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Vulnerability Strategy – customer research proposal for Wessex Water

April 2024

1. Context

Water companies are now required to operate under a new customer-focused license condition relating to service delivery. Late last year Ofwat also published guidance setting out expectations for supporting customers who need extra help accessing water and wastewater services 'Service for All.' Ofwat now requires all water companies to publish their vulnerability strategy by June 2024.

Wessex Water has led the industry in delivering high quality service to customers and specifically in the support it provides via e.g. stakeholder partnerships, its Tailored Assistance Programme; and the corporate ethos (lived by staff through the 'GEM' initiative).

The full scope of Wessex Water's provision for customers in vulnerability is set out in its 'Every Customer Matters' strategy document. This strategy has been developed over many years and is updated annually. The strategy has been informed through partnerships with debt agencies and other support charities; the CCG's Vulnerability Advisory Panel as well as targeted customer research (e.g. social tariff design). Ofwat specifies, however, that companies must develop their vulnerability strategies with the involvement of customers.

It is clear that 'Every Customer Matters' is *indirectly* informed by customers (i.e. through representative bodies) but there is potentially a gap in terms of direct customer feedback. There is a short window in which we can plug this potential gap with a targeted research exercise which we set out below.

2. Research objective

To evaluate Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy through the eyes of customers whom it is designed to support.

3. Key considerations

Vulnerability is a broad term and covers a wide scope of mental, physical, health, circumstantial and financial situations.

Consequently, the strategy set out in 'Every Customer Matters' is detailed and lengthy – reflecting the need to tailor support to a multitude of different circumstances. This research can not provide an exhaustive evaluation of every aspect of the strategy, nor from the viewpoint of every customer circumstance. But we can convene a broad sample reflecting a wide range of customers to review the parts of the strategy relevant to them.

We want to be able to see differences where customers have experienced the support services in action but also those who have had no problems, no contact and who may be unaware of support services (as they represent the majority of customers).



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To achieve this we will require customer lists to aid recruitment or the parts of the sample who have had recent experience of support services: this might include customers who have recently experienced an incident/problem (in the last 12 months), or who have sought help, or who have registered for PSR.

We need to develop a suite of stimulus materials that offer an accessible and engaging spotlight on the strategy.

We do not propose to show customers the actual strategy document but instead ask them to reflect on extracts that are presented in a consumer-friendly way and can as easily be spoken aloud by the moderator rather than read, which may not always be easy or possible for participants.

We will also probe throughout the interviews to gain an understanding of what a customer summary version of the strategy would look like.

4. Proposed approach - overview

We recommend conducting a series of 36 x 1-hour depth interviews with a sample of customers who need extra help. These interviews will cover the following:

- Exploring personal needs when dealing with service providers generally, and Wessex Water specifically
- Understanding experiences (and how these meet needs)
- Evaluating relevant parts of Wessex Water's vulnerability strategy
 - Is the service level offered acceptable?
 - Are the performance metrics appropriate?
 - How do Wessex Water deliver services to those in need of extra help?

From these interviews we will provide an analysis of the strategy from the customer perspective:

- Is it meeting their specific needs?
- Are they satisfied with the service levels?
- Do they consider the performance metrics to be stretching enough?

Our report will include case studies where these help to illustrate lived experiences of vulnerable individuals; verbatim quotations to bring direct customer voices into the strategy document; and a systematic evaluation (including a red/amber/green framework for at-a-glance review) of customers' assessment of the current strategy.

5. Sample and methodology

We propose convening a broad range of customers to reflect the diverse types of experiences your strategy covers. Our sample frame will ensure we get this breadth - however, we know that customers frequently have multiple indicators of vulnerability, and many will be able to discuss their needs from more than one point of view (e.g. financial vulnerability *and* having additional health or disability needs).

We recommend individual depth interviews as best practice when exploring needs – and reflecting the often personal and sensitive nature of these conversations. We expect that most of the interviews will take place online (via Zoom), but we will ask respondents how they would prefer to participate and have made provision for up to six interviews to be conducted in-home. Additionally, we will invite participants to



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include a supporter or carer where appropriate and have included additional incentive costs for c.8 respondents to opt for this.

The three key sample segments are:

- Those in financial vulnerability / have needs relating to paying the bill. We will agree definitions for 'low income' but propose to use income thresholds reflected in your social tariffs.
- Those with non-financial vulnerabilities (such as physical or mental health problems) who have additional needs when a problem occurs with the service.
- Those who have additional needs for everyday matters (e.g. non-English speaking, BSL, hearing or sight loss).

Across the sample, we will also aim to include households in 'transient' vulnerability i.e. those experiencing temporary circumstances. This category might include e.g. newborn in household, post-op recovery or undergoing specific medical treatment; bereaved or managing following major financial upheaval (such as job loss or divorce/separation).

	Financial vulnerabilities (financial support)	Additional needs when a problem occurs (incident support)	Additional needs for everyday matters (communication/ accessibility support)
Recent experience: Sample recruited using customer lists provided by Wessex Water	On a social tariff and had recent intervention/support (in last year)	PSR customer and had recent service experience (in last year)	PSR customer with communication / accessibility needs
<i>Number of respondents</i>	6	6	6
No recent experience: Free-find recruitment	No recent intervention support (may/may not be on a social tariff)	Eligible for PSR (may or may not be on it) – with non-financial vulnerabilities	Eligible for PSR (may or may not be on it) – with communication/ accessibility barriers
<i>Number of respondents</i>	6	6	6
Total	36		

Minimum quotas will be applied to achieve a wide-ranging sample:

- Min. 15 to be metered, min. 15 to be non-metered
- Even mix of males and females
- While vulnerability is more prevalent in older age groups, we will include participants from across life stages (couples or single / family / empty nesters / retired).
- Min. of 8 participants to have children in the household.
- Mix of those who receive wastewater only vs. wastewater and water services.

