



Water Services Regulation Authority Water Industry Act 1991 Section 8(3)

Proposal by the Water Services Regulation Authority (Ofwat) to vary the appointments of SSE Water and Thames Water as water and sewerage companies

This notice is a consultation on this proposal. The consultation period will last for 28 days. Having considered any representations submitted in response to the consultation, Ofwat will decide whether or not to grant the variations to these companies' appointments.

The Site

SSE Water has applied to be the water and sewerage company for a development consisting of 645 household properties called Heart of East Greenwich, in London (the Site). The Site is presently within the water supply and sewerage services areas of Thames Water.

The proposal

Ofwat proposes to:

- (i) vary the appointment of SSE Water as a water and sewerage company by adding the Site to its water supply and sewerage services areas; and
- (ii) vary the appointment of Thames Water as a water and sewerage company by excluding the Site from its water supply and sewerage services area.

By means of these variations, SSE Water will become the water and sewerage supplier for the Site.

Policy for new appointments and variations

The new appointment and variation mechanism, set out in primary law¹, provides an opportunity for entry and expansion into the water and sewerage sectors by allowing one company to replace the existing appointee as the provider of water and / or sewerage services for a specific area. This mechanism can be used by new companies to enter the market and by existing appointees to expand their businesses.

When considering applications for new appointments and variations, Ofwat operates within the statutory framework set out by Parliament, including our statutory duty to protect consumers, wherever appropriate by promoting effective competition. In particular, in relation to unserved sites, we consider that we must ensure that the future customers on a site – who do not have a choice of supplier – are adequately protected. When assessing applications for new appointments and variations, the two key policy principles we apply are that:

1. customers, or future customers, should be no worse off than if the site had been supplied by the existing appointee; and
2. Ofwat must be satisfied that an applicant will be able to finance the proper carrying out of its functions as a water and/or sewerage company.

We clarified these two policy principles in February 2011 when we published '[New appointments and variations – a statement on our policy](#)' and '[New appointments and variations – a statement of our process](#)'. In November 2012, we published '[Statement on our approach for assessing financial viability of applications for new appointments and variations](#)'. This states that we will adopt a company-based assessment of financial viability, rather than a detailed site-based assessment, where it is appropriate to do so.

When we assess whether customers will be no worse off as a result of the appointment, we not only consider the customers on the site but also the generality of customers. These include not only the customers of the existing provider but also customers more generally across England and Wales, who in our view benefit from the effective operation of the new appointment and variation mechanism.

The application

SSE Water has applied to be the water and sewerage company for the Site under the unserved criterion set out in section 7(4)(b) Water Industry Act 1991.

¹ The legal framework for new appointments is set out in the Water Industry Act 1991 (WIA91). Section 7 of the WIA sets out the criteria by which an appointment or variation may be made. Section 8 sets out the procedure for making that appointment or variation.

Unserved status of the Site

To qualify under the unserved criterion, an applicant must show that at the time the appointment is made, none of the premises in the proposed area of appointment is served by the existing appointee. In general we require an independent report that verifies the site as being unserved. However, in this case Thames Water has confirmed that it agrees that the site is unserved and, having considered the facts of the site, we are satisfied that an independent report is not required. This is consistent with our policy and process statements on new appointments and variations, published in February 2011.

Protecting customers

Ofwat acts to protect consumers, especially those who are unable to choose their supplier. In assessing applications to supply new development sites, Ofwat acts on behalf of end-customers who are not yet on site to protect their interests. The fact that future customers on a site have not directly chosen their supplier is not a position unique to new appointments – very few customers in England and Wales are able to choose their supplier².

Recognising this, our assessment of an applicant's proposals includes analysis of its plans to ensure customers will be at least no worse off in terms of their annual bills and levels of service than if they had been supplied by the existing appointee. We will continue to protect customers on the Site by regulating the new appointee's prices and service levels.

Customers on the Site – price

SSE Water will take a bulk supply of water from Thames Water to supply the Site, and will discharge from the Site into Thames Water's sewers.

SSE Water will match the fixed water and sewerage charges of Thames Water and offer a 3% discount on Thames Water's volumetric water and sewerage charges. The WaterSure tariff will be available to those customers that apply and qualify for it³.

² The only customers that can choose their supplier are non-household customers that consume at least 5 MI per year and are supplied by a company that is wholly or mainly in England (and at least 50 MI for companies wholly or mainly in Wales) and satisfy the water supply licensing (WSL) eligibility criteria. Those non-household customers that consume at least 50 MI in England (and at least 250 MI in Wales) can switch under either the WSL or NAV framework.

³ Through the WaterSure scheme, households on meters who receive certain means tested benefits or tax credits, and are either responsible for three or more children under the age of 19, or have a medical condition which requires significant additional use of water, can apply to pay no more than the average household bill for their region.

Having considered SSE Water's pricing proposals, we are satisfied that customers will be at least no worse off in terms of their annual bills than if they had been served by Thames Water.

Currently, SSE Water's conditions of appointment provide that SSE Water's price limit is set by reference to the charges of the previous appointee for each of its sites. In this case, SSE Water may not charge customers on the Site more than Thames Water's charges for water and sewerage. We consider that, given SSE Water's small size, this represents a more proportionate way of regulating its prices than subjecting it to a full bespoke price review as we do for larger companies. However, condition B of SSE Water's conditions of appointment allows us to set a specific price limit for SSE Water. This condition is temporarily suspended but we will activate it when we consider it is appropriate to do so. This is unlikely to be before 2014.

Customers on the Site – levels of service

SSE Water is subject to the same customer service level requirements as other water and sewerage appointees.

Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS) compliance and base service levels

SSE Water has submitted information about its proposed service levels under:

- the GSS Regulations⁴;
- our service indicators; and
- its own company standards.

We have assessed these planned levels of service and are satisfied that they match or exceed those typically achieved by Thames Water and the sector as a whole.

Codes of Practice

Every appointee is required under conditions G, H and I of its conditions of appointment to publish debt, leakage and customer Codes of Practice. We have assessed SSE Water's Codes of Practice, and are content that these are of an approvable standard and that customers on the Site would be no worse off than if they had been served by Thames Water. The Consumer Council for Water, the independent public body that represents water and sewerage consumers in England and Wales, is also content with Ofwat's assessment of SSE Water's Codes of Practice.

⁴ The Water Supply and Sewerage Services (Customer Service Standards) Regulations 2008.

SSE Water's voluntary standards

We have also made a detailed check of SSE Water's voluntary service standards, including where they enhance the regulatory GSS provisions, as part of approving SSE Water's Codes of Practice. We require that SSE Water matches or exceeds Thames Water's own standards (except where there is reasonable justification for not doing so).

Examples of where SSE Water will offer improved customer service compared with Thames Water include:

- SSE Water will offer a free leak repair service on domestic customer supply pipes, as compared with Thames Water which offers only a subsidised repair service. (However, for a new build site leakage should be less likely which makes it an easy option for SSE Water to offer an improved policy).
- SSE Water offers 0800 free phone numbers for all customer contacts, while Thames Water's are 0845 (local rate) numbers.
- SSE Water's call centre opening hours are at least as good as Thames Water (Thames Water offers 8am-8pm Monday to Friday and 8am-1pm on Saturday, whereas SSE Water offers 8am-8pm Monday to Friday and 8am-2pm on Saturday. Both have 24-hour lines for emergencies).
- SSE Water will make higher GSS payments in some areas, for example offering £50 for low pressure or failing to respond to account queries within 10 days, compared with Thames Water's £30.
- SSE Water offers several additional standards which Thames Water does not offer. For example, it will pay £100 for internal flooding due to a burst water main, £30 if it does not read the customer's meter at least once a year and £150 if it issues a Court Claim in error.

However, SSE Water does not propose to match Thames Water in some ways, for example:

- SSE Water does not currently offer such an extensive range of services as Thames Water for customers with special needs. For example, Thames Water offers a sign language interpreter for customer visits, coloured background bills for dyslexic customers, and an email service for screen-reading software users.
- SSE Water does not offer as extensive a range of payment options, although the range it does offer is adequate. SSE Water has signalled its intention to expand this range in future.
- SSE Water offers more limited ways for customers to contact them than Thames Water. For example Thames Water has a 24 hour automated bill payment line, and offers 24 hour availability of its textphone/typetalk service

(SSE has no automated phone services, and its textphone service is only available during call centre opening hours: 8 am – 8 pm Mon–Fri, 8 am – 2 pm Sat).

- SSE Water does not currently have a customer assistance fund, but Thames Water does. However, several other incumbents do not offer a charitable trust or assistance fund.

While the areas in which SSE Water does not propose to match Thames Water are not statutory or appointment requirements, we have explained to SSE Water that these areas must be kept under review as its customer base expands. SSE Water has committed to do so. As a minimum, we will review these three years after the most recent approval as part of the re-approval of Codes of Practice. As SSE Water extends into different existing appointees' areas, all Codes will be assessed against other existing appointees' policies and we will request improvements we judge are required as its customer base grows.

Having considered SSE Water's overall proposed service levels, and compared them with those of Thames Water, we are satisfied that customers on the Site will receive a level of service that is comparable with the level of service they would have received had they been served by Thames Water.

Developer choice

Ofwat takes into consideration the choices of the site developer. In this case, the Site developer has said that it wants SSE Water to be the water and sewerage company for the Site.

Environment Agency and Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI)

We take the views of these organisations into account before progressing to consultation on an application for a new appointment. Both the Environment Agency and DWI informed us that they are content for us to consult on this application.

Thames Water's existing customers

In considering whether customers will be no worse off, we also looked at the potential effects of this variation on the prices that Thames Water's existing customer base may face.

The calculation necessarily depends on a range of assumptions, and there are clearly difficulties involved in quantifying the effect on Thames Water. It is therefore necessary to use a simplified set of figures. We have expressed the effect in 'per bill' terms to try and quantify the possible effect in an easily understandable way.

Broadly, we have assessed the potential magnitude of this impact by comparing how much Thames Water might have expected to receive in revenue from serving the Site directly, with the revenues they might expect from serving the Site indirectly via bulk supply and discharge agreements with SSE Water. The lower bound of the range takes into account the benefit to Thames Water as a result of SSE Water serving the site, by estimating the costs that Thames Water is likely to avoid, such as retail costs and capital and operating costs associated with the local network used to serve the site. The upper bound of the range does not take these avoided costs into account. We look at these differences in revenue and costs over a hundred year timeframe to reflect the long-lived assets that will be used to supply customers at the Site.

In this case, we have calculated that if we grant the Site to SSE Water, there may be a potential impact on the bills of Thames Water's existing customers of between - £0.02 and £0.01.

We are comfortable that this range accounts for the uncertainty in the costs that may be avoided by Thames Water. It is important to note that we do not have information on the level of developer contribution that Thames Water would have received had it served the Site. We have therefore used data on the level of developer contribution that SSE Water will receive as a proxy. Generally, this will understate the level of developer contributions, as we might expect a new appointee to offer more attractive terms to a developer than an incumbent in order to win the new development. In this case, SSE Water is not receiving any developer contributions. This has the effect of marginally reducing the stated impact.

Further, this impact does not take into account the potential spillover benefits to customers arising from dynamic efficiencies achieved as a result of the competitive process to win new sites. We set out the wider benefits we believe stem from the new appointments and variations regime below.

Wider benefits

The new appointment and variation mechanism provides a means for companies from outside the water and sewerage sectors to enter the market and for existing water and sewerage appointees to expand their businesses.

Entry and expansion (and even the threat of such by potential competitors) can lead to benefits for different customers in different ways (such as developers of new housing sites and household and non-household customers). Examples of benefits delivered via the new appointment and variation mechanism include price discounts, better services, environmental improvements and innovation in the way services are delivered. Benefits can also accrue to the existing appointee's customers, because

when that appointee faces a challenge to its business that challenge can act as a spur for it to raise its game.

These wider benefits that we believe stem from the new appointments and variations regime are set out more fully in our [policy statement](#).

Overall assessment of effect on customers

Overall, we consider that customers on the Site will be at least no worse off being served by SSE Water than they would have been had they been served by Thames Water. We consider that the potential effect on Thames Water's existing customers is very likely to be offset by the wider benefits of the new appointment and variation mechanism. We are therefore satisfied that customers would be no worse off as a result of our granting this variation.

Ability to finance the proper carrying out of functions

We have a statutory duty to ensure that efficient appointees can finance the proper carrying out of their functions. When a company applies for a new appointment or variation, it must satisfy us that it is able to carry out all of the duties and obligations associated with being an appointed water or sewerage company.

In this case, SSE Water has satisfied us that it can finance its functions.

Conclusion and next steps

In assessing SSE Water's application for this variation, we have considered the general benefits of new appointments. We are satisfied that our two key policy principles have been met in this case, as customers will be no worse off, and SSE Water will be able to finance its functions. We have also considered the effects of granting this variation on Thames Water's existing business.

We are therefore minded to grant the appointment under the unserved criterion. We are consulting on our proposal to do so.

Where to send submissions

Any representations about, or objections to, this proposal should be sent in writing to Richard Field, Senior Case Officer, Markets and Economics Division, Ofwat, Centre City Tower, 7 Hill Street, Birmingham, B5 4UA so as to be received no later than 14 June 2013. Submissions can also be emailed to: Richard.Field@ofwat.gsi.gov.uk.