



Our customer inclusivity strategy 2018-2030

# FOR EVERYONE

**NORTHUMBRIAN**  
**WATER** *living water*

**ESSEX & SUFFOLK**  
**WATER** *living water*



# CONTENTS

- 05 INTRODUCTION**
- 06 THE CHALLENGE**
- 09 BUILDING ON STRONG FOUNDATIONS**
- 10 CO-CREATING THIS STRATEGY**
- 14 INNOVATION AND AMBITION**
- 16 CUSTOMER PRIORITY 1: MAKING SURE SERVICES ARE INCLUSIVE AND AFFORDABLE FOR ALL**
- 18 CUSTOMER PRIORITY 2: LISTENING AND THINKING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS**
- 20 CUSTOMER PRIORITY 3: SENSITIVE POLICY DESIGN**
- 22 CUSTOMER PRIORITY 4: ENGAGING THE EXPERTS AND PROMOTING OUR GREAT WORK LOCALLY**
- 24 OUR AREAS OF FOCUS FOR INCLUSIVITY**
- 28 HOW WE WILL KNOW WHEN WE GET THERE**
- 29 SUMMARY**



# INTRODUCTION

Operating across the north east and south east of England, including parts of Greater London, we serve more than 4.5 million customers. This document sets out the steps we are taking to make sure that every single one of those customers enjoys an unrivalled customer experience – whatever their particular circumstances or needs.

Our focus is to provide extra support, financial and otherwise, for customers who need it and to remove the barriers that might get in the way of delivering exceptional service. Our aim is to treat all customers fairly and consistently, working alongside our partners to provide experiences that demonstrate respect and empathy always.

Making sure bills are affordable for all of our customers is our industry leading aspiration. This will only happen if we think beyond the 'here and now' and put plans in place over a long timeframe. Our aim to eradicate water poverty by 2030 is a powerful example of this, particularly given the very high levels of unemployment, benefits receipt and income deprivation that we have in our regions. We are confident we can do this and have a sense of social responsibility - as a company in the privileged position to serve almost all of the households in our regions - that this is the right aspiration to have. You can read more about this unique aim in this report.

When it comes to financial hardship we do not underestimate the scale of the challenge; there are currently eight million people in the UK who do not have the means for a decent standard of living. Eleven million more are so far below what they need that they are likely to be living in poverty.

By knowing our customers well we can appreciate their diversity, and understand that at any one time customers may have particular needs that mean they require extra support from us. We know

too that a change in circumstance – whether it is financial, health or another factor – can happen to anyone, at any time (and may be short term or much more permanent).

Our customers have told us that a personal approach is incredibly valued by them; this is particularly true for customers who do need more help or support. It is in recognition of this that we are developing our 'Unrivalled Customer Experience' strategy further by publishing this document, to make sure that it is truly inclusive of all customer groups.

Everyone has a role to play in this. If we are all sensitive to how others' needs might differ from our own, we will be better at creating and acting on opportunities to help our customers. This document shares our commitment to doing all that we can to enhance our customers' well-being and, in doing so, to improving their lives for the better.

*Heidi*  
**Heidi Mottram**  
*Chief Executive*



# THE CHALLENGE

We want all of those we serve to enjoy an unrivalled experience and for all customers to have an equal voice. Yet sometimes customers are not aware of the support that is available, or are reluctant to tell us about their circumstances. Being classed as 'vulnerable' can also make customers feel they are being labelled so, rather than helping, may push customers away.

**We have drawn on our own dedicated research, and on the learning of our partners, to gain a deeper understanding of our customers and of the challenges that must be overcome.**

- Around half of our customers are likely to be facing, at the least, one situation that could lead them to experience circumstances in their lifetime where extra support would help. That help could be ongoing or temporary.
- Customers who would benefit from extra help are likely to be less satisfied with their water and wastewater services than other customers. This is backed up by the Consumer Council for Water's (CCWater's) annual Water Matters research.
- Identifying customers who are most likely to need help and, more importantly, engaging with them, can be difficult. Going through trusted support organisations and charities works well for some customers.
- Those customers who might benefit the most from the extra support we provide are usually the most difficult to reach; we need to work harder to make these customers aware of the help that is available to them.
- No single approach to services or to communication will be successful with all customers. Tailored services and communications such as targeted campaigns should be developed for each type of circumstance, with further room for personalisation within these approaches. A true understanding of customers is critical to success.
- We need to promote and raise awareness about the help that we offer through our Priority Services Register, and much more. Many customers simply do not know this support is available.
- For customers who need extra help and support, it is really important to use simple and clear language in our communications, and to steer away from any jargon.
- Customers do not always realise the impact a change of circumstances (such as illness, bereavement or losing a job) can have, and can refuse support if it is not promoted in the right way.
- Some customers do not seek help because they are wary of sharing their personal information or are prevented from doing so by pride or fear. These customers may prefer to make sacrifices, such as going without heating or food, rather than fail to pay their water bill.
- Where we cannot help further, customers tell us they would like us to signpost them to other sources of local help such as charities and organisations that provide grants.

# THE CHALLENGE

Ofwat, the economic regulator of the water sector and Defra, the government department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, have carried out research at a national level. This shows the size of the challenge the sector faces in raising awareness and take-up of support, and in making sure that bills are affordable for all.

- 12% of households in England and Wales are struggling to pay their water bills (Defra, 2016).
- Nearly a quarter of households in England and Wales spend more than 3% of their disposable income on water and wastewater services (Ofwat, 2015).
- The number of people who contact the National Debtline about water bill arrears has increased by 10% since 2010 (Ofwat, 2015).
- Unrecovered debt added £21 a year to the average bill in England and Wales over the four years to 2014 (Ofwat, 2015).

CCWater has conducted research into customers' awareness of the support that is available to them (Water Matters, 2016). This found that while a high proportion of customers would benefit, their awareness of the extra support available to them was low. Clearly there is more we can do to increase awareness of the help we can offer.

AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS	NW	ESW
Agree their water and wastewater charges are affordable	83%	66%
Aware of WaterSure	12%	11%
Aware of the Priority Services Register	44%	44%
Aware of the social tariff	5%	6%
Aware that we offer free fitting of water meters (unmeasured customers only)	68%	75%
Aware they can trial a meter	34%	31%

NW: Northumbrian Water  
 ESW: Essex & Suffolk Water

Other research by CCWater (Delving into Water, 2016) has highlighted the extent to which our services are taken up by customers. This is lower than we would like it to be and demonstrates that there is an opportunity to improve in this area.

Take-up of our social tariff is also lower than we would like it to be at present. This is in part because of the way that it has been funded, which has meant that only customers who are already in debt are eligible for support.

We plan to introduce a new cross-subsidised social tariff in April 2018. We expect that the number of customers who take up this tariff will grow significantly from that time. The tariff will be linked to income levels as well as to debt. This approach has received support from our customers and from CCWater.

At present, customers who have signed up for our Priority Services Register appear to be up to 300 times more likely to have contacted us about an operational issue than other customers, with one contact for every four customers on the Priority Services Register. This indicates to us that there is an opportunity to offer support to customers on the Register in a much more proactive way.

# BUILDING ON STRONG FOUNDATIONS

The approach of our inclusivity strategy is to build on the range of support that is already in place. As part of providing an unrivalled customer experience, we always aim to make sure that our people consider how best to serve every single customer. In addition, our Priority Services Register offers extra support for those customers who need it.

This includes:

- Providing braille, large print, audio or EasyRead versions of documents for those with visual impairments or literacy difficulties.
- Offering telephone interpreting services for those whose first language is not English.
- Providing Next Generation Text (NGT) for customers who are deaf or hard of hearing. If customers do not have access to a computer for web chat, then they can contact us using NGT by prefixing any of our listed telephone numbers with 18001 and an operator will join the call.
- Taking extra meter readings for those who are not able to read their own meters.
- Delivering bottled tap water to customers who rely on a continuous supply (for example because they have specific medical needs like dialysis, or have babies who need formula milk).
- Using passwords so that customers who are wary of unplanned house calls can verify the identity of our employees.
- Contacting a trusted friend or family member who has agreed to talk to us on the customer's behalf.

- Confirming the name of the person attending any appointment made by a customer on our Priority Services Register.

**Under our SupportPLUS umbrella, we also offer a range of support to customers who are going through financial hardship.**

In addition to offering direct support, we work closely with charities and other organisations that can point our customers in the right direction for help.

This includes:

- Discounts of up to 50% off their water/water and wastewater bill.
- Providing support with past water debts if customers stick to good payment habits.
- Offering free, independent financial assessments and advice from our partners such as StepChange, Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty.
- Providing capped bills for large families and those with water dependent medical conditions under our WaterSure scheme.
- Helping customers budget by paying bills directly from their benefits through the Water Direct scheme.

# CO-CREATING THIS STRATEGY

In developing this strategy we have involved customers who face financial, mobility and communication barriers, among others. We heard first-hand from them what they would want from a company that gave them unrivalled customer service.





As we have developed our business plan for 2020-25, we have made sure around a quarter of the customers who have been involved have been those who might benefit from extra support.

We held workshops with customers to design our services together, asking:

- Wouldn't it be great if...?
- How can we find you?
- How do we help and hinder?

We asked customers to highlight what excellent service looks and feels like to them. They gave us examples of where they have received this, from both within and outside the water industry.

## CUSTOMER PRIORITIES

We asked our customers what unrivalled customer service means to them and checked it against what we already provide. The key messages were very clear. To deliver against our vision for inclusivity, we need to:

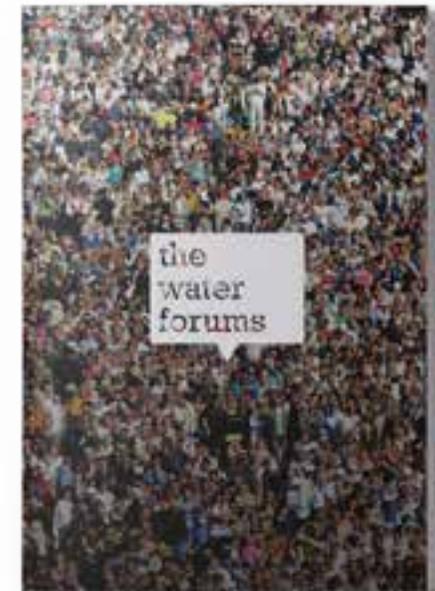
- Make sure that our services are inclusive and affordable for all.
- Listen, and think beyond the obvious. Own the customer's problem. Proactively offer extra support when customers need it.
- Design customer policies with sensitivity to the needs of customers who may benefit from extra help and support.
- Engage the experts and promote our great work locally. Spread the word to customers by partnering with trusted local organisations and charities.

You can read more about each of these four customer priorities and our plans in the coming pages.



## WATER FORUM CHALLENGE

Our Water Forums, which scrutinise our approach and challenge our plans, include community and voluntary sector experts. We have engaged with Water Forum members to make sure our plans reflect customer priorities, and they have provided valuable guidance and feedback.



# CO-CREATING THIS STRATEGY

## OTHER GUIDANCE

As part of our approach to this strategy we also considered the information and guidance contained in a number of reports, published by Ofwat, on vulnerability and on how to unlock the value in customer data.

These reports recommend:

- Working in partnership with third parties and public sector agencies in order to identify customers who would benefit from extra support.
- Embedding approaches to vulnerability within a general vision of excellent customer service for all.
- Using customer data in a proactive way in order to identify customers with extra needs and to support them in the right ways.
- Training employees and providing accessible resources and a range of payment options.
- Scanning the horizon, and reviewing government policies and wider trends to understand the potential impacts on customers who might need extra support.

The water sector is currently preparing its longer term plans as part of the 'price review', which will cover the period 2020-25. Ofwat has set out its four key themes for the review, which we fully support. Our inclusivity strategy is fully aligned with the four themes:

**Great customer service:** Our strategy is all about our ambition to achieve unrivalled customer service for all, including customers who may need extra help or support at any point in time.

**Long-term resilience:** As part of our engagement with customers and other stakeholders while designing this strategy, we have considered how we can help customers achieve financial resilience (the ability to cover the expense of life events) at an individual level.

**Affordable bills:** Affordability for all (both current and future customers) and eradicating water poverty by 2030 is a cornerstone of this strategy.

**Innovation:** This strategy includes new ideas and ambitions to better support customers who need it most.





# INNOVATION AND AMBITION

Our ambition is to make a difference for our customers and to help change their lives. In our view there is no reason why, in the 21st Century, customers should be in a position where a water bill is unaffordable.





We are committed to leading the way in making this happen. As part of this we aim to eradicate water poverty by 2030 and to make sure that water bills are affordable\* for all of our customers. We estimate that in our Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water areas around 400,000\*\* households will benefit from this.

In our regions, with some of the highest levels of unemployment, benefits receipt and income deprivation, this ambition is particularly challenging. We recognise that this is a significant aspiration, and that there are many areas out of our direct control that will influence progress. However, these should not be a reason to deter our ambition, and indeed we will make our plans flexible and responsive to change.

We are taking an innovative approach to inclusivity, and continually looking at initiatives that will provide extra help and support to our customers.

### SHARING INFORMATION

We will invest in smart, innovative ways to help our customers by working in partnership with financial, health and community support organisations, as well as with other utility providers, to share information that will help our customers, where we have their consent to do so. We will press for multi-agency data sharing to provide our advisors with relevant information so that they can better support our customers.

### VOLUNTEERING

As part of our company-wide 'Just an Hour' community volunteering programme, we will sponsor additional training of employee volunteers in debt advice, financial hardship and vulnerability so that at least 10% of volunteering activity supports customers through these areas.

### FINANCIAL INCLUSION

We will offer targeted financial inclusion programmes in income deprived communities in the form of free events and classes. We will also provide families with information about water efficiency, the health benefits of drinking tap water and drain care. We are already carrying out home visits to discuss financial support with customers to help them save money and make sure they are on affordable payment plans.

### DIGITAL AND SMART TECHNOLOGY

As an innovative company, we are looking at how we can use the latest smart and digital technology to improve customer service through our Think Digital Programme.

### AT HOME SIGN UP

To reach out to our customers, we will expand our campaigns such as 'Every Drop Counts' and 'Love Your Drain' to include discussions around Priority Services and affordability schemes. This allows customers to sign up for services in the comfort of their own homes.

### PLUMBERS & DIY NETWORK

We will work with local plumbers to leave information with customers and attach Priority Services cards to stop cocks and meters. We will also promote our Priority Services through DIY stores, plumbers and DIY networks.

### COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS

We will employ community ambassadors in targeted locations, as well as in our customer centre. Ambassadors will help us to achieve more diverse engagement and participation with hard-to-reach customers. We anticipate that some, if not all, of our community ambassadors, will be from charity and stakeholder groups.

We are in the process of developing our plans for each of these areas further, as part of our planning for the 2020-25 price review. Our active engagement and participation approach will make sure customers develop services alongside us.

\* Our affordability definition is any household paying more than 3% of their disposable income on water, after housing costs.

\*\* Estimate derived from a range of sources including our own independently commissioned analysis and Ofwat's Debt & Affordability 2014-15 report.

We believe this represents the number of households who would be recognised as being in water poverty.

# CUSTOMER PRIORITY 1: MAKING SURE SERVICES ARE INCLUSIVE AND AFFORDABLE FOR ALL



It is important to our customers that our services are available to everyone and, they tell us, affordable for all. Water poverty is an industry-wide challenge, and one that we experience across our diverse operating areas in the regions covered by Northumbrian Water and by Essex & Suffolk Water.

We work in some of the most deprived areas of the UK, with thousands of customers struggling to make ends meet, some of the highest levels of unemployment and chronic health problems across our cities, towns and rural communities.

Our inclusivity strategy will give us a game changing opportunity to eradicate water poverty for our customers. We know that it will require multiple, targeted initiatives, planned out sensitively and over a number of years.

We are already active and are further developing our plans right now. We believe it is possible to achieve zero water poverty by 2030.

How we will achieve this customer priority:

- We are developing a sophisticated, ongoing and wide-ranging plan of initiatives between now and 2030 to move customers out of water poverty.
- We will continue to develop our tariffs and charging approach to maximise the number of customers we can support.

- We will refine our already successful customer segmentation techniques to reach thousands of customers, and tailor the support we can provide to them so they can save money. Customers need unique approaches.
- We are adding more partnerships to our network of support which creates mutual financial and social benefits for our customers, often beyond the scope of just their water services.
- To support customers who are struggling financially, we will design our tariffs with a view to making bills affordable across all customer circumstances.



# CUSTOMER PRIORITY 2: LISTENING AND THINKING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

We understand from customer feedback that awareness of the support we offer for customers in difficult circumstances could be higher. Our greatest opportunity to promote the services we offer is through our interactions with customers, whether this is over the phone, in writing, online or face-to-face.

We want all of our employees to be sensitive to the diverse needs of our customers. We will allow them the time and give them the skills to listen carefully to customers, and to be aware of triggers such as a change in circumstance that may lead to a need for extra help.

Employees will be empowered to suggest services that would help, and to think beyond our policies and practices. This might include, for example, instances where a simple action would ease a customer's worries or situation, and reassure them.

How we will deliver this customer priority:

- We are expanding further our training on vulnerability so that all of our people understand and can identify situations that may mean customers need extra support.
- We will adopt an approach based on 'trigger points' (such as changes in personal characteristics, life situation, changes in policy and economic conditions).
- We are running awareness campaigns that encompass all of our people and our supply partners.

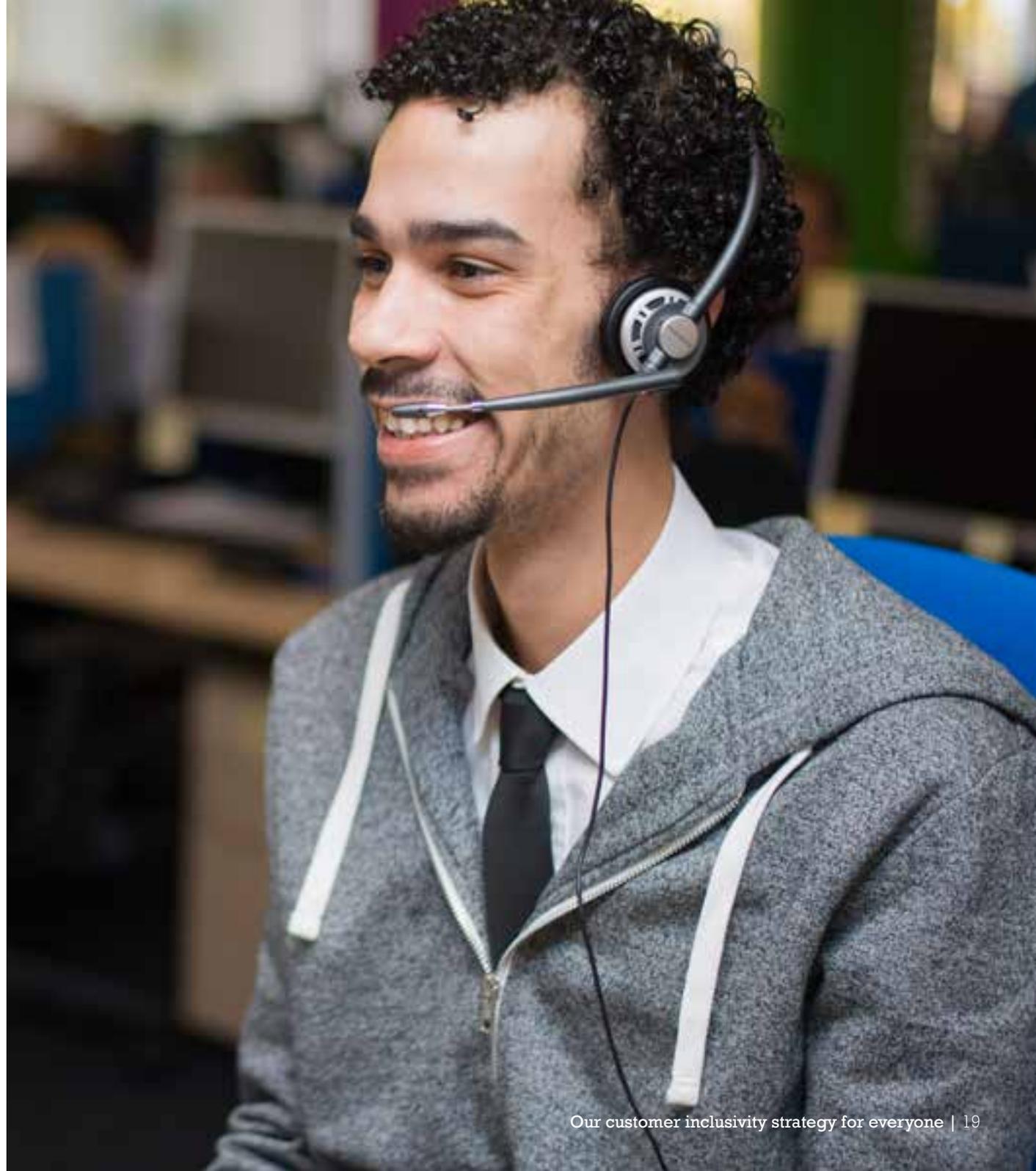
- For all new customers, we will ask relevant questions to highlight any priority services requirements or other circumstances that may mean they need extra help, so that we can offer the best support from day one.
- We will provide a dedicated, easily accessible team who will offer advice and support to all customers who need extra support.
- We will also provide additional ways for customers to communicate with us, including video calls, so that our services are as easy to access as possible.
- Our people are empowered to use their initiative, make decisions and take actions that would help our customers.
- We embrace diversity in our workforce to create a culture where inclusivity is considered as a matter of course.



### Some examples of going above and beyond:

Mrs A from Durham called to set up a direct debit. As part of the conversation, she mentioned that she was struggling to pay her bill. We noticed that her consumption seemed high. However, when chatting we identified that Mrs A was on benefits and had four children under 19, so was eligible for our WaterSure scheme, which would cap her bills at a more manageable level. We also signposted Mrs A to our partner StepChange Debt Charity to discuss her circumstances, so that we could reduce her bills as part of our affordability scheme, should she be eligible. As part of the support from StepChange Mrs A would also receive help and advice about the full range of her household bills.

Mrs S called regarding her water consumption, which had increased. As Mrs S was not able to carry out a leak test, we visited her home and found a leaking overflow in her toilet. Although a less customer-focused approach would be to explain that it was the customer's responsibility to organise a repair, our response was to carry out a simple repair, which quickly reduced water wastage and saved Mrs S the expensive of calling out a plumber.



# CUSTOMER PRIORITY 3: SENSITIVE POLICY DESIGN



Our customers tell us that our standard policies and procedures may not always provide the support they might need.

This may include customers who are struggling to pay their bills. It could also include, for example, customers who are not able to read their meter because of a physical impairment, so cannot monitor their water consumption.

We want to make sure that we consider the impact on all of our customers when we set our policies and design our services. We always involve our customers up front when contemplating any changes.

In particular, we want to prioritise appropriate service improvements towards customers who have circumstances that may require a particular focus. This would include, for example, increasing sewer capacity for customers on low incomes who live in areas with high flood risk or prioritising lead replacement for customers who live in deprived areas or where the population of young people is high. Similarly, areas where there are high proportions of elderly people who may be financially vulnerable would be prioritised for meter awareness campaigns.

How we will deliver this customer priority:

- We are creating our policies together with a wide range of our customers and other stakeholders to ensure that they meet their needs.
- We continually monitor economic trends and changes that will affect our customers, such as changes in benefits, and how this might impact on our own policies for customers or local provision. We will put to use our data science approach in order to signpost areas of greatest need.

- We will work with third party wastewater providers to align policies, so that it's easier for customers to understand different roles and responsibilities and for customers to get the services they need.
- We are re-designing our web capability so that customers can assess their own needs and apply for the most appropriate support.
- We are actively promoting tariffs and services to customers.

**“I have on a number of occasions called a customer back to discuss their financial situation. They have explained they felt vulnerable and frightened when having to pick up a phone and make that initial call. I went through the debt tool used by StepChange online and their accounts have been successful for arrears and reduced tariff support.”**

**“Mr P wanted to keep on track with his consumption. However, he was unable to read his meter due to a physical impairment. Under our Priority Services, we arranged for additional meter readings to be completed, and followed up with a telephone call to discuss his consumption and make sure he was happy with his bills.”**



# CUSTOMER PRIORITY 4: ENGAGING THE EXPERTS AND PROMOTING OUR GREAT WORK LOCALLY



We will continue to develop strong partnerships with advice agencies and voluntary organisations that support our customers, to promote our services and refer customers to trusted organisations for additional support.

We have seen that identifying customers who are in vulnerable circumstances, and engaging with them, is challenging – particularly those in financial difficulty. During our workshops to co-create this strategy, both customers and support agencies explained that when customers are in need of advice and support, they tend to seek out a trusted service, such as Citizens Advice, rather than approach the service provider directly.

We already partner with StepChange Debt Charity, which offers free, independent debt advice to help customers manage their budgets. StepChange will refer customers to us, advising them to apply for our affordability schemes. The feedback we have received from our customers on this service has been very positive, with many customers being provided with a route out of debt.

We are working closely with National Energy Action (NEA), a national charity from the energy sector; to learn lessons from their great efforts to eradicate fuel poverty and to understand how we can work together for the benefit of water and energy consumers.

How we will deliver this customer priority:

- By selecting partners to work with, we can share and raise awareness with all customers, making sure that we reach diverse cultural and minority groups.
- We will share data with other organisations, with our customers' consent, so that customers who need extra support do not have to keep providing information to multiple different organisations.
- We will champion the opportunity to design and implement a joint platform with other water and wastewater companies and non-industry partners so that customers who need extra support can be registered and identified more easily.
- We will introduce Customer Ambassadors into our teams and communities. They will be trusted individuals who partner with us to raise awareness of the support we offer among those who need it most.

Our 'Safe and Warm in Kirkley' campaign saw partners from National Powergrid, UK Power Networks, the Fire Service and volunteers from Essex & Suffolk Water visit customers in their homes to fit smoke alarms and deliver messages about safety, money saving and Priority Services.



# OUR AREAS OF FOCUS FOR INCLUSIVITY

This section provides more information about the steps we will take to deliver our inclusivity strategy. Each of the nine areas listed builds on our customers' priorities and will form the basis of our action plans.

## 1. ZERO WATER POVERTY - BY 2030

Improving our customers' ability to afford our services is one of the most important ways we can help them. Customers support a cross-subsidy to expand our social tariff, which offers up to 50% discounts for customers who are genuinely struggling to pay their water and wastewater bills. However, the number of customers we can help this way only scratches the surface of the proportion of our customers who we believe could be in water poverty.

Ofwat estimates that as few as 10% of customers who are struggling receive help from their water company. We also estimate that recovering bad debt when customers cannot or will not pay is costing all of our customers in our areas of supply approximately £15 per year. This has led us to consider wide ranging changes to our tariff structures.

Reshaping the ways that we charge our customers may enable us to reduce the proportion whose water and wastewater bills comprise more than 3% of their disposable income. We will explore and model different ways of doing this with our customers and phase in any changes proactively over the next ten years.

Where our customers could save money, we will do more to promote metering and help customers to save water and so lower their bills.

We have a zero water poverty action plan which includes many activities to help customers save money and increase their disposable income. We will share more details of our plan later this year.

## 2. INNOVATIVE TARIFFS - ONGOING

We are continually looking at our future tariffs and involving our customers in this work to make sure tariffs are innovative and meet customers' needs.

We have already successfully helped thousands of customers with a company funded discounted tariff (social tariff) and arrears support schemes.

Our customers have recently agreed that they are willing to pay a cross-subsidy to expand our social tariff from April 2018. This enables us to make the tariff more accessible and help thousands more customers who are struggling to pay their water and wastewater bills.

To help more customers to benefit from these services, we will review our tariffs and affordability schemes annually.

### 3. CUSTOMER AND STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION – ONGOING

We already ask customers as well as employees and stakeholders to participate in designing and renewing our services and policies.

We are developing a deeper understanding of our customers and using innovative segmentation to reach specific groups. We already include customers who need extra support in all of the customer engagement and participation that we currently undertake so we can understand different perspectives.

Our work includes developing relationships with specialist partners to help better understand physical challenges, mental well-being, financial hardship and life in rural communities.

We are making sure that our customer engagement and participation programme is representative and allows us to consider the impacts for customers who need additional support. For example, as part of our research about customers who are affected by discoloured water we specified that at least 20% of the sample should have a financial vulnerability, 20% should have a health vulnerability and 20% should have a communication vulnerability. When the research findings came back this information allowed us to consider how best to design our response. For example, we found that customers aged over 65 tended to experience more worry than others and were more likely to contact us.

### 4. EXPAND OUR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND NURTURE REGIONAL AND LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS – ONGOING

We will continue to build a strong network that is alive to our customers' needs and reaches those households and individuals who will benefit most from our support and services.

We have always held a strong belief that partnerships with organisations such as our own, who our customers trust, are key to successful outcomes for those who are the most in need. This is reinforced by our customers, who tell us this time and time again.

Our latest strategic partnership is with the highly respected and well-established national charity NEA, whose focus for many years has been to eradicate fuel poverty. We believe this new partnership, which will support our longer term strategic aim to eradicate water poverty, including a focus on research and practical support for customers, is ground breaking and will nurture greater collaboration and inclusivity between the water and energy sectors.

# OUR AREAS OF FOCUS FOR INCLUSIVITY

## 5. BUILDING AWARENESS OF OUR HELP – ONGOING

We will increase people's awareness of our financial help and Priority Services Register, both among our employees and with our customers. This will include campaigns, using our research to segment our customers and target areas of our regions that are likely to have high proportions of customers who may need extra help. Social media will be used to promote our offer, using key partners to retweet and share messages.

Promotion packs that set out the services we offer are already being distributed to all of our partners, in order to increase awareness of our schemes among their case handlers. We also provide a range of leaflets and posters for our partners to give to their clients.

We will employ members of our diverse communities as contact centre community ambassadors. We anticipate that most of them will have links to charity and stakeholder groups such as Citizens Advice and the Alzheimer's Society.

## 6. INCLUSIVITY AWARENESS FOR ALL EMPLOYEES – ONGOING

Online Inclusivity Awareness training has already been provided by the Money Advice Trust for 300 of our frontline teams to give them the tools to identify customers in situations where we can offer further support.

This will be expanded to provide in-house training for all frontline teams and supply partners. This training programme will be reinforced with coaching and best practice assessments.

We will run a detailed internal awareness campaign for all employees about the different types of circumstances customers may be in where we should offer extra help and support.

On an ongoing basis we always encourage employees to contribute their ideas to improve services for customers, and will highlight examples of good practice.

## 7. SHARING CUSTOMER DATA – BY 2019

We know that our customers have low awareness of our support, and are reluctant to tell organisations about their need for extra help at times. We will overcome this by minimising their need to tell multiple organisations that offer similar services and have similar policies.

We will share intelligence about our customers who need extra support with partner organisations such as other utilities, public sector organisations and charities, when customers have given their explicit consent for this to happen.

We are already working with British Gas, SGN, UK Power Networks, Northern Powergrid, Northern Gas Networks and Cross Utilities Forum, as well as with other water companies, to identify the best and most secure way to share this information.

## 8. BEING EASY TO ACCESS VIA CHANNELS OF CUSTOMERS' CHOICE – ONGOING

We will make sure that all contact channels are easy to access for all customers at all times.

We recognise that customers who need extra help often wish to use online channels because of personal sensitivities. We are investing in

improvements through our Think Digital Programme which is developing new digital experiences for all customers who choose to use them.

We plan to simplify online registration and access to our services and to provide more and better options so that all customers can manage their own accounts and services online. To make it easier for our customers and ensure they don't have to keep repeating information, our technology can put contacts through to the same person the customer was in touch with. The investments we are making in new systems makes it far easier for our advisors to see, at a glance, a customer's history and understand their individual circumstances.

We will create an online tool that will allow customers to assess their eligibility and suitability for additional services such as affordability schemes, Priority Services, water metering and efficiency. As many customers are sensitive about discussing their financial circumstances, we want customers to be able to apply and assess their own eligibility online, when they prefer this to talking to someone.

We already use home visits to talk customers through the types of support we can provide, and a small number of customers visit our offices to seek help. We know face to face conversations can be a really useful way to make sure customers understand and can get access to all of the services we provide. We often use customer drop in sessions, as well as our customer engagement vehicle, Flo,

to reach customers across local communities and speak to them about how we can help. We are extending the level of face to face contact to support customers and will target communities where we know our help will make the biggest difference.

## **9. EMPLOYEE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY – ONGOING**

Through our NWG Academy we work hard to attract and develop the skills, knowledge, talent and workforce we need for the short, medium and long term, sustainably.

We will continue to monitor and track our progress in diversifying our workforce so that we are best placed to serve our customers and innovate.

We will build on our 'Different like me' inclusion training for employees and managers to make sure our people are aware of the impact of unconscious bias on their behaviours and decision making. By continuing to focus on the development of the emotional intelligence of our leaders, we aim to further embed a culture where everybody is supported to be the best that they can be and feels comfortable expressing their ideas and views.

By fostering an inclusive culture, we will improve our people's ability to understand and empathise with all of our customers, regardless of their personal circumstances.

## **RAISING AWARENESS**

Raising employee and partner awareness and understanding of how we can support customers and the types of help we can offer is important for our future success. We recently completed a survey with customer facing teams to understand their perceptions of our services. This showed that eight out of ten employees believe it's very important to offer bespoke services to customers who need extra help. Six out of ten employees are confident about offering service to customers who need extra help.

We will survey again, once our training and awareness campaign has been rolled out, to monitor improvement levels.

# HOW WE WILL KNOW WHEN WE GET THERE

We are confident we can deliver our plans and give a commitment to do so. We will monitor our progress closely, and report back regularly to our customers, Water Forums, partners and other stakeholders. Our aspirations are for the long term and focus over many years will be required to achieve them.

**These are the ways in which we will measure success:**

## EVERY YEAR

- At least 25% of all of the customers who get involved in helping to develop our plans for the future and improving our services will be those who need extra help.

## BY 2020 WE WILL:

- Increase the number of customers we support financially from 1.5% to 5% and keep the support at this level as a minimum.
- Increase the number of customers who are registered for our Priority Services from 2.5% to 7% and keep support at this level as a minimum.

## BY 2022 WE WILL:

- Achieve equal levels of customer satisfaction between customers who need extra help and those who do not.
- Increase awareness of our Priority Services from 44% to 65% and keep awareness at this level as a minimum.

## BY 2025 WE WILL:

- Reduce complaints about our SupportPLUS and Priority Services to zero.

## BY 2030 WE WILL:

- Have reduced water poverty from 22% of our customer base to zero.

**“As a Forum with diverse experiences, we welcomed the opportunity to review the company’s inclusivity plans and aspirations. We’re confident our challenges and views have been listened to and, as a result, have shaped this strategy for the better.”**

**Jim Dixon  
Water Forums Chair**

# SUMMARY

We are very excited about the ambitions for our customers that are set out in this strategy, which we believe will have hugely significant, positive impacts for those customers who need our support the most. Our plan to eradicate water poverty by 2030 will be a unique achievement for the utility sector, one that is all the more worthwhile given the high levels of income deprivation that customers in our regions face.

Key to this, and to making sure that help and support reaches as many customers as possible, will be partnerships and collaboration. By working together across the water sector, wider utilities and a range of trusted support organisations, at national and local levels, we can make a positive difference.

Our employees, customers, stakeholders and our Water Forums have participated fully in the development of this strategy. With their support and a real focus on what matters most to our customers we will do great things for our diverse range of customers, changing many lives for the better.



#livingwaterlovingcustomers



**NORTHUMBRIAN**  
**WATER** *living water*

**ESSEX & SUFFOLK**  
**WATER** *living water*

If you have any ideas or would like to contribute to helping us achieve our strategy, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

You can contact Mark Wilkinson or Lisa Connell at Northumbrian Water Group:

[mark.wilkinson@nwl.co.uk](mailto:mark.wilkinson@nwl.co.uk)  
[lisa.connell@nwl.co.uk](mailto:lisa.connell@nwl.co.uk)

[www.nwl.co.uk](http://www.nwl.co.uk)  
[www.eswater.co.uk](http://www.eswater.co.uk)  
[www.welivewater.co.uk](http://www.welivewater.co.uk)