

Severn Trent Connect Vulnerability strategy

September 2024

Introduction

Providing customers with clear, accessible information is essential for all water companies to achieve their ambitions for a high standard of customer service and support. All customers should be aware of core customer information and be able to access it easily in order to understand the services they are entitled to, their rights as customers and the avenues available to seek additional assistance from the water companies when required.

The 'Strategic Policy Statement for OFWAT' empowers OFWAT to emphasise the importance of water companies delivering an equitable and enhanced water service to all customers. This includes prioritising the improvement of support services and complaint resolution mechanisms. Consequently, adhering to sections 12A and 13 of the Water Industry Act 1991, Condition G of any water company's licence outlines the mandatory core customer information that water companies must furnish to their customers.

Industry surveys undertaken on behalf of OFWAT and other government organisations have established that customer satisfaction is decreasing, and the number of complaints being raised against water companies in recent years is increasing. The surveys have concluded the following:

- Overall satisfaction for services provided by water companies has fallen in recent years;
- Customers have documented negative experiences during interruption to supply events;
- Throughout interruption to supply events, vulnerable customers felt unsupported by water companies
- Individual customers have experienced repeated poor service which included examples of threatening or aggressive debt recovery action for relatively small amounts of debt.

In February 2024 OFWAT introduced new, customer-focused updates to Licence Condition G, which will help improve water companies customer focus and encouraging the very best services. The updated objectives of Condition G are outlined below:

‘Through meeting the principles of the licence condition, companies will be required to put the customer experience at the heart of any decision they make and, in the process, deliver the good service that customers want.’

In accordance with Condition G, OFWAT expects all water companies to take accountability for the management of vulnerable customers.

About us

We are a Statutory Sewerage operator, providing regulated services to customers in the southeast of England.

Taking care of one of life's essentials

Our Purpose is **Taking care of one of life's essentials** – from start to finish, ensuring our customers and communities experience the best of our essential service every day.

Our network of sewers and pumping stations collect wastewater, taking it back to our treatment works. Wastewater is carefully screened, filtered, and treated in our sewage treatment works to meet stringent environmental standards and recycled back to the environment.

Delivering for customers

We are committed to delivering an excellent service to all of our customers 24/7, 365 days a year. We back this up with our service guarantees and will make a compensation payment if we fail to meet the required standard. The scheme applies to our household customers. During 2023/24 we have had zero failures against the scheme.

Wastewater networks

We are pleased to report zero customer serviceability incidents for the year ending 31st March 2024. Our inspection and proactive maintenance programs have allowed us to keep our networks flowing without issue for another year.

In the event of a serviceability issue, we have in place a robust set of measures for rapidly identifying and rectifying issues; minimising inconvenience to our customers.

Value for money

We regularly review our levels of service to ensure our standards are equal to / better than those offered by the local incumbent. Additionally, we offer a discretionary discount on our tariffs (compared with the local incumbent) where we carry out the full sewage collection and disposal service ourselves.

Customer

We recognise just how difficult the current economic climate has been for our customers, which is why we're able to help around 8% of our customers pay their bills through our WaterSure and Social Tariffs.

Our strategy

South East Water (SEW) are our retail services partner, they manage customer accounts and provide a billing service on our behalf; meaning customers have a single point of contact for retail and billing matters and receive a **single combined bill for water and sewerage** services.

SEW have developed a robust vulnerability strategy covering the period 2025 to 2030 which our customers will benefit from. Full details can be found [here](#). The strategy focusses on five priority areas of support for customers, all of which are inter-linked to provide holistic and tailored support to our customers that need it most.

SEW will ensure that support is accessible and designed and delivered with our customers' specific needs in mind. This includes:

- Introducing a new social tariff to support more customers than ever before with discounted bills,
- Increasing the provision of support, as well as the number of customers supported, through our priority services register,
- Auto enrolment data share agreements to automatically transfer customers in need onto our discounted tariffs or priority service register without having to apply,
- Helping customers struggling to pay their bills with innovative and suitable water efficiency support, saving them money on their bills,
- More partnerships and greater collaboration with organisations to increase levels of awareness and engagement to ensure we can provide support to as many people who need it, as possible.

Why is it important to help vulnerable customers?

We have been living through challenging times, with both the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, which is continuing to influence daily life within the UK. Therefore, as an essential service provider, it is critical for ST Connect to provide excellent support to all customers. We are committed to providing customers with the most beneficial and user-friendly services available. If customers feel they need further assistance, via South East Water we offer a variety of specialised services at no additional charge. Further information can be found [here](#).

Types of Vulnerable Customer

While most customers consider themselves to be resilient with daily life and believe they will never face vulnerability, the truth is that the situations can swiftly transform, leaving anyone susceptible and in need of additional assistance. Vulnerability is not confined to a specific timeframe, nor is it always apparent. In certain instances, it can arise due to factors such as age, physical or mental health conditions, literacy limitations, language barriers, unemployment, digital exclusion, or sudden life changes like bereavement or divorce.

Engaging with our customers

We have a strong relationship with Graingers Plc, the land developers at our Wellesley site near Aldershot. They host regular community engagement events which we contribute into. For example, we have hosted open days giving the opportunity for our customers to engage with us and learn more about what we do to support them. At a recent event, we hosted members of the community at our local wastewater treatment works, we also used this opportunity to discuss and promote our vulnerability service offering.