

Helping customers that need extra support

Our Customer Vulnerability Strategy
June 2024 revised



from
Southern
Water. 



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Our strategy for delivering services to customers needing extra support

We provide water for life to 2.7 million water customers and 4.7 million wastewater customers. Our goal is that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can access the services they need.

Our Customer Vulnerability Strategy is key to making sure all our customers – including those in vulnerable circumstances – have access to the essential water and wastewater services we provide.

Our strategy was developed following engagement and research carried out with customers in vulnerable circumstances. It means we can get an even greater understanding of the challenges our customers face, which is vital in enabling us to give extra support to those that need it.

We know that across the South East, 5.3% of the population are children under the age of five, 19.4% of people are aged 65 or over, and those registered as disabled account for over 6.3 percent. A survey carried out in 2020–21

highlights a deterioration in mental health and wellbeing for people in this part of the country, with numbers of those reporting anxiety and low happiness increasing compared to the previous survey, and over 3.95% of over 65-year-olds recording a prevalence of Alzheimer’s and other dementias.

Our strategy shows how we try to give our customers in need the right support at the right time, as well as finding ways we may look to expand our services in the future to provide the best services to those in need.



Our customers

We recognise that vulnerable circumstances include several things such as age, health conditions, financial difficulties and social isolation. Across our region we use statistical data to highlight where our communities may need the most support. Working with key stakeholder partners such as Citizen's Advice, Housing Associations and local charities, we are able to tailor and widen our support.

At least **30%** of our customers fall into the lower income levels

6.8% of people on the Isle of Wight report their health as bad or very bad

47% are concerned about the affordability of future water bills

An estimated **17%** of adults reported a common mental health issue in Kent and Medway

Nearly **37%** of our customers struggle to pay their household bills

More than **152,000** in the South East have chronic Kidney Disease (Kidney Care UK)

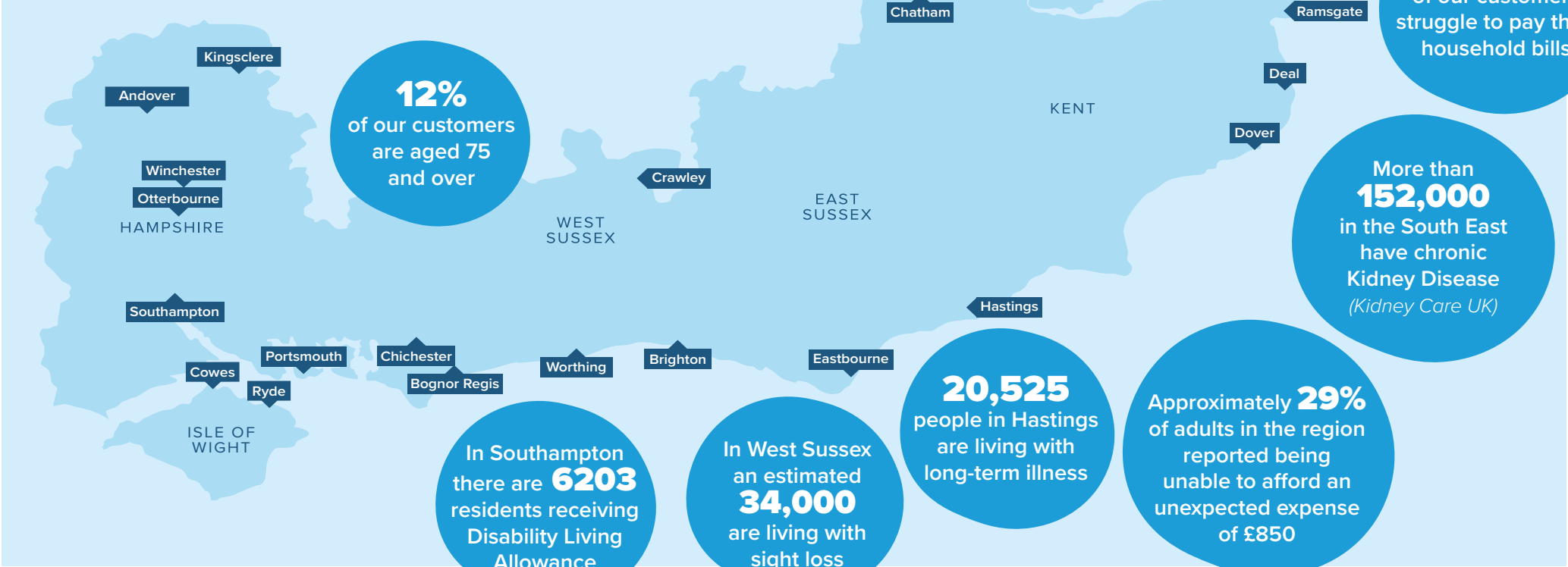
Approximately **29%** of adults in the region reported being unable to afford an unexpected expense of £850

20,525 people in Hastings are living with long-term illness

In West Sussex an estimated **34,000** are living with sight loss

In Southampton there are **6203** residents receiving Disability Living Allowance

12% of our customers are aged 75 and over



¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/expenditure/articles/impactofincreasedcostoflivingonadultsacrossgreatbritain/november2021tomarch2022>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics>

³ [Portsmouth demography - JSNA report - Portsmouth City Council](#)

⁴ [Mental Health NA Kent 2019 \(kpho.org.uk\)](https://www.kpho.org.uk/)

⁵ [East Sussex Joint Strategic Needs Assessment I \(eastsussexjsna.org.uk\)](https://www.eastsussexjsna.org.uk/)

⁶ [Needs Assessment - Visual Impairment in Adults - West Sussex JSNA Website](#)

Our affordability and vulnerability services

Our services are developed to assist our customers who need extra support, using a tailored approach to address financial hardships and improve accessibility to essential services.

Through engagement with stakeholders and specialised partners including Citizens Advice and Kidney Care UK, we have a better understanding of circumstances that impact our customers. Collaboration has led to improvements in services such as our Hardship Fund, supportive tariffs, and service delivery during incidents.



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Visit our website for live chat or to log into your account
southernwater.co.uk/help

0330 203 0277
Weekdays 8am to 7pm
Saturday 8.30am to 2pm

Your customer number

Your payment reference

WATER for LIFE Southern Water

GARDENS

We're making things right! We'll manage and repair any problems directly at our customer's home, making it easier for you to get things sorted. As agreed with our customers and the Environment Agency, we will reduce our water charges by £125m over the next 5 years. We will also reduce our water charges by £125m over the next 5 years. We will also reduce our water charges by £125m over the next 5 years. We will also reduce our water charges by £125m over the next 5 years.

Dear

Here's your latest bill based on the meter reading we took on 02 April 2022. You currently pay by Direct Debit, so you don't need to do anything – your payments will be taken automatically.

Meter reading Water used in cubic metres 92 m³ Older meter: 1.0001 litres This is equivalent to 10 litres, or 14 mins of showering or 100 mins of washing	Charges £367.07 Bill date 07 Apr 2022 Billing period From: 02 April 2021 To: 02 April 2022 Bill type Metered - Direct Debit Previous bill's charges £334.13	Future payments Next monthly payment £30.60 10 May 2022 For full list of future payments, see Your payment summary. Struggling to pay? See p. 3 Previous bill's payments £26.50 monthly
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Water Period: 02 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 Variable Rate £1.487 x 91.90m ³ = £136.06 Standing Charge £21.44 Total Water £158.38	Wastewater Period: 02 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 Variable Rate £2.045 x 84.64m ³ = £173.09 Standing Charge £34.51 Total Wastewater £208.69
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How we can provide extra support

Accessibility	Communication	Financial	Assistance
Dedicated support helpline	Large print bills	Debt write off scheme	Meter reading service
Talking bill service	Audio bills	Breathing space	Bottled water delivery in a supply outage
Recite me accessibility tool	Braille bills	Discounted social tariff	Leaking pipe repairs
Webchat	Third party bill communication	Debt matching scheme	White goods grants
Community events	Alternative language literature	Capped water charges	Water efficiency visits
Drop-in sessions		Payment schemes	
WhatsApp		Domestic abuse debt scheme	
Video triage service			
Digital Assistant			

[Full details of the services we provide and how these fit with Ofwat’s vulnerability guidance in their document Service for All.](#)

Our affordability and vulnerability services (contd.)

Here to help

Customers needing extra support have priority access to our dedicated 'Here to Help' team. Our office-based team are trained to offer specialist support, advice and signposting. With bespoke training from key partners and stakeholders – such as Kidney Care UK, Dementia Friends and Survivors of Economic Abuse – and our training framework for policies – including safeguarding and information handling – our team offer individual case management and are well-equipped to support our customers.



Vulnerability outreach

We engage directly with those in need through our outreach work, attending community events, support surgeries, and local drop-in centres. Our focus is to make sure support is easily accessible to those that need it. Our outreach team build trusted relationships within their local communities, each developing statistical and knowledge-based strategies, to deliver a wide range of support in their area. Alongside our training framework for policies, our outreach team are trained to engage with customers directly. Training includes British Sign Language and First Aid. In addition, the team receive training from our key partners and stakeholders, such as Kidney Care UK, Dementia Friends, and Survivors of Economic Abuse. Our community work with partners, and local organisations, such as Age UK, Citizens Advice and Job Centre Plus, provides even more opportunity for the team to highlight the support available.



Inclusive online services

Our new website, launched in April 2024, is more customer friendly. It was designed using an analysis of customer interaction on our previous website. The new site is more accessible to make sure every customer has the best possible experience, as shown in our BSI International Kitemark ISO 22458 accreditation. Customers can access tools such as Recite Me and Web Chat, as well as direct links to our dedicated Here to Help team. This improved customer journey allows easy access to communications, business updates, and a straightforward application process for customers.








Our affordability and vulnerability services (contd.)

A Priority Services Register for those in need

Our Priority Services Register makes sure those in special circumstances can access water services. Signing up to be on the register may give access to an audio bill or some extra support if there's a problem with the water supply. By making sure the data held on our Priority Services Register is up to date and relevant, we can easily identify specific extra needs and offer the right support. We want our support to reach as many people as possible and we have data agreements with other utility companies or third parties, to make sure our Priority Service Registers are all as up to date as possible.

Our Priority Service customers have access to:

-  Bottled water delivery if there's a problem with the water supply – we contact Priority Service Customers about extra support if their water supply is interrupted.
-  Regular meter readings – if reaching their water meter is difficult, we can arrange for regular meter readings for our customers.
-  Alternative communication methods – we can offer customers talking or audio bills, large print, braille or digital bills as well as the option for bills to be issued to a third party.
-  Leaking pipe repaired for free – depending on where the leak is we may be able to fix it for free.
-  **We currently support over 240,000 customers through our Priority Services, representing 15.2% of our customer base.**

Financial support to suit changing needs

Our range of financial support is designed to provide several options to suit customers' changing needs. We understand it can be tough if customers are struggling to pay their bill and our tailored support includes a discount of at least 45% on future bills, as well as providing grants for essential white goods.

We want our support to reach as many people as possible. To enable us to efficiently enrol those that meet the eligibility criteria for discounted tariffs, we currently have data agreements with [third parties](#) such as local authorities, charities and organisations, including Age UK and Housing Associations. This allows us to extend our reach to those that need support.

We currently provide financial support to over 129,000 customers via our Essential Tariff and are committed to increasing this support to 158,000 by the end of 2024-25.

Essential Tariff	Provides a discount of at least 45% on future bills
WaterSure	Offers capped bills for metered properties
Water direct	Allows payments to be made directly from customer benefits
NewStart	Could help customers tackle debt

During the COVID-19 crisis, we reached out to all household customers, adjusting tariff criteria to reduce financial burdens. This was part of a support package to help those hit hardest by the rising cost of living, showing our commitment to water affordability through discounts and support mechanisms. This initiative included increasing bill discounts for 104,000 households from 20% to 45%, providing at least £200 in annual savings on dual service bills for an additional 21,000 households, and offering discounts of up to 90% for those in greatest need.

Jayne had been living in a women's refuge for a number of months, and was delighted to be allocated her own home.

However, when she moved in, there was no equipment in the kitchen. Jayne has struggled with mental health and eating disorders, so having a cooker was really important to get her back on her feet. She applied to the Hardship Fund and the cooker was installed in her kitchen.

“Throughout the process it felt like I was dealing with friends. They really did everything they could to help.”

Jayne



Our affordability and vulnerability services

Hardship Fund

Our Hardship Fund provides customers experiencing additional financial hardship with an opportunity to apply for a debt write off up to £2000, or to access essential home appliances or furniture which may otherwise be unaffordable. To date we have supported over 1000 customers through either debt write offs, grants or food vouchers.

During 2023-24 we provided essential white goods or specific items of furniture to over 200 customers, including £4,000 of food vouchers. In addition, we supported over 150 customers with significant financial hardship by offering a debt write-off up to £2,000. Providing over £195,000 of support.



Partnerships

Our ongoing partnership work allows us to offer specialist support to our customers, providing access to subject matter experts as well as bespoke training and advice for our colleagues.

In May 2023 we entered a partnership with the leading kidney charity Kidney Care UK, to support over 150,000 individuals affected with chronic kidney disease within our region. Through the initiative, we want to provide tailored support to more than 3,000 individuals currently undergoing dialysis within our network.

Our partnership means we can now quickly identify dialysis patients if there's a loss of water supply, and make sure that critical water supply is maintained. We've worked closely with Citizens Advice Hampshire to support their Home and Well Project. This is a unique collaboration of organisations working to help residents in the local area return home quickly and easily after a stay in hospital. Our partnership provides funding for specially trained assistants to support residents with Priority Service applications and water and energy advice.

In 2023 we achieved the British Standards Institute accreditation for inclusive services, and in 2024 we secured the BSI International Kitemark for inclusive service standard expected.

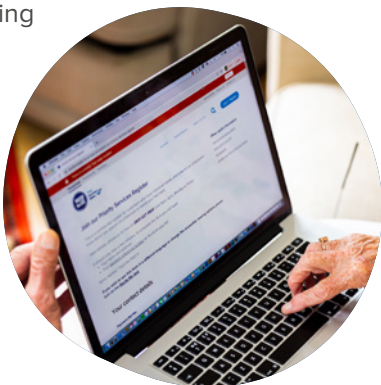


What our customers say

We want our vulnerability strategy to be customer led. By communicating directly with our customers needing extra support, we have an opportunity to hear what our customers need and expect from us.

Listening to our customers is part of what we do every day. This includes activities such as customer research, analysis of data, and sharing insight with other companies. Our insight work allows us to have a deep understanding of what our customers want and helps deliver improvements. In 2023–24 we engaged with over 35,000 customers for direct feedback and views on our service and future plans, representing over 8,000 hours of engagement – with customers needing extra support being included throughout our research programme.

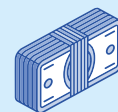
This strategy highlights how we are putting into action what customers want to see from us now and in the future.



Our engagement included:

- tracking the satisfaction levels of our Priority Service Register customers, according to Ofwat’s performance commitment reporting
- setting up a dedicated Vulnerability Panel for the strategic programming period 2025-30
- carrying out desk research into best practice in engaging customers in vulnerable circumstances.

Our research identified key themes and our customers told us they wanted:



Affordability

Our customers want bills to be affordable for everyone and support available for those most in need. Any increases to bills should be predictable and smooth.



Awareness

Customers want increased awareness of services that are available and how we can support them, particularly around our Priority Services Register.



Engagement and Communication

Being kept informed and receiving relevant communication was highlighted as a customer priority. With regular updates on business plans and communication during incidents being a focus.



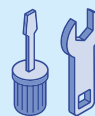
Accessibility of services

Accessibility and inclusivity for all services and support was highlighted as being critical by our customers. They want flexibility and options available for everyone that needs it.



Tailored Support

Customers value personalised and meaningful service. They expect their particular needs in relation to their water/wastewater services to be met.



Incident Support

During a major incident customers want information and support precisely when they need it and expect communication to be honest and transparent.

Support we've given so far

Over 5,000
hospitals, schools
and care homes

Over 250
outreach events
attended by our
Vulnerability Liaison
officers during
2023–24

Over 17k
customers charges
capped on our
WaterSure Tariff

£256,000
of support provided to
our customers via our
Hardship Fund between
2023 and 2024

£193,356
spent on debt
write-offs in
2023–2024 with an
average debt of
£956 cleared

£57,000
worth of white goods
and £4,000 worth of
food vouchers provided
to our customers who
are struggling

112,300
of our customers on
the Priority Services
Register are
over 65

246,470
customers on
our Priority
Service Register

129,217
of our customers are
supported through our
low-income Essentials
Tariff offering up to
90% discount on
their bills

“

I have multiple health conditions, such as Fibromyalgia, skin conditions, COPD, asthma, arthritis and I have just had major back surgery which has left me with some health issues, incontinence and numbness in my leg. I've also have got to have another back operation at some point. I am unable to work and claim Universal Credit and PIP, so money is very tight. I desperately needed a new bed, one that I can get out of easier which will help my mobility issues.

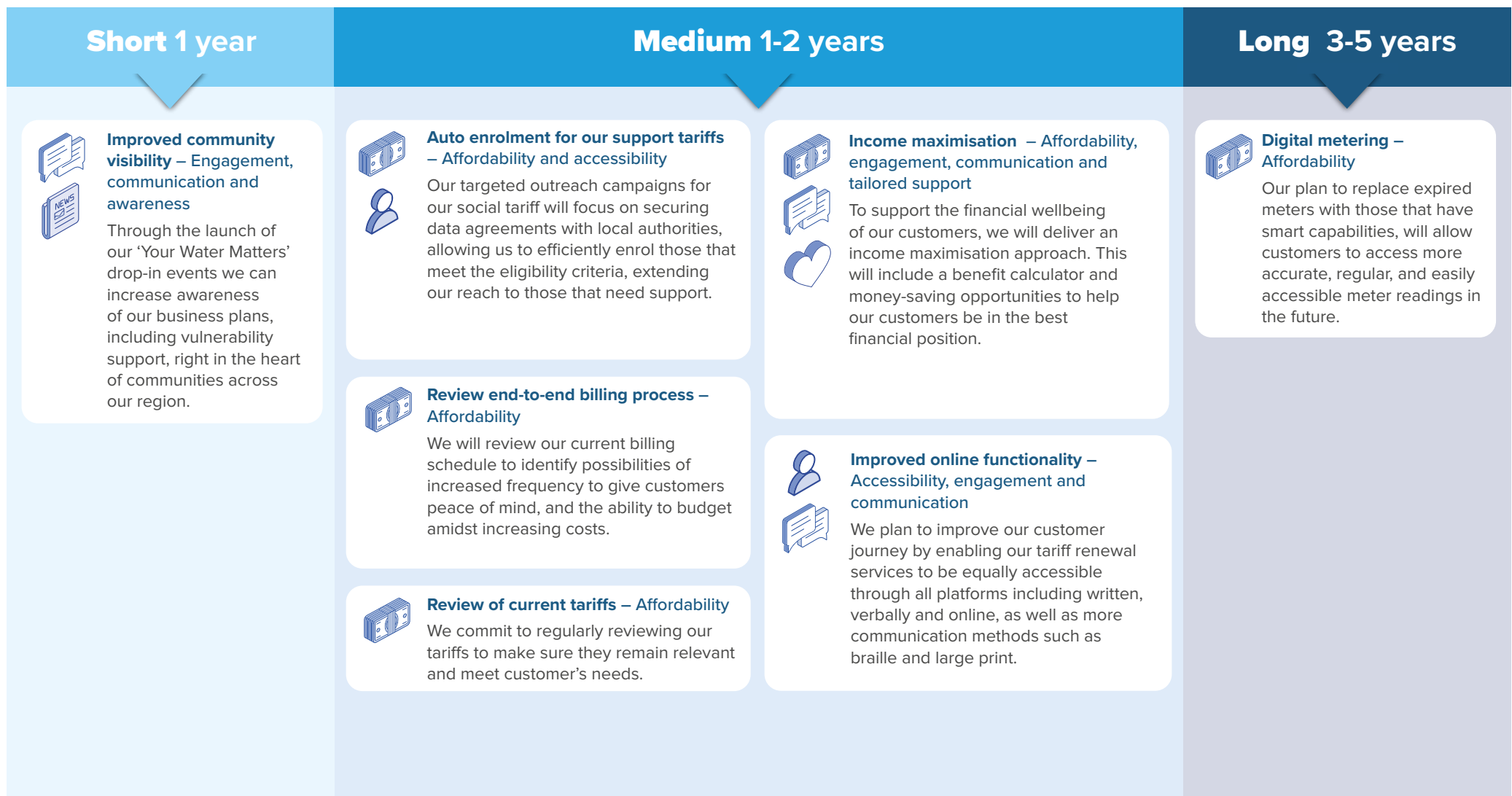
I cannot thank Southern Water enough for helping me with a new bed, I have many health issues and having a new bed will really help my health. They were very helpful and very understanding, absolutely went out of their way to make sure I had the right bed.”

Melanie



Our strategy to meet customers' needs

Our customers have been clear about what they need from us. Our strategy sets out our approach and how we plan to deliver the right changes to meet those needs. Our focus is on 'getting the basics right'. We are dedicated to giving the support our customers in need expect from us and our action plan details how and when we will deliver that support. We have detailed our timeframes below for delivering on our actions.



Short 1 year



Debt advice – Affordability, engagement, communication and tailored support



To support the financial wellbeing of our customers, we are joining the Money Advisor Network. Provided by Money and Pensions Service, a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions, this service will allow our colleagues to refer customers to immediate, confidential and independent debt advice.

Medium 1-2 years



Incident communication review – Tailored Support, Incident Support & Engagement and Communication

We will undertake detailed analysis of our customers' requirements and feedback during major incidents and perform gap analysis to identify improvements.



Incident process review – Tailored Support, Incident Support & Engagement and Communication



We will undertake detailed analysis of our customers' requirements and feedback during major incidents and perform gap analysis to identify improvements.

Long 3-5 years



Priority Service Register communication – Awareness, engagement and communication

To help increase awareness of the assistance available for our Priority Service Register customers, we will review our current communication and outreach campaigns, and perform detailed gap analysis to identify improvements.



Partnerships – Engagement, communication, accessibility and tailored support

We will continue to identify the best ways to support our customers needing additional support by maintaining, strengthening and expanding on our current partnerships. Partnerships improve our ability to identify, reach and support vulnerable customers through shared expertise and resource.



Increased hardship support – Affordability and tailored support

We want to increase the number of customers supported through our Hardship Fund, as this targets those most in need. We're proposing to use a further £5 million of penalties to increase the Hardship Fund to £1.25 million per year. Penalties would be returned to customers in the form of a discount, but we believe the funds could be better focused on our customers who need additional support the most. We need Ofwat's permission to be able to do this and we will work with them to make this case.



Priority Service Register services – Awareness, Accessibility and Tailored Support

To make sure the additional support for those on our Priority Service Register are known and relevant to each individual, we will record the extra services needed.

Our affordability and vulnerability services

Our actions

	Affordability	Awareness	Engagement & Communication	Accessibility of services	Tailored support	Incident support
Auto enrolment for our support tariffs	✓			✓		
Improved community visibility		✓	✓			
Income maximisation	✓		✓		✓	
Review end to end billing process	✓					
Review of current tariffs	✓					
Improved online functionality			✓	✓		
Debt advice	✓		✓		✓	
Incident communication review			✓		✓	✓
Incident process review			✓		✓	✓
Priority Service Register communication		✓	✓			
Partnerships			✓	✓	✓	
Increased hardship support	✓				✓	
Digital metering	✓					
Priority Service Register services		✓		✓	✓	

Making sure our strategy works

Measuring success and expanding the services where and when we can.

We want to be clear on the progress of our actions and the impact of any additional extra support we provide. Our measures will be reviewed monthly by our Executive Performance Committee, to make sure our strategy is working, remains relevant and delivers support where it is needed most. We'll track our performance by:

- tracking the impact of our plans through our annual PSR satisfaction score. Currently at 70%, we are committed to increasing customer satisfaction amongst our Priority Service customers to 75%, an increase of 5% by 2030.
- committing to achieving and maintaining the common performance commitment targets for contacting Priority Service customers as set out by Ofwat.
- aiming to increase the percentage of our customers who feel that we support their needs from 63% to 75%. Ensuring our actions are making a difference.
- conducting a review of our dedicated 'Here to Help' vulnerable customer line, to ensure response times and availability remain in line with the volume of customers seeking support and additional extra assistance.
- performing detailed-gap analysis to identify efficiencies and improvements.
- by extending assistance through our social tariff, we plan to support an additional 24,000 customers with our Essentials Tariff by 2030, increasing the total number of customers supported to 182,000.
- by increasing awareness and improving communication, we will expand the reach of our Priority Services Register from just over 15% to more than 20% of our customers. This means customers who need additional support will receive it.



Looking to the future

We are committed to making our plans relevant, flexible, and adaptable to the constantly evolving needs of our customers. We will continue to listen as we progress through our strategy, using a combination of insight, partnership expertise and data to identify and explore innovative ways we can improve.

Using our [strategic framework](#) to identify gaps in our current services, including our future plans, we will make sure we provide the right support at the right time.

Future plans may include:



Priority Services awareness week



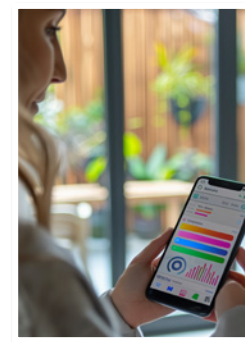
Identify strategic partnerships



Liquid level indicators for visually impaired



British Sign Language video calls



Improved text services

Moving forwards

We are fully committed to not only continuing, but significantly improving the level of support provided to our customers. By 2030, our customer-led actions will ensure we are 'brilliant at the basics' providing a solid base to build, flex and improve to deliver the services our customers expect.



from
Southern
Water® 

The Southern Water logo graphic consists of three stylized, wavy lines that resemble water or a landscape feature, positioned to the right of the word 'Water'.