



Wessex Water

Vulnerability Strategy Research | Full report of findings

June 2024





Photo by [James Shaw](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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Ofwat requires all water companies to publish their vulnerability strategy by June 2024.

- The full scope of Wessex Water's provision for customers in vulnerability is set out in its 'Every Customer Matters' strategy document.
- This strategy has been developed over many years and is updated annually.
 - The strategy has been informed through partnerships with debt agencies and other support charities; the CCG's Vulnerability Advisory Panel as well as targeted customer research (e.g. social tariff design).
- Ofwat specifies that companies must develop their vulnerability strategies with the involvement of customers.
- While the strategy has been informed *indirectly* by customers, this research was commissioned to provide **direct customer feedback**.



The objective of this piece of research is to **evaluate Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy through the eyes of customers for whom it is designed to support.**

We conducted:



**36 x 1 hour
qualitative depth interviews:**



- Conducted on Zoom or over the telephone between 7th – 30th May
- Participants were offered the opportunity to conduct the interview in person, and / or with a carer present

Interviews covered:

- Personal needs when dealing with service providers
- Past experiences of dealing with Wessex Water
- Participant responses to:
 - Wessex Water's approach to meeting the needs of customers with additional needs
 - Relevant parts of Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy
 - Wessex Water's 4 workstreams for delivering services to customers needing extra help



Qualitative interviews were conducted with **36 participants** across the Wessex Water region

The sample was designed to capture the views of customers who have experienced Wessex Water’s support services in action, as well as those who have not. To achieve this, we recruited half the sample from customer lists provided by Wessex Water, and half using free find methods.

- **List generated sample** had experienced an incident / problem (in the last 12 months), sought financial help from Wessex Water, or registered for the PSR.
- **Free find recruits** were financially vulnerable, eligible for the PSR, or had non-financial or communication related vulnerabilities.

Many participants recruited had a range of interlocking vulnerabilities

	Financial vulnerabilities (financial support)	Additional needs when a problem occurs (incident support)	Additional needs for everyday matters (communication/ accessibility support)
<i>Sample recruited using customer lists provided by Wessex Water</i>	On a social tariff Recent intervention /support (in last year)	PSR customer Recent service experience (in last year)	PSR customer Communication / accessibility needs
Number of participants	7	7	5
<i>No recent experience: Free-find recruitment</i>	No recent intervention support (may or may not be on a social tariff)	Eligible for PSR (may or may not be on it) Non-financial vulnerabilities	Eligible for PSR (may or may not be on it) Communication/ accessibility barriers
Number of participants	8	9	6
Total	36 (several with multiple vulnerabilities)		

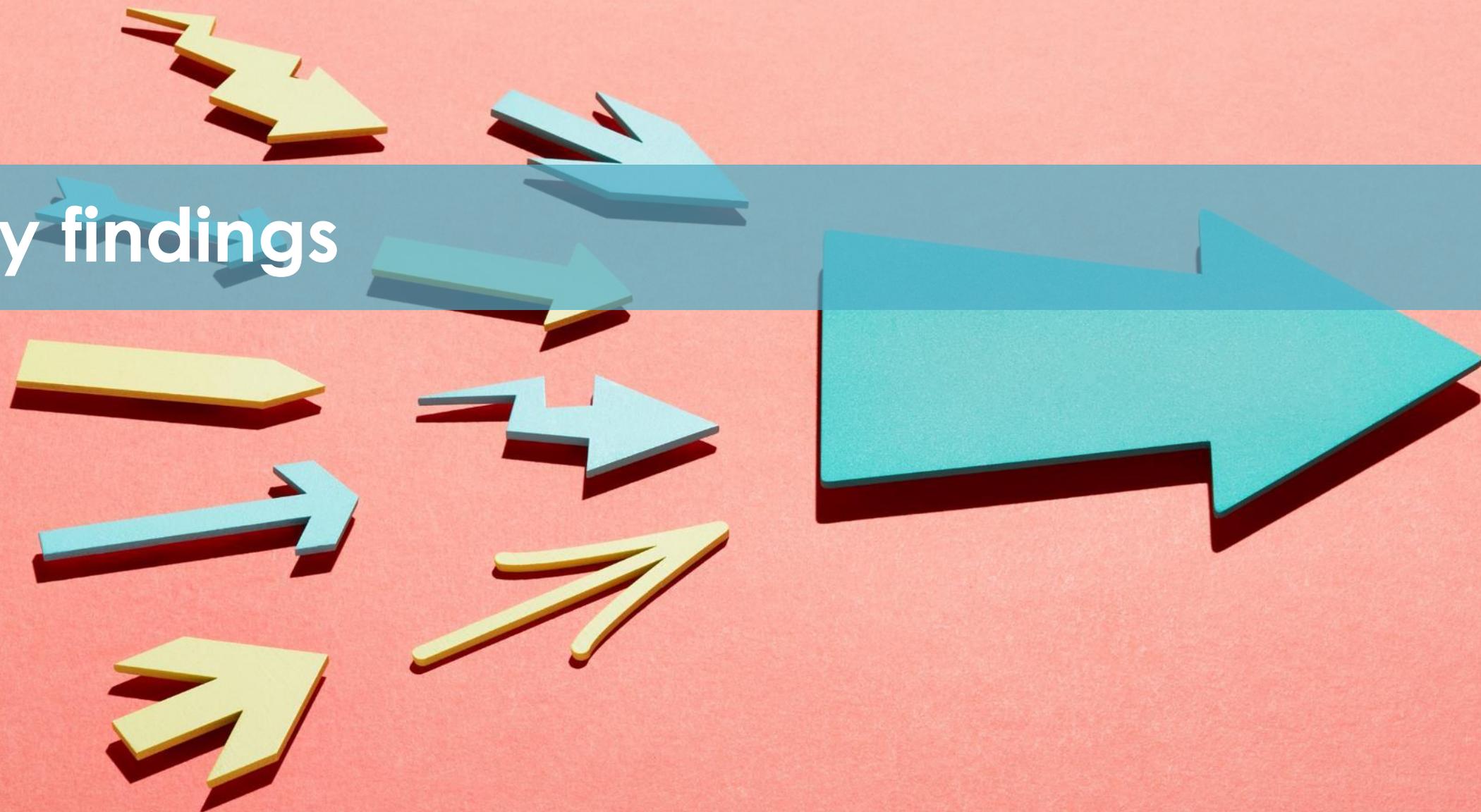
Within these quotas, we ensured a spread of:

- Metered / non-metered
- Gender
- Life stage
- Age
- Location across the Wessex Water region

		Out of the 36 participants:
Financially vulnerable		29
Mental health condition that impacts daily living		16
Physical health condition that impacts daily living		15
Physical disability affecting daily living		14
Wanting communication support		13
Health condition relies on using water		8
Visual or hearing impairment which impacts daily living		4
Transient Vulnerabilities	Sudden loss of household income	8
	Short term health issue	5
	Having a newborn baby in the home	1
	Bereavement of partner, parent, close family member in the last year	2
	Relationship breakdown in the last year	0

Metered / Non metered		
Metered	Non-metered	Not sure
22	13	1
Gender		
Male		Female
14		22
Age		
<40	40-60	61+
15	16	5
Household makeup		
No children family	Family with children	Post children / empty nester
7	17	12
Location		
Urban	Suburban	Rural
11	16	9

Key findings



1

In the wider context of other service providers, Wessex Water is praised by those who have experienced support services. It delivers on key drivers for satisfaction: positive staff interactions, choice of communications channels and effective issue resolution. **However, participants also want their service providers – including Wessex Water – to proactively offer support, i.e. reaching customers eligible for support – or making it very easy for customers to find out about and use these services.**

2

Overall, Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy is well-received by participants. They particularly like the range of support available to them, however, **some note that much work needs to be done to ensure all are aware of this support and can access it.**

3

The principles, workstreams, and service area promises of the strategy are seen as impressive, comprehensive, and achievable. Participants feel it highlights the level of thought put into the strategy, and many felt Wessex Water was already living up to much of the strategy in practice. Only a minority offered small refinements, namely ensuring that the interlocking nature of vulnerabilities is considered, so that customers with complex needs are fully supported.

4

The 2030 commitments (including the Priority Service Register commitments), are seen as important goals. Additionally, most participants see them as achievable and appropriate. **Some feel that Wessex Water could be bolder, pushing the targets for the commitments higher, particularly around awareness.**

5

In terms of the model for providing support services, most prefer the current approach i.e. Wessex Water deciding what support is appropriate based on needs vs. customers self-selecting services. However, **care should be taken to ensure Wessex Water is seen as transparent with their support offerings, and that staff take the time to fully understand the needs of all customers.**

6

Participants want to see more prominent communication of support services, reflecting their concern that they or others could be missing out through lack of awareness. A tailored approach is desired to direct the right service(s) to the relevant customers. These communications should be regular and delivered via a range of channels.





Participant overview

These participants face additional challenges due to their unique circumstances.

Vulnerabilities observed	Impact on day-to-day life
<p>We spoke with participants who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are financially vulnerable • have disabilities/ physical health conditions • have mental health conditions • have experienced bereavement • are carers of relatives or with young children / dependents in the household • have difficulties communicating • are visually or hearing impaired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A minority experience vulnerabilities that have no real impacts on daily life. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some, but not all, of those with transient vulnerabilities fall into this group. The knowledge that their circumstances will not last forever can help them manage daily life. • Most participants we spoke to have long-term vulnerabilities, with significant impacts on daily life, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictable, prolonged or chaotic daily routines. • Difficult social and emotional lives, e.g. loneliness and isolation. • Financial stress, e.g. due to limited ability to take on extra work. Many have found their vulnerabilities have exacerbated the impact of the cost of living and financial stress. • Negative health impacts, e.g. exhaustion from the effort of managing daily life and finances (e.g. cutting costs). <p>The financially vulnerable (e.g. reliant upon Government benefits) were typically the most stressed group we spoke to. They are struggling to manage the current cost of living, often balancing this with other vulnerabilities they have. Those reliant on financial support (e.g. Government benefits) are particularly fearful about their future and support being taken away.</p>

“Getting up and doing the OCD routine and stuff, that normally takes a couple of hours....And then obviously the nighttime routine takes another hour and a half, two hours as well.”
Physical condition, child with OCD

“The majority of my time is caring...for example I’ve had three wet beds this morning, which is why I’ve already been so busy.”
Physical and mental health conditions, developmental conditions, financial vulnerability

“I used to have little bouts of it, but now it affects me literally daily. I get quite anxious about even leaving the house, because I’ve been on the floor in Lidl before, and yeah, I mean, you’re just incapacitated.”
Physical condition, financial vulnerability

However, awareness of services and fear of asking for help can act as major barriers.

Current support accessed



Informal support: Many receive social (and sometimes financial) support from friends, family, local communities, and carers (indeed, some are themselves carers for others in their household).



Financial support: Through the government or their local council, such as Universal Credit, disability allowances, and social housing.



Support from utility providers: Via the Priority Services Register, either with Wessex Water, or their other utilities (or both). Many are also on social tariff schemes with their utility providers.

Barriers to accessing support



Awareness of support services: The majority of participants are not aware of the full range of support available to them from service providers, with some assuming that water companies in particular would not offer any support. Additionally, some believe that service providers are solely profit-driven, which reinforces the belief that support services “do not exist.”



Fear, nerves, embarrassment: Many participants express feeling scared or nervous when thinking about contacting their service providers, while some mention feeling embarrassed having to ask for help.



Many participants were surprised to hear about the full extent Wessex Water’s support for customers in need of extra help, highlighting awareness as a significant barrier.



A photograph of two women sitting at a white table in a bright, modern office. The woman on the left, with curly hair and wearing a white top, is smiling and looking at architectural plans spread on the table. The woman on the right, with long dark hair and wearing a yellow top, is seen from the back, looking towards the first woman. A laptop is open on the table to the left. The background shows large windows with a view of greenery outside.

Setting the context: experience of service providers

Positive staff interactions are a strong driver of overall satisfaction.

Ease of contact with service providers and issue resolution also drive positive perceptions of service providers.



Staff interactions

Positive interactions with specific customer service representatives are typical across all positively perceived experiences with service providers.

Participants describe staff they dealt with as **empathetic, caring, active listeners who were also articulate and easy to understand, and did not rush them on the phone.**

"It was a great personal rapport."
Communication Vulnerability



Touchpoints & channels

Participants praise service providers who enable customers to contact them through a **range of touchpoints and channels.**

Many acknowledge that customers will all have **different preferences** for how they communicate – be this over the phone, via email, or live chat etc.

Good service providers are seen to have an **easy-to-use, accessible website**, and allow participants to speak with a **real person**, as opposed to a chatbot. This enables less technologically-savvy customers to still engage with providers digitally, should they choose to.



Outputs & resolution

All of the positive experiences that participants had with their service providers had **good resolutions.**

For many, this involved an **issue being addressed** (such as a broadband outage being resolved, or a billing error fixed), while for others it involved the company **offering support**, such as putting the participant on the PSR, or a bill repayment plan.

"I rang them up and it was sorted pretty much the same day, and they reduced my bill for the next three months, they couldn't apologise enough."
Mental health conditions, financial vulnerability



Many cite difficulties contacting companies, and a perceived lack of support, marring their opinions of service providers.

Negative staff interactions

Negative experiences with service providers are often typified by **poor interactions with customer service representatives**.

Participants describe experiences where staff were perceived as **unempathetic, curt, not listening, and hard to understand** (with particular frustration at offshore call centres).

Additionally, being **'passed around'** different staff, having to repeat themselves, and **rediscover sensitive information multiple times** are sources of frustration.

"To be honest, I get fed up talking to them because each time I'm on the phone for about 4 to 5 min then it's, "can I put you on hold?" and then they come back with something completely random, and I haven't even asked them that question. And I'm like, but we're not talking about that."

Developmental conditions in household

Limited communication channels

Participants are critical of times where they found it **harder to get in contact with their service provider**, due to either limited channels, or restricted hours for using those channels.

Some mention difficulties having a **nominated person speak with the service provider on their behalf**.

"We got an automated phone call, which felt like a scam, and the fact that the only way to confirm that was checking online isn't the best, especially for older people who may not have online access, or may not be as tech savvy and not think to check online."

Mental health conditions

Limited or inadequate support

Negative experiences are often **linked to a perceived issue or error**, for example:

- Not providing adequate notice for upcoming works
- Being offered limited support options
- Being redirected to a third party
- Being rejected for support despite being eligible
- Billing errors
- Mixed service levels during a supply outage (i.e. not receiving bottled water during a water supply incident)

"They don't provide enough notice when they're doing works which makes it hard for me to take time off work, and I need to be home as my son won't answer the door."

Mental health, developmental conditions





Sarah & energy company



Sarah* was fairly recently made unemployed and is receiving universal credit. She is struggling to keep up with her bills and outgoings, particularly as Bath is a very expensive city to live in.

She was incorrectly informed by her energy company that she owed a certain amount which was based on an error caused by an account moving to a different tenant.

She tried to contact the company by telephone and spent hours on the phone trying to get through and resolve the issue. Even when she did get through, she found the experience frustrating, as staff were demoralised with limited English-speaking skills.

She feels as though she has just been sending information into "a bottomless pit" and hasn't been able to resolve the issue yet.

"Utility providers just want the money when they need it, they don't care about the individual... They don't care about anything other than the money."

Financially vulnerable

*N.b. all names are changed



Kathy & energy company



Kathy* has a long-term health condition which has left her unable to work and led to significant financial difficulties, including falling behind on various utility bills.

She tried to contact her electricity provider to resolve the issue but found it tricky to get through to them. Even when she was able to get through, they had no record of previous conversations, so she had to repeat the process of explaining her situation multiple times.

Eventually they agreed on a repayment plan which would last for a month or two – and then her bills would increase without warning. When she tried to contact them to address the issue, she found she was unable to unless she put in a formal complaint (which she had to do by recorded delivery because no other options were provided).

"When you have a problem, they just fob you off unless you put in a complaint by recorded delivery. It's a stress because you know nothing is going to change."

Health condition, financially vulnerable



Monique & housing association



Monique's* son has autism and is unable to answer the door, while Monique works full-time. She has found her housing association particularly difficult to deal with.

Her housing association conducts annual gas service checks but do not provide sufficient notice, despite her son requiring prior warning and Monique having to arrange time off work. The housing association no longer provide the option of booking appointments and only provide a week's notice.

Monique tried to contact them to sort an alternative arrangement, but the housing association were not flexible. In the end, they turned off the gas to the property for four months as they were unable to complete their checks.

"They were completely inflexible and just turned the gas off for four months. They just said 'this is how we do things'."

Communication vulnerability



Most notably, participants want it to be easier to speak with service providers, and the onus not to be on customers to ask for help, or to have to repeatedly reconfirm information.

In addition to positive staff interactions, a range of communication channels, and good issue resolution, participants identified:



Proactive support

Many participants feel **nervous, scared, or embarrassed** to reach out to service providers and ask for help.

Participants therefore want their service providers to **proactively reach out to them to offer support.**

This also helps manage issues around low awareness, as currently some feel they do not know what support is even available for them to ask for.



Streamlined information sharing

One of the biggest pain points when contacting / communicating with service providers is the **need to constantly provide the same personal information** again and again.

Participants mention not wanting to have to always reconfirm their vulnerabilities and personal details when speaking with different members of staff.



Additional communication channels

Many participants mention that having **additional ways to contact** their service providers would be useful, as well as offering a wide range of options. This included options such as:

- **After-hours calling**, for those whose working days are taken up with caring for those in their households.
- **Video calling** for neurodivergent customers (particularly those with autism or ADHD).



Not only are staff seen as good to engage with, but this engagement translates into action and resolution.



Great staff interactions

Those who have had interactions with Wessex Water see the **staff and customer service** provided as a **real strength** of the organisation.

Staff are described as **friendly, not rushing them on the phone, quickly delivering on promises, and being sensitive and emotionally intelligent.**

Additionally, participants who have positive experiences with staff often say that this is key to **their issue being resolved.**

"I was on the phone with the lady for a long time, and it didn't feel like she was rushing me or anything. It just felt like she was trying to help make sure I understood everything."

Physical health condition,
financially vulnerable

"Every time I have had to call them up, it's been very straightforward, and they're very quick. They've also been very quick to respond and fix the issues."

Physical health condition in
household

Case study: Cheryl & her bill repayment plan

Cheryl* lives with her husband and two children. She has fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, and mental health conditions. One of her sons is also autistic. Because of this she is unable to work.

At one point, she was not keeping on top of her water bill. The longer Cheryl left it, the more she panicked and put it off, throwing away any letters from Wessex Water.

She eventually phoned Wessex Water and found them very supportive. Wessex Water put her on the WaterSure scheme to cap her bill due to her household's disabilities, and also put her on a debt repayment plan.

While she struggled making the initial phone call due to her worry about being told off, she now wishes she had done it sooner, due to the response she got from Wessex Water.

"The lady I spoke to, I spoke to her a couple of times, but one of the ladies I spoke to she was really nice and explained like, 'You're not going to get in any trouble. We're going to help you like, you've done nothing wrong. These things happen...' and stuff like that. I think that they have must have like mental health training, which is helpful."

Cheryl

*N.b. all names are changed



Kathy* lives in Poole with her son. She has Meniere's Disease and the symptoms have intensified significantly in the past 6 months, leading to physical incapacitation, anxiety and inability to work. This has caused significant financial difficulties, including falling behind on water bills.



Kathy's condition causes tinnitus, hearing loss, vertigo and brain fog. Her symptoms have become more acute in the past 6 months with **significant impact on daily life**. She is anxious about leaving the house, is worried about driving and can have severe physical attacks. **She has reduced daily activities and is unable to work.**

Because of her condition, Kathy began **experiencing financial difficulties** and was "living off credit cards" as her debts began to accumulate. She was experiencing **significant stress** and was initially living 'in denial', **too overwhelmed to resolve issues** with various suppliers.

Kathy was **contacted by Wessex Water** who offered to put her on a **repayment plan** for the money that was owed. They set an **affordable amount** for her to pay and **supported her throughout the process.**

Kathy was **impressed** with and **grateful** for the support provided by Wessex Water. In particular, she appreciated the **time taken by staff** to understand her situation, the ability to **quickly get through to someone** and the **empathy and understanding** they demonstrated.

"So many people aren't comfortable contacting companies, people are scared of the phone. Especially if they are vulnerable. When things are piling up, you sit on the sofa and put your head in the sand. It can be too much to deal with, it can be overwhelming."

"Wessex were the most amazing company of everyone I dealt with... I was stressing about finances, and it got too much but they helped get me back on track with everything. There was always someone really nice on the end of the phone, someone listening to you and wanting to understand your situation. It was so simple. We went through my finances coming in at the time and they set an amount that was affordable. I could call them whenever I had a problem, and I wasn't waiting for ages on the phone."



* Name changed. Severity rating based on participant's perception of impact

Additionally, some participants feel that Wessex Water could be more proactive in offering support.

Increase awareness of support services

Many participants mention that they were **not aware** of the support services offered by Wessex Water, until they reached out to customer service staff. They feel that Wessex Water could do more to **advertise their support offerings**.

Indeed, throughout the research participants were asked about their awareness of different support services offered by Wessex Water (PSR, communications support, social tariffs etc). Largely, only participants currently accessing these support systems were aware of them.

“So yeah, they capped it, which I didn’t know that was a thing, and maybe more advertisement of that could help more people because I didn’t know that was a thing until I asked.”

Physical health condition, financially vulnerable

More proactively reach out and offer support

For some participants, there is a disconnect between the **customer service staff and the support provided**. For example, some participants mention feeling that Wessex Water should **have at least an indication of their personal circumstances** – e.g., through being on a water cap already for health reasons, or not having paid a bill for some time. These participants are disappointed that Wessex Water did not reach out to them, and they themselves did not ask due to being **unaware of their options**.

These few participants feel that Wessex Water can do more to **proactively provide support** to their vulnerable customers, and help them navigate through what can, at times, be a challenging process to go through.

“I would have appreciated more letters before getting the final warning notice. Surely, they could have realised I was struggling, maybe called to check in.”
Mental health condition, financially vulnerable

“It’s not until you’re on rock bottom, and then you need to ring them about something bad that you find out about all these extra things that you’re entitled to. But you have to dig around for help, and you have to be at rock bottom before you get that help. It’s not like I’d get that help when I’m paying my bill every month. Like, I could be having cheaper bills ages ago. Not when I’m on my ass.”
Mental health condition, financially vulnerable



A photograph of two women in an office setting. One woman, with blonde hair, is seated at a desk and pointing at a computer monitor. The other woman, with dark curly hair, is standing behind her, looking at the screen. The monitor displays lines of code. The scene is brightly lit, with a window and a potted plant visible in the background. A semi-transparent teal banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text.

Response to Wessex Water's vulnerability support strategy

They welcome the range of support on offer, but crucially feel more work needs to be done in how Wessex Water communicates about its support to increase awareness.

Positive reactions



All participants speak highly of the strategy, generally feeling the support on offer would **meet their needs** as a customer (with some small suggested improvements).



Many feel it is a step in the right direction, indicating that Wessex Water has already put a **great deal of thought** into the support that they offer.



All participants feel there is a **good range of support** on offer (despite stressing the implementation must work well).



Importantly, many feel that the strategy shows Wessex Water **cares about the wellbeing of its customers and** is not exclusively driven by profit.

"I have to say it's encouraging - the fact that they have a strategy in place. It's a bit of an eye opener for me. I didn't realise as a company that they got all these things in the background. It's been really useful, this experience. It's helped me understand them a bit better."

Physical health condition

Suggested improvements



The majority suggest a stronger focus on **increasing awareness of the support on offer** (e.g. stretching the 2030 commitments on this) – with many unaware of / surprised by how much support is available.



Linked to this, participants want to see **proactive support** – with Wessex making sure people eligible for the support actually get it (e.g. through the workstreams).



Many participants feel that Wessex Water can be **bolder and more ambitious** – namely around having shorter timeframes and higher targets for the 2030 commitments.



A few participants mention **small refinements** to some service offerings e.g. increased call centre hours, additional support for new homeowners, young families.



Stimulus material: four underpinning principles

Participants first reviewed the four underpinning principles of the vulnerability strategy.



We always go the extra mile:

- ✓ Our staff do all they can for customers
- ✓ Our staff are caring and sensitive when helping customers in ways that suit their needs
- ✓ Our staff are trained to quickly spot when a customer needs extra help and provide immediate support – e.g. a customer is having financial difficulties
- ✓ Our staff will help find the best solution for a customer, depending on their situation, to help make their bills affordable and prevent them falling into debt

We are accessible for everyone:

- ✓ Customers can choose how they want to talk to us, for example over the phone or on a live chat, depending on what works best for them
- ✓ However customers want to talk to us, our customer service team will help them
- ✓ In an emergency, we can text customers to contact them
- ✓ If customers are on the Priority Service Register, we can also visit their home, use an interpreter or 'signlive', or speak to a chosen carer, family member or friend

We provide an inclusive service:

- ✓ We follow guidance from many organisations to make sure we give customers the specific services they need
- ✓ We are endorsed by over 50 organisations for providing an inclusive service
- ✓ We hold a number of awards and certifications for our service e.g. the Customer Service Excellence Award and British Standard for Inclusive Service Provision

Looking for signs of extra needs and requirements:

- ✓ We train our customer service team to look for signs of lots of different needs and requirements
- ✓ Our staff are also trained to be confident in listening and communicating with customers in complicated situations. And, we train our staff to tell customers about support that is available for them
- ✓ We make sure staff have enough time to spend with those who need extra help, by focusing on quality and not on speed when taking care of customers
- ✓ We have experts who share information about our support strategy throughout our teams



The four principles underpinning the strategy are well received by participants.

All are seen as sensible and important parts of a service offering, with only a few participants offering small critiques.

Participants were presented with the four principles underpinning the 'Every Customer Matters' strategy.



Positives

- ✓ Those with more contact with Wessex Water tend to validate that the principles are delivered in practice.
- ✓ 'Actively looking for signs' and 'going extra mile' seen as the most impressive ideas – supporting those unaware or too nervous to ask for support.

"It all sounds good in principle, but I'm unsure about how accurate it is."
Transient vulnerability

Neutrals / negatives

Those with limited experience of Wessex Water feel unable to validate the principles are being delivered.

- ✗ A minority are actively sceptical that these principles reflect reality. And for a few, many aspects of the principles are seen as hygiene factors i.e. the bare minimum.
- ✗ A minority feel that Wessex Water do not always 'go the extra mile' or 'look for signs of extra needs' based on experiences of not being offered support proactively, and later finding out they were eligible for it.
- ✗ Awards and certifications are not as important or meaningful – more important to 'walk the walk'.



For some, these are seen as hygiene factors, indicating Wessex Water could potentially go even further.

We always go the extra mile

- ✓ Our staff do all they can for customers.
- ✓ Our staff are caring and sensitive when helping customers in ways that suit their needs.
- ✓ Our staff are trained to quickly spot when a customer needs extra help and provide immediate support – e.g. a customer is having financial difficulties.
- ✓ Our staff will help find the best solution for a customer, depending on their situation, to help make their bills affordable and prevent them falling into debt.

Needs improvement

- ✗ For some, these are seen as givens, so do not think it counts as going the extra mile.
- ✗ Some participants recall negative experiences with staff, in particular where staff did not spend time understanding their needs.

Seen to work well

- ✓ Wessex Water is largely seen as **living up to this principle already**.
- ✓ Those with less direct experience are less able to comment on Wessex Water's performance but agree that the principle sounds **good in practice and is achievable**.
- ✓ Those with direct experience often cite **positive interactions with customer service staff**, calling them attentive and sympathetic.

"The person that I've spoken to was really understanding, and I usually feel quite embarrassed if I say that personal stuff. But I didn't feel pressed to give any specific content and stuff like that. It was quite a lot of understanding."

Mental health condition

"Is that really going the extra mile? I'm not sure. That's just a basic necessity of all those things, but I don't think that's going beyond."

Dependent in household with OCD



Participants agree that it is good for Wessex Water to be accessible for everyone.

A few customers were unaware of the myriad ways to get in touch with the company and suggest a focus on increasing awareness of these.

We are accessible for everyone

- ✓ Customers can choose how they want to talk to us, for example over the phone or on a live chat, depending on what works best for them.
- ✓ However customers want to talk to us, our customer service team will help them.
- ✓ In an emergency, we can text customers to contact them.
- ✓ If customers are on the Priority Service Register, we can also visit their home, use an interpreter or 'signlive', or speak to a chosen carer, family member or friend.

Needs improvement

- ✗ A few express concerns about how much it will **cost to implement and maintain** all communication channels.
- ✗ Awareness of accessibility services needs to improve – some weren't aware of things like live chats, Wessex Water should be more **proactive in promoting this**.
- ✗ Different contact options would be good – like an app, video calling, different contact hours.
 - ✗ An app in particular would help with those who have **reticence about calling for 'minor' issues**, such as checking if they are on the PSR.

Seen to work well

- ✓ There is general agreement that Wessex Water **lives up to this principle** – and further highlights that they do care
- ✓ Participants welcome the **range of options** available to contact Wessex Water, as they enable **flexibility and accessibility**. Participants particularly praise texting in an emergency, the option for a nominated contact, and live chats.
- ✓ Those participants with limited contact still think that the methods of contact are **easy to use and cover their needs**.

"You call them and then from there, you go through the department, and then they're going to have to put you through to someone. It's not so quick and easy to get to the right person. Even if you speak to that person, the person can't really help you. All they do is just send out a form to you."
Transient vulnerability



And while having accreditations is welcomed by some, others feel it more important to show **how** you are being inclusive.

We provide an inclusive service

- ✓ We follow guidance from many organisations to make sure we give customers the specific services they need.
- ✓ We are endorsed by over 50 organisations for providing an inclusive service.
- ✓ We hold a number of awards and certifications for our service e.g. the Customer Service Excellence Award and British Standard for Inclusive Service Provision.

Seen to work well

- ✓ Participants generally feel that this principle is **positive and important to have**.
- ✓ Participants feel Wessex Water is **inclusive based on previous contacts** – e.g. they addressed mental health issues well and put things in place to help.
- ✓ Many have limited experience to draw on, but **feel it sounds good in theory**.

"Oh, it's good that they've got awards and certifications for their service, the customer service, excellence award, and that. It's not important to me that they have them, but obviously it does show then that they've reached a certain standard."

Physical condition, Communication vulnerability

Needs improvement

- ✗ For many, it is less important to have the certifications, **more important to 'walk the walk.'**
 - ✗ For those with limited contact in particular, the accreditations mean little.
- ✗ Some wonder how **broad the inclusivity** is – feel that **examples could be included in the strategy**.
- ✗ Details provided are **'organisation-focused'** and self-congratulatory, and not **'consumer-focused'**.
- ✗ As with 'going the extra mile' – some feel Wessex Water could be more inclusive by having **'asked the questions when they had the chance'**.
- ✗ A few want to know the organisations Wessex Water are endorsed by.
- ✗ None had heard about these endorsements and awards before – a few feel these should be **'bragged' about**.

"I'm not sure that that means a lot to a lot of people, to be honest. I think the inclusivity can get a bit overstretched at times, but I think the good intentions are there."

Physical condition



However, a few feel that, in their previous experiences, Wessex Water could have been more proactive.

We actively look for signs of vulnerability

- ✓ We train our customer service team to look for signs of lots of different needs and requirements.
- ✓ Our staff are also trained to be confident in listening and communicating with customers in complicated situations. And, we train our staff to tell customers about support that is available for them.
- ✓ We make sure staff have enough time to spend with those who need extra help, by focusing on quality and not on speed when taking care of customers.
- ✓ We have experts who share information about our support strategy throughout our teams.

Needs improvement

- ✗ A minority share experiences where Wessex Water could have **gone further, asked more questions**, and so feel there is a mismatch with this principle.
- ✗ Some feel this is not **framed correctly**, as the customer needs to make contact in the first instance – this may need to be made clearer.

Seen to work well

- ✓ **Well received**, and participants with more contact with Wessex Water believe this to be **lived up to in practice**.
- ✓ Some participants acknowledge that some **responsibility has to fall on the customers**, but also that they appreciate that Wessex Water **does what they can**.
- ✓ **Prioritising quality over speed** is praised by many – particularly for participants who may be slower to communicate.

"They just want to resolve things, I guess, and then if they can help you, they will sort of thing. Just really sort of helpful."
Physical condition

"They don't really think, 'well, this person's got these particular priorities, why don't we get in touch and find out why this has happened?'"
Physical condition



Participants were asked to pick out a few promise areas that they felt were most relevant or interesting to them, which they were then shown to review in more detail.

They went through around 3-6 of the 20 areas each, depending on timing and how many they were interested in.

Everyone was shown the 2030 commitments for the Priority Services Register. General 2030 commitments were shown alongside the relevant promise area (e.g. 'help with water bills').

Stimulus material: 20 'promise areas'

Participants were then shown a list of the 20 'promise areas' included in the vulnerability strategy.

Hearing impairment / deafness

We promise to...

- Ensure our customer facing staff have deaf awareness training
- Make sure our communications used during an emergency are tailored for deaf/hearing impaired customers
- Ensure our customer help videos are subtitled
- Give staff access to sign language translation apps
- Speak to a nominated contact on behalf of the customer
- Be aware that customers may have information about themselves within their home to share with us e.g. a card by...

Reasons customers may need extra support

1. Help with water bills
2. Hearing impairment / deafness
3. Dementia / cognitive impairment
4. Mental health
5. Dialysis
6. Blind or partially sighted
7. Pensionable age
8. Physical impairment
9. Digital exclusion
10. Developmental conditions, e.g. autism, Down's syndrome
11. Unable to communicate in English / literacy difficulties
12. Chronic / serious illness
13. Protecting against bogus callers
14. Speech difficulties

Priority Services Register – future aims

Extra support when you need it
Register for Priority Services if you have additional needs

By 2030 we commit to:

- Increase the numbers on our Priority Services Register from 114,000 today to around 290,000
- Increase awareness of Priority Services from 39% to over 50%
- Contact customers on our Priority Services Register every two years to check their needs and details are up to date
- Achieve a score of more than 85% when we ask customers and our partners if they were satisfied with our service and if we met all their needs
- Achieve a number of external accreditations about our service

We tested the 20 'promise areas' of the vulnerability strategy with participants.

The 20 'promise areas' of the vulnerability strategy, and 2030 commitments

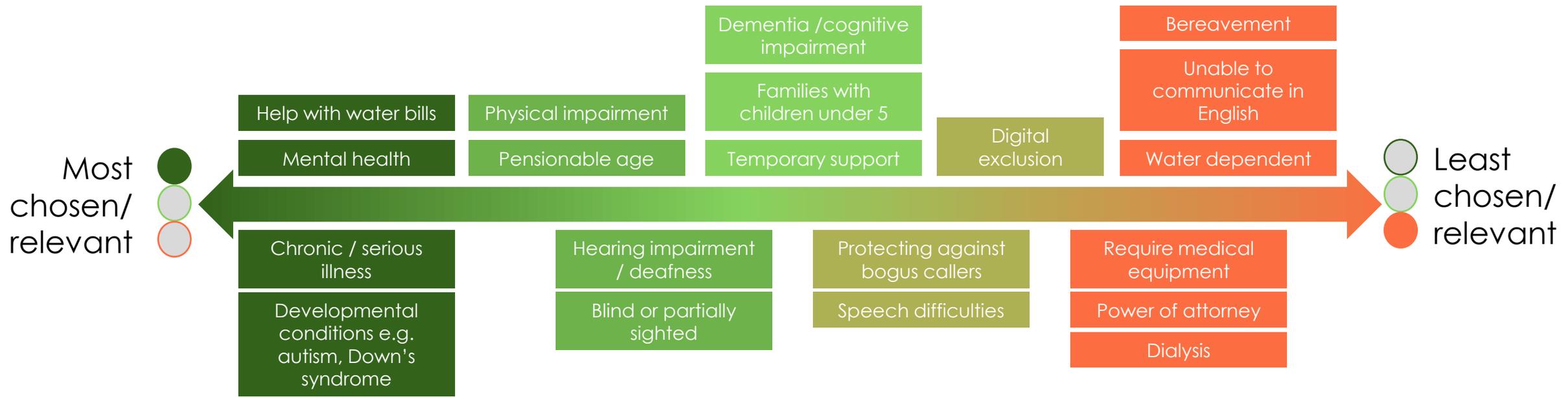
- Reasons customers may need extra support**
1. Help with water bills
 2. Hearing impairment / deafness
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 4. Mental health
 5. Dialysis
 6. Blind or partially sighted
 7. Pensionable age
 8. Physical impairment
 9. Digital exclusion
 10. Developmental conditions, e.g. autism, Down's syndrome
 11. Unable to communicate in English / literacy difficulties
 12. Chronic / serious illness
 13. Protecting against bogus callers
 14. Speech difficulties
 15. Power of Attorney
 16. Bereavement
 17. Families with children under 5
 18. Water dependent
 19. Require medical equipment
 20. Temporary support for things such as redundancy, divorce, post-hospital recovery

Priority Services Register – future aims

Extra support when you need it
Register for Priority Services if you have additional needs

By 2030 we commit to:

- Increase the numbers on our Priority Services Register from 114,000 today to around 290,000
- Increase awareness of Priority Services from 39% to over 50%
- Contact customers on our Priority Services Register every two years to check their needs and details are up to date
- Achieve a score of more than 88% when we ask customers and our partners if they were satisfied with our service and if we met all their needs
- Achieve a number of external accreditations about our service



NB: the coloured circles on the following slides are used to highlight how chosen / relevant each promise area was. Please note that the relevance of the promise does correlate with the sample recruited for this research and does not indicate that those discussed least often are any less valid service areas to the whole customer body.

There is a view that Wessex Water has put a lot of thought into the plan.



Comprehensive

- The service levels are generally viewed as **acceptable and appropriate**.
- Many are impressed by the **breadth and range of vulnerabilities covered** (e.g. many liked how seriously mental health, as well as physical health, was being treated).
- The focus on **staff training** is seen as very important, given how impactful staff interactions are on customer experience.
- Many participants like the **range of contact options** available for them to engage with Wessex Water.

Achievable

- Most feel that the promises set out in the strategy are **all achievable**.
- For many, it indicates Wessex Water is **willing to put in the work** to support vulnerable customers.
- Those with direct experience of Wessex Water often feel that **promises are already being achieved**, particularly citing positive staff interactions.

(Seems pleasantly surprised) "Yeah, actually, those are pretty good suggestions. I used to work in mental health, and they definitely fit the bill and the criteria, so I definitely wouldn't add or subtract anything because it captures everything."

Physical health condition

Many acknowledge that vulnerability is a complex area - and challenging to create a service that supports everyone.

Consider/acknowledge the interlocking nature of vulnerability

- **Promises in some areas of the plan are applicable for more than one vulnerability:** participants encourage Wessex Water to not be afraid to repeat promises across multiple areas.
- **Many households have a range of extra needs:** participants want reassurance that Wessex Water would not just consider one vulnerability when providing support.

Suggested changes to specific service areas

- Some participants suggest specific refinements to areas of the plan, including:
 - **Increasing the age cap** for support offered to parents of young children (from 12 months to 5 years, or even older).
 - **(Where there is a nominated contact) notifying this point of contact** if there are concerns about a customer's mental health.
 - **Providing copies of bills to nominated contacts**, as opposed to a bill redirect.
 - **Option for video calling** for customers who struggle with communication over the phone or email.
 - **Bogus caller protection to cover phone calls** as well as in-person visits.



As well as the above, raising awareness of the available support systems is critical in the eyes of most participants, and is the first thing they want to see addressed.



Help with water bills

We promise to...



- Make sure water bills are affordable for all – no one should be unable to afford their water bill
- Offer a range of lower-rate tariffs, debt support schemes and flexible ways to pay
- Provide customers with a tailored solution that meets their individual financial circumstances
- Continue to evolve this programme so that it meets the needs of our customers on the lowest incomes now and into the future



What works well

- ✓ The majority of participants see the different promises as sufficient and comprehensive.
- ✓ Those who already received financial support were particularly complimentary about the support available to customers.

"I think this is amazing, especially nowadays with all of the bills having gone up."
Physical and mental health conditions



Needs improvement

- ✗ Many participants, particularly those financially vulnerable, are unaware of a lot of the support offered in this area, noting that Wessex Water needs to do more to promote these services.
- ✗ A minority have experiences that did not match the promises (e.g. one participant received a letter chasing them on a bill they had already paid).
- ✗ There are small levels of scepticism as to how achievable the promises are, given the size of Wessex Water's customer base, and whether it is financially viable.

"That would be my worry to all these promises that they have....for you to get to it, it's like walking through treacle."
Financially vulnerable



Mental health



We promise to...

- Recognise when to signpost customers to other organisations
- Know the right questions to ask to encourage customers to give us information about their mental health, so we can support them in the right way
- Give those who are experiencing mental health problems the opportunity to have contact tailored to their needs and offer to speak to a nominated person on their behalf
- Continue supporting the local network e.g. attending events sharing current best practice
- Train staff to become mental health first aiders
- Support national mental health awareness week each year



What works well

- ✓ Participants see this area as broadly positive and are impressed to see mental health taken so seriously.
- ✓ Signposting to other services and knowing which questions to ask are particularly liked by participants.

"Definitely the right way to go with mental health and the right approach...they seem like smart goals and things that can be implemented straight away." Mental health conditions



Needs improvement

- ✗ A minority are more cynical, feeling Wessex Water may be being too ambitious.
- ✗ A few mention that Wessex Water could perhaps notify a nominated point of contact when there are concerns about a customer's mental health.

"Training everybody might be...counterproductive because you're asking people to sit with two hats really, and it can be a bit pressured." Mental health conditions



Chronic / serious illness

We promise to...



- Wait if the customer takes a little longer to answer the door
- Read the meter up to four times a year, if the customer requests it
- Offer to redirect bills to a carer, family member or friend, if required. We can also withdraw the water and/or sewerage charges if an unmetered property is unoccupied but furnished
- Provide help with bills and debt if required
- Deliver free bottled water during emergencies or planned work if the customer informs us that they have mobility issues



What works well

- ✓ Promises are generally seen as comprehensive and useful.
- ✓ Participants particularly praise the knock and wait service, as well as delivering water in an emergency.



Needs improvement

- ✗ A few participants question what is classified as a 'chronic' illness, and how staff are trained to consider the wide range of needs that could fall within this.
- ✗ For a minority, the promises feel like 'the bare minimum', and financial support should also be considered for those with chronic illnesses, given such conditions can often prevent people working.

"You can't train everybody on everything, but I just wonder how much need there is to know a little bit about what people are going through...if you're talking about the individuality of approach, which seems to be underpinning what they're aiming at. I mean, obviously, there's fairly broad categories like dementia, Parkinson's, cancer, heart issues and long-term chronic conditions like fibromyalgia. Whether training includes some knowledge of what the impairment means in terms of communication and so on...It's understanding some of the nuances and being able to pick up the degree to which that person is impaired."

Physical health condition



Developmental conditions



We promise to...

- Offer a range of communication options for our customers.
- If we speak to an autistic customer on the phone, we will check understanding and offer a follow up email to set out what has been agreed
- Offer to redirect bills to a carer or family member
- Offer to speak to a person of the customer's choice instead of the customer
- Ensure our leaflets and other communication methods are jargon free and written in plain English
- Speak in a clear, literal way, avoiding jargon and checking understanding
- Plan with the customer what they should do if something goes wrong or if there is an emergency



What works well

Participants who reviewed this section were often carers/parents. They considered the promises in the context of their current living situation, but also considered what their dependents may need if/when they move out of home.

- ✓ Participants feel this section is very comprehensive.
- ✓ Removing jargon, ensuring customer understanding and having a nominated contact are seen as particularly good inclusions.

"I really like that, actually. So, the one that's sticking out is 'if we speak to an autistic customer we check understanding and offer a follow up email to set out what's been agreed', because my lot especially will just start yes-ing stuff. And then I've no idea what's going on."

Physical and mental health conditions, developmental conditions, financial vulnerability



Needs improvement

- ✗ Participants suggest more consideration of the needs of carers – e.g. extending call centre hours, set times when WW would call within, to not interrupt a schedule.
- ✗ Alternative contact methods – e.g. video calling for those who need face-to-face contact.
- ✗ Send carers copies of bills / communications, instead of a redirect.



Physical impairment

We promise to...



- Read the water meter up to four times a year, if the customer requests it
- Look at moving the water meter to a more accessible location
- Deliver free bottled water during emergencies or planned work if the customer informs us that they have mobility issues
- Ensure that all our sites with public access are wheelchair friendly
- Wait if the customer takes a little longer to come to the door



What works well

- ✓ Once again, participants see these promises as comprehensive and achievable.
- ✓ Participants did not feel that anything was missing; the list covers everything they need.

"At least they're actually thinking about customers' needs...they've actually sat down and thought about this stuff, you know?"

Physical condition

"The two that stick out to me mainly are the 'look at moving the water meter to a more accessible location.' I think that's really good, and I've read earlier they wouldn't charge for doing that either which is nice. 'If the customer takes a little longer to come to the door,' that's a nice touch I think."

Financially vulnerable



Needs improvement

- ✗ For those without a water meter, some of this support is less relevant.



Pensionable age

We promise to...



- Wait if a customer takes longer to answer the door
- Offer a personal password in the customer's chosen format which we will use every time we visit to help guard against bogus callers
- Ensure that all our staff carry an identification card
- Read the meter up to four times a year, if the customer asks us to
- Look at moving the meter to a more accessible location
- Work with Age UK on providing training for staff to better support the elderly
- Deliver free bottled water during emergencies or planned work if the customer informs us that they have mobility issues
- Give customers in receipt of Pension Credit or whose only income is State Pension a discount of around £55 on their water bill
- Offer to redirect bills to a carer or family member or friend, if the customer is in hospital, living in residential care or staying with relatives for a long period
- Speak to a nominated contact on behalf of customers



What works well

- ✓ Seen as comprehensive and achievable by participants.
- ✓ Nominated contact praised in particular.

"Well, I'd say it's actually working, from the experience I've had, they've been excellent. They've kept me informed as to what issues are happening, what's beneficial to me. I've got no issues with them at all."

Physical condition



Needs improvement

- ✗ It was noted that the ID card service would be less useful for visually impaired customers.



Hearing impairment / deafness

We promise to...



- Ensure our customer facing staff have deaf awareness training
- Make sure our communications used during an emergency are tailored for deaf/hearing impaired customers
- Ensure our customer help videos are subtitled
- Give staff access to sign language translation apps
- Speak to a nominated contact on behalf of the customer
- Be aware that customers may have information about themselves within their home to share with us e.g. a card by their front door
- Offer hard of hearing customers who wish to use our password scheme the means to do so either through a written password or other communication arrangements



What works well

- ✓ Participants saw these promises as sufficient and comprehensive – the password scheme in particular was popular.
- ✓ Experiences are shaped by interactions with customer service staff – so it was seen as important to provide training to staff.

"I think they're all admirable."
Communication Vulnerability



Needs improvement

- ✗ One participant mentioned it is important that staff are considerate of the situation a customer may be in when they call (for example, due to their hearing aids they need to have their phone on speaker, which makes it harder for them to have confidential calls).

"So maybe putting something about that you know somebody who's deaf may be speaking to them on speaker phone. So therefore, it's not necessarily a confidential phone call."
Communication Vulnerability



Blind or partially sighted

We promise to...



- Arrange for water supply interruption notices to be given via telephone or text message
- Provide bills and a selection of our leaflets in large print, or braille
- Read the meter up to four times a year, at the request of the customer
- Take into account the needs of those blind/partially sighted when we are working in the street



What works well

- ✓ Participants feel that this area of the plan is comprehensive and covers the needs of those with visual impairments. Offering bills in braille and considering the needs of the visually impaired during works, are praised in particular.

"I think that's really good, to take into account the needs of those blind/partially sighted, when they're [WW] working in the street. I think that's good."

Financially vulnerable



Needs improvement

- ✗ One participant would like Wessex Water to actively look out for customers with visual impairments and would also like to receive additional notifications via telephone calls as opposed to large print letters.
- ✗ The participant also feels that it is important to specify that workers in the street will be looking out for the signs of someone with a visual impairment, from a safety point of view.

"'Provide bills and a selection of leaflets' – that one's good, but it would still be good to get a telephone notification even just to go through the basics of it, doesn't have to be in depth, just the basic information would be helpful."

Physical condition, communication vulnerability



Dementia / cognitive impairment

We promise to...

- Ensure that all customer facing staff are trained and have an awareness of dementia
- Ensure that all our sites are dementia friendly
- Take part in the national dementia action awareness week each year
- Give those with dementia/cognitive impairments the opportunity to sign up to Priority Services so that any contacts will be tailored to their needs
- Speak to a nominated contact, when requested, on behalf of the customer
- Continue supporting the local network e.g. attending events sharing current best practice
- Be aware that customers may have information about themselves within their home to share
- Encourage and support our partner organisations e.g. charities when it comes to best practice in this area



What works well

While this research did not include anyone with dementia or cognitive impairments, some participants chose to reflect on their experiences with loved ones.

- ✓ These participants feel that this section is comprehensive.
- ✓ Staff training and being Dementia Friends is emphasised as being particularly important for providing adequate support.

"I think that's important. I think it's like a level of safeguarding going on between them and people that suffer with dementia. And I think it is definitely achievable."

Mental health conditions, financially vulnerable

No participants gave any suggestions for improvement for this area



Families with children under 5

We promise to...



- Call the customer during an event such as a planned or unplanned supply interruption or a problem with water quality particularly where the customer has a child under 12 months old
- Deliver free bottled water during emergencies or planned work if the customer has a child under 12 months old

"I don't agree with the under 12 months old, I'd make that age bracket higher. I have a toddler at home, he's still a young child." Mental health condition, financially vulnerable

General comments

- Participants welcome support specifically for young families.
- However, some feel the age brackets should be higher (particularly the caveats focussed on under 12-month-olds).
- One participant would like to know if there is support for those who have regular custody of young children who don't live with them (e.g. their grandchildren).

Temporary support

We promise to...



- Be aware of the impact on the customer and treat them sensitively
- Make the customer aware they will be supported temporarily and check in with them after a year to see if they still require our support or have more additional needs

"I think that's a really good one, like I said, a couple of years ago my husband was made redundant...I didn't personally know about this at the time, but I didn't ring. I might imagine if I would have rung them and told them they could have told me that help was available." Physical condition, mental health condition, financially vulnerable

General comments

- Participants respond positively to this support, particularly praising the idea of a check-in for those with transient vulnerabilities.
- Some participants note a mismatch in the support offered versus their own experiences and feel Wessex Water should promote this support more, so customers know to access it.

Protecting against bogus callers



We promise to...

- Wait if the customer takes a little longer to answer the door
- Offer a personal password in the format of choice which we will use every time we visit to help guard against bogus callers
- Offer hard of hearing customers who wish to use the password scheme the means to do so either through a written password or other communication arrangements
- Ensure that every member of staff carries a photo ID card
- Wait if the customer would like to verify our staff
- Be part of the local distraction burglary network in the local area
- Follow the UK Water Industry Distraction Burglary Protocol
- Offer friends against scams training to all customer facing staff



What works well

- ✓ Promises are seen as comprehensive and useful.
- ✓ Participants praise the **proactive protections** and see this as being particularly beneficial for the **elderly**.

"Very good, I like that. I think it's desperately important these days...I think what you've just read out is particularly important to the older generation because we were living in a much more trustworthy age."

Physical health condition



Needs improvement

- ✗ Some participants feel it could be more explicit as to whether this protection covers **phone call interactions**, as opposed to just **in-person visits**.
- ✗ The password scheme is seen as worthwhile, but one participant is concerned about how **secure this may be in practice**.

"I suppose the only thing about passwords is that somebody might get hold of them, but it's better than nothing isn't it? I think it offers another level of reassurance."

Physical health condition



Speech difficulties



We promise to...

- Make our services accessible via many different channels including:
 - Live Chat
 - Emails/letters
 - Social media
 - Relay UK text service
- Offer to speak to a person of the customer's choice instead of the customer



What works well

- ✓ Promises are generally well received, with most participants not suggesting any additions to what is already covered.
- ✓ Participants feel that the forms of communication outlined, as well as the usual methods offered by Wessex Water, cover the needs that customers with speech difficulties have.



Needs improvement

- ✗ One participant feels that it should be an option to nominate someone to speak alongside the customer, and be their advocate, as opposed to speak on their behalf.
 - ✗ They feel it could be considered insulting to someone with speech difficulties, implying that because they have challenges speaking means they are also unable to hear, which is not always the case.

"I think, offering to speak alongside the person...as an advocate rather than someone who's taking over the decision."

Physical and mental health conditions in household, water dependent



Digital exclusion



We promise to...

- Offer a range of communication channels for our customers
- Continue supporting the Keep Me Posted campaign to ensure customers are given the choice in how they receive their bills and statements



What works well

- ✓ Once again, participants see these promises as generally achievable, although one questions how Wessex Water would know people are digitally excluded.

"That's really good, I like that. It does make me wonder how they know where and how you're digitally excluded. But no, I think that's really lovely. I really do."

Physical and mental health conditions, developmental conditions, financial vulnerability



Needs improvement

- ✗ One participant feels that this section is focussing on those who do not have **access** to the internet, emails, social media etc., but that focus could also be put on those who do not have the knowledge or skills to use the internet. They feel Wessex Water could support services to help people be more digitally minded.
- ✗ They also note the disparity in access for the digitally excluded, as phone lines are only available at certain times of the day.
- ✗ One participant also mentioned not being aware of the Keep Me Posted campaign.

"What is the Keep Me Posted campaign? I've been a customer of Wessex Water for 20 years and I haven't seen it."

Household with mental health conditions



Unable to communicate in English / literacy difficulties



We promise to...



- Provide bills and a selection of our leaflets in a preferred language
- Offer an interpretation service at our customer service centres
- Offer to speak to a person of the customer's choice instead of the customer
- Use Google Translate when visiting people in their homes
- Ensure our leaflets and other communication methods are jargon free and in plain English
- Work with third party organisations such as Scope to make sure bills are easy to read and understand



What works well

- ✓ These promises are generally considered to be comprehensive and achievable.
- ✓ Offering leaflets in multiple languages and removing jargon is praised in particular.

"This is really important for people whose first language isn't English."

Transient vulnerability



Needs improvement

- ✗ Some feel that an interpretation service is logistically challenging, particularly where certain languages may have limited interpreters, so the service cannot be guaranteed at all times.
- ✗ Services like Google Translate are also seen as not fully reliable, in instances where Wi-Fi / cellular connection is not strong (however the intent for using these is viewed positively by participants).

"We have to be realistic...What are the guarantees you're going to have somebody from that background at that exact particular point in time?"

Mental health conditions



Dialysis

We promise to...

- Call the customer during an event (such as when the water supply is interrupted (planned or unplanned))
- Send text messages during the time that the supply is off, to ensure that the customer is up to date with accurate information
- Deliver free bottled water in emergencies or during planned work
- Quickly check the quality of our water supply after an interruption event to ensure that it is safe to use for dialysis again
- Work closely with the NHS to support our customers on dialysis*
- Work with Kidney Care UK to reach more customers who may need to be on Priority Services or need help with their bill

Requires medical equipment

We promise to...

- Wait if the customer takes a little longer to answer the door
- Read the meter up to four times a year, if the customer requests it
- Offer to redirect bills to a carer, family member or friend, if required. We can also withdraw the water and/or sewerage charges if an unmetered property is unoccupied but furnished
- Provide help with bills and debt if required
- Deliver free bottled water during emergencies or planned work if the customer informs us that they have mobility issues

Water dependent

We promise to...

- Wait if the customer takes a little longer to answer the door
- Offer to speak to a person of the customer's choice instead of the customer
- Call the customer during an event (such as when the water supply is interrupted (planned or unplanned))
- Deliver free bottled water in emergencies or during planned work
- Send text messages during the time that the supply is off, to ensure that the customer is up to date with accurate information

Power of Attorney

We promise to...

- Help customers have a nominated point of contact in place before the need for a Power of Attorney occurs
- Offer to redirect bills to a carer or family member
- Treat attorneys as if they are the customer to ensure consistent service levels

Bereavement

We promise to...

- Train all staff to deal with someone going through a bereavement
- Ensure it's easy to notify us and provide the relevant information quickly and efficiently
- Tell customers about free online services that allow them to notify other organisations about the death of a loved one, all at once
- Provide a dedicated online form for a simple way of notifying us of a customer passing away at a time that suits them

General comments

- Participants generally find these areas comprehensive and offer no amendments or improvements.

"Yeah. I think they've got it covered pretty well. They must have thought about it well and had a lot of input. It is quite comprehensive I think."
Physical health condition



The 2030 commitments are praised: participants see these as very worthy goals.

Some want the awareness of the affordability commitment to be stretched further, especially in light of the perceived numbers of households financially struggling.



2030 commitments:

Increase the number of customers on our social tariffs from 65,000 to 140,000. No one will be unable to afford their water bills

Increase awareness of our affordability support from 40% to over 50%

Continue to fund local community projects across our region to build financial capability and increase access to services

All customer facing staff become Friends Against Scams

Continue to be a dementia friendly utility with all customer facing staff Dementia Friends

- **Commitments seen as good areas for focus and realistic to achieve by 2030:**
 - The idea of 'commitments' is praised: seen as Wessex Water making a promise to customers.
 - The language and mission of 'no one will be unable to afford their water bills' is seen as an important goal.
 - Participants particularly praise the inclusion of a commitment around preventing scams, feeling this is a major issue.
- **However, some want more ambitious social tariff numbers and awareness targets:**
 - Given how front of mind awareness is as an issue, and how many customers are seen to be struggling with bill affordability, many want this figure to be higher - at least 60%.
 - Some also perceive 140,000 is not that high compared for the region (although participants also say they are unsure what is realistic).

"I think 140,000 - I know it looks really high but actually, that's not a lot when you consider the size that Wessex Water covers. I'm surprised that there's only 65,000 people on them, if I'm honest. I wonder if they could afford even more."

Physical and mental health conditions, developmental conditions, financial vulnerability



The PSR commitments are generally seen as appropriate and achievable.

Although some want to see these stretched further, especially around increasing awareness of the PSR.



2030 PSR commitments:

Increase the numbers on our Priority Services Register from 114,000 today to around 290,000

Increase awareness of Priority Services from 39% to over 50%

Contact customers on our Priority Services Register every two years to check their needs and details are up to date

Achieve a score of more than 85% when we ask customers and our partners if they were satisfied with our service and if we met all their needs

Achieve a number of external accreditations about our service

- **Commitments generally all seen as appropriate and achievable in the 2030 timescale.**
- **However, some want these to go further:**
 - Many want the awareness figure to be more ambitious - e.g. more like 60%.
 - Awareness needs to include the services on offer, rather than just awareness of there being Priority Services / the PSR itself.
 - Check-ins every two years are generally sufficient, although some suggest this could go up to once a year if resource allows.
- **Final commitment on accreditations has limited meaning (especially without specifying which accreditations).**
 - Seen as a 'business' rather than customer-facing point.



"They need to up the awareness. So everyone knows. Yeah, I do again think that could be higher, that's only an 11% increase on this one."
Mental health condition, communication difficulties



Stimulus material: four workstreams

Participants reviewed the four workstreams in the vulnerability strategy. For each workstream, they were read a small blurb of information relating to that workstream.*

Growing partnerships

Co-creating initiatives with our partners

citizens advice Bath & North East Somerset East Bristol foodbank NATIONAL DEBTLINE

Problems paying
Do you have clients who struggle to pay their water bills or who are in water debt?

Wessex Water's PartnerHub
Helping you to help customers throughout our region.

Welcome to Wessex Water's Partner Hub

Community engagement

Blue Monday roadshow - Bristol

hydrates feel great

Helping with the Salvation Army toy appeal

Using data wisely

Collecting and using data to focus help where it's needed most

Extra support during power cuts or water supply interruptions
Register for Priority Services

Sharing data with other utility suppliers so customers only tell us once

Improving customer journey

Helping our staff to understand the effects of dementia

Maintaining the highest standards of customer care

Supporting customers who need extra help

ServiceMark
The Institute of Customer Service

*blurbs are shown on the following slides

Growing partnerships

Wessex Water is aiming to increase the number and range of organisations that they work with, to help reach and support their customers better. This includes organisations like Citizens Advice, local foodbanks, and other places that provide services like financial advice. For example, they work with the energy sector to raise awareness of the Priority Services Register, and make sure customers only have to sign up once for this service. They can provide free advertising for organisations like job centres to raise awareness of their services and want to fund a range of community projects.



What works well

- ✓ This workstream is seen as very positive; this activity will effectively help raise awareness of support offered by Wessex Water.

"I think that's a really good place to go. I think Citizens Advice and the food banks is where you're gonna find the most struggling people in the community... So that is where you might actually pick up and read a leaflet."

Mental health conditions, financially vulnerable

"That's really good, actually getting in contact with food banks and Citizens Advice. These are the services on the front line, they're gonna know better than anyone who are the most needy. I think that's really good." Financially vulnerable



Suggestions for improvement

- ✗ **Many suggest additional partners, feeling these could be more 'mainstream'** e.g. supermarkets, NHS (including GPs and hospitals etc.)
- ✗ A few participants have questions about how the partnerships work in practice, and if this involves their **information being 'passed on.'**

"Are they just going to take your details and pass it on to Citizens Advice?"

Mental health conditions

"It would be more useful if they go to libraries, even certain shops where people are struggling like Iceland, where you know the demographics of the people who are struggling with their income, go and shop."

Transient vulnerability



Community engagement

Wessex Water wants to work within local communities to talk to customers who otherwise might not have been heard and make it easier for them to access the support they need. For example, they have attended community events like 'Blue Monday' in the Galleries in Bristol, the Wiltshire Money Forum, and energy saving events in Swanage. They want to keep having staff attend events like this, and also want to support and fund community projects through their staff volunteering programme and the Wessex Water Foundation.



What works well

- ✓ Many participants agree that this is a sensible activity and can see how it could help with low awareness.

"Finding different ways to reach customers is really good, as I say, because you might not want to approach them yourself."
Physical and mental health conditions

"I really like the sound of that, I think more events are needed, I didn't realise they went to them, I like the idea of being able to go and speak to volunteers in person, gives a face to the company."
Mental health conditions, financially vulnerable



Suggestions for improvement

- ✗ **Some participants emphasise the importance of other channels** pointing out that community engagement might not reach them specifically, as they do not attend such events.
- ✗ A few participants also noted the need to be sensitive when engaging with customers within the community and consider why people are at such events / organisations.

"The person's there to access a particular specific service at a specific time. The last thing somebody might want to do at a food bank is stand around, talk to Wessex Water. The two don't really marry up."
Physical health condition

"I just doubt the people that they're trying to reach actually go to those events."
Household with mental health conditions



Using data wisely

Wessex Water wants to use data to identify and provide a better service for people who may need additional support. For example, they can target eligible groups such as pensioners on low incomes to make them aware of discounts. They have already teamed up with organisations such as National Grid and Taunton Deane Borough Council to support households experiencing health impacts from cold homes. They also want to share data with other organisations so that customers only need to inform one company of their needs - rather than telling all their service providers. To be able to do things like this, Wessex Water needs to collect, store, and manage information about you, and other customers.



What works well

- ✓ Many participants see how this workstream could make their lives easier, by allowing more targeted support.
- ✓ It is felt to enable the more 'proactive' support many want to see.

"For me, telling one company and it being shared is amazing because, as I said, it's daunting enough phoning up and telling companies that you're struggling, or you have these medical conditions, or somebody in the household that might need help."
Physical and mental health conditions



Suggestions for improvement

- ✗ **Some participants express concern about GDPR and feel data being 'sold' is common – desire for reassurance that data will be used with consent, legally etc.**

"I would rather Wessex Water hold your information. You should then tell them, okay, well, I'm with Scottish Power, so you can share my information with them, but I don't want to it shared with everybody else...I don't want it to be their job to share my information."
Household with developmental conditions

"Well, I presume that they would be storing this information correctly under GDPR rules and confidentiality rules. So as long as it's not kind of broadcast over the Internet, it's alright."
Physical health condition, communication vulnerability



Participants welcome changes to make it easier for them to engage with Wessex Water (even if this workstream feels more nebulous).

Improving the customer journey

Wessex Water wants to make it as easy as possible for customers to learn about and access the support they offer, through whichever channel is best for them. For example, they have been a dementia friendly business since 2020, and all staff are trained as Dementia Friends, meaning they can help support customers living with dementia to continue living the life they want. They also conduct biannual check ins with customers on the Priority Services Register to make sure they are meeting their needs and are working to make their website more accessible for everyone, as well as offering some self-service features in their customer billing portal.



What works well

- ✓ Some participants **welcome the specific changes to the self-service portal and website.**

"Yeah, I think it sounds really positive. It's interesting to hear about online stuff. I wasn't really sure that there was any online stuff going on. [In terms of the website accessibility, or the service features?] Well, both. Actually, I think a lot of people still think you've kind of got to go through something like the phone call process and stuff like that. Yeah, I think that's quite nifty."

Mental health conditions, financially vulnerable



Suggestions for improvement

- ✗ For many, this workstream feels abstract and corporate, and they find it harder to see what it means for them in practice (e.g. unsure what 'customer journey' actually means).
- ✗ Some suggest an **app format** could make it even easier for customers to access their information.

"Again, I think an app would be a very good option of getting people to understand more about their outgoings and their usage, and the payments and stuff like that. It would definitely be an easier way to manage it as a customer."
Household with developmental conditions

"Mapping the customer journey, what's that bit?"
Household with mental health conditions



A person is shown from the waist up, wearing a white t-shirt and a plaid shirt tied around their waist. They are holding a bright green megaphone in their right hand. The background is a light-colored, textured wall. A semi-transparent teal banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text 'Communicating about support' in white.

Communicating about support

Although there is a concern that customers may not be offered all the support relevant to them if this is out of their hands.

OPTION 1: Tell Wessex Water about situation, Wessex Water then decides which support is appropriate.

- ✓ **Preferred option for most:** Wessex Water is seen as the 'expert', knowing the support available and able to ensure customers don't miss out on support that is relevant to them.
- ✓ Some highlight they would struggle to look through a long list of support services, so appreciate someone else narrow it down for them.
- ✓ A concern that if customers select from a longlist of support options themselves, it could result in support services being overburdened.

OPTION 2: Wessex Water promotes all services for customers to select from

- **Minority preferred this option:** suspicious that option 1 would enable Wessex Water to 'hide' some of the support available and not be fully transparent with customers.
 - These participants tend to have low trust in utilities companies / service providers generally.
- Some say customers know themselves, better placed to choose the support they need.
- Others would struggle to articulate their personal circumstances and worry they would miss out without the chance to select their own support services e.g. from a long list.

"I think it needs to be more tailored to the individuals. I'm not stupid, but I wouldn't necessarily pick the right one, and then you know, if you pick the wrong one and then you get refused it's a bit of a waste of time, so having someone's advice and being led up the garden path correctly would be a good idea."

Household member with mental health condition

"A lot of these companies try to hide some of what they do. So, of course, you don't know it's out there."

Physical health condition



Participants want to hear about the strategy and support that is offered to them.

Beyond wanting a basic awareness of services on offer, participants feel a tailored approach is needed for communicating about both support on offer and Wessex Water's strategy for customers who need extra help.



Basic awareness & Knowledge

- All participants want a baseline, high-level awareness of the **strategy** and a **summary of the support services** on offer.
- With the opportunity to explore services and the strategy in more depth, via **signposts to more detailed information**.



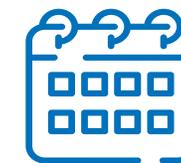
Tailored, targeted communications

- Beyond this general overview and signposting, participants feel there is **no one-size-fits-all approach**.
- A **proactive, targeted approach** to communicating specific support is needed, based on what is/can be known about the customer e.g. leaflet on support for those with mobility issues.



Range of formats

- Participants want communications in a **range of formats**, e.g. short-form messaging via email, text etc., and long form content on websites and leaflets.
- Many feel a **leaflet or booklet would be most appropriate** for a general overview/introduction to WW's support strategy and services.



Regular updates

- Reflecting concerns about **not 'missing out'** on support, participants suggest **frequent updates**. They have a **strong desire for more information**.
- However, there is a need to balance regular updates with **not bombarding customers**.



There is a general view that Wessex Water is doing this already - to an extent. However, Wessex needs to focus on more consistent and concerted communications about support services to improve awareness.



Key findings recap



1

In the wider context of other service providers, Wessex Water is praised by those who have experienced support services. It delivers on key drivers for satisfaction: positive staff interactions, choice of communications channels and effective issue resolution. **However, participants also want their service providers – including Wessex Water – to proactively offer support, i.e. reaching customers eligible for support – or making it very easy for customers to find out about and use these services.**

2

Overall, Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy is well-received by participants. They particularly like the range of support available to them, however, **some note that much work needs to be done to ensure all are aware of this support and can access it.**

3

The principles, workstreams, and service area promises of the strategy are seen as impressive, comprehensive, and achievable. Participants feel it highlights the level of thought put into the strategy, and many felt Wessex Water was already living up to much of the strategy in practice. Only a minority offered small refinements, namely ensuring that the interlocking nature of vulnerabilities is considered, so that customers with complex needs are fully supported.

4

The 2030 commitments (including the Priority Service Register commitments), are seen as important goals. Additionally, most participants see them as achievable and appropriate. **Some feel that Wessex Water could be bolder, pushing the targets for the commitments higher, particularly around awareness.**

5

In terms of the model for providing support services, most prefer the current approach i.e. Wessex Water deciding what support is appropriate based on needs vs. customers self-selecting services. However, **care should be taken to ensure Wessex Water is seen as transparent with their support offerings, and that staff take the time to fully understand the needs of all customers.**

6

Participants want to see more prominent communication of support services, reflecting their concern that they or others could be missing out through lack of awareness. A tailored approach is desired to direct the right service(s) to the relevant customers. These communications should be regular and delivered via a range of channels.





BLUE MARBLE

www.bluemarbleresearch.co.uk



Standards for high-quality research:	How addressed in this project:
Useful and contextualised	This project was conducted to evaluate Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy in the eyes of the customers whom it is designed to support. This helped to ensure that the strategy is informed by direct customer feedback and will also feed into creating communications that are more relevant to consumers.
Fit for purpose	We used a qualitative approach for this piece of research involving both online and telephone interviews. All participants were additionally given the option to have their interview take place in-person, and were able to have a carer or support person take part in the session alongside them. This approach allowed for a flexible research process, whereby each individual participants' specific vulnerabilities were catered for as much as possible. Full documentation was prepared (screeners, stimulus, discussion guide) and reviewed by the Wessex Water client team, and their Vulnerability Advisory Panel. This ensured that the research process embodied the spirit of the strategy it was designed to evaluate.
Neutrally designed	Our team's extensive experience in designing discussion guides ensured our lines of questioning were not leading. In particular, the language and stimulus was designed based on the vulnerability strategy, with any amendments made in collaboration with Wessex Water to aid participant understanding and/or to avoid any risk of offence.
Inclusive	Qualitative samples were recruited ensuring a spread of vulnerabilities, and level of engagement with Wessex Water, to ensure we did not speak only to customers already supported (via tariffs or PSR) by Wessex Water. We also used broad demographic quotas to ensure a diverse mix of customers.
Continual	Wessex Water to advise.
Shared in full with others	The research findings are included in this full report for Wessex Water to share as required. The report has already been shared with the Vulnerability Panel and will sit on Wessex Water's website.
Ethical	Blue Marble is a company partner of the MRS. All of its employees abide by the MRS code of conduct and as such all of our research is in line with their ethical standards.
Independently assured	Wessex Water have consulted its Vulnerability Advisory Panel throughout the design and implementation of the research.