



Billing journeys: Water customers' experiences

Interim report

May 2025

Ofwat
Thinks
— Insight & Strategy —

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Background and approach

Background

Ofwat has a programme of research into customers experiences, including when something goes wrong. The research is used to share what works well and areas that need improvement, to ensure customers receive the service they expect and deserve.

Billing is the most common cause of complaints in the water sector. More than 125,000 complaints about billing were made to water companies in 2023-24.

This is a challenge that is growing: the Consumer Council for Water (CCW) report that the volume of billing complaints is increasing – both in terms of complaints to companies and complaints to them.* Further, household water bills are increasing in 2025, and this is likely to result in further queries, potential issues and complaints.

Ofwat therefore commissioned a two-part research project with Thinks Insight and Strategy to better understand experiences of billing issues and identify potential learnings. **This interim report sets out the findings from the first part of the project.**

The research objectives for this project are to:

- Understand more about the reasons for billing contacts and complaints, and the customer journeys when engaging with companies about billing issues.
- Capture the experiences of the 'worst served customers'** and understand the causes, factors and experiences that cause the most harm.
- Consider the range of customer experience as they apply to: 1) different companies and organisations; 2) customers in different circumstances.
- Identify any recommendations, learning or good practice in the handling of billing problems that can be used to inform Ofwat's guidance on licence condition G (the 'customer-focused' licence condition introduced in 2024) or wider work.

*See CCW's report on complaints [Household complaint handling report 2024 - CCW](#).

** 'Worst served customers' references those deemed to be worst served across the sample of participants, rather than across all customers nationally.

Approach – what we’ve done so far

Selection of companies

Water companies were selected using criteria that included the number of billing complaints per company, company size and geography.

The water companies included:
Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, Portsmouth Water, South Staffordshire Water, Thames Water, United Utilities

October – November 2024

Survey

We conducted a survey of 568 customers who had contacted their water company about a billing issue. The contact data was provided by the water companies and CCW (for the 5 water companies).

No quotas on demographics were set for the survey, sample was what fell out naturally.

18th November to 11th December 2024

Online community

We ran a 10-day online community with 56 customers.

Participants who took part in the qualitative research were asked some additional screening questions to understand life circumstances and needs (e.g. financial / health vulnerability, need for communication support)

4th to 14th December 2024

In-depth interviews

We conducted interviews with 10 participants from the research sample.

These were participants who were deemed the ‘worst served’ from the sample.

16th January to 6th February 2025

Note: small sample sizes for individual water companies mean that findings reported by company should be taken as indicative

Key findings

Key findings

1.

Billing issues by nature are highly varied, ranging from simple administrative issues to more complex and/or substantial problems. As such, their impact on customers can be hugely varied. For example, while for some, their billing issue is a relatively low-level inconvenience, for others the issue can lead to a sudden and immediate impact on their finances, including loss of, or threat to, funds.

2.

While there is evidence of positive customer experiences in billing, many customers are dissatisfied. Reports of good and bad practice are evident across the whole sample, meaning there are similarities in customer experience from all water companies in this sample. However, given the huge number of billing issues reported each year, negative experiences still represent a substantial number of customers.

3.

For these ‘worst served customers’, the impact of their billing issue is substantial, impacting their finances and their mental wellbeing. Financially, this can include bills of thousands of pounds, leaving customers facing debt, and include longer term financial impacts, such as marks on credit scores. Emotionally, this can include extreme cases of needing to seek professional help due to the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions.

4.

While customers expect their customer journey for resolving a billing issue to be straight forward, in reality, it is more complex for many. Customers generally have set expectations for how quickly their billing issue will be resolved, particularly if it is impacting their bill amount. However, in reality, many spend longer than anticipated going back and forth between the ongoing communication and action/outcome stages before a final outcome is reached.

5.

While there is a room for improvement across all stages of the customer journey, improving communication is likely to have the biggest positive impact. Whilst the end outcome is of utmost importance to customers, communication is seen to feed into all stages of the customer journey (including for example, helping customers to better understand why a certain outcome has been offered to them) and therefore has the potential to play a key role in improving overall levels of satisfaction.

Areas for change – what we’ve heard so far

Communication

Customers want **initial communication** to be improved through reduced waiting times when making phone contact, and to feel that there is a triage system for issues, to better acknowledge the huge variety of billing issues that can be experienced. Those facing an issue that they would deem as ‘urgent’ (such as a loss of or threat to funds) expect even more prompt – even immediate – initial communication from water companies.

Ongoing communication should be improved through ensuring that all customer agents adopt a compassionate tone when dealing with customers facing billing issues, and that their communication is proactive and informative in nature. Customers want to be given clear timeframes on when to expect responses and clear, consistent guidance on getting their issue resolved.

Action/Outcome

Water companies should be aiming to offer a clear and timely **outcome** to their customers as a top priority. However, they should also be ensuring that they offer any **additional support** needed e.g. if the customer is vulnerable in some way, and that they are also seeking to help customers address any knock-on impact of the billing issue either directly or by signposting them to other relevant support (e.g. from charities or Government schemes).

Understanding what is meant by ‘billing issue’

What we mean by 'billing issue'

Billing issues make up a substantial proportion of water customer complaints*. All customers within this research were recruited from contact lists provided by their water company or CCW. They all had been in touch with one or both regarding a billing issue. A

billing issue is one that is classed as, or related to, billing, i.e. something that has an impact on customer bills in some way.

For the purposes of this research, purely transactional billing (e.g. a change of address) issues were excluded. Examples of billing issues include:

Mistake in billing

This could include account errors such as incorrect details or backdated charges

Billing problem related to a meter

Examples include an incorrect or disputed meter reading

Billing problem related to a smart meter

Examples include higher than expected bill after installation, being over-billed, still receiving estimated bills

Billing problems related to leakage

This could include a dispute over increased bills because of a leak or a disagreement on a leakage allowance

Issues relating to debt repayment or non payment

Examples include disagreement over the way a debt is being recovered or the amount of debt, court action, credit score, legal fees

Payment method

This could include issues to do with how bills are paid e.g. cheque

Request for support

This could include issues around trying to apply for a discounted bill

*CCW's report on complaints showed that 57% of all complaints in 2024 were about billing, compared to 52% in 2023 [Household complaint handling report 2024 - CCW](#).

The types of billing issues experienced can be hugely varied, as can the financial and emotional impact of these on customers

Simple billing issues, which
are generally more
straightforward in nature

Complex billing issues,
which require more time and
energy to resolve

Small scale administrative problems e.g. queries about payment methods or having trouble registering for an online account / updating their details

- Low level annoyance or inconvenience.
- Minimal impact on customer time, but not bills or finances more broadly.

Medium sized issues, e.g. queries about a small increase in bills, a request for additional support (i.e. financial or practical), reporting a leak, a query relating to scheduling water meter readings

- More substantial stress, but normally temporary in nature.
- Some impact on customer time, but no significant impact on finances.

Substantial issues e.g. incorrect bills of large amounts, problems relating to debt, issues that have reoccurred over years

- High levels of anxiety / distress which can be long lasting and for a minority, extreme.
- Immediate threat to or loss of funds.

Customers* in the qualitative sample were more likely to fall into the medium and larger sized issues

**Over half of the participants in the qualitative sample could be classified as vulnerable, meaning these impacts are often even more pronounced within this cohort.*

Overall: views on the customer billing journey

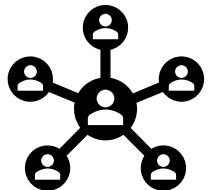
There are instances of good and bad journeys across and within water companies



Positive experiences often relate to more straightforward instances, where the stakes for the customer are perceived to be lower, for example, smaller scale administrative issues. These customers are likely to report positive individual interactions with customer service agents, an appropriate timeframe for their issue to be resolved, and a satisfactory resolution.



Customers with more complex billing issues, or a higher financial impact, are more likely to report negative experiences and are the worst served by their water company. These customers are likely to discuss very slow response times, rude or unempathetic interactions with agents, a lack of resolution and a lack of support.



Instances of good and bad practice exist across all the water companies included in the sample. While there are some common themes around positive or negative experiences across companies, this research has shown that, even within the same company, **experiences can be inconsistent and variable.**

There is evidence of positive customer experiences in billing, both in terms of communication and action taken

COMMUNICATION

‘Overall I am satisfied with the communication I received from my water company regarding my billing issue.’

Between 44% and 71%* of customers across water companies in this research agreed with this statement.

ACTION

‘Overall I am satisfied with the action and support of my water company regarding my billing issue.’

Between 40% and 66%* of customers across water companies in this research agreed with this statement.

Satisfaction is broadly correlated with the type of billing issue experienced. For example, customers experiencing more straightforward issues (e.g. queries about administrative issues) report higher levels of satisfaction with communications and action taken than those experiencing more complex issues (e.g. ongoing debt).

**Range is between different water companies in the research. For data by water company, see the individual company reports.*

Q. Please consider the following statements and select the statement that comes closest to your experience on [communication / action]. Base: All respondents (n=568), Portsmouth Water (n=51), South Staffordshire Water (n=88), Thames Water (n=236), United Utilities (n=126), Welsh Water (n=67)

However, many customers are dissatisfied. Given the large number of customers who face billing issues, this equates to a significant number who could be better supported

COMMUNICATION

‘Overall, I am satisfied with the communication I received from my water company regarding my billing issue.’

Between 29% and 56%* of customers across water companies in this research disagreed with this statement.

ACTION

‘Overall, I am satisfied with the action and support of my water company regarding my billing issue.’

Between 34% and 60%* of customers across water companies in this research disagreed with this statement.



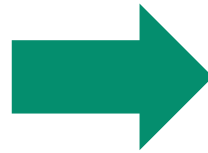
Even for water companies where dissatisfaction is lower, this equates to a large number of individuals who could be better supported simply due to the number of people who report billing issues.

**Range is between different water companies in the research. For data by water company, see the Appendix.*

Q. Please consider the following statements and select the statement that comes closest to your experience on [communication / action]. Base: All respondents (n=568), Portsmouth Water (n=51), South Staffordshire Water (n=88), Thames Water (n=236), United Utilities (n=126), Welsh Water (n=67)

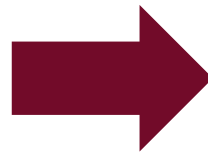
Satisfaction is lowest amongst those with complex, financially impactful issues who have higher needs from service

Customers facing billing issues that are deemed relatively straightforward – which normally includes those posing little or no threat to household finances – are most likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with the service they received.



- While the perceived straightforwardness of such billing issues means that customers expect – and want – a quick and easy resolution, they bring fewer concerns and lower expectations of service to their conversations with water companies.
- Their issue is normally resolved efficiently, and they are left happy with the interaction.

Conversely however, those with more complex and / or financially significant issues are most likely to report lower levels of satisfaction with the service received from their water company.



- These customers are more concerned about their billing issue from the start, approaching conversations with water companies with greater levels of apprehension and concern. There are often vulnerable customers who have higher needs in terms of the service and support they require.
- Their issue is often harder to resolve, requires more time and energy from the customer and is more likely to be accompanied by perceived poorer service as well as an unsatisfactory outcome.

Customers' personal circumstances can also impact their levels of satisfaction. Around half of participants could be classified as vulnerable customers (e.g. on PSR, have a long-term health condition or could be classed as financially vulnerable). Those already struggling financially or emotionally may feel they need more support or are left more dissatisfied by an outcome that doesn't work for them.

It is often the customers most in need of support that end up being the worst served by their water companies

Worst served customers are normally those that face an immediate impact of the billing issue, including funds being taken from their account unexpectedly, leaving them in their overdraft or struggling to buy food for the week.

Customers in this category often have pre-existing vulnerabilities and therefore require immediate support.

However, they are most likely to report response times that are slower than what they would like, inadequate action taken and poor support along the way.

They feel left behind by their water company and can face longer term financial and emotional impacts due to the billing issue.

“The whole process caused me anxiety when I was already under enormous pressure ... I am still experiencing the same worries of paying the bills.”

Woman, 45-54, United Utilities customer

“In terms of the arrears [I’m in] I have no idea as to what happens now. I’m left feeling confused, unaware and worried. I remain frustrated and indifferent without a voice- insignificant. The impact emotionally is massive. I’m mostly anxious and worried about what happens next and how I will afford to pay the arrears.”

Woman, 31-44, Portsmouth Water customer

Examples of worst served customers were present across each of the water companies included in this research.

*Henry's experience

Henry is in his 30s and lives by himself in a house he owns just outside of London. He has a neurological disorder which means he relies on receiving paper copies of his bill in order to remember to pay them.

Following an issue setting up his account when he moved into his house, Henry received no bills from Thames water for a year. A year on, he then **received a bill from his water company instructing him to pay over a thousand pounds, followed a day later by a letter from a debt agency** instructing him that he must pay, or he will be taken to court.

Henry does not dispute that he is in debt to his water company, but got in touch to **ask to see a record of the bills that he should have received over the past year and to ask for some support in managing payment**. He describes himself as a vulnerable customer, and felt his water company was unwilling to help support him. The impacts of his issue have been significant:

Involving a debt agency means Henry **received a detrimental mark on his credit score**. He is struggling financially and wants to remortgage his house but as a result of his credit score he is **locked into a mortgage product he now struggles to afford**.

Henry had to **borrow money from his parents** to pay off his debt after his water company offered no support with repayment. He already struggles with bills and describes **some months having to choose between paying bills or buying food**.

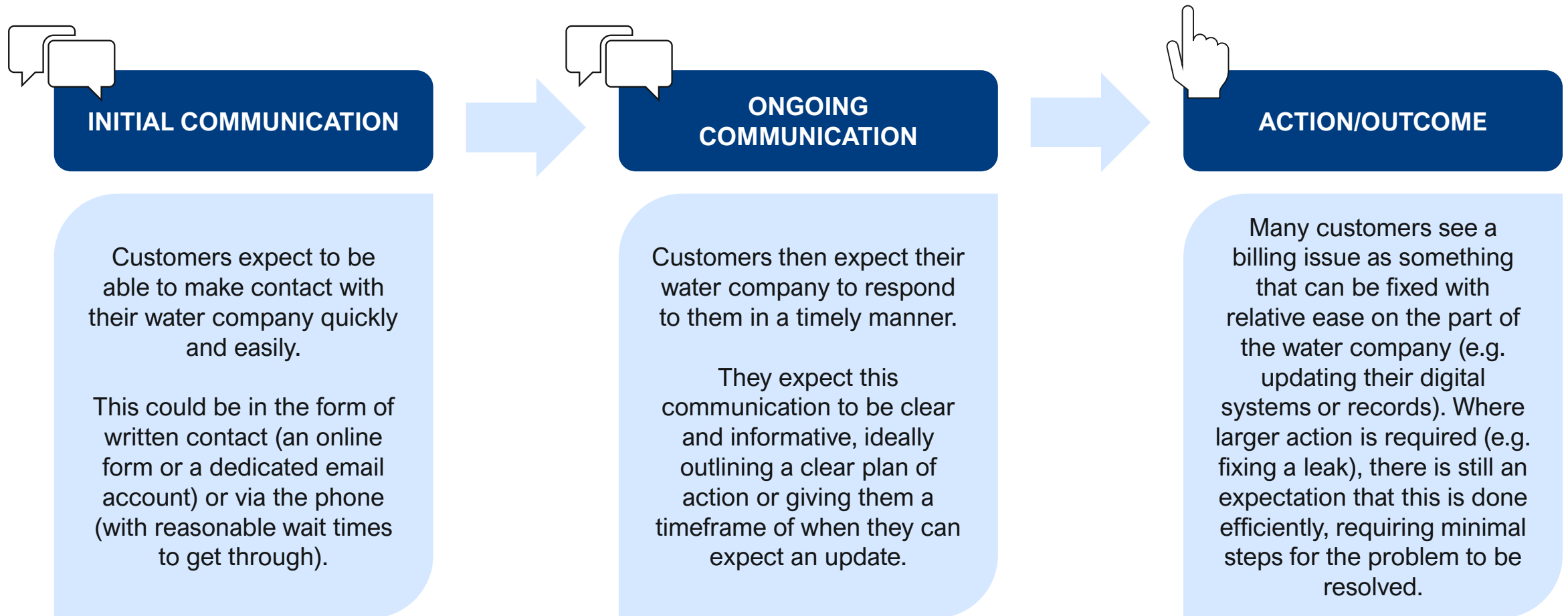
Significant emotional distress, created by the financial position and heightened in the face of poor communication from his water company. Henry describes the situation as having a massive impact on his mental health.

"They sent me this really big bill that I had to deal with and the letter from the debt agency about the credit score right at the time I was looking to remortgage my house. I now can't get out of my mortgage product and it's gone up from £400 to over £900 a month. This situation has strained my finances to a point where I would have to sell my house or not pay my mortgage... This house is all I have left of my old life and I almost had to give it up because Thames have done what they've done."

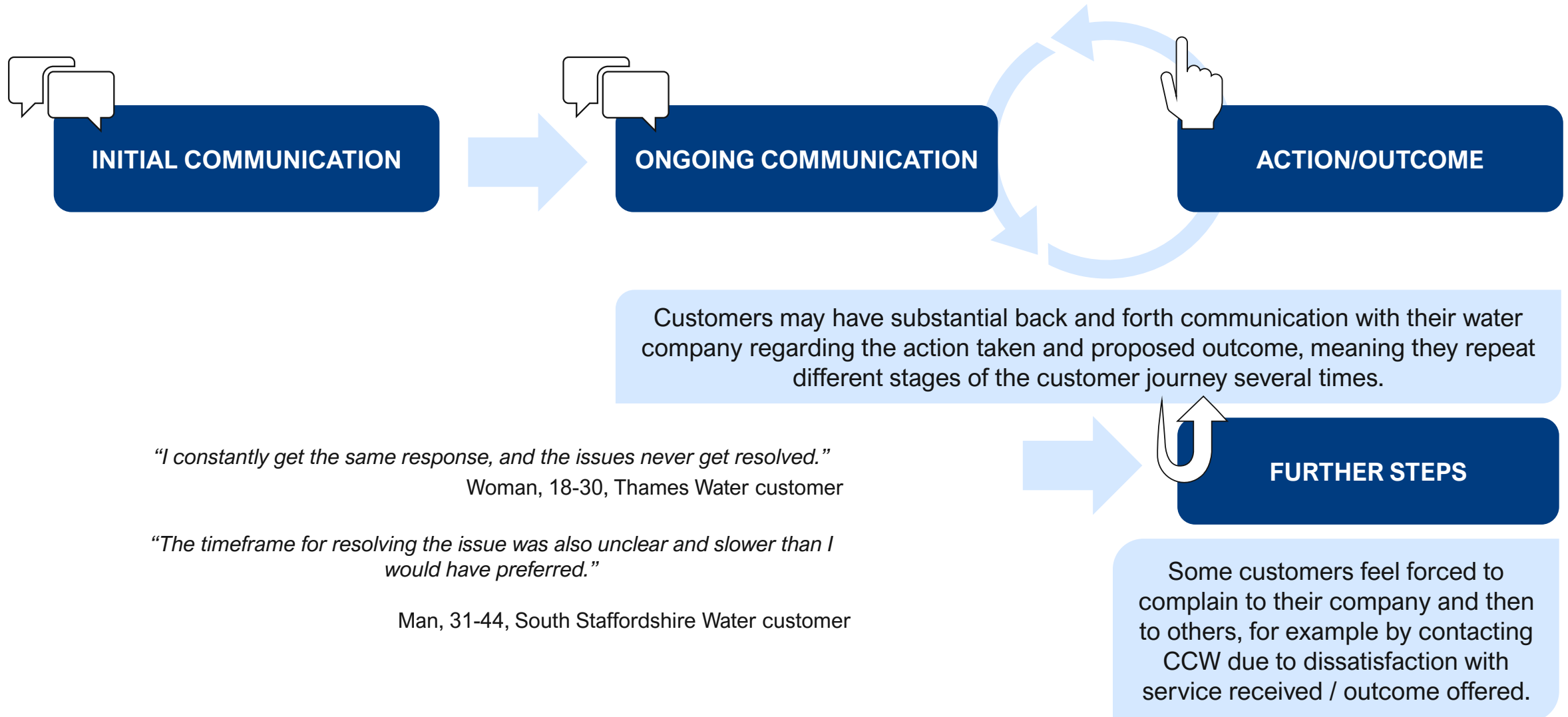
"Because they couldn't communicate with me with empathy and understanding I nearly lost my life and my house and that was all because of them. I'm not in that place anymore but the way they treated me tipped me over."

Deep dive on the customer billing journey

For customers, the ideal customer journey for billing issues would be simple in nature, following three key stages



In reality, the ongoing communication and action/outcome stages often merge, and escalation is a fourth stage used by some



Whilst there is room for improvement across all stages, improving communication is likely to have the biggest positive impact

Whilst the end outcome is of utmost importance to customers, communication is seen to feed into all stages of the customer journey and therefore has the potential to play a key role in improving overall levels of satisfaction.

Clear, timely and effective communication can:

Help customers better understand *why* they might not be able to get the outcome they initially hoped for or expected.

Make a customer feel listened to and cared for, even if they do not get the final outcome they desire.

Reduce any negative emotional impact of the billing issue on customers.

Deep dive: Communication

When customers contact their water company, they have five key expectations regarding communication

Tailored communications

Customers expect personalised responses to their queries or complaints that respond to their specific situation and needs. They easily spot templated or automated responses and deem these as being ineffective in helping them find a resolution.

Easy and accessible ways to get in touch

Customers expect getting in touch to be easy, with several forms of communication available to them (e.g., email, chat and phone).

A quick response time

A prompt response is also expected. This includes reduced wait times when calling, and quick replies to written communication. For some, a holding email with detail on further timeframes is also sufficient, while those who deem their problem as urgent require a response to their problem in the shortest timeframe possible.

Empathetic tone

Customers expect to see compassion and empathy from the customer service agents they come into contact with, to show that they are understanding of their issue and its impacts. This is particularly important for those who are facing financially sensitive issues, who may feel vulnerable discussing the problem with their water company.

A clear plan of action

Customers expect their water company to quickly come up with a clear plan of action to address their problem, and to communicate this effectively to them, including with indicative timelines. This makes them feel reassured that their issue will be resolved.

In some cases, water companies are meeting these expectations, with positive examples given

Customers are positive about:

Tailored communications

Being **able to speak to a real human**, rather than AI or templated responses is raised by some customers.

Easy and accessible ways to get in touch

The **choice of different contact channels**, with most initially able to **get in touch via their preferred method**. Customers across all water companies are positive about having **different options** for initial communication method.

A quick response time

A small number of customers discuss **quick response times** from their water companies in hearing back on their issue. These customers are likely to be those with smaller or more straightforward issues.

Empathetic tone

Professional and friendly service provided by customer service agents who put customers at ease, which is deemed particularly important when discussing more sensitive issues. Agents are described as being 'polite' and 'professional'.

A clear plan of action

Receiving a **holding call or email with a timeframe** on when to expect a response upon their initial contact. Customers across all water companies report receiving an initial holding email or acknowledgement of their contact.

However, experiences are variable, even within the same company

Customers report problems with:

Tailored communications

Confusing or depersonalised communications from their water company, which fail to accurately address the specifics of their issue.

Easy and accessible ways to get in touch

Most customers report problems with **slow response times**, particularly for those getting in touch via the phone, where many are kept on hold for long periods of time.

A quick response time

A perceived lack of urgency where customers feel the timeframe given in their holding email is not proportionate to how urgent they see the issue being. This is particularly true for customers who have been overcharged or with billing issues relating to debt, where the perceived impact can be significant.

Empathetic tone

A perceived lack of empathy, where communications feel unpersonal, intrusive or even threatening (i.e., outlining that legal action may be taken against customers). This is often felt most strongly by vulnerable customers, who want to feel that their issue is being dealt sensitively.

A clear plan of action

‘Mixed messages’, where there are inconsistencies in what customers are being told by different agents or departments they interact with, leaving customers unclear on next steps.

For certain customers, a perceived lack of urgency in initial communication sets a negative precedent

For customers with financially sensitive issues such as being overcharged, payment disputes or debt:

The perceived severity of the issue (e.g., having to pay a very large bill) means **customers want to see an immediate response** from their water company on their issue.

For these customers, being provided with a holding email that gives a **timeframe of even 24 hours is not satisfactory**. In some cases, this can lead customers to pay the bill even if they think it is incorrect, to avoid any negative impacts of missing a payment.

Personal circumstances such as having a financial vulnerability or children **can also significantly heighten this concern**, where the ability to pay an unexpected bill from their water company can leave them unable to cover the basics.

This can lead to a perception that there is a lack of empathy or interest from water companies from the very first interaction.

"I have been in touch with them for over 2 years and it's made me very frustrated. I was asking for help and a water meter, and being ignored made me angry. The financial burden and pressure were made worse. I reached out at least ten times."

Woman, 45-54, Thames Water customer

"I emailed and there was nothing done. I tried a few times. I know it's a cliché but it was like a brick wall, the service was so poor."

Man, 45-54, Welsh Water customer

Many report facing significant challenges in the ongoing communication they have with their water company

Many participants report strong dissatisfaction with ongoing communication. This is characterised by:

Poorly joined-up communication and a lack of a clear paper trail, which can result in customers needing to repeatedly re-explain their situation to multiple agents.

A lack of proactive communication and challenges in getting updates, meaning customers must continuously chase to ensure progress is made.

Slow or no responses, particularly for more complex issues, which for some customers means their issue has been ongoing for over a year.

Call centre agents who are perceived to be only **'reading off a script'** and **lack the skills or authority to effectively address their enquiry**.

The impact of this dissatisfaction can lead customers to feel that there is a **lack of interest** or empathy from their water company in addressing their issue. For many, poor communication is felt to act as a **barrier in moving further in the customer journey**, particularly where responses are particularly slow or drawn-out. In some cases this can lead customers to **give up on their billing issue altogether**.

"You get through to a call centre, and you know straight away they're reading from a script. There's no clarity or emotion from them, no empathy."

Man, 45-54, Welsh Water customer

"They need to offer more signposting and support – like a case manager, so you wouldn't have to repeat things."

Woman, 45-54, United Utilities customer

"This issue has been ongoing for over a year, I am constantly having to call them to check and see if there are any updates and I get the same response every time."

Woman, 18-30, Thames Water customer

*Rhys' experience

Rhys is in his 30s and lives with his partner and their two young children in London. He has recently moved to a bigger home to accommodate his growing family, and the increased mortgage and utility bills mean Rhys has less money left over each month.

Last year, Rhys woke up to find more than £2,000 had been taken from his bank account by Thames Water without warning, based on an incorrect meter reading by Thames. This large, unexpected bill **pushed him over his overdraft limit, leaving him worried about how to afford basics for his family** and the impact this would have on his credit score. For Rhys, resolving this billing issue was a **very urgent matter. However, the response he received from Thames Water did not reflect the urgency of his situation**, and he was told it would take up to 15 days for Thames Water to investigate the issue.

Both Rhys and his partner had to chase Thames Water for a response. They did not reach out to Rhys proactively, and at times he felt they were trying to brush him off, rather than addressing the problem.

The initial stress the billing mistake put on Rhys and his family was exacerbated by slow and unempathetic responses from Thames Water. The lack of a plan or timeline meant Rhys felt uncertain the issue would be resolved.

Once the issue had been resolved and the money had been refunded, Rhys was offered £100 as compensation for the mistake made by Thames Water. Rhys felt this was insufficient in compensating him for the time and stress involved in resolving the issue.

"I woke up to find more than £2,000 had been taken from my bank account without any warning. It completely wiped out my balance and pushed me over my overdraft limit, leaving me in a really stressful situation...I couldn't cover basic expenses for my family that day, and I was worried about being charged overdraft fees, which only made things worse. Thames Water's lack of care and urgency turned an already stressful problem into something much harder to deal with."

"I felt frustrated because it was such an avoidable mistake, but when I got in touch, I wasn't getting the help or urgency I needed. And honestly, I was angry because the lack of notice and the unempathetic response from customer service just made everything feel so much worse. It was like they didn't care about the impact this had on me."

**Names have been changed to protect anonymity.*

Rhian is in her 30s and lives in Wales with her three children and partner. Rhian recently left her job to become a full-time carer for her mother-in-law, as well as looking after her children.

After having to leave her job, Rhian got in touch with Welsh Water to enquire about additional support available for her family as they were facing new financial struggles. After letting her water company know she was struggling, they sent her a bill informing her that she has been put on a new, more expensive tariff. Her family are now struggling more than before and are looking to make lifestyles changes elsewhere to cover this money.

Across all her interactions with Welsh Water, Rhian felt that her situation had been dealt with poorly:

Rhian describes Welsh Water as lacking empathy or compassion when communicating with her. She felt dismissed and 'turned away' rather than Welsh Water trying to understand her situation and find a solution. This was particularly distressing as her sick mother-in-law lives with them at home, making the family circumstances even more vulnerable.

Rhian feels that Welsh Water have actively made her situation worse by putting her on a more expensive tariff, instead of offering her support. She has been repeatedly told that her case has been closed, making her feel she has reached a 'dead end'. Even when CCW recommended to Welsh Water that she should be moved onto a cheaper tariff and was eligible for further support, they rejected CCW's recommendation.

"I feel incredibly ashamed to have to ask for help and feel very embarrassed that we're in that position. Nobody wants to be struggling financially and then dealing with the pressure of somebody who's unwell ... It was like they didn't really care. So, I think compassion and empathy would be a good start, perhaps better awareness and training."

"When you feel there's nowhere we can go for help it's really hard. We've had a hard blow and things have been turned upside down and [Welsh Water] are the people that are supposed to be able to help, but they don't care. They don't care that someone in our home is really ill and we've had to give up our jobs and go on benefits."



*June's experience

June lives with her 3 children in Liverpool. She has been finding it increasingly difficult to cover household bills, but has struggled to secure any support from her service providers.

Although June has been struggling with household bills generally, she has had particular issues with her water bill due a recent increase in water usage. One of June's daughters struggles with OCD, and a worsening in her mental health has resulted in her needing to use an increased amount of water.

June reached out to United Utilities in the hope of receiving some support from them, ideally in the form of a fixed tariff or a reduced bill. After detailing her situation and need for support in an online form, she was contacted by United Utilities a few weeks later and asked to explain her situation again. She was asked to complete another form, detailing her financial situation, but was ultimately told she didn't qualify for support a few weeks later. June was put onto the PSR, and her case was closed.

June was unsatisfied with the outcome of her query. She felt she was in a very vulnerable situation at that point in time, but that she had been dismissed by United Utilities as being ineligible for support. She felt let down by the lack of support offered.

Beyond her dissatisfaction with the outcome of her query, June found the process of requesting support and the communications received from United Utilities disappointing. June found repeating details of her circumstances distressing, and long wait times for responses increased her anxiety around the situation.

"[The communication was] impersonal, sort of dismissive. Your issue was sort of disregarded. It wasn't really seen as being that important ... not really taking into account what actually said and what the issue was, just trying to pay lip service. I told them, which was quite personal stuff, to go through."

"Anxious, stressed, upset ... It was worrying, how you're going to pay bills. It was a very stressful situation at the time, and they just didn't help at all. I was quite disappointed."

Deep dive: Action / Outcome

When customers get in contact with their water company they have five key expectations regarding action

Addressing the problem

Customers' biggest priority is that their issue is addressed, for example fixing leaks, servicing water meters or correcting an administrative issue. This is seen as the most important action to take and outcome to receive.

Timely action

Customers expect their water company to respond to their issue quickly and to be kept updated with a timeframe for when their issue will be addressed. This is particularly true for customers who are dealing with complex or financial related issues (such as money being incorrectly taken from their account).

Additional support

Customers expect their water company to be proactive in identifying additional support needs, either by looking at pre-existing records or taking the time to understand their needs. This is a particular priority for those with physical disabilities and those who are financially vulnerable.

An apology

Customers feel strongly that their water company should apologise to demonstrate that they are taking accountability for the issue in cases where the water company has caused the billing issue. This is seen to be a recognition of the time, effort, or emotional impact that the issue has had on a customer's life.

Managing the impact of the issue

Customers expect their water company to also support them with managing the impact of their billing issue. For example, reimbursing them for any financial impact the issue has had on the customer such as charges for going into their overdraft or helping them get a mark off their credit score. Whilst some would like to see this go further and include additional compensation, this is seen as a nice-to-have.

There are positive examples of experiences in relation to these expectations

Customers are positive about:

Addressing the problem

Some customers report their water company **taking action to address their problem**, including sending out agents to examine leaks, fixing administrative errors or arranging a payment plan.

Timely action

Customers with more simple, straight forward billing issues often report **satisfaction with the timeframe in which their problem was addressed**, which was felt to be reasonable in line with its severity/impact. This is typically reported by those with smaller scale issues, such as administrative queries.

Additional support

For a small number only, **proactive support tailored to their specific needs**.

An apology

For a small number only, a customer's water company **acknowledged their mistake and apologised for any impact**.

Managing the impact of the issue

Some say they got help **managing the impact of the billing issue**, including reimbursing any financial loss caused by a billing mistake.

However, there are many areas where customers are left dissatisfied

Customers report problems with:

Addressing the problem

A perceived reluctance from their water company to engage in their issue, including a drawn-out response, not sending out agents to investigate, issues only being partly addressed, no apology or recognition of fault and no support managing any knock-on impacts. Some report no action taken at all.

Timely action

The time taken regarding their billing issue. For some this is as long as two years, over which time they have to constantly reach out to their water company for updates. This can cause customers additional stress and upset, for some even leading to significant mental health issues.

Additional support

A lack of additional support for vulnerable customers, with many feeling that a record is not being made of their situation. Customers can find it embarrassing or triggering to keep informing their water company of a vulnerability. This is also perceived to slow down receiving any support that may be available.

An apology

Many customers report not receiving an apology from their water company for the initial problem, even if they were found to be at fault.

Managing the impact of the issue

Many of the worse impacted customers report feeling 'left behind' by their water company following a billing issue, as they receive no support on longer term issues such as marks on credit scores which have emerged as a result of the initial problem.

Despite some mismatch in expectations of action, most* report eventually reaching a final outcome with their water company regarding their billing issue

Most customers report reaching a final outcome with their water company eventually. Final outcomes include:

Being refunded for an incorrect bill

Having an engineer fix a leak and / or being offered a 'leakage allowance'

Smart meter issues being fixed

Administrative problems being corrected

Being offered repayment terms / being put on a payment plan

Of these customers, the majority are ultimately satisfied with their water company's action and outcome.

"I was totally happy with the final response."

Woman, 55-69, United Utilities customer

"I was satisfied with the timeframe and how quickly the engineer's visit was arranged."

Woman, 55-69, Portsmouth Water customer

"I eventually received all the support I required from my case handler after complaining about the unsatisfactory level of support I'd received from customer services."

Man, 55-69, Portsmouth Water customer

*Includes participants across both the survey and qualitative research

However, others report feeling dissatisfied with the outcome offered by their water company

This is normally for one of the following reasons:

A misalignment of expectations

- Some customers **have expectations** of the outcome they want. Where this is not provided, this leads to **dissatisfaction, even if an alternative solution is offered.**
- **This is seen most in customers facing bills they feel they cannot pay,** where a satisfactory outcome would only be wiping their debt, capping their bills or putting them on a payment plan.

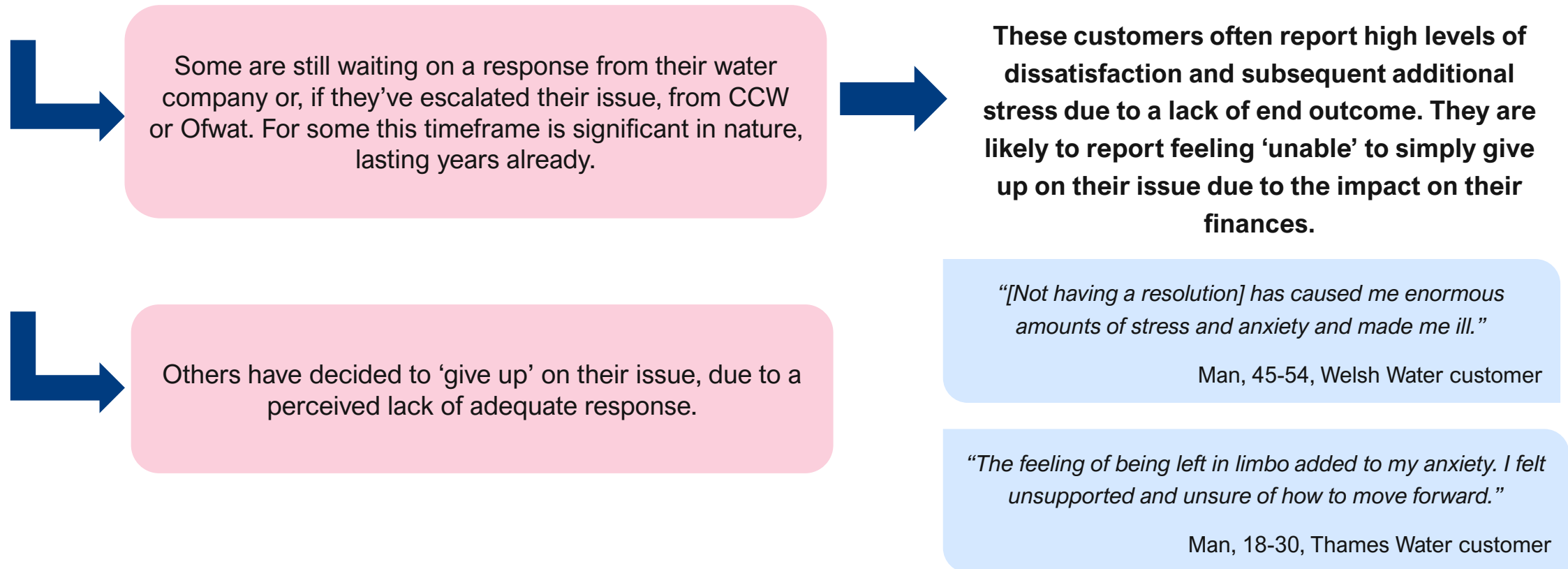
Poor service prior to outcome

- Many customers report **excessively long timeframes** in waiting for a final outcome, during which they have to **constantly reach out** to their water company for updates.
- This means even if a 'good' outcome is delivered, it **no longer feels proportionate to the time or effort** that has been invested, or the emotional impact that the issue has created.

A lack of faith that their water company will improve

- Customers also report **dissatisfaction with the sentiment behind the resolution** offered to them by their water company.
- A lack of an apology or indication of how they will seek to change in the future leaves customers feeling that **others will likely experience similar issues** moving forward.

Some are still awaiting a final outcome to be reached with their water company, or have given up trying



*Helena's experience

Helena is in her early 60s and lives alone in a flat in London. Until her father passed away recently, she was his full-time carer. Money was tight both before and after her father passed away, and Helena is currently in arrears for multiple utility bills.

Helena began to fall behind on water bill payments roughly 4 years ago, paying her bills whenever she had the money to do so.

Last year, Thames Water reached out to her to discuss her finances and what she could afford to pay for her water bill. Over the course of the in-depth discussion, some discounts were applied to her bills going forward, and a payment plan was agreed for her existing debt.

During a stressful time when keeping on top of bills had become a struggle, Helena appreciated Thames Water's proactive approach to managing her debt and future bill payments.

Empathetic and understanding staff members made her feel more relaxed about her financial issues, and that she was a valued customer.

The solution of a payment plan and capped future bills is a very satisfactory outcome for Helena, and she feels very positively toward her water company after having this experience.

"I felt very helped in such challenging times and it is a great weight off my mind to know that even if I am unable to pay the bill in its entirety, I am at least able to make some payments on a regular basis."

"I felt relieved and pleased that we could come to such an arrangement with comparative ease. I felt uncomfortable discussing the state of my finances with a stranger on the phone and at the same time reassured by their professionalism and practical approach [...] The behaviour of the water company in helping me to sort at least this bill out was a light in the darkness of debt."

**Names have been changed to protect anonymity.*



Liam is in his 40s and lives alone in a housing association flat in Pembrokeshire. He is a vulnerable customer due to a long-term health issue that has left him unable to work for a number of years. He has recently begun studying part time, whenever his health issue allows.

As Liam is unable to work due to his health, his income is limited, and he keeps a close eye on all bills and outgoing expenses. Due to his income, he has an ongoing arrangement with Welsh Water to be on a lower, fixed tariff.

Liam's issue began when he moved home in 2015. Unbeknownst to Liam, he was taken off his fixed tariff and was being billed for much higher amounts than he was able to afford. Over the course of 2 or 3 years, this resulted in Liam accumulating £2,000 in debt to Welsh Water.

Liam was not sent any communications indicating he had been taken off the fixed tariff, or that he was accumulating debt. In 2018, he was contacted by a debt collection agency and felt he had no choice but to agree to a payment plan going forward to pay off his debt to Welsh Water.

Liam feels very unsatisfied with the solution to his billing issue. As he feels Welsh Water did not effectively communicate to him that he had been taken him off the fixed tariff, he believes he should not be responsible for the debt accumulated during the time he was being billed the higher amount.

Liam is still paying off his debt through his payment plan. He is trying to get clarity from Welsh Water about how much he still needs to pay back, but has been unsuccessful so far.

"I am very anxious about my household bills as I live on a small fixed income, I have my Electricity and Gas on a fixed monthly direct debit which is just about manageable as long as I keep a close eye on my usage and my water bill."

"The response was disgusting, they neither addressed the issues or made any effort to fix it basically insinuating everything was my fault for getting into debt with them."



Conclusions and next steps

Customers have a number of priorities when it comes to improving the customer journey for billing issues



COMMUNICATION



ACTION/OUTCOME

TOP PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

- A triage system to identify the most urgent issues
- Proactive and joined up communication
- An empathetic approach
- Clear information and detail on expected timeframes
- Acknowledgement of 'valued customers' e.g. if somebody misses a payment, their previous record of paying bills on time to be considered

- Action taken in a timeframe that feels proportionate to the severity of the issue
- Specific needs identified and responded to
- Outcomes that not only address the problem, but also consider any knock-on impacts
- Clarity on *why* a certain outcome has been offered, including explaining why a desired outcome may not be possible
- Sign-posting towards other types of support available

In stage two of the research, we will continue to focus on:



VULNERABLE CUSTOMERS

- **Around half of the sample in stage one can be classified as vulnerable customers** (either on the PSR, for example for a long-term health condition, or can be classed as financially vulnerable).
- This will continue to be a focus for stage two, where we will aim to understand **the impact of billing issues on vulnerable customers who may require greater levels of support from their water company.**

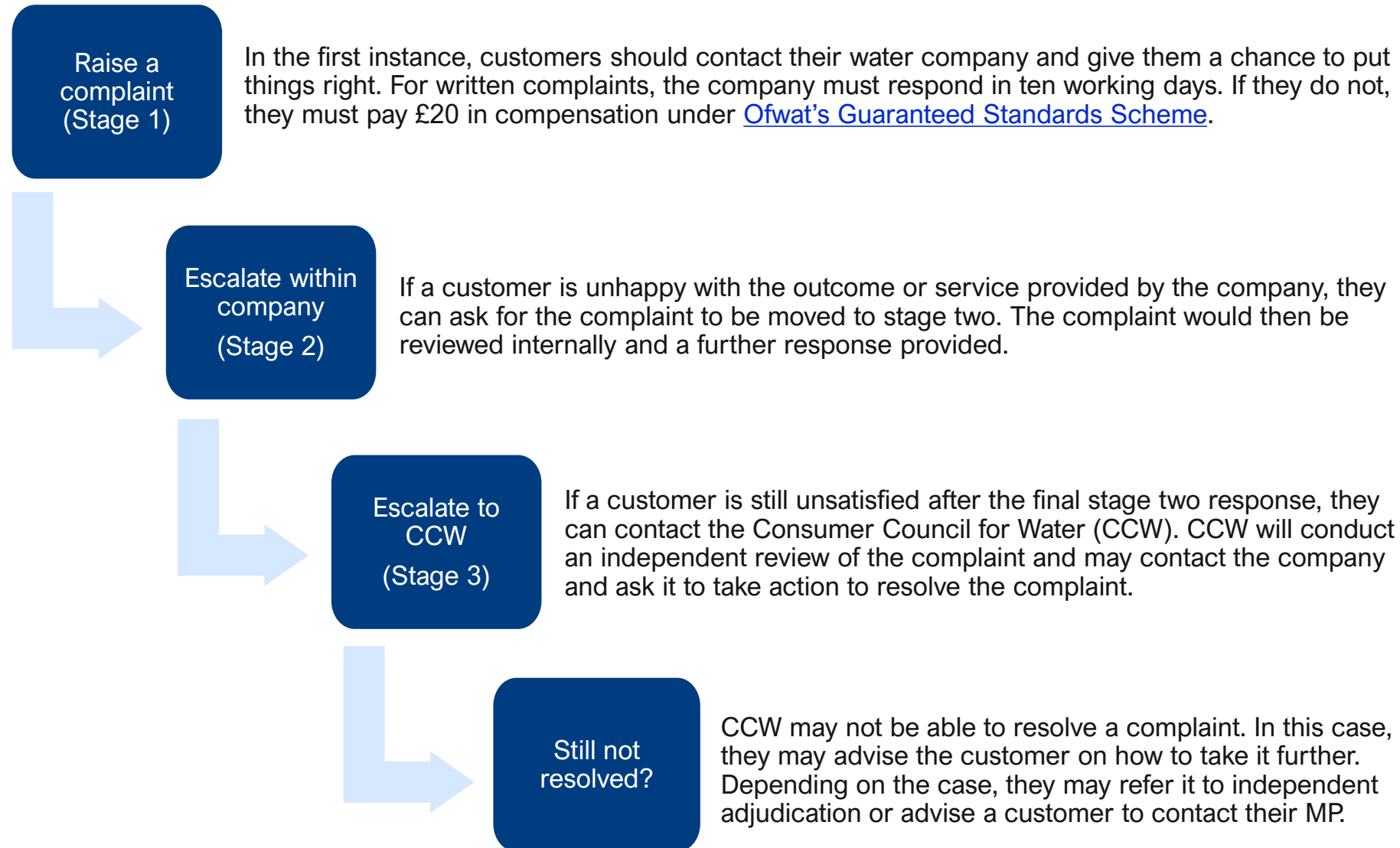


ESCALATION AND NEXT STEPS

- **A limited number of participants in stage one reported escalating their issue either internally within their water company, or externally to other bodies.** These customers did not report noticing a change in communication from their water company when this escalation occurred.
- **This data will be merged with data in stage two, where a closer look at what happens when the contact moves into the complaint stage, and how complaints are escalated to others will be explored.**
 - This will include aiming to further understand whether the move from contact stage to complaint stage feels relevant or noteworthy to customers.

Appendix

Stages of a complaint: billing



For complaints about billing:

CCW are best placed to take forward an individual customer complaint about billing. You can make a complaint [online](#) or by calling 0300 034 2222 (England) or 0300 034 3333 (Wales).

For complaints about other service issues:

Ofwat has power to determine [certain complaints and dispute under the Water Industry Act 1991](#). In most cases, Ofwat recommends that customers contact CCW first. You can contact Ofwat [online](#).

For complaints about drinking water quality, please [contact the Drinking Water Inspectorate](#).

Notes on the sample and findings

Customer sample lists

- All customers within this research were recruited from contact lists provided by their water company or CCW. They all had been in touch with one or both regarding a billing issue. All customers who took part in the qualitative research were given a financial incentive for their participation.

Survey element

- The survey in this research was primarily used as a tool for recruitment for the qualitative research, but also as a way to collect wider customer feedback. It was not designed to replicate Ofwat's C-MeX survey which already provides representative data for customer satisfaction.
- The survey did not include quotas and is therefore not nationally representative or representative of customers who experience billing issues. It also has a relatively small sample size, particularly for some water companies. Caution should be used when interpreting results.
- Quantitative data is featured sparingly in the main report, but key stats by water company have been included in the Appendix. The use of total sample figures has been avoided to better capture differences between water companies.

Qualitative elements

- It should be noted that those with more negative experiences may have been more inclined to take part in the qualitative research compared to those with positive or neutral experiences who may have felt they have 'less to say'. This was despite high numbers of survey respondents registering interest in the research overall.

Contact data

Water companies and CCW were asked to provide customer contact data for those that had been in touch regarding a billing issue (specific criteria was set to cover a range of issues relating to billing, but excluding purely transactional contacts). The data request sought to collect no more contact data than necessary, while also trying to collect data from comparable time periods:

					
Two criteria for timing, both apply. 1. All complaints* that meet the criteria between 15 May and 15 October. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 15 May 2024 that have not been resolved*.	Two criteria for timing, both apply. 1. All contacts that meet the criteria between 15 May and 15 October 2024. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 15 May 2024 that have not been resolved (e.g. stage one or stage two complaints).	Two criteria for timing, both apply. 1. All contacts that meet the criteria on dates 15-17 July 15-17 Aug 15 -17 September or 9-11 October. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 15 May 2024 that have not been resolved (e.g. stage one or stage two complaints).	Two criteria for timing, both apply. 1. All contacts that meet the criteria on dates 23 Aug, 23 Sept or 14 Oct. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 14 July 2024 that have not been resolved (e.g. stage one or stage two complaints).	Two criteria for timing, both apply. 1. All contacts that meet the criteria on 15-16 July 15-16 Aug 15- 16 September 10-11 Oct. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 15 July 2024 that have not been resolved (e.g. stage one or stage two complaints).	1. From 1 April to 15 October for all billing complaints. 2. Any other billing complaints prior to 1 April 2024 that have not been resolved. <i>This criteria was for complaints from customers of the 5 water companies included in the research</i>

*Note that Welsh Water were unable to provide contact data and shared complaint data only. This should be considered when reviewing company-specific data for Welsh Water.

Survey sample

No quotas were put on demographics for the survey, so the sample fell out naturally.

CATEGORY	CRITERIA	SURVEY SAMPLE
Water companies <i>Customers from 5 different water companies were invited to take part in the research.</i>	Dŵr Cymru / Welsh Water	67
	Portsmouth Water	51
	South Staffs Water	88
	Thames Water	236
	United Utilities	126
Billing issue <i>Customers identified the category their billing issue fell into, from a list of 7 options, plus 'other'.</i>	Mistake in billing	94
	Billing problem related to a meter	90
	Billing problem related to a smart meter	36
	Billing problems related to leakage	63
	Issues relating to debt repayment or non-payment	38
	Query about payment method	62
	Request for support	75
	Other*	110

CATEGORY	CRITERIA	SURVEY SAMPLE
Age	18-30	71
	31-44	174
	45-54	106
	55-69	139
	70+	78
Ethnicity	White British / White European / White other	392
	Asian / Asian British	41
	Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	30
	Mixed	13
	Other ethnicity	21
SEG	A	69
	B	168
	C1	117
	C2	45
	D	40
	E	129
Gender	Male	295
	Female	257

*Upon review, most of those who selected 'other' had issues that would have fitted into one of the options given.

Qualitative sample

Participants who took part in the qualitative research were asked some additional screening questions to understand their billing issue and personal circumstances. No quotas were set on this sample, which fell out naturally.

CATEGORY	CRITERIA	ONLINE COMMUNITY	DEPTH INTERVIEWS
Water companies <i>Customers from 5 different water companies were invited to take part in the research.</i>	Dŵr Cymru / Welsh Water	12	3
	Portsmouth Water	9	1
	South Staffs Water	10	1
	Thames Water	14	4
	United Utilities	11	1
Billing issue <i>Customers identified the category their billing issue fell into, from a list of 7 options, plus 'other'.</i>	Mistake in billing	17	4
	Billing problem related to a meter	6	-
	Billing problem related to a smart meter	1	-
	Billing problems related to leakage	5	-
	Issues relating to debt repayment or non-payment	6	2
	Query about payment method	7	1
	Request for support	9	3
	Other	5	-

Participants who took part in the qualitative research reflected a range of demographic characteristics and personal circumstances, including:

- A spread of age, gender and location
- Those currently on the Priority Services Register
- Those with a disability or long-term health condition
- Those with caring responsibilities
- Those living with a child under 11 at home
- Those needing extra support due to a life changing event (e.g. bereavement)

*Upon review, most of those who selected 'other' had issues that would have fitted into one of the options given.