

Future Water
Association

40 years

of uniting the UK water sector





The voice for the water supply chain

For an association built around looking forward, this year we've allowed ourselves to look back. 40 years back, to be precise.

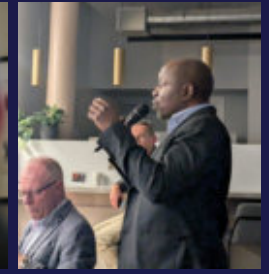
The story of Future Water Association – known for most of its life as the Society of British Water and Wastewater Industries, or SBWWI – is really the story of the UK water supply chain strengthening its voice, decade by decade, meeting by meeting, member by member.



1986

1990s

2001



2011



2015



Future Water
Association

2026



The story begins...

1986 is remembered in the water sector for the white paper that set the blueprint for privatising England and Wales' 10 water authorities. It was a moment of huge uncertainty for the companies who supplied pipes, pumps, valves and materials into the industry. These were businesses that would keep the taps running and the sewers flowing, but who had no collective voice of their own.

At the time, the network they supplied into was in a poor state. Sewers were collapsing at a rate of 16 per 1,000 kilometres every year. A third of water mains were so corroded that brown water was running out of household taps. A quarter of all treated water was being lost to leakage before it ever reached a customer. The sector was underfunded, under pressure, and hungry for investment and transformation.

So, in July 1986, a group of suppliers from Society of British Gas Industries (SBGI), met in Coventry to talk about forming an association specifically representing the water industry – reportedly the first trade association to address the UK water network.

The following November, the Society of British Water Industries (SBWI) was launched, led by Bill Sinden, with a mission

"To help members serve the industry better by providing a forum for discussion and dissemination of information"

That first AGM, made the record books for a different reason too: a bomb scare brought proceedings to an untimely close, though it was thankfully just a scare.





Laying the groundwork

By 1988 the young Society had outgrown borrowed premises from its sister association, the SBGI, and needed a home of its own. Anne Kirby was appointed Assistant Director, and the headquarters moved to Leamington Spa.

The Society's growth mattered at a time of great sectoral change.

The 1989 Water Act privatised the 10 regional water authorities under the same Conservative government that had commissioned the original white paper. It brought in new regulators alongside it: Office of Water Services (Ofwat) and National Rivers Authority (which later became the Environment Agency in 1996). The Drinking

Water Inspectorate (DWI) came a year later in 1990.

The same period saw the water industry enter its first Asset Management Plan period, AMP1. This would become a recurring 5-yearly investment cycle, and one that put roughly £6 billion into a network the Society's own members had spent three years describing as underfunded.

Anne became Director in 1993, establishing the liaison meetings with water and wastewater companies that remain central to the Association's work today, connecting members with company needs, procurement and investment programmes.



In June 1998, Carol Hickman applied for the role of Assistant to the Executive Director, shadowing Anne Kirby ahead of her retirement later that year. On hearing she'd got the job, Carol recalls telling her husband, "That's fantastic.....this will be a doddle!". It turned into rather more than that. A role she'd go on to make her own for the next 16 years, taking the Society through 4 AMP investment cycles, spanning 3 changes of government, from John Major's to Tony Blair's to Gordon Brown's, each bringing fresh reviews and reforms for the sector to absorb...



Leamington Spa



16 years of leadership

Carol Hickman, former director of SBW(W)I



"It's very difficult to summarise 16 years...such a lot happened and developed during that time!! However, the quote 'Mighty Oaks from

Little Acorns Grow' is very apt....the Society/Association is always evolving....great things come from the smallest beginnings.

"My background was in Travel and Marketing so, on joining SBWI (as it was at that time) it was a completely new sector for me. The lovely Anne Kirby, who was Executive Director at the time, had been instrumental in forming the Society from the offices of SBGI.

"During those early years Anne and her team commenced discussions with the water companies, Ofwat, NJUG (National Joint Utilities Group, now Street Works UK) and various other organisations, all of which were influential in their own way

within the water and wastewater industry. As time went on, further links were made and when I took over as Executive Director, there was already a schedule of water company meetings and other industry bodies.

"From my first few days of SBWI, the Management Committee (at that time consisted of David Brown, Tony Kenworthy, Ray Doughty and Ian Acford) were so supportive and knowledgeable that it made my initiation into a new sector very easy.

"SBWI went on to substantially increase its involvement with the water companies, etc and eventually had regular meetings with each of the water company management teams across all four nations of the UK. The Society also increased its engagement with OFWAT, NJUG and the Institute of Water, and had representation on many of the All Party Parliamentary Groups affecting the water industry.



"The Society also brought the Sewer Renovation Association's members into the fold, further strengthening the business, and administered UKAMRA (United Kingdom Automatic Meter Reading Association), linking into the European organisation. We also ran training grant funding on behalf of the Institute of Water, covering various types of training – the highest grant awarded was for a course at Harvard University, such an excellent offering!

"I am extremely proud to have also been involved in the development of the wonderful Water Dragons event, formed from a business proposal by John Batty, and which continues to be a main feature of the Association's focus. Through our many working groups, including metering, the Intelligent Metering Initiative was formed, chaired by George Archibald (RIP). The IMI received significant funds from the water companies to undertake and develop the area of Smart Metering, which was extremely successful at that time and produced substantial insight into the machinations of how smart metering could work effectively.

"During my 16 years the Society continued to develop strong links within the water industry and became a significant contributor to

industry events and groups. However, things needed to go to another level for the Association and your current Chief Executive, Paul Horton, took on the challenge to take the Association onto the next stage.

"There are far too many happy memories and wonderful people to pinpoint them all. Without the time and dedication offered by the management committees throughout my time, and representatives from the member companies, nothing would have been successful. I thoroughly enjoyed my 16 years at the SBW(W)I and met so many absolutely brilliant and talented people, who all wanted to make a difference. It's so encouraging that the Association continues to thrive and remains an influential and active body.

"My congratulations to Paul and his team and all those who are involved in the running, organising and fulfilment of the FWA's activities. It's great to know the organisation is in good, solid hands to take the Association to the next level in this 40th Anniversary year. SBWI/SBWWI/FWA is respected by all sectors of the industry and will continue to flourish going forwards."



The addition of the second 'W'

The turn of the millennium brought the association's next big shift. In 2001 the Sewer Renovation Federation's joined forces with SBWI. The merger reflected something the Society had been becoming for years: an association not just for water, but for wastewater too.

The Society of British Water Industries became the Society of British Water and Wastewater Industries – SBWWI – a name, and a responsibility, to provide even more connections for the sector.

The Society introduced two key areas to drive innovation: the Water Dragons competition, launched in 2005 and formally established as an annual fixture in 2008, and the Innovation, Research and Development Group. Together, these gave suppliers – including many smaller companies – a platform to pitch new products to the industry.

One of the founding members, AVK UK (now a partner of the 40th celebrations) said at the time how impressed they were of the Society's "innovation within the industry through seminars, exhibitions and its own Water Dragons industry award." Noting that as an innovator, the competition has opened up opportunities to showcase their strengths.

SBW



By 2010, as the sector entered AMP5, annual investment had climbed to £22 billion. A new coalition government under David Cameron and Nick Clegg inherited a sector reshaped by The Pitt (UK flood policy after 2007 floods); Cave (review of competition and innovation in water markets); and Walker (charging for household water and sewerage services) Reviews of 2008 to 2010. SBWWI became a regular voice in the DEFRA, Ofwat and Environment Agency briefings that followed, secured seats on industry steering groups, and sponsored the All Party Parliamentary Water Group to keep the supply chain's concerns in front of MPs.

When government confirmed plans to transfer private drains and sewers into water company ownership, SBWWI didn't simply respond – it acted, establishing the Private Sewers Forum. The aim to bring together the Society alongside 8 other trade bodies; EU Skills; Water UK; the Home Builders Federation; and CCWater to work through the practicalities before transfer took effect in October 2011.

Marking the Society's 25th milestone in 2011, then-Chairman Martyn Hopkinson reflected on how far the association had travelled since his own involvement began in the mid-1990s: "With the addition of the second 'W', the Society has become truly representative of all sectors of the UK supply chain to the Water & Wastewater sectors."



Becoming Future Water Association

The society's next reinvention came in 2015, when SBWWI became the Future Water Association – a name that looked forward as the community had always done.

It was a fitting moment for the rename. The wider sector was moving into its own era of digitalisation and competition: smart metering, IoT and leakage detection technologies were transforming how water companies managed their networks through the 2010s.

Northumbrian Water hosted its first Innovation Festival in 2016 that put the sector's appetite for new thinking on public display.

2017 then brought the launch of the Open Water retail market, opening up competition for non-household customers for the first time.

In an industry that was ready for rapid change, Future Water Association was better placed to speak for its members in that environment. One that reflected an increasing focus on innovation, sustainability and the long-term resilience of the network.

The same year the Association changed its name, Carol Hickman stepped down after 16 years and Paul Horton was appointed the Association's new Chief Executive. Paul's background across CIWEM and British Water had given him a close-up view of how policy gets made and where regulators were heading.



Informing. Innovating. Influencing.



Leading since 2015

Under Paul's leadership, the Association has put its weight behind the things members advocate for: a focus on asset health as networks age, resilience as pressure on the industry grows, future-proofing infrastructure as the climate changes, and sector talent as the workforce transforms.



"40 years ago, our founders came together because the supply chain needed a collective voice in an era of uncertainty. Reaching this milestone in 2026 – at a time of major regulatory,

environmental and operational change – shows just how enduring that purpose is.

"Over the past 11 years as CEO, I have seen our members continually step up: championing innovation through Water Dragons, contributing to important work such as the Cunliffe report and industry consultations, and helping shape conversations on leakage, metering, resilience and asset health.

"When COVID came in 2019, we adapted quickly – moving online, hosting events virtually, and creating new ways to stay connected with members and partners.

"Partnership has always been central to our DNA. From running the secretariat for the UKSTT until 2020 to collaborating with partners across the wider infrastructure landscape, we have long recognised that the sector's greatest challenges cannot be solved in silos.

"That spirit of evolution has continued, from the development of Networks November in 2022; and our growing support in areas such as Black History Month in the water sector, skills, and inclusion.

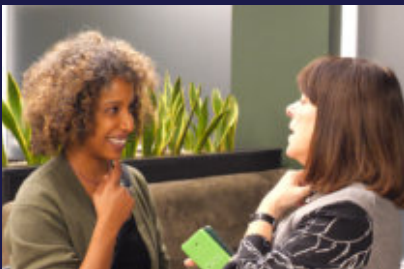
"The introduction of FWA Report Card in 2024, gave a comprehensive evaluation spanning asset health, leakage, sewer issues, research, people and innovation, graded A*–F by our community to show how well the sector is truly doing. To act as a compass for the future."





“Future Water has never been about standing still; it has been about informing, influencing and bringing people together to move the sector forward.

“I am hugely grateful to the members, chairs, partners and colleagues – past and present – who have helped shape the Association’s direction over that time. Their expertise and commitment have ensured that Future Water remains a place for frank conversation, practical collaboration and fresh thinking. We do not just observe the future of water; we help build it.”





Today, the association counts more than 125 members from right across the supply chain – a fair way from the 32 companies who gathered in Coventry in 1986, but built on exactly the same idea: that suppliers to the water industry are stronger, and better heard, together.



In members' and partners' words

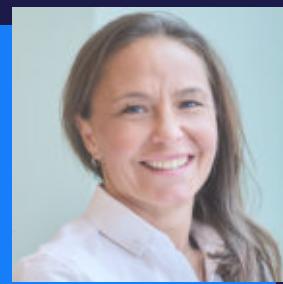


"As a founding member of the Future Water Association, AVK UK is proud to celebrate its 40th anniversary and the vital role it plays in bringing organisations across the water sector together.

"Through its events, forums and technical discussions, the Association has helped strengthen relationships across the supply chain while encouraging the exchange of ideas and solutions to industry challenges. We have particularly valued its commitment to fostering innovation and open dialogue between manufacturers, utilities, contractors, consultants and other stakeholders.

"The Future Water Association has consistently provided a valuable platform for collaboration, knowledge sharing and industry engagement. For AVK, one of the greatest benefits of membership is the opportunity to work alongside organisations that share a common goal of delivering resilient, sustainable and efficient water infrastructure and solutions.

"We congratulate the Future Water Association on this significant achievement and look forward to continuing our partnership and shared commitment to the water sector for many years to come." - [Martin Greenhalgh, Managing Director, AVK UK](#)



"For me, one of the real strengths of Future Water Association is how it brings people together. Its all about sharing ideas and sharing learnings and that's not just people from the water sector but other industries as well.

"That's particularly important in areas like smart metering and smart networks where we're not just trying to deliver technology, we're trying to turn that technology into real outcomes for customers and communities who are trying to do something positive for the environment. So well done FWA on getting to 40 years, here's to the next 40 years of collaboration and innovation" - [Tanya Dady, Horizon Water Infrastructure, Dayworth Consulting, and Chair of Future Water Association Metering Group](#)



"40 years in the sector from SBWI days to Future Water, you're a great organisation to work with. Fantastic for innovation and bringing new products into the sector; superb for consultancies and contractors; very frank conversations with water companies, all leading to evolving the sector to be a better place to work and be better for customers. Well done everybody involved, keep it going." – [Simon Dray, Energy Assets](#)



"Congratulations to Future Water Association on 40 years of supporting our industry. What stands out to me most is the way Future Water brings people together, encourages collaboration, and helps shape the future of the water sector. As someone passionate about developing people and future talent, I hope the next 40 years continue to inspire innovation, skills development, and opportunities for the next generation. Here's to the future and another fantastic 40 years." – [Phil Barnaby, SGB Civils](#)



"We've been involved with Future Water for a number of years and its been fantastic opportunity for connecting with people in the industry, sharing ideas and seeing innovation develop. Entering the Water Dragons was a great accomplishment for our company and gave us a great opportunity to showcase our ideas. Congratulations Future Water on reaching 40 years. It's been a great journey and we wish you all the best for the next 40 years." – [Iain Fisher, Steve Vick](#)



"Membership has facilitated access to clients for us to listen and better understand the challenges they face, and how we can be part of the solution." – [Leon Fern, Hydrosave](#) (member since 2015, when Future Water began and sponsor of Water Dragons)



"When I took what for me was quite a scary step and went out on my own setting up Watershed Associates, I decided to join SBWWI, as it was then, and found the organisation very supportive.

I helped with the leakage conferences then, which led me to work with a lot of colleagues who I'd known for a while, and I've continued to be active with Future Water. After Carol retired, Paul kept the very proactive approach going, and I think what he's done for Future Water has been fantastic.

So what the next 40 years will bring, I don't know, but I'm sure it'll all be really exciting." – [Jo Parker, Watershed Associates](#)



"I've massively valued your commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and in particular Paul's personal commitment to driving change in this space. Keep up the good work!" – [Nicci Russell, Waterwise](#)



On the cusp of change, again

Fittingly, the association's 40th year lands in the middle of the biggest shake-up the UK water sector has seen since privatisation.

The 2020 release of Water UK's Net Zero 2030 Routemap, saw the sector make a commitment to reach net zero by 2030. There's now a sharpened focus on storm overflow reduction and nature-based solutions as public and political attention on the network has intensified and changing climate conditions put pressure on infrastructure. The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 gave Ofwat new powers to ban executive bonuses where environmental standards aren't met – a direct response to public anger over sewage discharges and boardroom pay.

Ofwat's 2024 price review promised the sector £104 billion through to 2030, a record figure to date.

In 2025 the Cunliffe Report set out 88 recommendations for a fundamental reset of the sector; and in 2026 outlined that Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) and the Environment Agency are to merge into a single super regulator – one built not just to consolidate oversight, but to shift toward a more supervisory model of regulation.

Thames Water's debts crept toward £20 billion and nationalisation has gone from unthinkable to a possibility for the first time since privatisation began.

It's the kind of moment SBWWI was built to navigate for its members in 1986, and one Future Water Association is just as ready to lead for them now.





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**Informing.
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