

Affordable, accessible and supportive services

Our strategy for delivering services to our vulnerable customers







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1 Welcome

Welcome to our dedicated strategy to make water services affordable, accessible and supportive for customers.

We know that a change in circumstances – whether it’s finances, health or something else – can make someone more vulnerable.

It can happen to any one of us at any time; and that change could be temporary, or have long-term consequences.

We also recognise vulnerability is about the situation our customers find themselves in, rather than about them as an individual.

That is why this strategy sets out what we will do to make sure our customers:

- **can afford their water bills**
- **have full access to the range of services and support we provide; and**
- **are supported when they need more help – whatever their circumstances or needs**

It is a strategy which has evolved over many years but, at its heart, recognises the role we have as the provider of an essential service. It also reflects our ambitions to be a more responsible business too – which is why we have set ourselves challenging targets and approaches that will deliver significant, wider benefits to our customers and communities.

It is also underpinned by the significant efforts we have already made to find, engage and help more customers in need; and what they are continually telling us about where we need to focus our efforts.

And that is right because customers pay for everything we do and therefore have a right to influence all aspects of our service.

“
An ambitious strategy that has now been developed by stakeholders and supported by customers

The result is this document. An ambitious strategy that has been developed not by us, but by stakeholders; They have directly shaped the approaches and solutions too.

A final important stage of this strategy’s development is to explore better ways of working together to deliver the promises set out in this document.

In fact, more partnerships and greater collaboration are key to making sure that the help and support we offer reaches as many customers who need it.

That is why we would welcome your views on how we can do that. Please turn to page 30 to find out more.

Thank you!



Paul Butler
 Managing Director

2 About us and our services

We supply top quality drinking water to **2.2 million** people in the south east of England. Through a network of **14,780 kms** of pipe we deliver

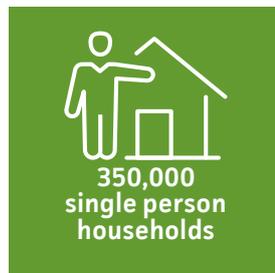
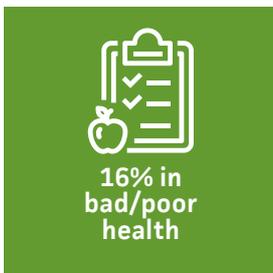
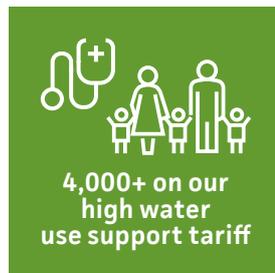
526 million litres of water every day. The skill and expertise of our employees ensures our customers' water meets the highest standards.



Key facts about our water supply area



Key facts about our household customer base



About us and our services **continued**

Our vulnerability services

Customer Care Team

Our Customer Care Team is made up of community and office-based customer service experts who find, engage with and offer the right help to those customers who may need extra support.

They attend community events and develop our stakeholder network to spread the word about what we do. When we do find customers who may need extra support, we sort out their needs; providing greater protection through a dedicated phone line or personal visits if required.



Tea dance celebrations

Our customer care team in Fawkham and Hartley with Kent Community Health for a day of dance to promote the importance of hydration to wellbeing.

Did you know?

We are the first water company to have achieved full accreditation with the British Standard for Inclusive Service Provision (BS18477:2010) which identifies and responds to consumer vulnerability.

It's just one of the things we're doing to make sure our service is always accessible and supportive.

southeastwater.co.uk

Priority Services Register



We can all benefit from a bit of extra help from time to time.

That's why we offer a range of assistance, including for those customers with mobility restrictions, who have hearing loss, are visually impaired or suffering from a long term illness.

By registering for our Priority Services Register, you can:

- receive prior warning of planned work which may interrupt your water supply
- receive priority treatment should your water supply be interrupted (we aim to arrange an alternative source as quickly as possible, and will often hand-deliver bottled drinking water to our customers with mobility issues)
- receive important information in a more convenient format, such as large print or the spoken word, where our normal presentation style is not suitable
- register your own spoken or written password for our staff to use so that customers can identify them if we need to call at your home
- nominate somebody else to receive your water bill on your behalf, or someone we should contact if it remains unpaid (the person you nominate must agree to this)
- receive easy-to-read, large print bills (we can also arrange to call you and read your bill to you)
- if English isn't your first language we may be able to help you with our interpretation service when you call
- receive information about specialist organisations which are able to provide advice on possible adaptations to water fittings and appliances around the home



About us and our services **continued**

Delivering bottled water during emergencies

We know from customers' feedback – and our own experience of water supply incidents – that many find it hard to cope with an interruption to their water supply; and, at the very least, would need bottled water delivered to their homes. For some customers those bottles need to be easier to physically open too.



That's why we've significantly ramped up our support during water supply emergencies to customers on our Priority Services Register. Whether it's checking they are okay with a call, text or visit, or regularly delivering bottled water to them (including smaller, easy-opening bottles) it's about doing more when it matters most.

Giving visually impaired customers peace of mind

We can all feel a little on edge when letting people we don't know into our home. Home is where we should feel safe and especially so for customers whose circumstance make them more vulnerable.

That's why we've started to roll out staff identity cards complete with Braille so our visually impaired customers who read Braille feel reassured if we do have to call on them. We operate a password scheme too for extra reassurance if it is needed.

Did you know?

We've added a clever communication tool to our website to help those customers with additional language needs, or for who English is not their first language.

'Recite Me' includes options to read out the website's content, applies special software so it can be read more easily by people with dyslexia, and a translation tool with up to 90 languages.

It's just one of the things we're doing to make sure our service is always accessible.



About us and our services **continued**

Financial support

We understand customers' circumstances can change – temporarily or permanently – which can often have a knock-on effect on their ability to pay their bills.

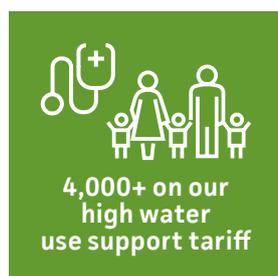
Whatever the issue, we're here to provide support and practical help so that customers have one less thing to worry about. Here's how:

Low income tariff



For customers who have a household income of less than £16,105 (excluding certain benefits) we will cap annual water bills at a reduced amount for that year, and provide water efficiency advice.

WaterSure (high water use tariff)



For those customers on certain benefits and who need to use a lot of water – for example they may have large young families or medical conditions – we will cap annual water bills at our average bill amount for that year.

Helping Hands



We can provide grants for customers who are actively sorting out their finances but need a helping hand to clear water and sewerage debts built up over the years.

Water Direct



We can be paid directly by the Department for Work and Pensions from Universal Credit to help customers pay their water bill and any debt they may have too.

Did you know?

In 2018 our Customer Care Team:

- attended 245 community events to promote our Priority Services Register
- contacted 1,592 customers temporarily without water and delivered bottled water to those who needed it
- undertook 23,137 home visits to customers needing extra support financially or during a water disruption

These are some of the things we're doing to make sure our service is always affordable.



3 Your views about our services

How we engaged to develop our strategy

We've turned to our customers and stakeholders to help create this strategy.

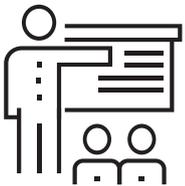
They've not only helped us identify what is important to focus on, but have co-created many of the approaches and solutions too.

We did this in the following ways:



On affordability

– research with over 9,000 customers, stakeholders and our employees via customer interviews and focus groups



On accessible services

– workshops with our Customer Care Team and organisations and individuals supporting customers with additional needs; as well as telephone and face-to-face interviews with customers in vulnerable circumstances



On supportive services

– telephone and face-to-face interviews with customers in vulnerable circumstances affected by disruption to their water supply; focus groups with customers on what additional services we should offer, especially when things go wrong



Helping Hand Social Tariff

south east water

Are you having difficulty with your water bill? We can help.

South East Water's Social Tariff

Fill in this application form and return it to us at South East Water, Buxton Road, Buxton, Derbyshire, DE1 2LH. If you need help with this form, please contact our Customer Services Centre on 0133 900 000, or alternatively please visit our website www.sewater.co.uk

Our Social Tariff can assist if you have a low income or are on a number of state benefits. To qualify for the Social Tariff you must have a household income of less than the low income threshold, which varies by region, including the following:

Child Tax Credit	Attendance Allowance	Personal Independence Payment	Housing / Council Tax Benefit	Mortgage Interest Relief (including living on a low income)
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Application form

About you:

*Water account number

Name

Address

*Postcode

*Landline

Mobile

Email

*Date of Birth

*National Insurance Number

Please provide correct details to avoid delays in processing your application.

How we engaged with you and what you told us **continued**

What you told us

About the affordability of water



Cost – “keep water affordable (and bills stable) so customers don’t get into arrears, especially if their circumstances mean they need to use a lot of water – and help them to keep their water usage low”



Meters – “give customers more certainty about what the financial impact will be when they switch to a water meter”



Debt – “help more customers in financial difficulty, such as those that are in employment or low incomes, and before they start to struggle”



Telephones – “don’t cause customers more financial headaches due to long hold times. Even better, provide them with a Freephone telephone number and a direct line for organisations that contact you as part of the support they are offering”

About the accessibility of our services



Bills – “make sure they are easy to understand and accurate”



Access – “try and make sure that customers have access to water so they are continually supplied, especially when they have medical issues”



Water efficiency – “offer customers more support and advice”



Promote – “your services more by working with other agencies and community groups and services”



Fast track – “access to self-service systems for agencies to help customers on the spot”

About the support you need – especially when things go wrong



Reach out – “to find and engage more customers who should be on the Priority Services Register”



Improve – “your communications with, and support for, these customers during water emergencies. This includes making sure those who really need it get bottled water delivered to them”



Ask for help – “use stakeholders and partners expertise, knowledge and resources when you need an extra hand”



4 How that has shaped this strategy

Making our services affordable – at a glance

We know that keeping water affordable, and our bills stable, are important for many of our customers which is why we are working hard to keep our bills affordable. But we will also do the following:

* **Short** = 1 year **Medium** = 2-5 years

Area focus	We will:	When by*:
Cost of water and our service	Introduce monthly bills to support customers who need to track every penny, every month	Medium
	Give payment holidays to customers who suddenly find themselves in difficult personal circumstances	Short
	Provide greater budgeting certainty – and limit any increases without causing debt issues – for customers who are sensitive to sudden changes e.g. pensioners on fixed incomes	Short
	Provide water efficiency advice and support to customers who will benefit most from lower bills – including home visits to up to 8,000 vulnerable customers a year	Medium
	Provide Freephone numbers to all customers on our Priority Services Register so we don't cause them an extra financial headache if they run out of phone credit	Short
Our water charges	Extend our low-income tariff to 65,000 customers	Short
	Develop a payment-matching tariff to provide financial support for a further 10,000 customers who are just about managing	Medium
	Keep eligibility rules for our current financial support simple and easy to administer	Short
	Undertake a full review of all our financial support tariffs, work with other water companies to streamline these, and agree next steps with our independent Customer Challenge Group	Short

Making our services affordable – in detail

Water efficiency

Helping our customers to reduce their water bills will be a key focus for us which is why we have committed to visit up to 8,000 households a year to see how we can help them become more water efficient. This will include installing free water efficiency devices when we can, and ensuring access to financial support where needed.

Ensuring our support tariffs really help

We will be reviewing our support tariffs to ensure they are really helping our vulnerable customers. This review will also look at how we can extend and maximise the financial support we offer for those customers that find themselves in, or at risk of, debt.

Helping everyone through those blips

Sometimes we all find ourselves in a position where we are struggling to manage our finances and need a bit of a hand. We will formalise our payment holiday scheme and give a better budgeting approach for all customers that need that support, whatever their circumstances.



How that has shaped this strategy **continued**

Making our services accessible – at a glance

This isn't simply about us always doing something – it is also about empowering customers so they have the tools to access the services they want and need.

* **Short** = 1 year **Medium** = 2-5 years

Area focus	We will:	When by*:
Strategy	Set up a new dedicated Vulnerability Strategy Team (to support the work of our Customer Care Team)	Short
	Through our Vulnerability Strategy Team , engage with experienced and specialist agencies to ensure greater accessibility to our services and support	Short
	Widen our definition of vulnerability so it includes a greater range of vulnerability indicators e.g. mobility problems or communication, and ensure these customers are on our Priority Services Register	Short
	Undertake a full review of how we engage with other agencies so we can share data and cross-promote our services, and provide customers with an 'instant passport' to access a wider range of support	Short
	Map types of vulnerability to our water network – so we can pinpoint those areas where there is a higher risk to our customers, especially when something goes wrong with their water supply	Short
Bills, letters and emails	Apply our 'talk simply' approach to our bills and letters	Medium
	Re-design our bills , letters and email templates with specialist input e.g. Mencap, Crystal Mark	Medium
Communications	Target and tailor our communications so we reach those who could benefit from our help and support; this includes capturing customers' social media contact details on our systems	Short

Making our services accessible – in detail

The new vulnerability strategy team

By 2020 we will have created a new team whose sole purpose will be to deliver the best possible service for customers that need some extra support. They will also develop our stakeholder network and work with others to create initiatives that are simple for everyone to understand and access – making our services even more effective.

Mapping and understanding our region

Knowing who our customers are now, and what they will be like in the future, will ensure we create services and initiatives that are always fit for purpose. Using the intelligence and insight of our partners, and our own knowledge, we will summarise what we expect to change and how this will change our services, and capture this in our Performance, People and Planet annual report.

Our communications

We will adopt a ‘talk simply’ approach using communication channels that they want. We will learn from others about how to remove any jargon so what we say is clear and simple. We will also work harder at explaining to customers what will happen next if they have a problem that they need help with.



How that has shaped this strategy **continued**

Making our services supportive – at a glance

This is about working in partnership – with customers and other agencies and organisations – so collectively we can make sure our services support those who need extra help and when they need it the most.

* **Short** = 1 year **Medium** = 2-5 years

Area focus	We will:	When by*:
Being prepared	Increase the size of our Customer Care Team so we can reach and support more customers – especially during water emergencies	Short
	Help vulnerable customers to be more resilient and ‘weather ready’ – whether it’s heatwaves or wintry spells	Short
	Develop an early warning system about water emergencies for our trusted partner network	Medium
	Automatically sign up customers to our ‘in my area’ alert tool when they go onto the Priority Services Register – using their preferred method of communication	Short
	Continue leak checks for vulnerable customers and support them with our ‘find and fix’ service	Short
Help and support during water emergencies	Contact high risk customers if emergency lasts over one hour and provide a named contact who will check in at regular intervals	Short
	Contact medium risk customers if emergency lasts over four hours	
	Ensure regular communications for customers via the ‘in my area’ alerts	
	Deliver bottled water to those with mobility issues and a supply of smaller bottles and easy bottle openers, if needed	Short
	Engage with our trusted partner network to tap into their expertise and resources – whether it’s to spread the message or help with bottled water deliveries	Short

Making our services supportive – in detail

Improving sign-up to our services

We will risk-assess every customer we sign up to our Priority Services Register to determine who we need to help first in emergency situations, and with what support. For example, we will decide who needs bottled water delivered as a priority and if they need smaller bottles that are easier to open. Likewise, we will also phone high priority customers quickly to understand what immediate help they may need. More generally, we will make sure we sign up customers to our other communication channels to make sure they receive early notifications of any problems.

Not trying to do it all ourselves

We understand that collaboration with our partners, and tapping into their skills and expertise, is key to making this strategy successful. We also want to play our part in supporting community organisations that help those with additional needs, so we will develop initiatives and more formal partnerships so customers get access to our services and support from a wide range of trusted partners. This will be underpinned by specific funding that will allow us to grow these new partnerships.

Keeping stakeholders informed

We will continue to find and engage more stakeholders, such as health care providers and councils, not only so we can keep them informed about our work, but also to make sure they know when we have water supply problems – so we can work together to support our community.



5 How will we know our strategy is working?

Developing six new performance measures

Our strategy is underpinned by six new performance measures to specifically ensure we are supporting our customers with their vulnerable circumstances. These have been shaped by our customers, stakeholders and staff; as well as the independent Customer Challenge Group which scrutinises our plans and performance.

These six new performance measures are as follows:

Measure	Performance commitment by 2024/25
Satisfaction of household customers who are experiencing payment difficulties	4.5 out of 5
Satisfaction of household customers who are receiving non-financial support	4.5 out of 5
Satisfaction of household customers who are on our vulnerability schemes during a supply interruption	Target set in 2019/20*
Household customers receiving financial support	65,000
Household customers receiving non-financial support	60,000
Satisfaction of stakeholders in relation to assistance schemes offered by South East Water	Target set in 2019/20*
Checking data for customers receiving non financial support	attempted contacts by 2025 – 90%
Checking data for customers receiving non financial support	actual contacts by 2025 – 50%

* we will be undertaking baseline surveys to set our performance commitments for these new satisfaction measures

You will see that customer and stakeholder satisfaction with our service is a big feature of how we will measure our performance and the success of this strategy.

That's because we firmly believe customer satisfaction is the best yardstick for everything we do – not least because it underpins customers' trust and confidence in us.

That said, we have also set ourselves more conventional targets for some of these performance measures to track the success of our strategy.

Here's how we will determine if our strategy is working.



How do we know our strategy is working? *continued*

Satisfaction of household customers who are experiencing payment difficulties

This performance commitment focuses on the satisfaction of customers who are experiencing payment difficulties. It will not only capture those who are on our specific support tariffs, but those who access the range of payment schemes and help we offer.

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Satisfaction score out of 5	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5

Satisfaction of household customers who are receiving non-financial support

This performance commitment is focused on the satisfaction of customers who have applied to, or are already registered on, our Priority Services Register.

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Satisfaction score out of 5	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5

Satisfaction of household customers on our support schemes during a supply interruption

This innovative measure is focused on the satisfaction of those customers on our support schemes who experience an interruption to their water supply. It is designed to ensure that all aspects of what we do and how we respond – for example the speed of fixing the problem, arranging alternative water supplies, and how we keep in touch is – is measured by their satisfaction.

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Satisfaction score out of 5	To be confirmed	+0.1	+0.1	+0.1	+0.1	+0.1

Household customers receiving financial support

We will significantly grow the number of customers accessing and receiving our financial support tariffs and measure it year-on-year as follows:

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Number of households	19,919	47,000	58,000	66,000	72,000	75,000

In addition, we will use the following key performance indicators to track how well we are doing:

Key performance indicator	How we will measure it
Payment holiday and breaks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of customers supported Average duration of holiday / break
Reduced payment option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of customers supported Average duration on option
Monthly billing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of customers on scheme Percentage of customers in arrears
Improved budgeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of customers on scheme Percentage of customers in arrears



How do we know our strategy is working? *continued*

Household customers receiving non-financial support

We will significantly grow the number of customers on our Priority Services Register so more can access and receive our help, and measure it year-on-year, as follows:

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Number of households	10,882	31,000	49,000	70,000	90,000	110,000

This commitment includes customers directly signed up to our register by ourselves and also data sharing activities with the energy sector.

Checking data for customers receiving non-financial support

This is a commitment we made to ensure that customers who are on our Priority Services Register are receiving the correct support based on their needs.

Other than 2020/21 where the target is based on that single year all targets are measured over the previous two years.

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Households on PSR that have had attempted contacts	NA	45%	90%	90%	90%	90%
Households on PSR that have had actual contacts	10%	25%	50%	50%	50%	50%

Satisfaction of stakeholders in relation to assistance schemes we offer

This performance commitment is focused on ensuring stakeholders, who work with vulnerable customers, are satisfied with:

- the service we provide to those customers
- the partnership arrangements we have with them

Performance commitment	Where we are today	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Satisfaction score out of 5	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.0

Additional evaluations – BSI accreditation

We are proud to be the first water company to receive accreditation to BS 18477:2010, which is the British Standard for Inclusive Service Provision.

We will continue to use the BS auditing process to scrutinise and challenge our strategy, so we lead our sector in providing affordable, accessible and supportive services to customers.



6 Working together for the benefit of customers and the community

Delivering affordable, accessible and supportive services outlined in this document requires smarter ways of working and continued effort on our part, which we have committed to do.

Working together is key and we are continuing to develop our 'partnership toolbox' which provides groups and agencies with a range of ways that we can work together. This also recognises the valuable role that community groups and charities provide working with our customers who we also wish to support.

We are always keen to extend our range of partnerships to ensure that our reach is as wide as possible.

“

We want to make sure the help and support we offer reaches as many customers who need it

How you can input to our future strategy and working

We want to keep growing our reach for customers to ensure that everyone is aware on how we can help and support

We always want to hear from customers and stakeholders how we can improve in any aspect of our services

We want to develop an effective partnership network that supports all our customers regardless of their circumstances

If you wish to talk with us or just send us your ideas and thoughts then you can send this directly to yourwateryoursay@southeastwater.co.uk



Contact information



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