



Stakeholder Engagement Report

SOUTH EAST WATER VULNERABILITY STRATEGY

INFORMING POSITIVE CHANGE

South East Water

Stakeholder Engagement for the Co-creation of the Vulnerability Strategy

A report by CAG Consultants

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Appendices (available as separate documents):

- Appendix 1a – Staff focus group (January 2018)
- Appendix 1b – Staff focus group (June 2018)
- Appendix 2a – Customer interviews (business as usual)
- Appendix 2b – Customer interviews (water outage)
- Appendix 3a – Stakeholder workshops (March 2018)
- Appendix 3b – Agencies interviews
- Appendix 3c – Stakeholder workshops (June 2018)

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

South East Water's Vulnerability Strategy forms a key component of the company's 2020-2025 Business Plan and was produced to ensure that South East Water delivers the right services to the right customers at the right time, both now and in the future.

The Vulnerability Strategy was developed using a co-creation approach. This approach was designed and led by CAG Consultants, who were contracted to facilitate a stakeholder engagement process to support the Strategy's development. The intention was that this co-creation approach would ensure that the actions listed in the Vulnerability Strategy were targeted, effective and efficient. Furthermore, this approach was adopted to help put in place processes and relationships that continuously review the strategy and ensure it remains fit for purpose for future customers who may find themselves in vulnerable circumstances.

This report presents the findings of the stakeholder engagement process, including recommendations for the Vulnerability Strategy.

1.2 Approach

CAG Consultants undertook a qualitative and multi-faceted approach involving:

- Data gathering, including focus groups with South East Water's Customer Care Team (CCT) staff, phone interviews and face-to-face visits with customers in vulnerable circumstances, and phone interviews with stakeholder agencies that work with people in vulnerable circumstances;
- An initial set of stakeholder workshops with representatives of third-party stakeholder agencies that work with people in vulnerable circumstances;
- Further data gathering involving a stakeholder mapping exercise plus further phone and face-to-face interviews with customers in vulnerable circumstances who were affected by the water outage in late February and early March 2018;
- Drafting a set of recommendations and collating South East Water's responses to them; and
- Further data gathering and testing of these recommendations through a second set of stakeholder workshops and a second focus group with Customer Care Team staff.

1.3 Key findings

1.3.1 Definition of vulnerability and identifying vulnerable customers

Staff and stakeholders agreed that vulnerability is complex and transitory in nature, and that these factors should be considered by South East Water. It was felt that 'language' should be an additional category to those already included in South East Water's definition of vulnerability. There are multiple challenges to identifying vulnerable customers, including: language barriers; difficulties in accessing customers; customers' reluctance to discuss their problems; and a lack of understanding about vulnerability.

1.3.2 Feedback on current services for vulnerable customers

1.3.2.1 During 'business as usual' operations

In general, customers in 'business as usual' situations¹ were largely happy with the service they receive from South East Water. They reported being particularly satisfied with the quality of customer service, felt that staff were compassionate and that South East Water offered them appropriate solutions to any issues raised. Stakeholders and staff praised: the range of services that South East Water offers its vulnerable customers; the strong Customer Care Team; the good relationships between staff and customers and the outreach that staff are involved in.

Overarching concerns for vulnerable customers in 'business as usual' situations were: cost; billing; and access to water. They raised specific concerns about: incorrect or unclear bills; having to hold on the phone to speak to someone (when it is not a freephone number); receiving misleading information about the transition to a water meter; and the methods used by South East Water to communicate unusually high-water use.

CCT staff reported being conscious that they did not have capacity to reach all vulnerable customers and stated that the tablets they use can cause some problems (e.g. lack of offline functionality). They felt there was scope to: improve their equipment; ensure the password system requested by some vulnerable customers is more consistently used; improve communication between departments; and keep the Priority Services Register (PSR) up to date.

¹ As opposed to customers who had experienced an incident such as the water outage in February and March 2018.

1.3.2.2 During the freeze-thaw water outage

Customers affected by the freeze-thaw outage had no water for drinking, cooking, washing or for flushing the toilet. There were cases of customers requiring water to operate medical equipment on which their lives depended. Some also had pets (e.g. horses or dogs) that required a lot of water.

Issue raised by customers affected by the outage included: suffering from stress and anxiety (particularly those for whom the outage lasted several days); non-existent or poor levels of communication from South East Water during the incident; information being too vague or inaccurate; promised call-backs not happening; and a perceived lack of 'priority' treatment for those on the PSR.

Customers who highlighted positive customer service during this period conveyed satisfaction with: the level of South East Water staff contact; the speed with which they could get through by phone to helpful staff; and the quality of the bottled water delivery service.

1.4 Recommendations

There were a number of suggestions for additional services that South East Water could consider offering its vulnerable customers, focused around increasing awareness of services, improved communication and increased partnership working. In line with the Vulnerability Strategy itself recommendations are set out under the three central themes of affordability, accessibility and protection; specific recommendations for the Customer Care Team are set out in addition to these.

The key recommendations are listed below.

Affordability

- Implement earlier alerts and reviews for vulnerable customers when they go into arrears.
- Provide more certainty and more regular information for vulnerable customers about what their bills will be, with information on how much different things will cost.
- Work with agencies to encourage referrals to Helping Hands.
- Offer a freephone number for vulnerable customers.

Accessibility

- Raise awareness of services through, and increase cross referrals with, third parties.
- Simplify billing and communication.
- Offer more support during the transition to water meters including offering to fit water saving devices (not just supply them).

- Offer more support to those who do not speak English or with low literacy levels.
- Review the names of the 'social' tariff and 'Helping Hands' schemes as the language was felt to be misleading.

Protection

- Review PSR codes to identify who needs most support during water outage.
- Set up partnerships and data sharing agreements with key agencies.
- Improve communication with customers during an event, with a range of communication methods offered and a cascade system of updates through local agencies.
- Offer to open bottled water for vulnerable customers during outage periods.

Recommendations for the Customer Care Team

- Provide offline functionality for CCT tablets.
- Ensure meter readers are informed of cases where customers have requested a password.
- Increase awareness throughout the company of the CCT's work.
- Ensure senior management staff are situated at water collection points during outage periods.
- Review the system of pay and rewards for staff during incidents to ensure equity.

1.4.1 Delivering the strategy

Stakeholders hoped that the Vulnerability Strategy would position South East Water as a leader in this field, with enhancements to existing services, increased awareness of services, improved communication between departments, more partnership working with other agencies and better equipment and more support for field officers. Key concerns related to the potential impact on staff workload, potential barriers caused by data protection and a potential failure to focus help on those customers in greatest need.

Staff and stakeholders made a number of recommendations for indicators that could be used to measure the success of the strategy. These included measuring the number of:

- Customers in debt;
- Customers on the PSR;
- Customers on a social tariff;
- Customers visited;
- Complaints in relation to an incident, and

- Stakeholder agencies with whom partnerships have been formed.

Both staff and external stakeholders expressed a desire to be involved in the ongoing process of finalising the strategy and reviewing it. Stakeholders were also keen to see that customers were given the chance to input.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

At the time of writing, South East Water is developing their 2020-2025 Business Plan, of which the Vulnerability Strategy will be a key component. The Vulnerability Strategy will be specifically focussed on ensuring that South East Water's business planning delivers the right services to the right customers at the right time. The strategy must ensure, as far as possible, that South East Water's approach and services are inclusive both now and in the future.

South East Water's aims for their customers in vulnerable circumstances are as follows:

- To ensure we understand the needs of customers in vulnerable situations;
- To ensure customers in vulnerable situations are adequately supported in line with those needs, especially in times of service failure;
- To ensure our services and support remain in line with the changing future needs of customers in vulnerable situations;
- To understand the range of vulnerability risk factors that may mean that our services is not always accessible to all;
- To understand what the barriers are to customers in vulnerable situations being able to fully access our services; and
- To ensure we can access and engage with hard to reach groups so that all customers' voices are heard and acted upon.

South East Water intends to achieve these aims through the development and delivery of the Vulnerability Strategy.

CAG Consultants were contracted by South East Water in January 2018 to facilitate the stakeholder engagement element of the co-creation of the Vulnerability Strategy. This report sets out the findings of that process.

2.1.1 South East Water's customers

As of 31st March 2018, South East Water served 872,106 households, of which 30,248² customers were on the Priority Services Register (PSR, see section 2.3.1 for more details), whereby customers are recognised as requiring additional or priority support (see **section 2.3.1** for further detail). A snapshot of South East Water's customer base can be found in **Table 1** below.

²This figure increased by 447 during the March 2018 water outage.

Table 1 South East Water's customer base (at 31st March 2018)

No. of household properties	872,106
No. of household properties on a meter	711,993
No. of household properties paying by Direct Debit	589,314
No. of household customers for whom South East Water has an email address	289,481
No. of household customers for whom South East Water has a mobile phone number	496,431
No. of customers on social tariff	16,548
No. of customers on WaterSure tariff	3,371
No. of customers on Priority Services Register	30,248

2.2 Defining vulnerability

Vulnerability is about the situation or circumstances customers are in, and not just their personal characteristics. A person could find themselves in situations of vulnerability for a number of reasons. Customer vulnerability is dynamic - people can move in and out of positions of vulnerability - and vulnerability can be both a long-term and a short-term situation.

The term vulnerability itself has different connotations for customers. Some customers may see it as a negative term and may not want to be labelled as vulnerable; this in itself could lead to them feeling vulnerable and subsequently not seeking assistance. Therefore, it is more suitable to talk about 'customers whose circumstances make them vulnerable' or 'customer vulnerability'. Ofwat's *Vulnerability Focus Report*, for example, suggests we move away from using the concept of 'vulnerable customer' and replace it with 'customers in circumstances that make them vulnerable' or 'situations of vulnerability'.

Ofwat defines a customer whose circumstances make them vulnerable as follows:

"A customer who, due to personal characteristics, their overall life situation or due to broader market and economic factors, is not having reasonable opportunity to access and receive an inclusive service, which may have a detrimental impact on their health, wellbeing or finances."

(Ofwat, 2016)³

2.2.1 Identifying customers in vulnerable circumstances.

Ofwat have identified a number of 'triggers' that may indicate that a customer is in a situation of vulnerability (or at risk of entering this situation). These include:

- A customer's personal characteristics, e.g., age, income, health, numeracy/literacy;
- Changes in personal circumstances, e.g., losing a job, an accident or illness, an increase in caring responsibilities, or changes to domestic situations; and
- A combination of personal characteristics and circumstances.

These triggers can in turn be associated with several potential risks of harm for the customer, including:

- A customer's financial health – putting them at risk of either financial difficulty (including issues of affordability and indebtedness) and non-financial difficulty, e.g., if financial difficulty has an impact on the customer's physical or mental health;
- A customer's specified or unmet needs, e.g., because of health conditions that mean the customer has to use high volumes of water;
- A customer's ability or inclination to access or act on information or advice, which could lead to that customer not receiving the support they may need, e.g., customers with low digital literacy may be unable to access online resources or support; and
- Responses to the customer's needs from industry or policy, as well as third party organisations, e.g., if information or resources are not user friendly, that may have an impact on customers' ability or willingness to access support.

2.2.2 South East Water vulnerability categories

South East Water provided CAG Consultants with the following categories of vulnerability for this piece of work:

- **Financial** (low income/unemployed, includes, e.g. pensioner, single parent);
- **Medical** (physical and mental);
- **Disability**;
- **Age**; and

³ Ofwat, 2016, *Vulnerability Focus Report*, p.20

- **Personal** (e.g., carer, bereaved).

Since starting this work, these categories have been updated, and vulnerability is now presented as 32 'codes'. However, these five categories are referred to throughout this report as they were used as a reference point for discussions with the project participants.

2.3 South East Water's services for customers in vulnerable circumstances

South East Water offers a range of special services for those in vulnerable circumstances, including those:

- With mobility restrictions;
- Who are deaf, blind or disabled;
- Who are suffering from a long-term illness;
- Who have age-related issues (health, safety); and
- Suffering from financial difficulties.

The services offered to these customers are set out in **Table 2** below.

Table 2 South East Water's services for vulnerable customers

Service	Description
Social tariff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For those on a low income or in receipt of specific benefits. • Customer's water bill is capped at South East Water's fixed charge for the year. • To be eligible, the household income must be less than HMRC's low income threshold, currently £16,105 in 2018 (excluding Child Tax Credit, Disability Living Allowance, Mortgage Interest Relief, Attendance Allowance, Housing & Council Tax Benefit).
WaterSure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caps a customer's charges to South East Water's average bill. • Customers can be considered for WaterSure if they are a metered customer and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In receipt of certain qualifying benefits, and ○ Have either three or more children under the age of 19, or ○ Have someone in their home with a medical condition which means they use a lot of water.
Helping Hand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funded by donations from South East Water. • Offers financial assistance to clear water and sewerage debt.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides grants to customers who demonstrate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ They are taking steps to achieve financial stability, but ○ Need help clearing water and sewerage debt which has built up over the years.
Water Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administered by DWP for those in arrears by more than £50. • For customers claiming certain benefits, South East Water may be able to take bill payments directly from the benefits (Income Support, Pension Credit, Income-based Jobseeker's or Employment Support Allowance). • The scheme is free and those participating don't need to worry about any further debt recovery action. They pay their current charges plus a fixed amount to help clear their arrears.
Leak repairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water offer a leak detection service that is free for the first hour. • Customers can receive £100 towards the cost of repairing a supply pipe, or £250 if the supply pipe needs replacing. • There is a one-off leak allowance for high water consumption; where the leak is fully repaired, charges are adjusted back to normal levels.
Water saving advice & equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provision of various water saving devices, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Flowpoint shower heads ○ Shower regulators ○ Shower timers ○ Regulated tap inserts ○ EcoFlow tap aerators ○ Cistern bags ○ Toilet Leak detection strips ○ Plant water saving gel.

2.3.1 The Priority Services Register

Customers who are identified by South East Water as vulnerable are registered (with their permission) on the PSR. Those customers on the PSR are able to:

- Receive prior warning of planned work which may interrupt their water supply;
- Receive priority treatment should their water supply be interrupted (South East Water aim to arrange an alternative source as quickly as possible and will often hand-deliver bottled drinking water to all customers with mobility and health issues);
- Receive important information in a more convenient format, such as large print or the spoken word, where normal presentation style is not suitable;

- Register their own spoken or written password to South East Water staff to use so that customers can identify them when they need to call at a customer's home;
- Nominate somebody else to receive their water bill on their behalf, or someone that South East Water should contact if it remains unpaid;
- Receive easy-to-read, large print bills;
- Make use of South East Water's interpretation service if English is not their first language; and
- Receive information about specialist organisations which are able to provide advice on possible adaptations to water fittings and appliances around the home.

2.4 Creating a Vulnerability Strategy

In order to create a Vulnerability Strategy that realistically and effectively achieves the aims for customers in vulnerable customers, as set out in **section 2.1**, South East Water stated that a fundamental requirement of the Strategy is that it:

- Ensures as far as possible that South East Water's approach and services are inclusive; and
- Should be 'co-created' with:
 - Those who are experiencing the services that South East Water offer, whether their exposure to vulnerability issues is temporary or permanent;
 - Those who want greater protection when South East Water deliver their water services that they feel safe and cared about;
 - Those who South East Water can empower to be able to access more easily the benefits of its water service; and
 - Those third-party agencies and organisations who represent and work with a wide range of customers who are experiencing temporary or permanent vulnerability, and who have first-hand experience of their issues.

CAG's task was to facilitate the co-creation of the Strategy by engaging with key stakeholders. It was agreed that the key stakeholders that should participate in this co-creation process were:

- The vulnerable customers themselves;
- South East Water Customer Care Team staff that work with the customers; and
- Third party agencies that work with adults in vulnerable circumstances in the area covered by South East Water services.

2.4.1 Co-creation

Co-creation draws on a range of perspectives of key stakeholders in order to inform the process, and ultimately design and create the product. It focusses on customer experience and interactive relationships and allows for a more active involvement of key stakeholders, with a view to reaching a mutually valued outcome.

Co-creation has emerged largely due to multiple developments, including the mainstream adoption of internet technologies, the movement towards services and experiences, a more open approach to innovation and the growth of social and collaboration practices. Whilst these are relatively recent developments, co-creation is not an entirely new concept, having evolved in part out of the notion of co-production, however it was Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) that were the trailblazers of co-creation, describing it as:

*"The joint creation of value by a company and other stakeholders, and in particular consumers who work with the company to co-construct the service experience to suit his or her preferences."*⁴

Co-creation blends the ideas of key stakeholders (both end users of the product and other relevant parties) to create new ideas for the organisation, exploring both the existing challenges and the potential solutions.

South East Water adopted co-creation as an approach to the development of their Vulnerability Strategy, in which their customers, employees and stakeholder agencies play an active part in not only identifying what is important to focus on, but also in the creation of approaches and solutions to any problems, including the development of new services.

The process of co-creation should ensure that the services South East Water offer as a result are targeted, effective and efficient. Furthermore, this approach should mean that they have the correct processes and relationships in place to continuously review their strategy and ensure it remains fit for purpose for future customers who may find themselves in vulnerable circumstances.

South East Water's Customer Challenge Group describe co-creation as:

*"A collaborative approach at every stage of the company's traditional decision-making processes; customers and stakeholders play an active part in not only identifying what is important to focus on, but also in the creation of approaches and solutions to any problems."*⁵

⁴ Prahalad C.K. and Ramaswamy V. (2004) *The Future of Competition: Co-creating Unique Value with Customers*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston MA

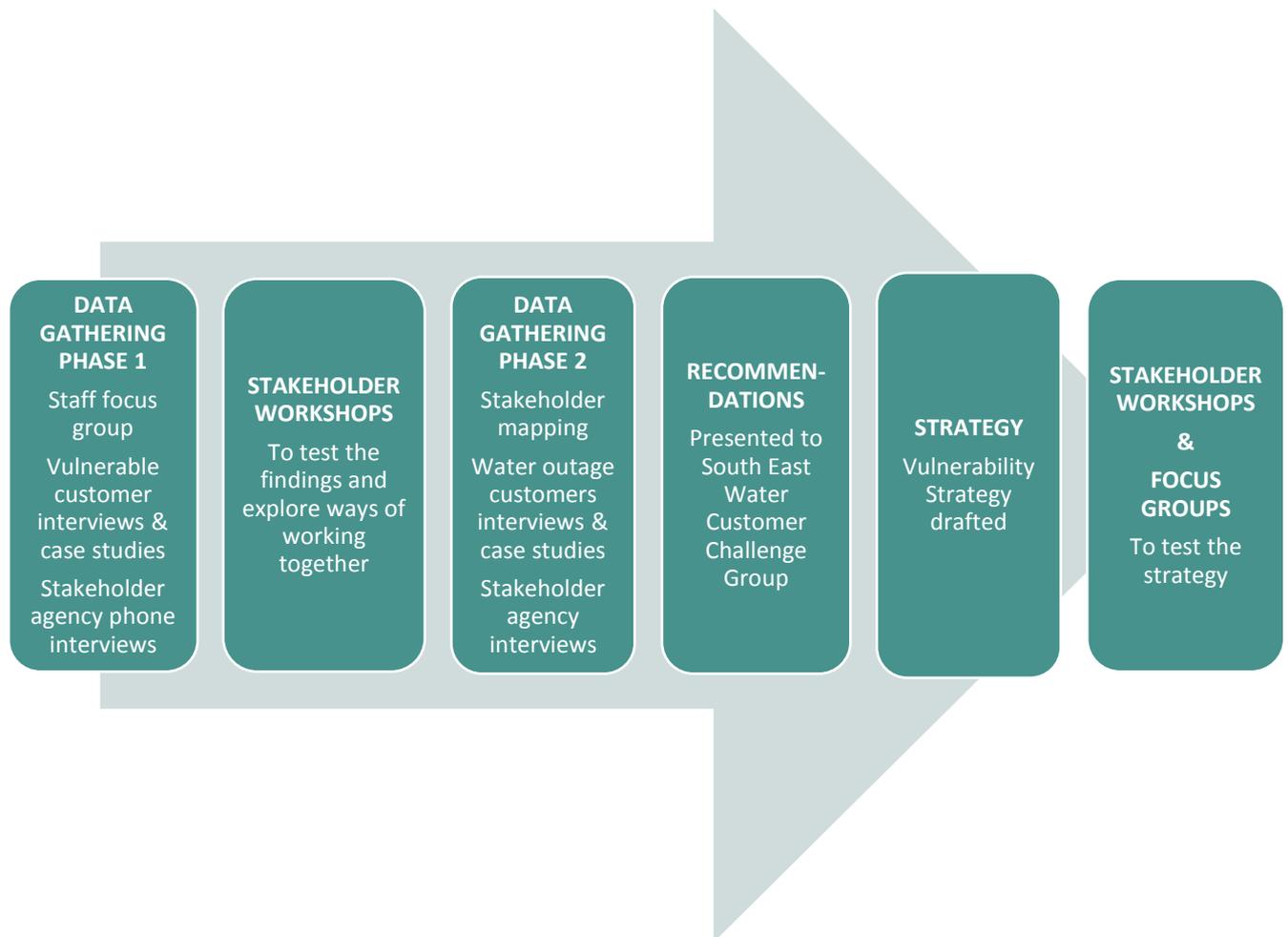
⁵ South East Water, 2017, *Co-creating our vulnerability strategy: our proposed approach, Draft V2*.

3 Methodology

3.1 Overview of our approach

We took a qualitative, multi-faceted approach to the methodology, as presented in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1 Overview of our approach



It should be noted, that this is a qualitative research report and therefore is a presentation of the different views and experiences of those who participated. It does not aim to quantify the number of participants who held particular views or had particular experiences. This is because the purpose of

“qualitative research is not to measure prevalence but to map range and diversity, and to explore and explain the links between different phenomena.”⁶

Within this process we engaged multiple stakeholders, made up of CCT staff, customers in vulnerable circumstances and representatives of third-party agencies, as set out in **Table 3** below.

Table 3 Participants that took part in the process

Stakeholder group	Research undertaken
Customer Care Team staff	3 x focus groups with 23 members of staff
Customers in vulnerable circumstances not affected by water outage	30 x interviews and 5 x face-to-face case studies
Customers in vulnerable circumstances affected by the water outage	26 x interviews and 5 x face-to-face case studies
Stakeholder agencies	9 x telephone interviews and 6 x workshops with 98 representatives of 76 organisations

3.2 Data gathering - phase 1

The purpose of the initial data gathering phase was to understand from staff, customers and third-party stakeholders:

- Their views of what constitutes a vulnerable customer;
- How vulnerability impacts on a customer’s needs in terms of water services and where barriers may exist to accessing services;
- Their knowledge of and opinions about South East Water’s current services for vulnerable customers; and
- Their suggestions for what more South East Water could or should offer to vulnerable customers.

There were three steps to the initial data gathering: staff focus groups; customer interviews and case studies; and interviews with key third party agencies.

⁶ Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Naughton Nicholls, C. and Ormston, R. (2014), *Qualitative Research Practice (2nd edition)*, London: SAGE

3.2.1 Staff focus groups

At the end of January 2018, CAG Consultants ran two focus groups (both following the same format) with members of South East Water's CCT.

The focus groups included both office-based staff and field officers. Two focus groups were run with two different groups of staff, following the same format. There were 23 participants in total.

The aim of the focus groups was to work with those staff who work directly with customers in vulnerable circumstances, in order to gain a better understanding of the following:

- The definition of and circumstances surrounding vulnerability;
- How customers in vulnerable circumstances are identified;
- The existing services that South East Water offers to customers in vulnerable circumstances;
- What is working well in relation to South East Water's services for vulnerable customers, what is not working well and what could be improved;
- Who should be involved in the production of the Vulnerability Strategy; and
- Key concerns and hopes for the strategy.

3.2.2 Vulnerable customers - phone interviews and case studies

The next phase of data gathering involved conducting phone interviews with 30 South East Water customers who were considered to be vulnerable. Customers comprised a mix of:

- Those on the South East Water PSR;
- Those on a Social Tariff (a lower cost tariff for customers meeting certain eligibility criteria including low income);
- Those on a WaterSure tariff (a capped tariff for customers on a water meter meeting certain eligibility criteria including low income and medical need for high water consumption);
- Those who had received Helping Hands support to clear off historic water debt.

South East Water provided CAG with a list of approximately 100 customers that fell into one of the above categories and we contacted them at random to arrange phone interviews. Customers were offered a £10 voucher as a thank you for their time.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify:

- How South East Water can ensure that:
 - The needs of customers in vulnerable situations are met;

- Customers in vulnerable situations are adequately supported in line with those needs – especially in times of service failure;
- Their services and support remain in line with the changing or future needs of customers in vulnerable situations;
- The vulnerability risk factors that may mean that South East Water’s service is not always accessible to all; and
- The barriers to customers in vulnerable situations being able to fully access South East Water’s services.

Interviewees were asked whether they would be willing to be visited in order for a case study to be written up providing more in-depth detail of their situation and experiences in terms of water services. Of those who were willing to be visited, we selected five customers to visit on the basis that they covered a range of vulnerabilities and experiences. In-home visits lasting around an hour were arranged with these customers, and customers were provided with a £20 shopping voucher (in addition to the £10 for the phone interview) as a thank you for their time.

3.2.3 Stakeholder agency interviews

Prior to the first set of stakeholder workshops, we conducted phone interviews with representatives from five key stakeholder agencies. Following the stakeholder workshops, we undertook interviews with a further four representatives of agencies who we believed to be key stakeholders but had been unable to attend the workshops. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of:

- The nature of the work that stakeholder agencies are doing with vulnerable customers;
- Their understanding of vulnerability;
- Their experience of South East Water (in a professional capacity); and
- Their interest and willingness to contribute to the development of South East Water’s Vulnerability Strategy.

Nine interviews were undertaken in total including two with agencies that had been actively involved in supporting vulnerable customers during the water outage, so we extended our questions to include discussion of that in addition to the topics highlighted above.

3.3 Stakeholder workshops - first round

Three stakeholder workshops were held in March 2018, on three consecutive days, at different locations across the South East Water area of operation: Basingstoke, Maidstone and Eastbourne. A range of organisations were invited to attend the workshops, with organisations identified using an

existing South East Water database of contacts – primarily organisations with whom the CCT had had dealings – combined with desk-based research to identify additional key organisations.

The aims of the workshops were to:

- Explore whether South East Water and third-party agencies and organisations have the same understanding of vulnerability in the supply area, both at present and in the future;
- Present the findings from the stakeholder engagement activities carried out at that point;
- Share data, knowledge and experiences of supporting vulnerable customers; and
- Co-create the Vulnerability Strategy by identifying potential solutions, performance measures and future working arrangements.

33 participants attended the workshops (in addition to the facilitators and representatives from South East Water), representing 26 organisations from a range of local government, police, housing providers and third sector organisations including advice agencies and specialist charities working with vulnerable people.

3.4 Data gathering - phase 2

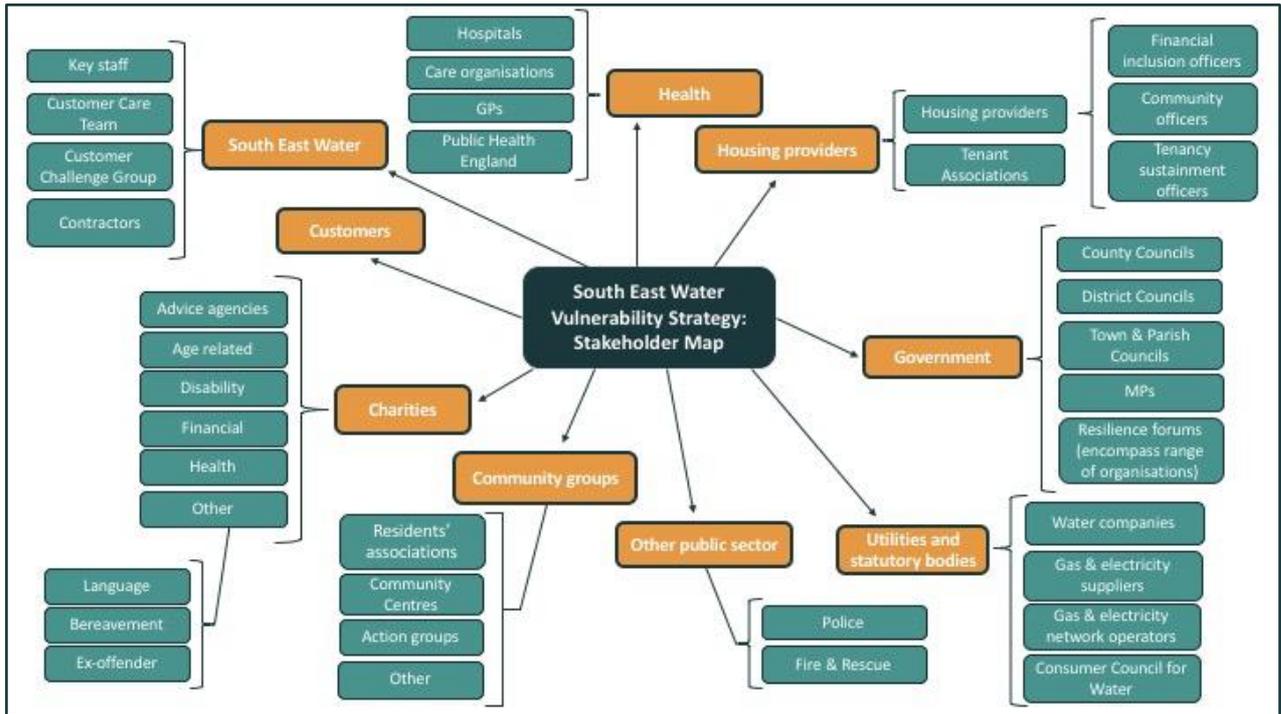
Following on from the workshops, additional data gathering took place. The purpose of this was to:

- Fill in gaps in the stakeholder contact list which had been identified through the first workshops; and
- Gather feedback from vulnerable customers who had experienced the water outage in late February and early March.

3.4.1 Stakeholder mapping

The first set of stakeholder workshops established that there were gaps in the contact database held by South East Water. CAG therefore undertook a stakeholder mapping exercise to develop a more comprehensive database of stakeholder contacts for South East Water, using the categories in **Error! Reference source not found.** below.

Figure 2 Stakeholder mind map



Using the stakeholder map, we sorted the database into categories. We then produced a detailed geographic map of the areas served by South East Water, using GIS software. The map for the west area is shown below, in **Figure 3**, with the numbers referring to a separate key of Parish Councils.

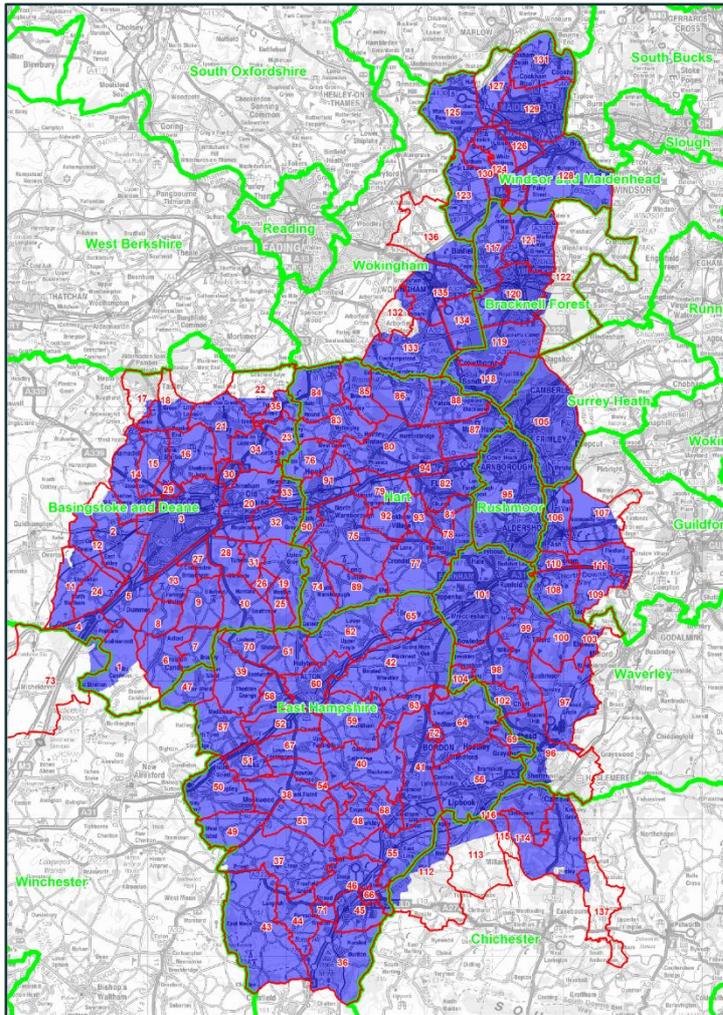


Figure 3 Map showing the west area of South East Water's coverage with an overlay of coded parish councils

The geographical map was used to identify which organisations were relevant to South East Water. Using the map resulted in including contacts from seven more District Councils in the database and identifying that six Districts previously included were not in fact serviced by South East Water. In addition, we added approximately 470 Parish Councils and a large number of other relevant organisations. In total we increased the number of stakeholders in the database from the original 150 to approximately 950.

We used the improved database to contact organisations for the second set of workshops, which resulted in improved attendance levels.

Sourcing the information was challenging, as there were no simple lists of contacts available (apart from Parish and Town Councils), and many organisations no longer provide contact details for individual officers online. The development work therefore involved a significant amount of direct phone contact with organisations (some of whom were reluctant to provide individual details). This did, however, contribute to increasing awareness of South East Water's work on the Vulnerability Strategy and relationship-building with these organisations. Due to constraints on time and budget, we were not able to undertake all the development work on the database that we would have liked. In

particular, not all the contact details for individual parishes were added, and more work is needed to identify a more comprehensive list of charities, voluntary and community organisations that work with the different vulnerability groups.

3.4.2 Customers affected by the water outage - interviews and case studies

After the first set of customer interviews had been conducted, there was an extended period of very cold weather which caused problems with water supply across much of England. A significant number of South East Water customers were without water for up to five days as a result. The CCT were very busy during this time delivering bottled water to vulnerable customers, and 447 customers were added to South East Water's PSR during this period. It was agreed that CAG Consultants should do a further round of interviews with vulnerable customers who had experienced interruptions in their supply.

The purpose of these interviews was to:

- Understand the experiences of vulnerable customers during a water outage;
- Find out what support they requested from South East Water and what support they received;
- Identify any other agencies that had been involved in supporting these customers during this period; and
- Ask for suggestions about how South East Water might improve its services to vulnerable customers during any future water outages.

In April 2018, we conducted phone interviews with 25 South East Water customers on the PSR who had been affected by the water outage. South East Water provided us with a list of approximately 100 customers on the PSR who had been without water in early March 2018 for anything from a few hours to five days. The circumstances of customers on this list varied: some lived alone, others with family; the age of these customers extended up to 94; customers had a variety of health conditions or disabilities; some were carers; and a few were entirely housebound. Customers from this list were contacted using purposive selection, ensuring coverage of different categories of vulnerability, with each customer participating in a phone interview being sent a £10 shopping voucher as a thank you for their time.

As with the initial batch of customer interviews, interviewees were asked whether they would be willing to be visited in order for a case study to be written up providing more in-depth detail of how the water outage had affected them, the support they received and their suggestions for how this support could have been improved. Of those who were willing to be visited, we selected five customers to visit on the basis that they provided a range of vulnerability categories and experiences. In-home visits, lasting around an hour, were arranged with these customers, with customers provided with a £20 shopping voucher (in addition to the £10 voucher for the phone interview) as a thank you for their time.

3.5 Stakeholder workshops - second round

A second series of three stakeholder workshops was held in mid-June. Previous participants were invited to attend as well as invitations being sent to the additional organisations identified through the stakeholder mapping exercise.

The purpose of these workshops was to:

- Share and seek views on the strategic local picture with regards to customers in vulnerable situations;
- Share South East Water activity and proposed process for the development of the Vulnerability Strategy and findings to date;
- Seek views on the emerging priorities and actions in relation to the key themes within the Vulnerability Strategy:
 - Affordability;
 - Protection;
 - Accessibility; and
- Understand how best to engage with those present going forward and share initial thoughts on best approach.

66 participants attended the workshops (in addition to the facilitators and representatives from South East Water), representing 44 organisations from a range of local government, police, housing providers and third sector organisations including advice agencies and specialist charities working with vulnerable people.

3.6 Second staff focus group

In June 2018, CAG Consultants ran a follow-up focus group with members of South East Water's CCT. The focus groups included both the office-based staff and the field officers. There were eight participants in total.

The aims of the focus group were to:

- Provide feedback to the CCT on key findings from CAG's stakeholder engagement work;
- Provide feedback to the CCT on which of their recommendations will be addressed by the Vulnerability Strategy, and why;
- Obtain feedback from the CCT on CAG's findings (e.g., to give them an opportunity to respond to customer comments); and

- Obtain feedback from the CCT on proposed measures to implement recommendations into the Vulnerability Strategy.

4 Findings

These findings present the views and experiences of three stakeholder types: staff; customers; and third-party agencies.

4.1 South East Water's Customer Care Team

4.1.1 Definition of vulnerability

Staff were asked about their understanding of vulnerability and what might lead to a customer becoming vulnerable. Participants felt that their understanding of vulnerability was broadly aligned to South East Water's five categories⁷. However, they also suggested including language barriers as a category, as well as a number of 'other' sub categories such as ex-offenders, ex-military and those on zero hours contracts.

Staff provided a range of examples of the circumstances that they came across in their customer base, which demonstrated how these different types of vulnerability can relate to issues in accessing South East Water's services. These included:

- Hoarders;
- Elderly customers who are reluctant to accept help;
- Customers hiding from their debt and not opening their post;
- Customers suffering from loneliness and isolation, who won't seek help;
- Customers who ignore their bills due to their illiteracy;
- Those who are recently out of prison and lack experience of managing their bills;
- Bereaved customers who are financially struggling and not used to managing their bills;
- Language barriers, which require field officers to use hand signals during visits; and
- Those suffering from cancer or other chronic illnesses who may be struggling financially.

4.1.2 Identifying vulnerable customers

Staff reported that they identified customers in vulnerable circumstances through inbound calls, field visits (e.g. for a meter read or a debt visit) and also through a range of outreach activities, as illustrated in the two diagrams below.

⁷ Financial, medical, disability, age and personal.

Figure 4 Inbound contact to customer care services

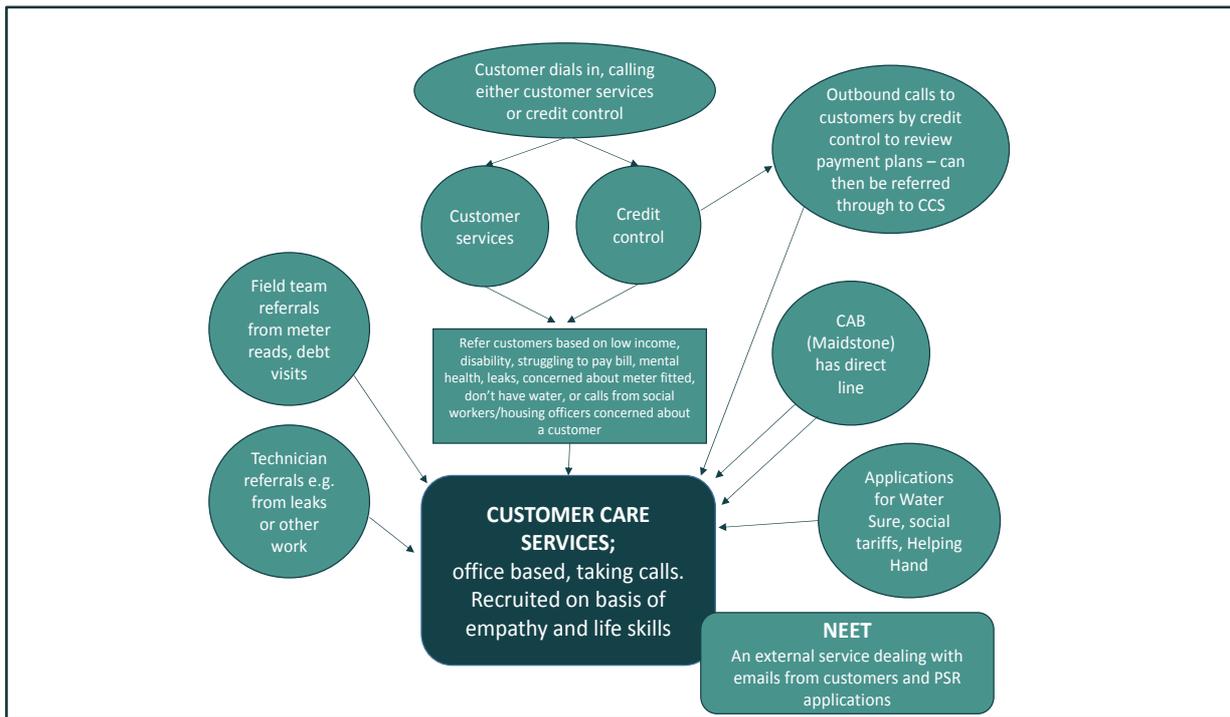
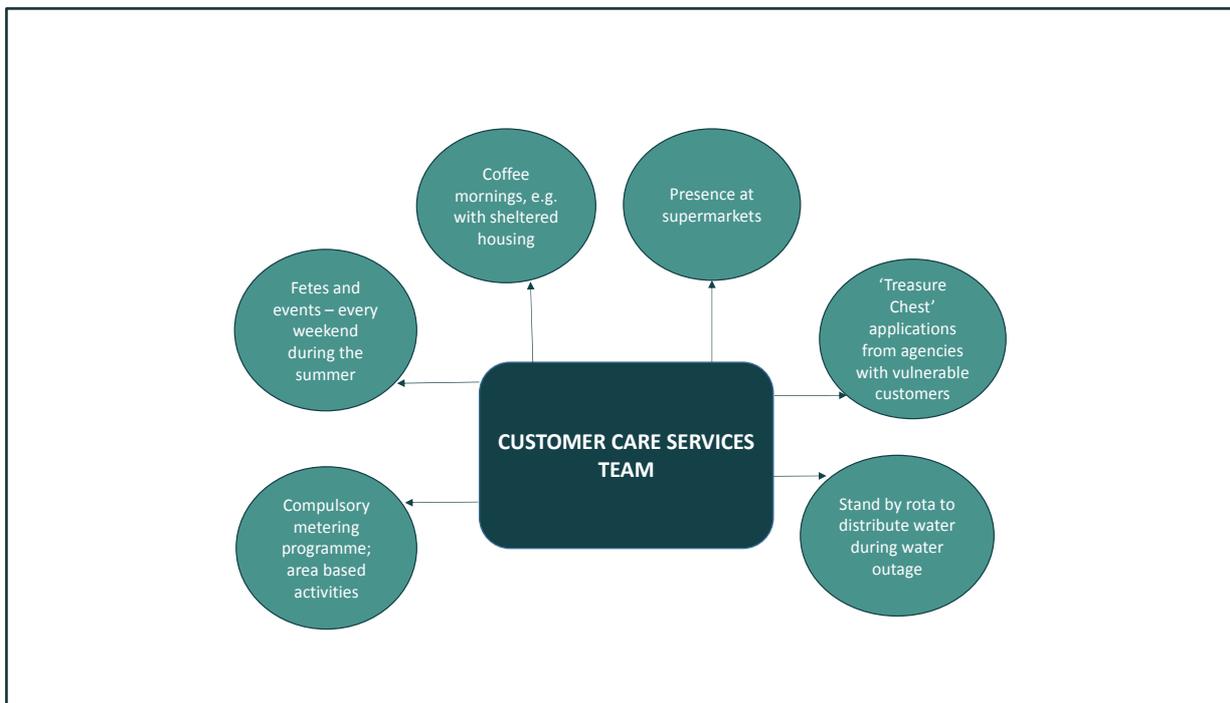


Figure 5 Proactive customer engagement by the Customer Care Team



Within those methods of identification, vulnerability could be identified through a variety of means, including the use of checklists and staff members' instincts. A number of challenges were identified by staff in relation to identifying vulnerability including:

- Language barriers;
- Customers refusing access;
- Customers reluctant to discuss problems and too proud to accept help;
- A lack of customer understanding about the need to pay for water (e.g. those newly responsible for paying their bills or from a country where water is not billed);
- Perceived inappropriateness of asking a customer directly whether they consider themselves to be vulnerable (yet a customer must consent to being added to the PSR); and
- Some vulnerable customers not getting in touch with South East Water even in situations where they were struggling to pay their bill.

4.1.3 Services for vulnerable customers

Staff identified a number of ways of supporting vulnerable customers, as presented in **Table 4** (see **Table 2** for further details).

Table 4 Services available to vulnerable customers

Service	Details
Social tariff	Lower cost tariff for low income customers
Payment plan	To help customers pay off any arrears
WaterSure	Capped bills for those on meters with certain eligibility criteria
Helping Hands	To help certain customers write off debt
Priority Services Register	A register of all customers considered to be vulnerable or requiring priority support in some way
Free leak repairs	Staff can offer this at their discretion, subject to manager sign-off
Water saving kit and advice	Available free to all customers

4.1.4 What's working well, what isn't working well and what could be improved: business as usual?

4.1.4.1 What's working well?

Officers cited many things that they felt were working well in terms of the services South East Water officers to vulnerable customers. These included:

- The **range of services** available for priority customers;
- A **good team in place**; problems are dealt with quickly; the link is good between the office and field team;
- The **relationships** they have developed with customers – there is a good level of trust, and customers can request the same member of staff visits them if they wish;
- **Equipment** – noting up visits live on the tablets that the field officer team have;
- **Community events** – staff are able to publicise the services available to a lot of people; and
- The online '**Get help**' button for people struggling to pay their bill is quick and easy for customers to use.

4.1.4.2 What's working less well?

The staff spoke highly of South East Water's services and had to be pushed to offer any criticism of the services. They key things they said did not work very well were as follows:

- There was a recognition that the team is not reaching all vulnerable customers; and
- It was felt that the tablets can present problems; staff lose eye contact with customers while making notes, which staff felt was not ideal.

4.1.4.3 What could be improved?

When asked what could be improved the staff offered the following suggestions:

- **Equipment**;
 - **Offline usage** would make the field officers' jobs easier;
 - **Voice activation** would help staff maintain eye contact with customers and record notes whilst driving between visits;
 - Having a **debt vulnerable marker** on the first screen would aid visits;
 - **Streamlining** the systems (multiple systems such as Nomad, Nexum, High Affinity, create complications).

"I don't use tablets in the home; I use paper because I don't like losing the face-to-face contact."

"If it was offline it would be so much easier... By the time I got to the door (in a block of flats), the screen had gone, I couldn't confirm the appointment, had to go back out to get reception. The customer thought I was dodgy!"

- Ensuring the **password system** works properly (meter readers aren't always aware that customers have requested a password);
- **Communication between departments** could be better;
- **PSR:**
 - Clearer guidelines on priorities within this;
 - Consideration of the issue of obtaining customer consent, which can be difficult in terms of signing people up to the register;
 - Consideration of additional services such as bottled water in a water outage.
 - Consideration of staffing requirements needed to meet needs of additional customers on this register.

You have to ask the customer's permission to put them on the register, but the fact that you have to ask – a lot of people won't say that."

- The **5/5 system** was felt by some not to be the best way of delivering services.

"It's bribery"

- **Training** for new and existing staff to raise awareness of the services available and ensure everyone follows the processes;
- **Maintenance of the PSR** and moving people off it when they are no longer vulnerable; and
- **Bill nominations** are time consuming; automation would help this.

4.1.4.4 What more could South East Water Offer?

Staff had a number of suggestions for additional services that South East Water and its CCT could offer including:

- For customers in debt, offering to **match their payments** to clear their arrears (this is something that it was reported Southern Water offer);
- Offering more **language interpretation**;

- Having information about the **PSR in big print and braille format** for field staff and others to give out;
- Offering a '**key contact**' for vulnerable customers;
- **Tariffs:**
 - Simplifying;
 - Extending eligibility criteria (particularly on WaterSure where criteria are currently felt to be too stringent); and
 - Not having a strict cut off point.
- **Helping Hands – streamlining** the application process; and
- Offering more **water saving equipment** to vulnerable customers including push taps for dementia customers who often leave taps running and ensure that the field team have plenty of water saving kit to give out.

It was also recognised that employing more CCT staff would enable more support to be offered to customers in vulnerable circumstances.

4.1.5 What could be improved: during a water outage?

Staff suggestions about how to improve support to vulnerable customers during water outages are set out below.

Please note that many of these comments relate to general improvements in a water outage rather than specifically to how support to vulnerable customers could be improved. Because of this, the following points have not been included in the tables of recommendations in section 5, but instead are listed separately below the table in **section 0**. 0

4.1.5.1 Identifying those who need most support

- The CCT needs better, more up to date information about which customers need most support during a water outage. They contacted everyone on the PSR who, based on the information they had, they felt would be in most need (e.g. those with mobility problems). However, this research identified that some customers with critical need for support (e.g. dependent on water-operated medical equipment) did not receive any contact from South East Water. It is suspected that this is because the information held by South East Water for these customers does not include this level of detail or is out of date.

4.1.5.2 Logistics

- It would be useful to have access to South East Water's larger vehicles to deliver water more efficiently (by being able to carry more in one journey).

- Ensure that bottle stations can be stocked up in private away from customers and have points available throughout the area where they can be restocked from, to avoid a lot of time spent driving to and from South East Water's offices.
- More bottle stations for staff to collect from for distribution, in order to avoid them having to drive all the way back to the offices to collect water.
- Better planning of routes for articulated lorries; there were problems with low bridges. And not all had forklifts which made unloading the bottles very hard work.
- Consider having reservoir water available via containers for people to collect water for washing and toilet flushing.

4.1.5.3 Communication

- Improve **communication from senior management to the CCT**; e.g. with a group email every time there's an update would be helpful.

4.1.5.4 Payment, support and training for the CCT staff

- Review the **system for paying staff**:
 - Ensure this is equitable so that everyone earns the same for the same work (at the moment those on standby earn considerably more).
 - Don't rely on people volunteering their time as they may not always be able to do this; consider other models (such as that reportedly adopted by BT) of paying staff an annual lump sum to make themselves available during a crisis.
 - Provide a food allowance when staff are working long hours in the field.
 - Consider a 'thank you' for staff once the event is over; this could simply involve a message of thanks from senior management or could include some kind of thank you reward.
- Provide **management presence in the field** to support staff working in difficult circumstances who may face hostile customers and/or questions from the press.
- Provide **training for staff** in how to deal with these emergency situations under pressure including how to deal with the press and how to respond to threatening and aggressive behaviour.

4.1.6 Who should be responsible for producing the Vulnerability Strategy?

A range of views were expressed but there was general consensus that the CCT, via their manager, should input into it.

"We should have an input because it's going to be us; we are the ones who see it first-hand."

The CCT also requested that information be included in the Strategy on the size and resourcing of the CCT to manage stakeholders' expectations of what is practical in terms of delivery.

There was also a view that the whole company should input, with representatives from different departments. It was also felt that other relevant agencies (such as Citizens Advice, Age Concern and debt charities) should be able to input, as well as vulnerable customers themselves.

4.1.7 Wishes and concerns for the Vulnerability Strategy

4.1.7.1 Wishes

Staff were asked what their key wishes for the strategy were. They said they hoped that the strategy would:

- Position South East Water as a **leader** in terms of its work with vulnerable customers;
- Include **information** on the services offered to vulnerable customers and a commitment to making **enhancements** to existing services;
- Include plans to **improve communication** and awareness of the services across all teams so that everyone follows the same guidelines;
- Include a commitment to provide **better equipment** and **more support for field officers** working on their own out in the field;
- Include plans for providing **further training to customers services teams** including on asking the right questions to identify vulnerability; and
- Plans for **partnership working** with other agencies.

4.1.7.2 Concerns

Staff raised a number of concerns about the strategy, including that:

- It will impact on **staff workload** with staff having to do too much;
- **Senior management will fail to listen to the CCT** in terms of the development of the strategy;
- **Data protection** will be used as a stumbling block to taking action;
- **Communication** in the strategy may be misleading, over complicated or incorrect; and
- It would fail to **focus on those who most need help.**

"If too many people are on the priority list, then no-one is a priority."

4.2 South East Water's vulnerable customers

4.2.1 During business as usual activities

Phone interviews were conducted with 30 customers that receive one or more of South East Water's services for vulnerable customers. None of these customers were affected by the water outage in spring 2018.

4.2.1.1 *What issues do customers experience?*

Not all of those we spoke to had experienced any issues or had any particular concerns about their water services. Where customers had experienced concern or anxiety, these fell into three areas:

- **Concern about cost** – either generally finding it unaffordable or getting into arrears, plus specific concerns about the cost of water after transferring to a water meter. This can be exacerbated by medical issues that require high water consumption, or that lead to loss of work and consequent financial problems, or by bereavement;
- **Billing** – having an incorrect bill or being confused about their bill. This can be exacerbated by visual impairment and other medical conditions, or older customers who report struggling to understand bills (which they used to have no problem understanding); and
- **Access to water** – needing to have access to water at all times for medical or mental health reasons, and fear of water supply stopping.

4.2.1.2 *What prompted customers to contact South East Water and how did South East Water respond?*

Customers had contacted South East Water because:

- Of a billing problem or confusion over a bill;
- Of problems paying their bill or managing their debt;
- Of water meters – either to request one or because they were concerned about their new water meter;
- They wanted to find out about cheaper tariffs – either because an agency had recommended they do this or because they had read about other tariffs being available; and
- They had been asked to get in touch with South East Water over their excessive water use.

South East Water had responded in one or more of the following ways:

- Putting them on a social tariff;
- Setting up a payment plan;

- Putting them onto WaterSure;
- Correcting an incorrect bill;
- Helping them process a Helping Hands application; and
- Sending a good will payment.

4.2.1.3 What were customers happy about in terms of South East Water's response?

Where customers had been in contact with South East Water, their comments were largely very positive. In particular, customers praised the company's customer service, felt staff were compassionate, thought the service was efficient service and reported that – where required – staff had offered them solutions that were appropriate to their needs.

I got into difficulty a while back and struggled to pay my bills. South East Water were very good and so helpful.

”

Example: Helping Hands - support for someone taking on the debt of a deceased relative

Ms K was, until recently, caring for her bed-bound mother, who was the tenancy holder of their council home and also the South East Water account holder. When her mother died, Ms K took on the tenancy and also called all the utilities to transfer the accounts from her mother's name to her own. Ms K was struggling financially, having paid over £7,000 in funeral and other costs related to her mother's death. Upon contacting South East Water, she discovered that there were arrears on the water bill going back several years. She was concerned about how she would pay off these arrears. South East Water suggested that she apply for their 'Helping Hands' support to help write off this debt and sent her the paperwork that she need to fill in.

“They wrote off £4,500 in total. It was a huge help. And now I'm back on track with paying the bills.”

Ms K was very happy with the support that she received and was very complimentary about the service provided by the CCT.

“The lady was so, so helpful. They knew mum had died and they were very polite and kind”.

4.2.1.4 What were customers less happy with?

Issues raised by customers included:

- Billing:
 - Incorrect billing – taking a long time to resolve, failing to apologise for this and/or to offer a goodwill gesture in response to this until pushed;

- Unclear bills.
- Having to hold on the phone for a long time before getting through to the right person (at a cost to the customer as there is no freephone number);
- Having been told that their bills should go down after they had a meter installed, whereas in fact they can go up; and
- Causing anxiety by telling someone they were using too much water.

Example: Watersure - request for clearer explanation

Mrs O is 94 and has a disabled son of 70 living with her. They are both incontinent, resulting in high water usage. The son also has psoriasis and needs regular showers to care for that. Her other son manages her affairs and that of his brother.

"The washing machine is always on, the carers who come in don't worry about saving water, as it's not their place. The water bill was a lot to pay."

He found out that he was eligible for WaterSure, which caps the total amount of the bill, and has been approved. However, he was confused about what the capping means.

"They just said it was going to be capped, they said something about it when I rang and posted me something, but I didn't understand what it meant."

Example: request for a free-phone number

Mr and Mrs S are both retired; Mrs S is disabled.

"We get a discount because of her medical condition; she needs lots of baths to help her soften up as she calls it."

He found South East Water very helpful; the only problem was,

"You are always put in the queue, costs a fortune on the phone, it costs a lot of money for us to ring in the daytime, you have to ring businesses then. I would like there to be a free-phone number."

4.2.1.5 What do customers feel South East Water do better?

Customers had a few suggestions for areas where South East Water could offer a better service, as follows:

- In the event of an issue or problem:

- In the event of an incorrect bill, offer an **immediate apology** and **goodwill payment**;
- Provide a **freephone number** or offer to ring the customer back;
- Provide a **single point of contact** until the issue is resolved;
- Communication:
 - Provide a **follow up letter** to explain any change in tariff (including WaterSure) and how it works,

"I think they could have sent me a follow up letter explaining everything – what I'm entitled to, what I'm going to get. The trouble is, when you get to my age, you tend to talk on the phone – and then you forget things, don't you?"

- Don't mislead people over the **impact of a water meter** on bills;
- **Communicate verbally** (preferably face-to-face) when raising the issue of high-water use, rather than by letter which can cause alarm;

We opened it (the letter) and thought 'oh my goodness we've got a leak on our drive'

- **Proactively promote Helping Hands** to customers who contact South East Water about their arrears;
- Supporting the **transition to a water meter**:
 - Offer more information and support on **saving water** for those transferred to a water meter;
 - Provide **certainty** to those on a water meter of what their bill will be; and
- Other:
 - Offer support and equipment on **descaling** appliances;
 - Provide **separate meters for a cluster** of properties.

Please refer to **section 8** for the in-depth case studies of customers not affected by the outage.

4.2.2 In the event of a water outage

We interviewed 25 customers who are on the South East Water PSR, who were affected by an interruption to their water supply in early March 2018.

4.2.2.1 How did the outage affect them?

The impact of being without water varied enormously. It ranged from having minimal impact, to being inconvenient or unpleasant, right through to being extremely stressful.

For those who felt they had been impacted significantly, they cited the following problems:

- **Stress and anxiety:** some reported feeling very anxious during the episode with others describing it as traumatic. In some cases, this related to a medical condition which required water use; such as the requirement to use a machine which requires a constant supply of sterilized water to help the customer with their breathing at night.

"During the outage there was no water to put into the machine which not only damages the mechanism but resulted in me stopping breathing temporarily" (as no air was being forced into her airways) "I was very panicked."

- **Not having water to drink,** both during the outage and for some days afterwards as the water quality was impaired. Some customers managed by using a filter jug to filter the dirty water after the water came back on.

"I suffer from kidney stones so should have drank a lot of water and couldn't do this, but as it was only for 18 hours, I managed - but it could have been more serious if it had lasted for longer."

- **Lack of toilet facilities:** this was cited as a very unpleasant impact of the water outage. This was particularly the case for those with medical conditions requiring frequent use of the toilet. Where they could, some customers used buckets to flush their toilets, filling them with snow or from water butts; but this presented challenges for mobility impaired customers.

"I'm visually impaired and at the age of 94 getting the water from my garden is difficult. It's very difficult to go outside into the garden as it means negotiating a steep step... It was very cold, although not exactly icy, so I was very lucky that I didn't have a fall."

- **Being unable to wash or bathe:** this was a particular issue for those with or caring for others with incontinence and for those who manage chronic pain through hot baths.

"I felt awful, I got depressed, all I did was stay in bed, or stay in the house. I couldn't go out, because I couldn't shower or bath. My pain levels went through the roof. Pain killers on their own just don't work; hot baths with Epsom salts - they help."

- **Being unable to cook or wash up** was another problem highlighted by those we interviewed. This was a particular challenge for those with caring responsibilities.

"I had to try to organise to get my parents out to feed them as I couldn't cook without water as I didn't want to use the 10 litres of water saved as it was needed for drinking ... it was a challenge."

- **Not having water for pets** such as dogs and horses.

"We have four horses who drink 20 gallons a day each. That was the most difficult thing – the horses have water troughs, but they were running out."

Example: Customer with obstructive apnoea - urgent need for water

Ms A is in her 60s and suffers from: asthma; glaucoma; prediabetes; high blood pressure; regular chest infections; a bowel condition which means she must use the toilet regularly; and obstructive apnoea for which she requires a machine to force her airways open at night. This machine requires several litres of water to work. She was without water for around five days. During this period there was no water to put into the machine, which not only damages the mechanism, but the customer stopped breathing (temporarily) as no air was being forced into her airways.

She had two very traumatic days until her neighbours brought her some water. She reported that South East Water were fantastic once she got in touch with them (a couple of days after her water went off) and they delivered water to her that evening.

"The delivery people were fantastic, brought the water right into the sitting room as I couldn't have carried it. They were fantastic, really chatty and friendly, once I got the water."

She had a water butt which she could use to flush the toilet, which really helped. It would have been worse if she could not have flushed the toilet given her bowel condition.

"It's really important for South East Water to have a list of people at risk during a water shortage [and that] they should have contacted the council as they have a list of vulnerable tenants."

Example: 94-year-old customer struggled to collect water from a water butt

Ms B is 94 and visually impaired. She was without water for four days. She considered herself to be very lucky that neighbours brought her bottled water. She also has a water butt and did not consider herself to be too badly affected. However, getting the water from the garden was difficult. It meant negotiating a steep step. She then needed to open the garden gate which took a while given her age. And then she could not carry a full bucket of water as it was too heavy. Also, as the weather was cold, she was felt she was lucky not to have had a fall.

She is not happy with South East Water's services.

"Appalling. People like me, aged 94 with macular degeneration, get very worried about these things. South East Water didn't communicate, they didn't distribute bottled water, there was absolute silence."

She feels that it would be helpful if customers could have been told how long the water was going to be off, so she could make contingency arrangements.

"The least they could have done was said something on the South East News, put leaflets through the letterbox or sent a loudspeaker round to tell people what was going on."

There were also customers who said they were not unduly affected by the water outage. This was generally the case for those that experienced shorter outage periods (a few hours rather than days) or those who had advance notice and so could prepare by filling kettles and jugs. Some managed by using water from their water butts.

Others received bottled water quickly from South East Water which meant the outage had a minimal impact.

"They delivered half litre bottles and the service was absolutely brilliant, they brought it right into the kitchen. Two young girls came around in cars from South East Water and they brought it into the house."

4.2.2.2 Contact with South East Water during the outage

Only a couple of people we spoke to had been contacted by South East Water as far as they could remember (being warned that the water was going to go off); the majority said they had not been contacted. (Based on the sample size, this indicates that a large proportion of customers on the PSR would not have received any contact.)

"There was no information whatsoever from South East Water as to how long we'd be without water, or why there was no water, and no water was supplied."

Some of those we interviewed contacted South East Water anything between within a few minutes and two days of the water going off. Some of these people reported being very satisfied with the service. Others specifically expressed dissatisfaction, as follows:

- Information provided online or via pre-recorded phone messages was felt to be too vague to be helpful. Some customers struggle to access online information;
- Similarly, text updates were sometimes inaccurate or insufficiently detailed; and
- Some were promised a call-back but never got this; one customer commented on the cost of this in repeat phone calls to South East Water.

Some customers did not try to contact South East Water, feeling it was unnecessary.

"No, I didn't phone them. Once I'd spoken to my neighbour and found out it wasn't just me, I thought there was no point."

4.2.2.3 Satisfaction with South East Water's communication

Where customers had had communication with South East Water during the outage, they expressed satisfaction about:

- The fact that they could get through to South East Water quickly by phone;
- How helpful the staff were, despite the challenging circumstances; and
- The quality of the bottled water delivery service.

"The delivery people were fantastic, they brought the water right into the sitting room as I couldn't have carried it. They were fantastic really chatty and friendly, once I got the water."

Others were critical of the level and quality of communication:

- Some reported having **no communication** from South East Water at all (some of whom did not have internet access to could not check the company website for updates);

"The communication was poor; I had to chase them to find out what was going on."

- Others found the communication **vague** or misleading;

"It was misleading. They said something about it coming back on - but it kept being postponed."

- Some felt that they **did not get priority treatment** despite being on the PSR; and
- There was a perception that people handing out bottled water had been **rude** (though it is unclear whether these were South East Water staff).

4.2.2.4 Other sources of information

Customers who used other sources of information about the water outage reported receiving useful information from the following:

- Radio Kent;
- The local BBC radio station;

- ITV South East News;
- The Kent Live website; and
- Facebook community pages.

4.2.2.5 *In what ways did South East Water support vulnerable customers during the outage?*

There were three types of experiences, in terms of support received:

- Those who said they **had bottled water delivered** to them by South East Water (or, in one case, a tank of water for their horses). Some were happy with this whilst others felt they had to wait too long (e.g. until the fifth day of the outage, just before the water came back on);
- Those who said **water was brought to a local collection point** for them to access (though for some it was not very local; up to 30 miles away). Again, some were satisfied with this whilst others felt they had to wait too long for this, had only found out about it by chance, or were not allowed to take enough for their needs; and

"We were only allowed 1 or 2 bottles and had to wait two and half days. I only found out about it because someone posted on Facebook that there was going to be a delivery. It ran out and they said they would have some more there by 7.30pm that evening, but it didn't come until lunchtime the next day."

- Those who said that they **did not receive any support**.

"They did nothing at all."

4.2.2.6 *What was good about South East Water's service?*

The following aspects of South East Water's service were praised by customers:

- The **quality of customer service** and level of phone or in-person support during the outage;
- The **delivery of water** and the effort that went in to getting this to vulnerable customers;

"The delivery people were fantastic, brought the water right into the sitting room as I couldn't have carried it. They were fantastic really chatty & friendly, once I got the water."

- The **hard-working staff**; and
- The **quick payment of compensation**.

Fantastic service from South East Water

Ms D is retired and lives alone. She has limited mobility arising from polio. She had limited water supply for a couple of days; it never cut out completely. She found the service from South East Water to be fantastic and felt they did an excellent job of supporting vulnerable customers throughout her village.

"The service was absolutely brilliant, they brought [the bottled water] right into the kitchen. Water was delivered to the village as well for people to collect and they were delivering to vulnerable people - the girls said they had a list and were going around looking for addresses for vulnerable people."

She said she was helped by wonderful neighbours and people phoned to make sure she was ok. She doesn't feel it should be South East Water's responsibility to tell everyone about the water status. "People can find out for themselves." It hasn't changed the way she thinks about water.

"I've only had two water upsets in 61 years so don't think I'm really going to worry about it!"

4.2.2.7 What was bad about South East Water's service?

Aspects of South East Water's service that were criticised by the customers interviewed were:

- The perceived lack of any support;

"People like me, aged 94 with macular degeneration get very worried about these things. South East Water didn't communicate, they didn't distribute bottled water, there was absolute silence."

- Water that was delivered too late;

"[The water] took so blooming long to get here, that was what was wrong."

- Issues with water being delivered to collection points:

- Information issues, with information on the South East Water website being reported as being out of date, customers having to rely on word of mouth to find out about the correct locations;

"[South East Water] said there was water at the pub, but I got there and it had run out. There were deliveries at the village hall but they weren't advertised on the website, so I didn't find out for two days"

- Locations being too far from customers (up to 30 miles away), with more local water delivered only as the water supply came back on;
- Difficulties in finding or accessing the collection points due to mobility issues or disorganization at the site;

"There was such a mad scrum where they'd delivered [the bottled water], and I couldn't go and join that scrum, I'm 85."

- Lack of clarity about the process for collecting water and whether they would need their own container.

- Bottled water being promised but not delivered;

"They promised it but didn't deliver it. I'm cheesed off about that."

- Nobody coming to check on PSR customers; and

"I know they had a lot going on, but they need to consider us older disabled, we don't like making a fuss, but we are still human, I still like to have a cup of tea and some water. It would have been nice for someone to check on me"

- Inadequate levels of compensation.

"£50 doesn't seem very much for three days without water."

4.2.2.8 What could South East Water have done better or differently?

Interviewees made suggestions for improving South East Water's service levels in the case of future water outages; these included:

- Try to ensure it doesn't happen in the first place by taking better care of the pipes so they don't leak;
- Identifying customers that need support more effectively and identifying who needs to be prioritised during such an event;

"You need to find out why they're on priority lists... There are different levels of priority. When people apply for it, ask them for the reasons why. So, you know who needs help first."

- Improving communications to customers. It was suggested that South East Water should:
 - Get in touch with customers to let them know the water is off and the likely timeframe for rectifying this – by phone, a card through the door or (for some customers) by text or email;
 - Provide regular, accurate, detailed, location specific updates on progress to fix the situation; and
 - Establish a network of people in affected communities with whom South East Water can communicate who can then cascade information to the community.

- Providing alternative water supplies to customers more promptly, working with local organisations to get water delivered to those in need, offering more to those who need it most, and offering to open bottles for customers. It was suggested that all those on the priority list should have bottled water delivered to them if the outage lasts from more than 48 hours; and

"After three days we got concerned about how long it would go on for, so would have liked someone from South East Water to come and knock on doors, although that's a lot to ask..."

- Fulfilling commitments to deliver water to customers.

"Fulfilling their promise to bring water would have helped."

4.2.2.9 Information and support from other organisations or individuals

Customers interviewed highlighted a range of other sources of support that they received during the water outage.

Sources of support included family, neighbours and community groups and organisations.

"We all pulled together, those that had water offered to others to come and have a drink."

There were also customers who said they did not receive any external support, some of whom did not feel in need of any such support whereas others did feel in need of help.

"Nobody even bothered to ring, I never heard from anybody."

Reliant on help from family and community

Ms C lives on her own and is disabled; she has poor mobility and impaired vision. She was without water for around two and a half days.

"The worst thing was going to the loo; you have to go to the loo. Others said use a bucket of water, but I couldn't do that because of my disability. I just had to wait. It was quite disgusting to put it mildly."

South East Water did not contact her. She tried to contact them but says she could not get through.

"If it hadn't been for my nephew it would have been very difficult. I would have had to use snow to drink. But it would be difficult for me to get the snow. I don't have any neighbours to speak of."

A local organisation, Rotherfield St Martin, very kindly contacted her (within 24 hours of the water going off) to see if she needed any help.

South East Water only got in touch after the water was back on. At first, they sent a letter saying she'd get £50 off her bill, then a second letter saying she'd get £100 off her bill. This was poorly received by Mrs C.

"Quite honestly I felt, 'Get stuffed'!"

4.2.2.10 Do customers feel differently about their water now?

Customers were asked whether the water outage had made them think differently about water.

The following views were expressed:

- Increased understanding of the value of water and the importance of not wasting water;
- A recognition that the water infrastructure is old and needs investment; and
- Plans to have a stock of bottled water in case this happens again.

Please refer to **section 9** for the in-depth case studies of customers affected by the outage.

4.3 Stakeholder agencies

In the following section we have combined the findings from both the stakeholder workshops and the interviews we carried out with stakeholder agencies, as questions asked were broadly the same and as a result there was significant duplication in the findings.

4.3.1 Vulnerability categories

Participants were asked to comment on the vulnerability categories that are currently being used by South East Water.

Participants suggested that consideration should be given to:

- **The scale of severity** within the category;
- **The transient nature** of vulnerability, e.g. a bereavement or a change in employment could move someone in or out of vulnerability;
- **Customers on the brink of vulnerability**, as it is important to try to get to customers as quickly as possible; and
- The fact that business as usual vulnerability can be different to in the event of an incident vulnerability.

Participants suggested that the following categories and sub-categories should be included:

- Carers;
- Those who are being moved on to Universal Credit;
- Unemployed;
- Those who are physically isolated;
- Ex-offenders who may lack life skills and support;
- Those who lack access to the internet;
- Dementia clients;
- Language issues;
- Learning difficulties and autism;
- Illiteracy and dyslexia;
- Those leaving hospital;
- Relationship breakdown; and
- Younger people who are new to managing their bills.

4.3.2 Horizon Scanning

Participants were asked what local issues and changes are having an impact on their vulnerable clients. The key points were as follows:

Universal credit

- Increased debts for clients
- PIPs (personal independence payments) are being affected
- Sick people have to go to work or they do not get paid
- There are more people in temporary accommodation because of housing shortages

Funding cuts

- Funding cuts are having a massive impact on council services and charities/support organisations, yet their work load is increasing because those cuts are impacting on services and vulnerable people are needing more support
- There is an increased reliance on charities, which means the charities are now struggling
- Decreased funding from Councils is having a knock-on impact on all services
- Stakeholder agencies are seeing more children in poverty
- There are huge cuts in social care, which has resulted in more people having to go into homes
- Increases in sheltered housing

- Increased demand on foodbanks
- Social care moving from institutions to in-home
- Bottle necking of assessments is slowing processing in the council

Decline in health and well-being

- Increase in loneliness - stakeholder agencies can't reach everyone
- Increased isolation particularly in rural areas (partly due to cuts in transport)
- Isolation/Loneliness is also occurring in urban areas
- A significant rise in mental health issues and autism

The coastal economy is having an impact on people

- Zero-hour contracts
- Seasonal work
- Immigration - the refugees themselves are vulnerable

Housing growth

- Increased population means increased strain on infrastructure
- Reduced regulation on standards of new homes (no more Code for Sustainable Homes); means poor water efficiency standards in the new homes

Increased poverty

- Increasing inequality in areas like Hastings is resulting in increased vulnerability
- There is no point chasing debt from families that have nothing; some are in abject poverty e.g. family with 2 teenagers with an income of £2k for the year (due to having to pay back benefits that were previously overpaid)
- Some people will never learn to pay their bills (particularly those children growing up in poverty)
- Growth in number and use of food banks and hubs – they are getting organised across areas. A potentially good way to access the most vulnerable
- There are 23,000 fuel poor homes in East Sussex alone – yet South East Water has fewer than this on the PSR for their whole area
- We are entering the digital era, but there are still people who can't access it

Aging population

- We have an aging population, which leads to an increase in long term health conditions

- Communities are trying to develop local support to respond to the increasing needs of vulnerable people
- Changes in health services – issues of recruitment and retention in health and social care
- GPs surgeries closing down, and also the way they operate is changing (e.g. no allocated doctors to individuals) this impacts on vulnerable people reducing contact and oversight of their needs
- An increased reliance on technology negatively impacts on elderly people

Young people

- Harder to find work and can't leave home as a result
- Have to live in multiple-occupancy creating difficulties with paying bills

Climate impacts

- Drier summers, more extreme weather events having an impact on our water services.

4.3.3 South East Water's services - perceived gaps and how they could be filled

There was limited awareness amongst agency representatives of the existing services that South East Water offers to its vulnerable customers. It was pointed out that it can be difficult for third parties to keep up to date with all the services that different utilities offer.

Key suggestions about how South East Water's services could be improved included the following:

4.3.3.1 Increased awareness of services

It was felt that awareness amongst vulnerable customers of South East Water's services was limited, and that this could be raised through a number of means, including:

- Providing leaflets summarising the different services on offer in key places like doctor's surgeries, supermarkets, libraries etc.;
- Information disseminated via social media, radio, community newsletters and local papers;
- Developing and providing a 'home starter' information pack for people setting up home for the first time;
- Stalls in public places like shopping centres and libraries; and
- Working with other agencies to promote services to their customers. As part of this, South East Water should provide information for agencies on the eligibility criteria for different services so they know who to promote the services to.

4.3.3.2 Partnership working

As well as raising awareness of services via third parties (see above), it was suggested that partnership working between South East Water and third parties could involve:

- An improved and standardised process for two-way cross referrals and signposting between South East Water and third parties;
- The development of links with partners in communities that could help deliver support to vulnerable customers in event of a water outage, including with organisations that have links to other smaller local organisations;
- The development of data sharing agreements to overcome any data protection barriers so that third parties can help deliver water to those who need it during a water outage; and
- The appointment of a liaison officer at South East Water who can link the relevant organisations and information.

It was noted that South East Water already engages very well with some of the stakeholder organisations in its area.

"South East Water engage very well with us...; it would be nice if all water companies did that. We need the other utilities to engage as well as (South East Water) does."

4.3.3.3 Communication

There were a few suggestions for how South East Water could improve its communication with customers, including:

- Thinking about the terminology used for particular services e.g.:
 - 'Social' tariff may suggest that it is only for those on benefits,
 - 'Helping Hands' may appear to be related to fixing things around the house;
- Offering a freephone or call-back service to vulnerable customers;
- Develop an App, whereby customers can log in to their account;
- Offering more outreach to vulnerable customers including home visits;
- Communicate via face-to-face, phone or text - letter's do not work as a form of communication for many people and text messaging is more reliable than phoning; and

"The ones who are in serious debt and have lost hope don't even open their letters. They bring them in for us to open. So, it doesn't matter what you put in the envelope that's helpful and friendly because they don't open the envelope."

- Providing quicker feedback on consumption for those on a water meter so they know how much their water use is costing them, e.g. one month after installation, with the option of monthly bills thereafter.

4.3.3.4 Tariffs and debt support

There were a number of suggestions for improvements that could be made around the services themselves.

These included:

- **Tariffs:**
 - Streamlining the tariffs so they are easier to understand; and
 - Making the eligibility criteria for WaterSure discretionary.
- **Debt support:**
 - Providing earlier alerts to people as they go into arrears;
 - Offering a personal visit to customers not paying their bills;
 - Restricting visits by enforcement officers to vulnerable customers with the view that enforcement officers cause stress and anxiety for customers who have nothing of value that can be removed; and
 - Contacting customers whose bills are unusually high.

4.3.3.5 Practical services and other suggestions

It was suggested that South East Water could usefully:

- Develop an app for its services to enable customers to easily access information and apply for support;
- Provide more support for those without English or with low literacy levels;
- Provide a pipe lagging services for vulnerable customers;
- Offer to fit water saving equipment as well as supply it;
- Provide fridge magnets with a number to call if in need of help; and
- Commit to being a dementia friendly organisation.

Please refer to section 5 for the full set of recommendations.

4.3.4 Delivering the strategy - what would success look like in five years' time?

Participants suggested a number of ways of measuring the success of the strategy, including looking for evidence of:

- **Improved partnership working**, including:
 - More partnerships in place with an easy, two-way referral process for customers to access support;
 - A system for keeping stakeholders up to date with progress on the strategy;
 - Working with other water companies to develop a common monitoring framework and measurable indicators; and
 - Working with partners to measure progress, e.g. where others collect statistics on enquiries received that relate to water issues.
- A reduction in the **number of customers in debt** to South East Water;
- **Increased uptake** of different tariffs;
- Improved **customer satisfaction** from those who have received these services;
- Reduced **number of complaints** in relation to an incident;
- A process for **keeping the PSR up to date** by taking people off when no longer vulnerable; and
- Keeping the strategy **up to date** through:
 - Mapping new categories of vulnerability;
 - Updating the case studies regularly; and
 - Providing annual updates on progress in delivering the action plan.

4.3.5 Key hopes and concerns for the Vulnerability Strategy

4.3.5.1 Hopes

Stakeholders expressed a number of key wishes for things they would like to see included in the strategy, including:

- Evidence of having gathered views from vulnerable customers;
- A long-term plan for implementation with plans for evaluation and follow up;
- Flexibility to look at individual circumstances, do not be so rigid that they don't fit in the box;
- Plans to work in partnership with agencies who offer advice to clients;
- A commitment to try to get all those entitled to be on a tariff, on a tariff;

- Offering vulnerable customers a key point of contact; and
- A commitment to contact all vulnerable customers during a water outage – by mixed methods.

"If this is an aspirational strategy, and that's what they should all be, if there's a water outage, would you call up vulnerable customers and check they have water?"

4.3.5.2 Concerns

When asked what concerns they had about the strategy, stakeholders suggested the following:

- Make it very inclusive of all;
- Remember temporary vulnerability, particularly at times of crisis;
- Allow for flexibility and a broad approach to vulnerability;
- Be aware how many people are struggling with life generally, and providing appropriate communication to these groups;
- Ensuring staff are knowledgeable, aware of different issues and dementia-friendly; and
- Involve a wide range of staff and other agencies in delivering the strategy.

"It's one thing having a paper document sitting on a shelf; but what's going to turn it into a reality? ...It's the responsibility of everyone to deliver it not just a small group."

4.3.6 Organisations involved during the water outage

Two of the organisations that we spoke to were involved in aiding vulnerable people during the water outage.

The following was discussed with them:

4.3.6.1 How did your organisation support customers during the water outage?

Organisations interviewed helped customers in a range of ways including:

- Buying in bottled water to deliver to those in greatest need and recruiting local volunteers and other resources (e.g. fire staff, community wardens) to help with distribution (both of the water they had brought and, once provided, water supplied by South East Water);
- Distributing water delivered by South East Water to collection points, to those most in need;
- Offering support to those suffering from stress and anxiety;

- Where possible providing information to people; and
- Setting up a command control process which involved trying to identify where the water outage was and where within the area there were vulnerable people. Mapping those people using information from South East Water so they could be checked on. A good existing relationship with one of the South East Water team was cited.

"Barry [Hayes] (South East Water Control Room Manager) worked well, he was everywhere. We have a good relationship with Barry, and having that pre-existing link was invaluable."

4.3.6.2 Any issues or problems in relation to South East Water's service?

The following issues were reported:

- Elderly people did not know what to do with their toilets and commodes, which were overflowing;
- Some people had water delivered to their doorstep but did not know it was there because they were unable to leave the house;
- The size of bottles was an issue for some people – they were too big and heavy to lift, whilst some people could not open the bottles. This contributed to the risk of people becoming dehydrated;
- Some people had to travel a long way, in some cases by foot, to collect water;

"There was one woman who walked over 3 fields with a basket to get water because she had heard we had some in Rotherfield. We had to stop everything and look after her because she was so exhausted and stressed."

- South East Water did not ration the water supplied, so people took more than their share of water; and

"South East Water dumped [the water] and left. Big crates. It was a bit chaotic. People were just filling their cars with water, it wasn't being rationed."

- It took a long time to get information from South East Water about where the outages were, where water was being delivered, and which customers needed help.

4.3.6.3 What could have been done better

It was recommended that South East Water undertake the following in any future water outage situation:

- Brief local agencies on the situation so they can take more effective action;
- Provide more volunteers (though it was understood that some staff were already volunteering to work outside of their standard hours);
- Be ready and able to share data with agencies so that they could reach those who needed the help most; and
- Work with hospitals to ensure where people are discharged to homes without water there is support for these customers.

4.3.7 Developing partnership working

Initial suggestions for taking forward stronger partnership working included:

- Stakeholder mapping to develop a better understanding of the relevant agencies that exist in South East Water's area of operation;
- Appointing a single, full time South East Water vulnerability champion to act as a contact point for agencies;
- Setting up a partnership working group that meets 6 monthly;
- Use existing contacts to lead to other contacts; and
- Developing an online forum.

Opportunities for joint working include:

- Raising awareness with agency staff of the services that South East Water provides, through talks delivered by the CCT and promoting the services via agency newsletter and websites, with succinct information on the services provided to the agencies; and
- The development of a clear two-way referral process between South East Water and other agencies, with data sharing agreements to facilitate this, with dedicated access to the South East Water CCT (e.g. dedicated email/phone number) to refer customers to.

Interviewees offered the following suggestions for improved partnership working:

- Agencies can let their clients know if South East Water are doing something or want to trial something;
- Provide information for agencies to disseminate amongst their clients;
- Engage organisations who have a lot of links with other/smaller organisations, e.g. Involve Kent;
- Enable engagement with the water industry to be able to find out for their customers who is eligible for what. They will likely know a customer's income etc. so would know who could be eligible;

- South East Water to commit to becoming a dementia friendly business, or take part in community/dementia activities (Alzheimer's Society could support South East Water to become a dementia friendly company);
- Share information with each other about customers' needs;
- South East Water deliver workshops to agencies and groups, and give talks at meetings;
- Good communication; being able to talk to the right people when you speak to them;
- If a vulnerable person is at risk of being harmed, agency should have over-written permission to share details in order to help them;
- Two-way communication - explore ways of becoming better aware of each other;
- An area on the website for agencies that requires a log-in, to be used for information sharing; and
- Two-way training between South East Water and stakeholder agencies.

"South East Water engage very well with us...; it would be nice if all water companies did that. We need the other utilities to engage as well as Barry does."

"Let's say there's a water shortage in Basingstoke; I'm not sure if you calling us and us telling our users is not going to work; that's not our responsibility, that's South East Water's responsibility; that wouldn't work, because that's not our remit as an organisation. Sharing info about South East Water services would be better, that would work."

Please refer to **section 0** for further details on working together.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The following recommendations are a compilation of those put forward by all stakeholders engaged in this study, including South East Water's customers in vulnerable circumstances, the CCT staff, and stakeholder agencies working with people in vulnerable circumstances. They have not been edited or prioritised by CAG Consultants in any way. The table of recommendations in sections 5.3 to 5.8 include responses sought from South East Water.

This section of the report has been structured according to types of recommendations, which relate to different aspects of the strategy. Within each section, all the stakeholders' recommendations are combined, in order to ensure that no stakeholders' opinions are given priority following the co-creation approach.

5.2 Vulnerability categories

CCT staff and representatives of stakeholder agencies were asked to comment on the categories of vulnerability used by South East Water, in order to assess if South East Water's understanding of vulnerability matched theirs, and to ensure that nothing was missing from the categories.

Participants suggested that recognition should be given to both the complexity of the categories and the transient nature of vulnerability. **Table 5** sets out the vulnerability categories identified by staff and stakeholders.

Table 5 Vulnerability Categories

Vulnerability category	To include
Mental or physical health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disability including blind, deaf, mute, paraplegic• Physical health• Medical condition (could be temporary) including those on dialysis• Mental health including hoarders
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Elderly• Young people (particularly those living independently for the first time without experience of managing their finances or paying bills)
Low income	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poverty

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial issues • Debt
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning difficulties • Dyslexia • Lack of education • Lack of financial knowledge • Illiteracy
Family circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divorce • Relationship breakdown • Bereavement • Single parent • Carer • Domestic violence
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Non-English speakers
Other circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical isolation • Poor living conditions • Lack of internet access • Unemployment • Zero hours contract or seasonal work • Homeless • Just out of hospital • Ex-offender • Ex-military • Partner in prison

The following sections set out the recommendations within tables that include the recommendations put forward by all the stakeholders (including customers, staff and stakeholder agencies), an indication as to whether they are already in place or will be implemented in the new strategy and an explanation from South East Water as to how they will be implemented, or why they won't be.

The recommendations are set out as follows:

- The three central themes of the Vulnerability Strategy:
 - **Accessibility** ;
 - **Affordability**; and
 - **Protection**.
-

- Equipment;
-
- **Working with stakeholder** agencies;
-
-
-
-
-
-
- Customer Care Team;
-
-
- **Additional recommendations from the Customer Care Team that relate to incident management rather than specifically to supporting vulnerable** customers

5.3 Accessibility

ACCESSIBILITY			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation from South East Water
Simplify tariffs	Streamline and simply to make easier to understand; consider just one tariff	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tariffs are simple, and they are working with all South East companies to agree £16k trigger for tariffs. • Some tariffs are mandated by the regulator so out of South East Water's control. • Work to keep tariffs and eligibility criteria simple • Continue working with other regional companies to standardize eligibility criteria • Work to ensure our bills look less 'complex'
Refine eligibility	Introduce a higher threshold for low income to enable more to access social tariffs and other support e.g. £26,000	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water follow the same eligibility criteria used by other utilities. • South East Water have c. 90k customers directly in their region that qualify (Experian household income data) • South East Water will review our help for customers outside the trigger i.e. a match payment approach etc.
	Offer more support for those who marginally miss out on being eligible for social tariff or financial support	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve identification of customers within current eligibility • Develop matched-payment scheme to support customers not meeting current eligibility

	Review eligibility for Water Sure; e.g. make it available to anyone with a terminal illness or make it discretionary	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water Sure is set by the regulator; this is not within South East Water's control.
	Base eligibility for all tariffs on overall circumstances and not just the customer's financial situation	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not considered practical; tariff eligibility needs to be simple to establish and consistent with other utilities.
	If a GP's letter is required to access support for a tariff, offer to cover the cost of this	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Already offered by South East Water CCT report that GP letter no longer required to access any tariffs Ensure all staff are aware of this Look at wider training for all staff around vulnerability approach, strategy and process
	Work with plumbers on WaterLink	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water will offer an opportunity for Water Link to help South East Water's vulnerable customers This needs to be formalised more as to when they would undertake this task (Housing Association and landlords are not as happy about this)
	Automatically apply discounts to those eligible for them	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This already happens South East Water are looking at how partners can 'passport' customers onto South East Water's schemes – without evaluation at the South East Water side
Improve information provided	Provide follow up letters to explain any change in tariff	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This already happens but South East Water will ensure that these letters are as clear and simple as possible This will be part of staff training – although it may not happen in all circumstances.

Provide plain English information about how Water Sure works	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water are committed to changing communication/bills in this area to simplify, without disempowering the customer through loss of consumption data • Work with support agencies who can help co-create our literature to meet customer needs. • Consider Crystal Marketing to ensure written in plain English • Consider Easy Read/video communications
Automatically tell customers about the Helping Hands grant when they ring about arrears or problems with payment	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping Hands is a limited pot of funding, but South East Water currently only use 50% of the fund • Consideration to be given to how to improve methods of finding customers that are eligible for Helping Hands • CCT suggest seeking more referrals from third parties e.g. those offering debt advice
Simplify bills wherever possible	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will try and simplify their support tariff bills that currently look complex, and are also looking at general bills
Use Plain English and large text in all written communication; do not use acronyms and jargon	Yes	<p>South East Water are committed to looking at this, and will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with support agencies who can help co-create our literature to meet customer needs. • Consider Crystal Marketing to ensure written in plain English • Consider Easy Read/video communications
Offer a single point of contact	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This already happens to an extent, but South East Water do need to consider where customers are passed between departments – this would not be a single point of contact

	<p>More communication options, including interpretation options, for those without English or with low literacy – to cover the more widely used languages in the SE region</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and redesign our literature to ensure it is inclusive • Review our training to ensure our explanations of services are easy to understand and consistent • Work with support agencies who can help co-create our literature to meet customer needs. • Consider more interpretation options for widely used languages in the SE region • Consider Crystal Marketing to ensure written in plain English • Consider Easy Read/video communications
	<p>Home starter information pack about how water is paid for and how to access support</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New water-customer pack • Better partnership working with existing trusted agencies • Introducing agency helpline – hotline into customer care • Consideration to be given to providing a home starter pack for vulnerable customers
	<p>Better use of terminology, e.g. the term 'social' tariff has negative connotations and implies it is only for people on benefits</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will review – interested in thoughts from CCT, for example BT has BT Basic tariff, Southern use 'Essentials' • CCT suggest that a 'capped' tariff could be a good option though this may also have negative connotations • Review and redesign our literature to ensure it is inclusive • Using our stakeholders, South East Water will look at developing better 'brands' and 'names' for services South East Water offer that encourage customers to sign-up for the help they deliver

	Develop an app for digital services, whereby customer can log in and see what their credit is, when next bill is due etc.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will be pursuing this under our technology plan
	More outreach for vulnerable customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This links to need for more staff (see below) • Better promotion and explanation during sign-up process for new customers • Improve bill format and communication to highlight additional services
	Create videos explaining bills, services and tariffs	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will be undertaken as part of strategy release
	Disseminate water saving tips via apps, emails, social media etc.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of water resources management plan and retail strategy
Communication	Have a hotline where you can talk to a relative or agency representative	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct line to be implemented for stakeholders
	Have two hotlines - one for stakeholders and one for customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCT direct line already exists • Direct line to be implemented for stakeholders
	If a call back is offered, ensure a time frame is given	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will continue to review this recommendation based on circumstances of the callback
	Two-way texting service	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of technology plan
	At account set up ask more detailed questions about family circumstances	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of training and expanded risk factor data capture

Vulnerability identification	Be aware of trigger signs, e.g. direct debit has stopped, arrears are mounting, name of bill payer changes, etc.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of training and expanded risk factor data capture
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5.4 Affordability

AFFORDABILITY			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation
Billing and arrears	Provide certainty of costs over 12 months to enable customers to budget	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's not possible to provide certainty of costs for those on a water meter (except for those on Water Sure and social tariff where this is possible and will be communicated), but more will be done to provide estimates. Improve bill communications e.g. current budget plans are predictions of customers' future usage but this is not clear... Consider capped charges – charge the cap or lower amount if usage is low
	Provide monthly bills for those who request it	TBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water will be looking at this especially for certain social / rented housing types
	Offer pay matching for those in arrears - offering to match what the customer pays	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The objective is not to have customers in arrears; South East Water will be considering some sort of payment matching scheme Develop matched-payment scheme to support customers not meeting current eligibility

Earlier alerts as a customer goes into arrears – ensure this is embedded in the system	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current process is quite quick – but if a vulnerable customer, South East Water need to consider their approach CCT suggest that it would be good to have a manual review for vulnerable customers earlier in the process and that text alerts could be good for some customers (but not all will have mobile phones)
Make personal visits to customers not paying their bills	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This already happens but will be introduced more quickly where possible and appropriate.
Take vulnerable people out of the automatic communications process when a bill has not been paid	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Important even if customers are vulnerable that they receive an early trigger. South East Water will be reviewing our strategy around vulnerable customers and credit management
Restrict or prevent visits by enforcement officers to vulnerable customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This already happens; visits by enforcement officers to customers on the PSR are rare.
Offer payment breaks	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water often do this by simply delaying a customer's account – South East Water need to formalise this process to create a 'payment holiday'
Streamline the process for Helping Hand applications to make it easier for field staff to help customers apply	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water will look into this and ensure staff are trained up on the process CCT feel the process is now well streamlined; the challenge is in identifying suitable customers. Seeking more referrals from third parties could be a good way to address this.
Consider working in partnership with debt organisations in relation to chasing debts	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will be considered as part of future procurement strategy of services
Set realistic repayment plans	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Already in processes

	Ensure advice to customers is appropriate (e.g. on debt advice services and loan sharks)	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of stakeholder network and appropriate partnerships will ensure customers get correct advice from the right place
Transition to water meter	Estimate of costs and assurance it will not exceed a certain amount	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where possible – e.g. for Water Sure, Social Tariff Improve bill communications e.g. current budget plans are predictions of customers’ future usage, but this is not clear Consider capped charges – charge the cap or lower amount if usage is lower Introductory Phase-in tariffs offered Look to improve bill explanation documents Current Budget plans are based on predicted customer usage – South East Water need to explain better Customers on support tariffs– South East Water need to explain better A move to Smart Meters is unlikely but South East Water will continue to work on communication and bill design
	Provision of an early bill	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plans to be considered – certain social housing types are only for social tariff customers and could issue monthly bills
	Information about the typical cost of water use for activities, e.g. having a bath or shower, running the washing machine etc.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water plans to produce such information and make it available through much better Internet and collateral – it maybe something they can provide as part of the initial engagement with all vulnerable customers
Communication	Offer a free-phone number or call back option	Yes	South East Water numbers are inclusive in packages and offer a call back service. South East Water plan to:

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate a freephone number for PSR customers Continue our commitment to positive, local, call centre services.
	Provide fuller explanation of costs behind the bill; have information online explaining costs, e.g. video of a water treatment plant	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covered under 'keeping it simple for customers'
	Clearer communication, making use of easy read, visual and audio methods	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covered under 'keeping it simple for customers'
	Digital app for bill updates	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of technology plan

5.5 Protection

PROTECTION			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation
During business as usual	Offer quick communication with the customer (preferably face-to-face)	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often it is the customer that identifies that something has gone wrong – South East Water will be looking at our communication strategy for liaising with vulnerable customers Develop two-way texting
	Provide an immediate good will payment if South East Water is at fault	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water already do this

	Make verbal contact (rather than written) when raising the issue of high water use	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is already being introduced
During a water outage:			
Identify who needs support & develop partnerships	Identify customers who would struggle most during a water outage and prioritise their support	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate PSR categories to better reflect customer need • Develop our PSR process to improve understanding of circumstances and need to enable prioritization of support and alternative supplies through need codes introducing risk factor (H/M/L).
	Identify and develop links with partners in communities that can help deliver support to customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a significant part of the strategic plan • South East Water are introducing an integrated mapping tool that enables early identification of stakeholder presence and immediacy of interest in incidents
	Use geo-mapping to identify key stakeholders within South East Water area, e.g. housing stock in South East Water area	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water is already working on establishing data in their GIS system that will give an area view for all parts of the business processes • South East Water are introducing an integrated mapping tool that enables early identification of stakeholder presence and immediacy of interest in incidents
	Work out data protection issues	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data protection issues need to be reviewed and considered – South East Water will need DPO input and it may differ by organisation type and the security they have to deal with South East Water data – all part of South East Water’s collaborative partnership. South East Water will aim to:

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with stakeholders where data sharing can benefit to ensure GDPR compliant • Work to ensure South East Water have ability to share and receive data compliantly during an incident • Develop a recognition of stakeholder types and their geographic areas of operations and enable systems to trigger alerts
	Implement effective emergency planning that includes key stakeholder agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of stakeholder network to support our already existing emergency plans
	Work with health care agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder engagement
Communication & updates	Contact customers immediately in the event of a water outage; be open and honest about situation	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water recognise that they need to make this whole process more robust to enable them to deal with any promises or expectations that they raise
	Contact agencies as soon as possible and keep them updated throughout	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review how South East Water communicate with customers • Communicate more frequently during prolonged, unplanned interruptions. • Also, see working with stakeholder agencies
	Provide regular, accurate, detailed, location specific updates	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through partnership working - more detail needs to be developed

	Use mix of methods to update people - phone, text, website, social media, local news, loudspeakers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to prioritise high service levels • Investigate free-phone service for PSR customers • Develop our two-way texting • Review our non-digital communication to improve promotion and stakeholder signposting • Continue to work with stakeholders to develop new channels
	Establish network of key people in affected areas with whom South East Water communicates	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water are introducing an integrated mapping tool that enables early identification of stakeholder presence and immediacy of interest in incidents • Develop local networks to help with water deliveries e.g. local water champions
	Include in communication a reminder for people to look out for their neighbours	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already in place
	Educate customers about water storage, e.g. 5 top tips	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considered as part of our freeze/thaw review
	Bear in mind different needs, e.g. language issues, mental health, dementia, learning difficulties	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In strategy – part of our training and development, supported by our new BSI accreditation for inclusivity
	Have a named contact at South East Water that agencies can call directly and be ready to provide necessary information and updates	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct hotline ensures stakeholders are dealt with consistently and efficiently

Priority for vulnerable customers	Keep the PSR up to date to ensure support can be targeted at those in most need	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of the strategy
	Raise awareness of the PSR amongst stakeholder agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of the strategy
	There needs to be a national database of vulnerable people; South East Water push Ofwat to work with other regulators on this	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently working with energy datashare as a single sign-up, not a national database
	When registering someone on the PSR ask for their comms preferences for both day to day and in the event of an emergency	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of the strategy
	Ask screening questions at registration point, e.g. "would not having water affect your ability to take vital medication?"	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of the strategy
Delivery of bottled water based on need	Prompt delivery of bottled water to vulnerable customers, with priority to those who are house bound	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water will investigate PSR categories to reflect customer need What is considered to be prompt will be established as part of South East Water's processes
	Consider quantity of bottled water provided - some customers need more than others	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop our PSR process to improve understanding of circumstances and needs, to enable prioritization of support and alternative supplies Investigate PSR categories to reflect customer need

	Offer to open bottles of water when it is delivered for those who may not be able to open them	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will review supply of bottle opening devices to vulnerable customers along with bottled water in order to establish the best approach.
	Visit everyone on the priority list with bottled water if outage lasts more than two days	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy includes an enhanced priority service promise to customers
	If outage lasts more than two days, offer a laundry service to certain customers (or work with agencies who may be able to do this)	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not something that South East Water could offer but they will work with other agencies to signpost customers to organisations that can facilitate this.
	Ensure that promises to deliver bottled water are fulfilled	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will need to be done as part of a process review • Review how South East Water communicate with customers • Communicate more frequently during prolonged, unplanned interruptions.
	Limit the size of bottles so people can carry them	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already do this
Compensation	Compensate customers for having to eat out during an outage	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water already compensates customers based on appropriate scales of compensation endorsed by the regulator

5.6 Equipment

EQUIPMENT			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation
	Install water saving devices for customers, particularly those on social tariff	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Link with Water Link
	More devices available for field officers to give to customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water will review efficiency and protection devices that may help protect and support customers and investigate how they can support with installation
	Offer to supply and fit pipe lagging	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not felt to be something that South East Water can cost effectively offer

	Offer support and equipment for descaling	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not felt to be something that South East Water can cost effectively offer
	Provide and install push taps for dementia customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We agree this would be a great service and ties in with links to Water Link - to be explored
	Provide free water filters to make water more palatable	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not felt to be something that South East Water can cost effectively offer or that is a requirement; all water is delivered under strict quality controls and measures to make the water potable
	Provide customers with a fridge magnet displaying number to call in an emergency	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will need to be designed from a wider perspective

5.7 Working with stakeholder agencies

WORKING WITH STAKEHOLDER AGENCIES			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation
Building partnerships			
	Work with existing contacts to build up stakeholder mapping database	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder engagement strategy

Stakeholder mapping	Prioritise recording organisation and job title above names of individuals	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing information will be part of our integrated mapping tool
	Develop links with GP surgeries and other health agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Develop links with faith groups, many of whom have different experiences of using water	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Develop links with housing associations, who can provide direct access to customers in vulnerable circumstances	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Ensure you reach organisations at all levels - national through to local	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Map the demographics of the area	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of integrated mapping tool
Relationship building	Put the effort into building relationships and a rapport with agencies, it makes a big difference	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Provide more support for charities to enable them to work with South East Water, e.g. funding, information, training	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy
	Tap into existing forums and panels	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of stakeholder network strategy

	Create a panel of carefully chosen key stakeholders	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder network strategy - New vulnerability focus group
	Ensure the support is two way - think about how South East Water can help agencies as well as agencies helping South East Water	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder network strategy
Communication			
Website	Specific area on the website for agencies with log in	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of technology plan
Phone	Hotline for agencies, that takes them straight through to CCT	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duplication
Raising awareness of South East Water's services			
Better publicity of services via stakeholder agencies	Information packs & leaflets provided to agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased promotion through existing trusted agencies Create easy mechanisms to understand our tariffs
	Information about South East Water services included in agency newsletters, websites etc.	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader range of customer promotion material and access points - community
	South East Water staff attend stakeholder agency events	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Already happening, South East Water need to explore scope to increase coverage

	Training about South East Water services for staff and volunteers at stakeholder agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower third parties to 'passport' customers onto our schemes through their work
	Keep agencies up to date regarding any changes to services	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a stakeholder approach that meets the needs of many
	Create YouTube videos about bills and services for agencies to distribute	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not part of strategy
Cross referrals between South East Water and stakeholder agencies			
Cross referrals	More signposting/cross referrals between South East Water and stakeholder agencies	Yes	Part of strategy
	Peer referral incentives	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not felt to be appropriate
	Agencies to do key checks	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to investigate whether/how agencies can check/approve customers for tariffs/support
	Allocate whole property as vulnerable (e.g. housing associations)	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water feels that this undermines the specific nature of the PSR, plus customer consent is critical to flagging a customer on the PSR
	Work with housing associations/providers, letting agencies and estate agents to access new householders	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder network strategy

Data sharing	Explore data protection issues in regard to working with others to deliver support to customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water will work with stakeholders where data sharing can benefit to ensure GDPR compliant • South East Water will work to ensure they have ability to share and receive data compliantly during an incident • Develop a recognition of stakeholder types and their geographic areas of operations and enable systems to trigger alerts
	Set up data sharing agreements / formal partnerships	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already covered in comments
	Make staff aware of data protection legislation in the event of a crisis	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already covered in comments
Working together during a water outage			
	Set up an effective communication system whereby stakeholder agencies can be notified of water outage and kept updated	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water is looking at how they can map stakeholder areas into our vulnerability geo-mapping tool
	Ability to share details of vulnerable customers during a water outage	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of data sharing agreements are key to enabling this wherever possible (see action above) • South East Water will work with stakeholders where data sharing can benefit to ensure GDPR compliant • South East Water will work to ensure they have ability to share and receive data compliantly during an incident • Develop a recognition of stakeholder types and their geographic areas of operations and enable systems to trigger alerts

	Ask agencies in advance, who would be prepared to help in the event of an emergency, and keep a record	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder network strategy
Additional recommendations			
	Undertake effective stakeholder mapping to identify most appropriate agencies to work with	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water are introducing an integrated mapping tool that enables early identification of stakeholder presence and immediacy of interest in incidents
	Appoint liaison officer who can link all relevant organisations and information and act as single point of contact	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unsure if this is at a strategic level or at an incident level – if the latter then this will be incorporated into the customer process activity
	Develop effective communication systems between South East Water and stakeholder agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic Stakeholder manager to be recruited for co-ordination and strategy Develop a stakeholder approach that meets the needs of many
	Allow time to get everything in place for better partnership working	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New role above to be dedicated to this type of activity along with feedback from existing relationship management
	Life skills courses, including better understanding of utilities and budgeting	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not included in the strategy
	Two-way training between South East Water and agencies	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Part of stakeholder network strategy

5.8 Customer Care Team

CUSTOMER CARE TEAM			
Recommendation	Engagement said...	In the strategy?	Explanation
Changes to existing practices			
	Single point of contact (key worker) for each vulnerable customer	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to consider this further – practicality of doing that – this suggests a key worker style approach
	Improved communication between teams and departments	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CCT suggestion; during an outage, more texts and updates to staff out in the field with updates CCT suggestion: better awareness of the CCT and their work throughout the company

	Increase size of CCT	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will naturally need to happen to handle our increased targets for 2025 • CCT comment: bringing in new measures will put more strain on the team. Needs to be recognition that they are limited in terms of what they can do.
Tools and support			
Improved tablets	Improve functionality of tablets, e.g. voice recognition	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will be reviewed but will be limited by balance of cost and interface with systems – more offline functionality seems to be more important than voice recognition that is not very stable • (CCT agreed that offline functionality is the most important improvement)
	Include 'debt vulnerable' marker on first screen	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to systems
	System of drop-down tabs to record vulnerability	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will be part of system design of new vulnerability module
	Streamline the different systems	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not included in the strategy
Customer feedback	Better system of customer feedback	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water not sure exactly what additional systems customers want – this will be picked up by RICA work
Priority Services Register	Information available in large print and braille for the field team to be able to give out	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of communications improvements in the strategy • What key information do CCT want to create as braille or large print collateral? • CCT response: information on the PSR

	Clear guidelines about services available and eligibility	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dealt with earlier about what South East Water promise customers and what our process will deliver
	Keep PSR up to date, so that customers are removed when no longer vulnerable	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As part of data protection South East Water have a legal obligation to keep this up to date – the CCT and every frontline staff will need to refresh on every contact to ensure South East Water are always up to date – will also need to have a data 'refresh by' date.
Customer care	Improve password system for customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consideration to be given to ensuring that meter readers don't have visibility on their systems of whether a customer has requested a password and so can't use that password with that customer Consideration to be given to encouraging more customers are encouraged to set a password at the point of being added to the PSR; they feel that many are too trusting at the moment
	Bill nominations - automate the process so less time consuming	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will be dealt with as business as usual systems improvements
Training	More training for new and existing staff, ensure staff don't get stuck in their ways	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South East Water need to do a company-wide training piece
	Training in increased awareness of different issues affecting vulnerable customers	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As above
	Become a dementia friendly company	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed – part of our wider training CCT report that they have all been trained on this
Identification of vulnerable customers			

	Include key questions at account set up	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included
	At the point of moving in, advertise South East Water services	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included
	Work with other agencies and share information between utilities	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Datashare with energy to be live by 2020 – look at pre go-live pilots once need codes and consent are embedded into our system • Shared initiatives - work with partners and agencies more effectively • Improve South East Water’s financial stakeholder network to allow for cross referrals
	Data mapping to enable better targeting of services	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerability geo-mapping tool to be integrated into our systems
	More prominent vulnerability marker on customers account	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealt with as systems improvement
	Flexibility around whether the team has to get a customer’s permission to add them to the PSR	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not optional but a requirement under data protection.
	Be flexible - look at individual circumstances	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South East Water’s vulnerability risk assessment (H/M/L) will deliver this

5.9 Additional recommendations from the Customer Care Team that relate to incident management rather than specifically to supporting vulnerable customers

Logistics

- Allow access by the CCT to larger South East Water vehicles to deliver water more efficiently.
- Have a better bottle station set up whereby staff can stock up in private away from customers.
- Have specific bottle stations for staff in more locations so that staff do not have to spend time driving all the way back to South East Water offices to get water.
- South East Water could offer to fill a container from a reservoir for people to collect water (in their own containers) for washing and toilet flushing.
- Better planning of routes for articulated lorries; there were problems with low bridges. Ensure they have forklifts to enable unloading of bottles.

Communication

- Ensure there is a good system for keeping CCT staff up to date during an incident e.g. regular group email.

Payment and support for the CCT staff

- Review the system for paying staff:
 - Ensure equitable system (avoid those on standby earning more for doing the same work as those volunteering their time).
 - Don't rely on staff volunteering their time; other companies have more robust systems (e.g. where staff are paid an annual lump sum to be on standby during any emergency).
 - Provide a food allowance - staff were working long hours in freezing conditions and in difficult circumstances and would greatly have appreciated a food allowance in recognition of this.
 - Consider a 'thank you' for staff once the event is over; this could simply involve a message of thanks from senior management, or could include some kind of thank you reward.

- **Provide management support in the field** particularly in relation to dealing with press.
- **Training** for staff in how to deal with these emergency situations under pressure. This should include how to deal with the press (who may not obviously be journalists) and how to respond to threatening and aggressive behaviour.

6 Working with stakeholder agencies

There was strong support amongst the stakeholder agencies for more effective collaboration between South East Water and those agencies, with all parties recognising potential mutual benefits. Broadly, working with stakeholder agencies falls within three areas:

- Developing the strategy/future policies;
- Day to day operations; and
- Working together in a water outage or other incident.

Within these areas, we considered two key questions:

- What can South East Water do to help the agencies; and
- What can the agencies do to help South East Water?

6.1 Strategy and policy development

This section explores ways in which stakeholder agencies can be engaged in both the development of the vulnerability strategy and future policies.

6.1.1 What can South East Water do to help the agencies?

6.1.1.1 Coordination

- Have a specific member of staff to coordinate the process
- Do a risk assessment in order to minimise the impact on stakeholder agencies
- Agency log in on website - to access policies, etc.
- Create a data sharing protocol

6.1.1.2 Communication and information-sharing

- Listen to the stakeholders
- Share the strategy with agencies
- Create a one-page summary of what it means for agencies
- Send strategy headlines - not a huge document
- Create an easy to read version with images, bullets, no jargon, 3-4 pages long
- Be clear about what South East Water can do before asking agencies to help; and include in this an explanation of what the different agencies do.

6.1.1.3 Meetings

- Face-to-face workshops:
 - Provide information in advance
 - Use them for focussed discussion
 - Priorities face-to-face - but not too many (once a quarter max)
- Use surveys as a follow up to workshops
- Attend existing stakeholder forums and groups
- Set up virtual meetings

6.1.1.4 Delivering the strategy

- Include KPIs and a clear timescale for action; e.g. how much has debt reduced by?
- Fund voluntary organisations to help deliver activities to deliver those KPIs.

6.1.2 What can the agencies do to help South East Water?

6.1.2.1 Review the strategy

- Bring everyone together to review the strategy, just emailing it out to people will not work
- Use the agencies as a reality check - ensure proposed actions are realistic
- Co-production - on both the strategy and literature for clients
- Share their own vulnerability strategies
- Input into the final strategy via a consultation process (ideally giving 4-6 weeks to respond)
- Input into the KPIs and the timeframe for delivery
- Age-UK has a panel of experts split by experience to feed into their policies – this could be a good model for South East Water to adopt

6.1.2.2 Communication and information-sharing

- Attend regular meetings/workshops/sessions - suggested to be no more than quarterly and half a day long.
- Hold an annual review to assess progress and changes and maintain engagement with stakeholders; as part of this hear back from stakeholder on their perspective in terms of progress. This could involve webinars between South East Water and the agencies.

6.1.2.3 *Delivering the strategy*

- When South East Water is closer to implementing the strategy, subject to resourcing, agencies could help South East Water to tailor materials/procedures to make sure they are appropriate for particular target groups. This might involve focus groups with those involved in speaking directly to clients (i.e. working level agency people). In other words: co-production of materials for vulnerable/new customers, to make sure they fit the requirements.
- Hold more events like those delivered during the development of the Vulnerability Strategy to check details of implementation (it would be good to have a mix of agencies at these).

6.2 Day to day operations

This section covers day to day partnership working and cross-referrals.

6.2.1 What can South East Water do to help the agencies?

6.2.1.1 *Coordination*

- Have an identified contact/lead within South East Water on vulnerability issues
- Set up a partnership working group focused on social housing providers – and involve local area staff, not just management
- Create an agency log-on on website where agencies can:
 - Download pdfs of leaflets, information videos etc
 - Discuss issues/comment within forum
 - Validate particular cases as 'trusted agency'

6.2.1.2 *Communication / information*

- Have an agency hotline for complex cases - a specific point of contact (SPOC) with Direct Dial in (DDI) for each agency, to help build relationships
- Provide materials to help social housing providers in new sign-up discussions (e.g. ideas on how much they might expect to pay for water, to help with budgeting – and cost of arrears (normally £3.70 pw). The latter is particularly important for those bringing arrears with them. (NB South East Water's current welcome pack goes directly to the tenants – include criteria for social tariff in this. But landlord needs some briefing info too, to use in discussion with tenant)
- Provide welcome packs for new residents in other tenures too (for Parish Councils – all tenures; and for private letting agents as well as social housing)
- Share information on South East Water services for vulnerable customers (e.g. one-stop shop of South East Water services for vulnerable people and simple explanation on how to access them, avoiding jargon such as PSR)

- Better, simpler communication about which services apply to whom

6.2.1.3 Skills sharing

- Agency representatives could spend half a day with CCT staff to improve understanding of how they work and how the agencies/CCT can work better together

6.2.1.4 Customer billing

- If a new customer is late in setting up payment arrangements for South East Water bills, South East Water should contact the client via South East Water and then refer them to agencies (e.g. social housing provider, if property identified as social housing)
- Make sure that materials going to South East Water customers with bill payment problems clearly signpost them to sources of help (e.g. CAB – put advice line on letter/bill)

6.2.1.5 Cross referrals

- South East Water could offer referrals to voluntary sector providers (and have frameworks for specialist providers for this), when triggers are observed (e.g. arrears mounting; change in bill payer name signalling marital breakdown etc).

6.2.2 What can the agencies do to help South East Water?

6.2.2.1 Raising awareness of services

- Better publicity of services via stakeholder agencies, for example:
 - Information packs & leaflets provided to agencies with information on what South East Water offers (tariffs, PSR etc.)
 - Information on South East Water's services included in stakeholder newsletters and on websites
 - South East Water staff to attend stakeholder agency events
 - Training about South East Water services for staff and volunteers at stakeholder agencies
 - Drop-ins at agency venues, e.g. CAB, so that South East Water can advertise their services to customers potentially in vulnerable circumstances
- Keep agencies up to date with information regarding their services and any changes that have occurred
- Offer shadowing opportunities for South East Water staff so they better understand how agencies work and the needs of their customers
- Agencies can help direct CCT outreach activities in their areas (e.g. they know where the Surestart centres are; when coffee groups happen etc)
- Agencies can share information through:

- literature available to new residents
- magazines
- Facebook/webpages
- face-to-face visits
- cascading info in talks to community groups (e.g. CAB have a contact person for the Nepali community)
- Give handouts/postcards etc. to agencies to pass on to clients (in paper and/or electronic format)
- Housing providers could show new tenants a video re water tariffs, water efficiency etc.

6.2.2.2 *Cross referrals*

- More signposting/cross referral between South East Water and stakeholders, including the NHS, care homes and similar services
- Peer referral incentives
- Agencies to do key checks
- Data sharing agreements:
 - Investigate data protection issues in terms of enlisting help from others to deliver support to those on South East Water's PSR. It was suggested that a formal partnership is required so that data protection doesn't apply the same way, and also data protection does not apply when you are protecting life
 - Make staff aware of data protection legislation in the event of a crisis
- Agencies can make referrals onto South East Water schemes such as social tariff (but funding in voluntary organisations is very tight, so resourcing would help agencies to do this)
- Social housing providers can provide first point of contact and help with sign-up process for new South East Water customers amongst their tenants
- Make more cross-referrals (e.g. Fire Services referring people with leaking taps/cisterns)
- Agencies can share info on other agencies working with vulnerable groups (but need to know who to tell within South East Water)

6.3 In the event of an incident

6.3.1 **General comments:**

- Jointly agree Contingency Plan and partnership working arrangements

- We need to consider flooding and consequent water contamination, as well as outages. Flooding is more frequent.

6.3.2 What can South East Water do to help the agencies?

6.3.2.1 Coordination

- Provide a single point of contact for agencies
- Work with Neighbourhood Watch
- Keep separate record of vulnerable premises and services and regularly update – important for smaller providers (e.g. of services to the elderly) which are likely to be less resilient than large hospitals for example
- Allocate senior staff to attend multi agency command and control groups- establish and publish roles and responsibilities.

6.3.2.2 Communication / information sharing

- An effective communication system whereby stakeholder agencies can be notified of a water outage and kept informed of the situation during the water outage;
- The ability to share details of vulnerable customers during a water outage, in order that stakeholder agencies can work with South East Water to provide support to their customers.
- Provide clear and direct info, giving timescale and impact, and being accurate and honest, using appropriate means of contact, and be appropriated targeted geographically
- Provide clarity about how agencies can help, this needs to be pre-planned
- Contact agencies annually to update contact details
- Provide up to date, specific real time geographic info
- Keep website updated, with a banner showing latest news
- Provide an incident hotline
- Arrange more events like this to keep us updated, especially at the initial stages of developing partnership working
- Provide info on how vulnerable people can cope in the event of an outage
- Make PSR available to other agencies – allowed to do this in an emergency situation – establish and publish trigger criteria for doing this.

6.3.3 What can the agencies do to help South East Water?

6.3.3.1 *Communication / information sharing*

- Disseminate info using social media, can get to hard to reach groups
- Speak to South East Water about resources we have
- Provide local contacts, including out of hours (but needs to be understanding of capacity)
- Get feedback from other parts of the team in the organisation, e.g. financial inclusion in housing associations
- Disseminate info to clients including through contact centres
- Provide non-personal info on housing association coverage

6.3.3.2 *Customer identification*

- Use outage event as an opportunity to identify vulnerable customers.

6.4 **Other recommendations**

In addition to the above, but applicable to all three areas of work, the following recommendations were made:

- Carry out effective stakeholder mapping to identify the most appropriate stakeholders to work with;
- Appoint a liaison officer who can link all the relevant organisations and information and act as a single point of contact;
- Allow time to get everything in place for better partnership working; and
- Develop effective communication systems between South East Water and the stakeholder agencies.

7 Measuring success

Finally, we asked participants at the stakeholder workshops what successful implementation of the Vulnerability Strategy might look like in five years' time.

The following suggestions were made:

- Active partnership working: more inter-agency partnerships and signposting with easy referral process for customers to access support. Also, joint working on the strategy;
- A marked reduction in debt among vulnerable customers;
- Increased customer uptake of tariffs and support;
- An up-to-date PSR (whereby people are taken off when they are no longer vulnerable);
- South East Water working with other water companies to develop a common monitoring and evaluation framework;
- South East Water working with partners to measure progress (e.g. Citizens Advice Basingstoke records whether customers are ringing about water – and also records health, welfare and mental wellbeing outcomes; could South East Water link to this, or assess these outcomes too?);
- Smart meters installed to improve budgeting and reduce anxiety;
- Mapping of vulnerability as an ongoing process; and
- An increase in satisfaction of vulnerable customers who have been helped.

A set of likely metrics was presented to the second CCT focus group and comments invited on additional metric. The following were suggested:

- Number of vulnerable customers visited;
- Number of meetings attended with stakeholders;
- Number of cross referrals; and
- Number of complaints that have been resolved.

The CCT pointed out that it is difficult to set quantitative measures for a lot of the team's work such as building relationships and trust with customers, supporting them with day to day life and building rapport with third party agencies.

8 Case studies - customers not affected by the outage

We undertook five in-depth interviews with customers who had previously been interviewed by phone and covered a range of vulnerabilities.

These interviews allowed us to explore in much greater depth the issues that we had covered in the phone interviews. It also enabled us to meet the customers in their home and get a greater understanding of their circumstances.

This section sets out the findings of these interviews, following the format of the interviews themselves. Everything presented here reflects the views of the participants that took part in the interviews. All quotes are from the interview participants, but have been anonymised for their protection.

8.1 Case study 1

Name: Mr B

Vulnerability categories: Blind, low income, mental health

Background

Mr and Mrs A are from Syria and have two children, aged 17 and 15. They left Syria approximately six years ago, escaping the war, and spent three years in Lebanon. Mrs A made the journey from Lebanon to the UK with her children. When they arrived at Heathrow, they walked for nine hours to a refugee camp, where they spent one month. They were then taken to Rotherham, where they were left in a hostel, and had virtually no contact with anyone for six months. During this time Mrs A was granted five years' UK residency. Mrs A then travelled to Wokingham, because she had been told by a friend that it was a very safe place to live. Having left a war zone, finding somewhere safe to live for her children was Mrs A's priority. Upon arrival the council provided a hotel room with one bed for Mrs A and her two children. She stayed there for a week before being provided with temporary accommodation, where they lived for two months. They were then provided with a council house, at which point she was able to start the process to enable her husband to come to the UK. A year later, her husband arrived.

Mrs A speaks very little English, but is learning, whilst Mr A's English is very good. They have both found learning to live in the UK very difficult; everything from learning a new language to learning how to live within a new culture has been a challenge.

In Syria, they had a business, three houses and an education; they had status within their society. Now that they have come to the UK, they have to start from the bottom.

"It is easier than the early days, but it is still very difficult."

Mr A currently works as a gardener and is paid the minimum wage. He gets 20 days holiday per year, but no sick pay, so if he or his family is sick he must take the time out of his holiday allowance. If the weather prevents work, he does not get paid. The family struggle to cover all their financial outgoings and budget to the last penny every week. After paying rent and bills, and buying food basics, they have £25 per week left.

Mr A owned a construction business in Syria, with a team of employees, and was very successful. He would like to work in that industry again, and make use of his skills, but in order to do so, he needs to get UK-recognised qualifications and a UK driving licence, all of which costs a lot of money, and he cannot currently afford it.

Mrs A is unable to work because she does not have good enough English. She volunteers in a local school but is bullied by some of the children and teased about her broken English.

Mr and Mrs A have had problems with HMRC. They claimed working family tax credit when they were first in the UK but were issued a fine for £3,160 a month later (it was not clear why), which they had to pay off at £5 per week. They no longer receive any benefits, but were recently sent another fine of £410, because apparently, they have been overpaid by HMRC. £410 is a lot of money to them and they do not believe it is their mistake. They went to Citizens Advice and were told that if HMRC make a mistake you can't do anything and must accept it.

Mr and Mrs A find it difficult to understand the 'ways' of the UK, and that combined with their broken English, prevents them from questioning things, such as the HMRC situation.

"It's not an easy life. Thanks to everyone who accepted us as a refugee in the UK. But we need to survive. Two things are really important. We need to feel safe, second thing is the education. And I need to improve my circumstances."

"Life was easy before the war, we had three homes, offices, everything, but everything has disappeared, but we're still alive."

Mr and Mrs A recently had a water meter fitted and are very anxious about their water use and forthcoming bills. They used to pay £21.20 per month, and recently received a bill for £35, which they do not understand. Things like this panic them, because they do not understand the bill and cannot afford any additional outgoings. They have always paid all of their bills and take great pride in supporting themselves and not being dependent on others.

What is the impact?

Mr and Mrs A are very anxious about their water bills; this is exacerbated by their background and the journey they have been on to come to the UK. They are having to learn a whole new way of life and

do not understand what is 'normal' or 'common practice' in the UK, so do not realise they can call South East Water about their situation.

Mr and Mrs A worry about their water use, both because of the cost and because they recognise that there is a limited supply to go around. Since the water meter was fitted, they are trying to reduce their water use, but they are extremely worried because they don't know how much it is going to cost being on the meter. They say they are scared and anxious.

Mr and Mrs A struggle to understand their bills, because their English is not perfect, and the water billing system, and the terminology used, is new to them. They now have a new charge of £35 which they do not understand.

They are frustrated because they want to be independent, and Mr A has the skills and experience to earn a decent living but cannot afford to get the certificates he needs to be able to secure work.

What has South East Water done to help?

Mr and Mrs A have had very little contact with South East Water and they have not tried to contact them. This is largely because they do not understand what is 'normal' in the UK.

They received a leaflet through the door about the meter, most of which they can read.

Since this interview, South East Water have called Mr and Mrs A and provided them with an explanation about the bill.

What could improve their circumstances?

Mr and Mrs A need to be able to budget for all bills. This would be made easier by:

- Receiving monthly bills
- Getting an estimate of the cost for a family of four on a meter, and
- Receiving a breakdown of costs for different water uses.

8.2 Case study 2

Name: Mr B

Vulnerability categories: Blind, low income, mental health

Background

Mr B, 44, lost his sight in 2012, following an accident at work. Two years ago, he became very ill with kidney failure; he was in intensive care for several days and lost his kidney as a result. Mr B underwent multiple surgeries having contracted infections and pneumonia and nearly lost his life. He is only just recovering from this.

Mr B lives alone. He moved to his current home three years ago, as his previous home was very isolated, and he needed to be nearer shops and other conveniences. He has a support guide for four hours per week to help him. He uses this time to get help with his shopping, go to hospital appointments, do household jobs, and deal with bills and other paperwork. Mr B suffers from anxiety and depression and is on daily medication. He is on the waiting list for a guide dog, but it is a long waiting list.

Mr B recently found out that has been overcharged for his water service. He is entitled to two discounts, and whilst he had informed South East Water about his medical needs when he moved into his house, and understood the discounts would be applied, they were not. He only realised there was a problem when his bills started to go up and upon discussing the situation with his carer and another disabled neighbour.

Mr B should qualify for single occupier discount and another discount, which he cannot remember the name of but thinks is the social tariff. He asked South East Water to install a meter, but they were unable to because of pipework constraints, with three other households running off the same pipes.

What is the impact?

Mr B has had to learn to cope with blindness, having previously been sighted. He has done courses at the Royal National Institute for the Blind, such as mobility training, to help with this, but still struggles enormously with day to day life.

"I find it really hard, I live by myself, I find it hard to cook. It can be difficult. I've tried to do mobility training, to use the public buses and stuff. Sometimes I can do it, but sometimes I can't. You have good days and bad. It's physically and mentally exhausting, and psychologically as well because you have to use your memory, you have to memorise everything, you have to stay really focussed."

The fact that he is blind means Mr B cannot read his bills and relies on his carer to read them. This becomes particularly difficult if there is an issue with his bills, and he has to get every bill checked by his support guide.

His accident has also had an enormous financial impact on him, and he constantly worries about being able to pay the bills. He worries that if he is unable to pay his bills he will be evicted from his home. This impacts on his anxiety.

As a result of the kidney loss Mr B has to drink a lot of water every day. However, his loss of sight has also meant his other senses are heightened and he finds the taste of the water unbearable, so now filters all of his drinking and cooking water, which incurs additional cost.

He found the situation with overcharging incredibly stressful, and it impacted on his anxiety and depression. He only felt able to deal with it when his support guide was with him, and because they are available for such limited periods of time, he often had to wait a week to take the next step towards resolving the situation, adding to the anxiety.

"It took a long time to be resolved. It added a lot to my depression and to my stress".

He believed when he first moved into the house, and notified South East Water of his situation, that they had taken it into account and were charging him accordingly. He had offered proof of his disability but they had not taken it up. As a result, Mr B had hoped to change water provider; he did not realise that this is not an option.

Mr B says his vulnerability makes it even more important that he is able to keep on top of his bills.

What has South East Water done to help?

When South East Water initially received the query from Mr B, they asked to see proof of his disability. Mr B found this frustrating as he had offered to provide this when he first set up the account.

South East Water have informed Mr B recently that all discounts have now been applied. He received a full refund for the amount of money he had been overcharged and received £20 compensation.

However, Mr B believes that South East Water took far too long to resolve the situation and did not take on board the difficulty he has in dealing with these matters, and the level of anxiety doing so causes.

Mr B has just received his latest bill, and whilst he can see it has been reduced by approximately £20, he still feels this is too much.

What could improve their circumstances?

Mr B believes that South East Water should have dealt with the situation much quicker, which would have reduced the level of anxiety over a prolonged period that he suffered.

He believes that if he wasn't blind he would have realised much sooner he was being overcharged. It would also have meant that dealing with the situation would have been much easier. Mr B suggests that South East Water should take more responsibility for ensuring their vulnerable customers are on the appropriate tariff.

Mr B believes people with disabilities need more help and South East Water should inform them of any changes. Improved communication would go a long way to reducing the stress and anxiety caused by his bills. He believes they should automatically apply any discounts to those who are entitled to them.

"They should keep track of who they've got in vulnerable circumstances and make sure they are getting the help they need and are on the best tariffs and deals to suit their circumstances."

Some of the things Mr B believes would improve his situation are:

- Free water filters
- Understanding exactly what his annual charges are going to be in advance, so he can budget
- Improved communication, by both telephone and post
- Immediate notification of any changes to his bills.

Despite all of this Mr B expressed his delight at being invited to participate in this study.

"I am so happy to take part in this because I have suffered a great deal since I moved here, and when I got that phone call to take part I couldn't wait. I know I got a voucher and that, but I didn't do it for that, it was to get my voice heard, for me it was important to take part. Whoever has organised this, to have you guys come out, has thought about it, because I'm not the only one. It makes me feel a lot better."

8.3 Case study 3

Name: Mr C

Vulnerability categories: Disability, medical condition

Background

Mr C, aged 66, is a pensioner who has been registered disabled for around six years; he is largely housebound. He lives in Canterbury with his partner, who is also disabled.

Mr C's family had, in the past, had a cut off meter installed by his water company, which, when they didn't pay enough, would cut off their water supply. This would happen two or three times a week. (These meters were banned by the water regulator several years ago.)

"It was very hard to cope with that."

What is his vulnerability and its impact?

Mr C has had a heart bypass, and both he and his partner have a number of medical conditions which require them to use a lot of water for washing. (For example, his partner has a stoma which sometimes leaks.)

His disability means he is not allowed to drive. He has a mobility scooter but doesn't go out in it much; he only really leaves the house to go to the doctor or hospital, but even then, he says he'll often cancel the appointments as he finds it hard to get out.

What has South East Water done to help?

Mr C has benefited from two of South East Water's services for vulnerable customers:

- Helping Hands funding to pay off historic debt on his water bill, and
- The WaterSure tariff to ensure that his tariff is capped.

Details of how we came to receive these are provided below.

Some years ago, Mr C and his partner had got into debt with their water bills.

"We didn't have much money coming in and we struggled with our bills."

At that time the account was in Mr C's partner's name, and she would stop paying one bill in order to pay another one. As Mr C put it, *"She was robbing Peter to pay Paul."*

Gradually the debt built up. South East Water sent a 'tariff collector' to visit once a week to take what Mr C could afford by way of payment – usually £5 or £10. But they weren't paying enough and gradually the debt built up.

In 2004, Mr C became ill and he stopped working. Later that year, he was declared bankrupt. Soon after this, South East Water sent bailiffs to collect the debt.

"I wouldn't let him in; I told him I'd been made bankrupt and eventually he left."

Mr C and his partner continued to pay something towards their water costs every fortnight, but they were not able to clear the historic debt.

"It went all the way back to the 90s. We just didn't have enough money to reduce it."

Then, included with one of their six-monthly bills, which they received in 2009, there was a copy of a South East Water newsletter that had an article about Helping Hands in it. Helping Hands offers funding to customers in certain circumstances to help them clear historic debt. Mr C rang the number and they sent him some paperwork, which he completed.

"It was quite a lot of paperwork."

It took three or four months for South East Water to respond to his application. But then they did and they told him they'd wiped off nearly all the debt (about £1,200), except for £100 which he would have to pay regular amounts towards. He got this letter just after he'd come out of hospital having had a heart bypass.

"When I got that letter, it was like a great big weight had been lifted off my shoulders."

Since receiving the grant, Mr C has been able to pay his ongoing water bills.

"Now everything is under control and there's less need to juggle."

A condition of having the Helping Hands grant was that he had a water meter installed and a payment card. The costs have reduced as a result of having a water meter, and Mr C and his partner are careful not to waste any water.

Costs have further reduced following a recent conversation (in 2017) with Southern Water (which supplies waste water and drainage services to Mr C), during which they said Mr C might be eligible for the WaterSure scheme. This scheme is for those on a water meter who are on certain benefits and who may have higher than normal water consumption (e.g. as a result of a medical condition). It caps a householder's bill to the average bill.

"Southern Water got the ball rolling and referred us over to South East Water. And the bills have gone down a bit. In fact, on our last bill, South East Water owed me some money, so it must have gone down by quite a bit."

Mr C says he has seen a huge improvement in the quality of South East Water's customer service in recent years.

"Before, they used to talk down to you, if you owed them money – like you were scum of the earth. But now they speak to you nicely, like you expect to be spoken to."

What could improve his circumstances?

Mr C feels that South East Water's customer service has improved significantly in recent years and he can't suggest any further improvements.

"It's just improved more and more recently, it's so much better."

If they were to have their water cut off, for any reason, it would be a big problem for them. Because of both his and his partner's medical conditions, they need to wash frequently, and going out to purchase water would be difficult for them. He believes having water delivered would be helpful if an outage occurred. However, to date they have never experienced any water supply issues.

8.4 Case study 4

Name: Mrs D

Vulnerability categories: Elderly, impaired mobility, full time carer

Background

Mrs D, aged 86, lives with her disabled adult daughter in Ashford, Kent. Her husband died 21 years ago. Mrs D has arthritis and osteoporosis which leaves her with limited mobility; she walks with a stick.

Mrs D's youngest daughter (aged 49) is severely disabled; this was a result of being given the whooping cough vaccine as a baby. She can't stand, walk or talk and suffers from epileptic fits. Mrs D is her full-time carer, with an additional carer coming in briefly in the morning and afternoon to help her. Mrs D's daughter goes out to a centre four days a week for part of the day.

What is the impact?

Mrs D's daughter is incontinent, so there is a lot of washing; Mrs D typically does three loads of laundry every day.

"You know, we can't get her to the toilet quick enough. I get a lot of wet sheets. She feeds herself with a spoon but she gets in a mess, so we have to change her top. So, I have an awful lot of washing. And she needs a bath regularly."

Mrs D has a car and is able to drive. However, her daughter's epilepsy means that Mrs D can't take her out very much.

What interaction has she had with South East Water?

Mrs D is on the South East Water PSR, though she wasn't aware of this. She hasn't had any interaction with South East Water but doesn't feel she's needed to have any interaction; her water supply is reliable and she pays her bills on time.

She is not on a meter; they came to install one but were unable to due to technical problems. She wasn't sure whether she'd be better or worse off with a meter. As a result of the amount of water used to take care of her daughter, she worried that she would be worse off. She would, however, qualify for WaterSure, which would cap her bills.

What could improve their circumstances?

Mrs D has never had any problems with her water supply. However, if there were to be an interruption, it would be very hard for her to cope if it went on for more than a day or so. Also, if it were to happen during a spell of cold and icy weather, she would be house bound; she can't leave her

daughter at home on her own and finds it impossible to get her out of the house and into her car during icy weather.

She keeps some bottles of water in the house, just in case there should be a water outage, but that would run out after a day or two. And a key problem for her would be dealing with the laundry; she could let it stack up for a couple of days but would then run out of clean sheets for her daughter.

Potential solutions to these problems would be:

- Delivery of bottled water to her door. (She would find it very difficult to go and collect it from a local collection point.)
- A laundry service; with soiled items being collected and, once clean, delivered back to her.

During any water outage situation, Mrs D would really welcome information about the situation. She says that for planned work, South East Water usually pop a note through the door, which is great, but that this may not be practical for an unplanned situation. A phone call would be appreciated.

8.5 Case study 5

Name: Mr and Mrs E

Vulnerability categories: medical, mobility

Background

Mr and Mrs E are aged 85 and 87. They've lived in their current home, in a village outside Canterbury, for almost 30 years and have been married for 63 years.

What is their vulnerability and its impact?

Both Mr and Mrs E have disabilities. Mr E has an injury to his right hand and has angina, but is reasonably able-bodied except in cold weather, when he has some problems walking and breathing. His wife has had two knee replacements and one hip replacement and has some difficulty in getting about. Both have diverticulitis (a bowel condition), which means they have to pay more attention to personal hygiene and therefore may use more water than others would.

"We manage reasonably well but it causes problems from time to time."

Mr E drives and they regularly drive into Canterbury or to visit their daughter.

They have a total of nine water butts installed in the garden to catch rainwater. This is used to water the garden, top up the fishpond and wash the car.

"I've set up a system so [the water butts] are connected to a hose and pressure washer. They never run out, even in a hot summer."

What interaction have they had with South East Water?

At the end of August, South East Water put their home onto a water meter as part of the compulsory metering programme.

When South East Water came to install their meter, they initially wanted to put it into the lawn. However, Mr E was able to persuade them to put it into the bed at the edge of the lawn instead. They were quite happy with the meter installation.

"They make an appointment and its very precise and they will let you know if they have to change it. They did it well, and they cleaned it all up the next day."

South East water have told Mr and Mrs E that they will probably save money by being on a water meter, but they don't know this for certain and are still waiting to see. (Despite having had the meter now for over six months, their first bill under the new system won't be until April). This doesn't worry

them unduly, as they know they are very careful with their water, but it is a little frustrating. They are being even more careful about water use now they have a meter.

"We've always been very careful with our water use; we're very, very careful with our finances. We're now using as little as we can to do things like our washing."

They don't feel this is a great hardship, as they both grew up without running water in the house.

"I used to collect our water from a well, and my wife collected it from the stream. When you've had to carry your water into the house you're very careful not to waste any!"

What has South East Water done to help?

A short while after the meter was fitted, they received in the post a leaflet from South East Water about the WaterSure tariff (as well as other information). They rang up to enquire about this and have now been put on this tariff, which caps their bill to the average. In order to access this tariff, Mr E had to provide South East Water with medical evidence from their consultant at the local hospital as well as their GP.

During this same call with South East Water, Mr E explained that they collect their rainwater for re-use within the garden and as a result have very little rainwater going into the drains. He feels that their waste water bill should be reduced accordingly. As this is a matter for Southern Water rather than South East Water, the person he spoke to said he would inform Southern Water of the situation.

In the same leaflet there was information about a range of water saving equipment that they could send off for. There were several different types of equipment, but the only one they asked for was a cistern bag to reduce the amount of water used to flush the toilet. They asked for two of these but were told they could only have one. However, the person they spoke to suggested they get a friend to ring up to ask for the second one on their behalf. Mr and Mrs E felt it would have been better for South East Water to simply send them two of this item, particularly given that they hadn't requested any of the other items on offer.

They have sometimes had water interrupted. On these occasions, South East Water have warned them in advance and given information about, for example, letting the water run. It hasn't caused any problems. South East Water always give them fair warning so can always make provision for themselves. If there was a sudden cut in supply it might cause a problem, and in that case, delivery of bottled water would be very helpful.

What could improve their circumstances?

In general Mr and Mrs E have been happy with their service from South East Water.

"On the whole, we are satisfied. I've got no complaints."

However, they had a few suggestions for how the service could be improved.

Quicker feedback on consumption following meter installation

It would be helpful to get some information on consumption and costs soon after having the meter installed. Having to wait more than seven months is frustrating.

"It's peculiar that they install a meter and it takes all this time to know how much it will cost."

For example, South East Water sent someone to read the meter about a month after it was installed – mainly to check for leaks. The adviser they spoke to at South East Water suggested that they would *"probably be better off"* financially with the meter. But it would have been useful if the adviser could have given them information on their exact consumption and the cost of this, so they have an idea of what their future bills would be. (The adviser told them they had used about ten units, but they did not know how much a unit cost.) This would help them to plan financially and to understand whether they are being sufficiently careful with their water consumption.

"At the moment, we're in limbo. We don't know whether we're spending too much, or are we being more careful than we need to?"

Clearer billing

Linked to this, Mr E made a plea for very clear billing in terms of what has been consumed, how much this cost and what has been paid for.

"When they start billing under the new system, for the meter, please make it very clear."

Water saving devices

Mr and Mrs E felt that it would be great if the water saving devices could be offered to them, in person, at the time the meter is installed. And, for customers who need it, it would be helpful if South East Water could offer to install these for the customer rather than just hand them over.

Also, they felt it would be good if customers could have more than one of some of the items, particularly if they are not opting to have everything on offer.

Interaction with Southern Water

Mr and Mrs E would be grateful if South East Water could follow up with Southern Water about whether they can get a discount on their waste water bill as a result of all their rainwater harvesting. (The meter they have had installed only related to their water supply; they are still on a fixed tariff for their waste water from Southern Water).

"It would be very helpful if they (South East Water) could press Southern Water on this matter. I really feel we should be compensated."

9 Case studies - customers affected by the outage

We undertook 5 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with customers who had been affected by the outage and that had previously been interviewed by telephone. They covered a range of vulnerabilities.

These interviews allowed us to explore in much greater depth the issues that we had covered in the telephone interviews. It also enabled us to meet the customers in their home and get a greater understanding of their circumstances.

This section sets out the findings from these interviews, following the format of the interviews themselves. Everything presented here reflects the views of the participants that took part in the interviews. All quotes are from the interview participants but have been anonymised for their protection.

9.1 Case study 1

Name: Mrs W

Vulnerability category: Disabled

Background

Mrs W is 83 and has been disabled since she was a child, having suffered from polio, and left with very limited movement down her left side. She has a brace for her back and neck, walks with a walking stick in the house and requires an electric wheelchair to go out of the house. Mrs W has lived on her own for 5 years, since her husband died. She can just about manage to get to the village shop, which she does about once a week. Apart from that she is house bound.

How did the outage impact her?

Mrs W did not lose her water all together, but only had 'a trickle' of water for about 4 days. She says that with patience she could have a drink of water, and fortunately she had some bottled water left over from the last outage at New Year and was able to use that until she had water delivered to her.

She says she managed moderately well and was very careful with her water usage. There was some water in the hot water tank that she could use, but as she was worried about draining the tank, she used very little of this. She could flush the toilet periodically, if she left it long enough for the trickle to re-fill it. She couldn't use the washing machine however. When the water did come back on it was very gritty, but she just let it run for a while and it did eventually right itself. She says she was fine, saying,

"you just take these things in your stride".

What did South East Water do to help?

Mrs W contacted South East Water to find out if it was just her house that there was a problem with but was told it was the whole village. South East Water assured her that they would bring water to her, but she thinks it was about 2 days later that they brought the water, the day before the water came back on.

She had been without water on New Year's Eve the previous year, and had contacted South East Water then, and they had delivered bottled water to her. A man delivered the water in pouring rain and took his shoes off at the door in order to carry the water through the house to her kitchen. They delivered large bottles of water that Mrs W was unable to carry or open on her own. When they were opened, by a friend, she was unable to pour them because the bottle 'squeezed' in her hands.

The water bottles that South East Water delivered this time were smaller and did not squeeze. South East Water left the bottles in Mrs W's porch and she was able to carry them through to the kitchen as and when she needed them.

The day after the water came back on South East Water staff came to check Mrs W had water and was OK.

Mrs W found all the South East Water staff very pleasant and helpful. South East Water provided Mrs W with £100 compensation, but she would rather they put this money towards fixing their infrastructure; she has discussed this with her friends and neighbours and they all agree. She says they are a profitable company, so they should put some of those profits into sorting out their infrastructure.

What could South East Water have done differently or better?

There was no communication from South East Water other than when the staff turned up with the water and then the day after the water was turned back on. She appreciates that they brought water out to her, as even in her wheelchair she would not have been able to collect water herself, however would have appreciated receiving it sooner. She thinks that if future outages occur, South East Water should contact their customers to apologise and let them know what is happening and ensure that they do have water. She hopes they realise that 'it's all very well' delivering water to central collection points, but not everyone can collect it.

Overall, Mrs W was not unhappy with South East Water's service and thinks they were good, given the circumstances.

9.2 Case study 2

Name: Mr G

Vulnerability categories: Limited mobility, ill health

Background

Mr G is 85. He lives on his own in the village of Mayfield, East Sussex, where he has lived since the 1970s. He has a melanoma on his face which weeps and bleeds, making it difficult for him to go out, so he tends to stay in his home. He is registered on South East Water's PSR.

How did the outage impact him?

In early March 2018, Mr G was without water for 3 days, from the Friday until the Sunday. This made everything difficult: drinking, cooking, washing, and using the toilet.

"There are only two things you can't live without – bread and water."

What did South East Water do to help?

South East Water did not contact Mr G during the period he was without water. He did call them, but only after the water had already been off for more than two days. He found the person he spoke to very helpful; they told him that the water would be on again within a few hours, which it was. They also promised to organise for bottled water to be delivered to him, but this never showed up. He assumed that was because the water had come on again quite soon after he spoke to them, but he was cross that they did not keep their promise.

"They promised it but didn't deliver it. I'm cheesed off about that."

He found out from neighbours that South East Water had set up a water bank in the village car park.

"There was such a mad scrum where they'd delivered it and I couldn't go and join that scrum. I'm 85."

He subsequently received a letter telling him that £50 would be taken off his account by way of compensation.

"£50 doesn't seem very much for 3 days without water."

Mr G relied on help from neighbours and the local community during the outage period. One neighbour drove out to Hailsham (around 8 miles away) to buy bottled water (the local shop ran out

of water very quickly) and brought him back a 5-litre bottle, which meant he could both drink and clean his teeth. Another neighbour collected a bucket of snow for him, which (once it had melted) he used to flush his toilet. Someone from the local convent also got in touch with him to check he was alright and to see whether he needed any water.

"My neighbours really helped me."

What could South East Water have done differently or better?

Mr G recognises that the circumstances were difficult and felt that South East Water did not do 'too bad a job'. He feels that it should be the Government's responsibility to insist that water companies upgrade all their old cast iron pipes to modern pipes that won't break in cold weather, so that this type of event doesn't happen again.

"The way it was handled by the Government was disgraceful. The old pipes should have been replaced years ago. The Government should insist on their replacement."

If an outage occurs again in the future, Mr G feels that South East Water should:

- Contact those who they know may need help in this type of situation, either by phone or by text.
- Provide an update on the situation to all vulnerable customers at least once a day.
- Quickly offer to deliver bottled water and keep the promise to deliver it. He would suggest at least 2 5 litre bottles per day would be needed (and that's before flushing the toilet).

9.3 Case study 3

Name: Family F

Vulnerability categories: Limited mobility, caring responsibilities

Background

Mr F lives with his parents who are in their 80s, for whom he is their sole carer, a couple of miles outside the village of Mayfield in East Sussex. They live on a rural road which can be difficult to drive on after heavy snow, as it is never gritted. His mother has very limited mobility following a stroke and his father has short term memory loss and uses a hearing aid. The family also have a large dog who drinks a lot of water.

His parents cannot be left on their own, so if Mr F needs to leave the house at all he needs to take both his parents with him. It can take half an hour or more to get everyone out of the house. In icy weather, his mother doesn't like to go out at all as she is afraid of falling and breaking something.

They are on the South East Water PSR having been encouraged to apply to be on this by social services.

How did the outage impact them?

In early March 2018, the family were without water for 4 days: from the Sunday until the Thursday morning.

The family had some bottled drinking water in the house already, as they find the tap water to be too chlorinated to drink. They had sufficient supplies to drink for a couple of days, but not enough to wash or cook with. So, Mr F took his parents out so they could eat a hot lunch every day (at a cost of over £20 a day) and then they had cold sandwiches for their dinner. After the first day, Mr F used water from water troughs in the adjacent field to flush the toilets once day. They were unable to wash at all during the outage.

"I had to try to organise to get my parents out to feed them as I couldn't cook without water – it was a challenge."

"We live between two villages and this little rural area gets missed."

What did South East Water do to help?

The family feels that South East Water did nothing to help. They said that South East Water:

- Did not get in touch with the family at any point during the water outage. They also failed to call them back with updates (which, after the family contacted South East Water, they had promised to do).
- Did not deliver any bottled water to the family (even though they promised this, three days after the water went off).
- Did not inform the family that water banks had been set up locally. They only heard about this via the local news.

Based on the customer's recollection of events, the outage timeline was as follows:

- Sunday: water went off. Mr F contacted South East Water by phone. When he got through, he was told that someone would call him back the following morning with an update on the situation.
- Monday: there was no call from South East Water so, in the afternoon, Mr F called the company again. On this call, he was told that the water may be off for some time. The person he spoke to at South East Water suggested he and his parents consider going on holiday or going to stay with friends or family. Mr F explained that that would be very difficult given his mother's mobility problems.
- Tuesday:
 - Information appeared on South East Water's website but it was not very useful. There was no firm information about when the water might be back on.
 - Mr F drove with his parents to find more bottled water as their supplies were running low. By this time the snow had thawed sufficiently that they could get out of their lane. They had to go all the way to Lewes before they could find a shop that still had bottled water in stock. This was a 35-mile round trip.
 - They heard on the local news that a bottled water station had been set up locally by South East Water, but they heard on the grapevine that it ran out very quickly. And in any case the Mr F felt that it would not have been practical for him to queue for water at such a station because he would have had to have brought his parents with him.
- Wednesday: they called South East Water again. This time they felt they were getting more accurate information about the cause of the shortage: a burst reservoir feed pipe. The person they spoke to said that she could see they were priority customers and promised that bottled water would be delivered to them later that day, but it never materialised.
- Thursday: their water came back on. It took a week for it to be back to its normal quality though; they could use it for flushing toilets and washing, but not for cooking or drinking for at least a week. (They had been warned by South East Water that this would be the case.) So, they continued to use their bought bottled water for drinks (hot and cold) as well as cooking.

At some point during the outage, neighbours had offered to go and collect water for them but by that time the family had established a routine of using the water troughs to flush the toilets and felt they could just about manage.

Mr F recognises that it must have been hard work for South East Water staff who would have been exhausted. But he feels they could have provided a much better service. In particular, he found it very frustrating that they did not keep their promises of calling him back and of delivering bottled water. He also found the communication with South East Water to be unhelpful.

"I phoned and got non-answers. They said things like 'It shouldn't be very long'. I would have preferred them to honestly say they didn't know and were working to fix it."

What could South East Water have done differently or better?

Mr F feels that South East Water should upgrade the water pipes so this type of event doesn't happen in the first place.

If an outage does occur in the future, he suggested that South East Water should:

- Contact those on are on their priority list, by phone or email, to check on them and to arrange delivery of bottled water. (Note that he said that a text message would not work for the family. Because although their phone number has the same format as a mobile number, it is in fact an old-style base station mobile phone - suitable for farms as it works up to 50 miles away from the base – but it won't accept texts.)
- Be very honest in their communication. If they do not know the cause of the problem, or when it will be fixed, they should be open about it.
- Keep their promises of calling back and delivering water.
- Provide compensation for all out of pocket expenses. He estimates that his family's incurred expenses were around £150, based on eating out, driving 35 miles or more to find a shop that still had bottled water in stock and buying bottled water.

9.4 Case study 4

Name: Mr W

Vulnerability categories: Multiple health problems

Background

Mr W is retired and lives on his own, since his wife died 6 years ago. He has multiple health problems, including the following:

- A tumour in his stomach which has been there for some time and is not thought to be malignant but does cause significant discomfort
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease
- A bad back (partly due to age and partly from lifting his late disabled wife for many years)
- Suspected Parkinson's

He also had a heart attack 5 years ago and has had skin cancer and pneumonia in the last two years.

Mr W has to have a bath every morning in order to relieve stiffness and pain in his body and to clear his airways. If he does not have a bath he will be in a lot of pain for the rest of the day. When he gets up in the morning he has great difficulty moving as he is so stiff and his lungs are congested, causing coughing; the bath sorts this out.

How did the outage impact him?

Mr W was without water for about 24 hours. He said, however, that he is a firm believer in being prepared for disaster, and as such did have a supply of bottled water in the house. He also has a traditional boiler with a hot water cylinder, so was able to have a bath in the morning. He keeps bottled water and a large jug of water in the fridge, as he needs to drink water regularly, and happened to have a full kettle of water. He sees himself as lucky in that he was well prepared.

By late afternoon the water was back on, having had relatively little impact on him.

Had he been without water for much longer, it could have had more serious consequences. For him, the worst of these would be not being able to have a bath. Mr W's pain is such that he is unable to drive until he has had a bath, so he would not only have been without water, he would also have been stranded in his house. He says even if his neighbour had had water, he would have struggled to get there.

"If it had been longer, I would have needed a fair amount of bottled water for drinking and boiling up for washing. I wouldn't have been able to have a bath, I would have been very creaky and smelly. I guess I would have phoned around to see if anyone had water."

What did South East Water do to help?

Mr W does not remember exactly when he phoned to report the situation, he thinks probably late morning. South East Water explained to him that there were multiple leaks and that they did not know at that stage when the water would be back on.

Mr W explained his circumstances, and at that point was immediately registered on the PSR. South East Water offered to bring him bottled water, but Mr W said he did not need any at that point. South East Water stressed that if he did become in need, that he should contact them immediately.

The water returned relatively quickly, so there was no need for Mr W to contact South East Water. He did, however, phone to thank them for their services.

South East Water contacted Mr W twice after the water was back on, first to inform him it was back on and second to check he was OK.

What could South East Water have done differently or better?

Mr W does not believe there is anything that South East Water could have done differently, although he does point out that had he been without water for longer he might have had a different view very different.

"I've no complaints about them at all; other than I don't like foreign ownership. Some people were off for several days and it caused all sorts of problems; but we know our whole infrastructure is dated. That's why this happens. We expect too much. We expect everything should always work."

9.5 Case study 5

Name: Ms V

Vulnerability categories: multiple health problems

Background

Ms V is in her 60s and suffers from obstructive apnoea; when she is asleep she stops breathing. At its worst, when she was first diagnosed 10 years ago, Ms V stopped breathing 86 times in 10 minutes, when monitored. Ms V has a CPAP machine⁸ that forces air in to her lungs, by the way of a mask, which she wears whenever she sleeps. The machine has to have distilled water to function. Ms V has also got asthma (which she has had all her life), high blood pressure, and is pre-diabetic. At the time of the water outage Ms V also had pleurisy and was on antibiotics.

When using the CPAP machine, oxygen is pumped into her airways, which makes her throat very dry, so it is recommended that she drinks plenty of water to keep her throat moist. Very often, when she wakes up, her throat is very dry. The machine must not run out of water but does not indicate when there is not water left, which means Ms V has to ensure it always has water. She has had the machine for 10 years and finds it a huge relief. It means she can breathe properly and looks forward to going to bed. She takes the machine everywhere with her, in case she needs to sleep.

How did the outage impact them?

Ms V did not realise initially that the water had gone off because the water tank was still full, so she carried on as normal. When she went to fill up the reservoir for the CPAP machine in the evening, however, she discovered there was no water. Ms V phoned a friend, a plumber, who explained that there was a water outage. Ms V realised she had no water whatsoever in the house and started to panic. She sat and cried. If she does not have her machine she cannot sleep. It did not occur to her to drive to the supermarket and buy water to boil as by then she was having a panic attack. She even considered putting flat lemonade in the machine.

Eventually, she phoned her son, who told her to go to a local supermarket, where she managed to get 6 bottles of water just before they closed.

Ms V went to the supermarket again the next day to get more water, although it was difficult for her to carry multiple bottles. After 2 days with no water, one of her neighbours told her that there was a water distribution point at the local pub, so Ms V went to the distribution point and explained her situation. The man distributing the water told her she could only have 3 bottles of water, like everyone

⁸ Continuous Positive Airway Pressure. The machine is medical device that delivers the prescribed pressure through the airway so that a person can breathe during sleep.

else. Someone else there told her she could go to Crowborough to get more water, but she did not feel comfortable about doing that as she thought that the water deliveries were for local people only.

In total, Ms V was without water for 5 or 6 days. As a result, she had no heating and slept in her living room with a small heater. Doctors came to check on her, and some of her neighbours also called in to see how she was coping.

"With my health conditions...I was really, really panicked and surprised that nobody had contacted me - I didn't even know there was a priority list... I didn't know what the procedure was... And there was no information about whether water was available. For two days it was very, very traumatic for me until I contacted South East Water and ...they were fantastic."

"I would have thought - I know this is probably too much to ask - but maybe South East Water should have had some communication with the surgery, to see if they've got any high-risk patients..."

What did South East Water do to help?

Ms V rang South East Water to obtain information about the water outage and explain her situation regarding the CPAP machine. The person she spoke to said she should be on the PSR, and assured her she would be put on it immediately. The member of staff also told Ms V that she would ensure she got a delivery of water that night, although could not guarantee what time it would be. She subsequently had 12 bottles of water delivered at approximately 10:30pm. They brought all the water in to the kitchen for her, and also gave her some water pouches for the toilet. Unfortunately, because of her arthritis, Ms V was unable to open the bottles. She managed to get a neighbour to open them for her the next day.

Ms V says the South East Water staff that she had contact with were amazing, very compassionate and thoughtful.

What could South East Water have done differently or better?

Ms V believes South East Water should do the following to improve their services for vulnerable customers:

- Ms V believes South East Water should write to all their customers, explaining about the PSR, and asking customers to get in touch if they are vulnerable.
- The bottles were very difficult to open, and some kind of gadget to make it easier to open them would have been very helpful.
- Ms V would have appreciated it if someone had checked on her the day after she was promised water, to make sure she was OK and had got enough water. That would have 'restored her faith' in them.
- Ms V struggles with online access as she does not have a computer, but texting, calling and writing are all good forms of communication for her.

- The website needs to have very clear signalling for vulnerable people, and should use the word vulnerable. Vulnerable people do not see themselves as a priority, so do not use that language.

Mrs V's experience has made her very aware of how much water she uses, and she has since hired a plumber to look at her system to ensure she is minimising her water use.