

Consumers registered with water and sewerage companies for special assistance 2007-08

Some consumers require special assistance in the way water and sewerage services are delivered to them because of their age, disability or illness. Under the Water Act 2003, Ofwat (the Water Services Regulation Authority) has a duty to take account of the interests of such customers.

In March 2001¹ we published 'Services for disabled or elderly customers – revised guidance to the water and sewerage companies'. This provided guidance to companies on essential elements of policy and procedures to meet the needs of these consumers.

Examples of services that we expect companies to offer include:

- password schemes to prevent bogus callers;
- issuing bills and associated literature in other formats, such as large print or Braille;
- special arrangements to communicate with consumers requiring assistance in case of an emergency; and
- meter resiting or frequent meter reading services so that consumers can monitor their water consumption.

In [RD11/08, 'Ofwat's guidelines on services for disabled or elderly consumers'](#), we set out some proposed updates to these guidelines to reflect recommendations made following the Consumer Council for Water's [review](#) of the services companies provide to elderly or disabled customers. We also used the opportunity to make a range of other updates to improve the overall value of the guidelines.

The [conclusions to RD11/08](#) and the [updated guidelines](#) were published on our website today. Overall, respondents supported the updates that had been proposed.

Each company must also maintain an accurate and up-to-date record of consumers who have expressed a need for assistance. The register is important as it is designed to make sure that companies make appropriate arrangements in emergencies, and allows consumers to receive the specialised services they require.

Number of consumers registered for special assistance in 2007-08

¹ Reviewed in 2004.

The [table](#) below shows the number of consumers² registered for special assistance in each water company. We do not collect details on the individual forms of assistance consumers receive.

In 2007-08, **103,581** consumers were recorded on companies' registers. This figure is **16%** higher than the figure reported in 2006-07 (**89,534**).

Reasons for the increase include:

- additional company efforts to promote the services offered and make the application process as easy as possible;
- increased meter penetration leading to more consumers requesting frequent meter readings; and
- industry-wide promotion of the doorstep password scheme.

Good practice and promotion

We continue to encourage companies to make sure that all consumers who could benefit are made aware of the services available. When carrying out our annual checks of companies' billing literature, we make sure that reference is made to the availability of such services.

Companies also use a number of other methods to promote their services.

Examples of good practice seen during the past 12 months include:

- mailshots to housing associations, councils and carers associations;
- holding drop-in sessions at libraries;
- educational programmes in the community;
- placing adverts in regional magazines;
- targeted promotional campaigns, for example, in Age Concern's newsletters;
- producing a DVD about bogus callers to use at community events; and
- using media messages to promote the password scheme.

Also, earlier this year the UK water industry launched a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of those who prey on the elderly and vulnerable.

The national 'Knock knock! Who's there? Be stranger aware!' campaign, is supported by the Home Office, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), Water UK and the Consumer Council for Water and aims to raise awareness in all age groups to help prevent distraction burglaries.

² Households receiving more than one service are only counted once.

The companies have also agreed to a national cold-calling protocol which sets out the most appropriate way for company employees to approach vulnerable and elderly customers and will work to strengthen partnerships with local police forces and other appropriate agencies, including Age Concern.

Any customer requiring further details on the various forms of special assistance offered by companies, or details of how to apply to be included on the register, should contact their [local water company](#).

Ofwat
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Number of consumers registered for special assistance – 2006-07 and 2007-08

Company	2006-07	2007-08	Number per 10,000 households ¹	% change 2006-07 to 2007-08 ²
Anglian	6,872	7,036	39	2
Dŵr Cymru	3,067	3,250	27	6
Northumbrian (incl. Essex & Suffolk)	7,273	7,870	45	8
Severn Trent	12,152	13,418	44	10
South West	5,038	6,418	95	27
Southern	9,195	8,214	87	-11 ³
Thames	12,195	21,748	67	78
United Utilities	12,405	12,950	47	4
Wessex	3,779	4,028	81	7
Yorkshire	3,341	3,636	19	9
Bournemouth & West Hampshire	1,049	1,081	61	3
Bristol	1,860	1,971	44	6
Cambridge	596	608	53	2
Dee Valley	377	455	42	21
Folkestone & Dover	706	678	101	-4
Mid Kent	448	502	22	12
Portsmouth	167	170	6	2
South East	1,254	1,257	23	0
South Staffordshire	3,140	3,114	62	-1
Sutton & East Surrey	1,670	1,693	68	1
Tendring Hundred	230	220	33	-4
Three Valleys	2,720	3,264	28	20
Industry	89,534	103,581	47	16

¹ This shows the number of customers registered for special assistance per 10,000 households billed for water in 2007-08.

² Percentage changes rounded to zero decimal places.

³ Reduction partly due to transfer of data from old billing system. A full review of current records will be undertaken in 2008-09.