading and comprehension.

- Continue to chunk information using headings, **bolding** and bullet points
- Consider adding **drop-down options**, where consumers can navigate to the section most relevant to them (as opposed to reading the whole document top-to-bottom).

"The idea of just having the drop-down menus for the charter, I suppose if that is taken forward, those titles need looking at, because you wouldn't immediately know what sits and don't." ***Female*****, 20-49, North England**

What this means:

- **Illustrating the process in a clear step-by-step diagram** can help consumers visualise and understand what happens at each stage better, and where the complaints charter sits relative to other schemes, i.e. introducing the Charter at an earlier stage, which can help evidence a step towards a new, more customer-centric approach to complaints handling.
- This is important so that consumers can contextualise where they are in relation to the final complaint resolution stage and when referencing escalation points as well (e.g. 'stage 2').

QUAL

Summary and conclusions



Overall, consumers found the charter to be clear and easy to understand, but challenged the use of vague, ambiguous language and unexplained terms

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Consumers are sceptical of utilities companies and have a negative perception of how complaints will be handled, especially for the water sector. This general distrust influences how consumers receive and engage with complaints charters, with those reporting previous complaint experience more likely to see complaints charters as important.

However, for most, a complaints charter can have a positive impact on customer perceptions of an organisation with over two-thirds reporting that it makes an organisation feel more trustworthy, responsive, and credible (i.e. 70%, 72% and 75% for utilities companies, 69%, 72% and 73% for water companies).



The charter is overall very clear and well received with consumers connecting with the **practical promises it makes.**

What worked best:

- Clear and specific information on expected timelines
- Clarity around the process and 'what happens next'
- Dedicated case ownership and single point of contact for updates etc.
- Multiple channels offered for making a complaint
- Accountability and executive oversight

What could be clearer:

- Industry-specific terms and jargon e.g. GSS, 'stage 2', and 'independent review'.
- Words that seem ill defined or open to interpretation, e.g., 'empowered'
- Standards with subjective qualifiers like 'regular updates' with no further detail on proposed frequency

What this means:

- **Keep the plain-English tone and concrete promises** but swap out jargon and explain technical references. Where helpful, use visuals to aid understanding, e.g. flowchart mapping out processes and stages, escalation.

QRE QUAL

Maximise impact of the charter by increasing consumer awareness, introducing it at key touchpoints, and clearly illustrating what the complaints charter brings to the complaints process

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The charter has potential to make an impact on customer perceptions of their water company and improve the experience of making a complaint, if done right.

Making the Charter known has the potential to move the dial on perceptions, as a way to demonstrate transparency and show steps are being taken to improve the customer experience.

- Present it to both existing and new consumers once published, ideally via their preferred method of communication

Introducing the charter in a way that feels helpful and at relevant touchpoints

- Shows a willingness to support consumers in a way that most do not expect from water companies.

Present information in a way that is clear and easy to understand and digest.

- Continue to chunk information via headings, bullets, bolding.

Consider including a process overview and ways to navigate to most relevant sections quickly, to aid usability

- Include a section nudging consumers to provide specific information when making a complaint (e.g. customer details, summary of complaint)



48 hours: Initial contact from trained team member

5 days: Complaint resolution timeline

10 days: GSS standard for company to reply to a complaint

Consider including a visual timeline mapping out the stages mentioned in the Charter:

- Including specific timeframes and how and when complaints are escalated (e.g. other parties are involved, such as when the GSS or ombudsman involvement becomes relevant).
- This can help highlight how early introduction of the charter can increase customers' sense of agency within the complaints process and improve resolution times.

Given the scepticism, consumers are keen to see water companies live up to stated 'commitments' and publish progress against targets openly, as **true accountability isn't measured in words but through actions.**

QRE QUAL

Complaints Charter Insights Report

Thank you

