

Ofwat PR24 and beyond: Reflecting customer preferences in future price reviews: A response by Hopkins Van Mil

1. About Hopkins Van Mil

[Hopkins Van Mil: Creating Connections Ltd](#) (HVM) facilitates engagement and conducts research so that voices are heard, learning is shared and understanding achieved. We create safe and trusted spaces for productive and engaging discussions on the issues that matter to individuals, to communities and to society. Director of HVM, Henrietta Hopkins has worked with ComRes (2017-2019) and EQ Communications (2018) on research programmes for Thames Water. Senior Associate with HVM, Suzannah Kinsella, has worked on research projects for CCWater (Customer communication: Water supplies & resilience deliberative workshops 2017) and Anglian Water (Customers in vulnerable circumstances ethnographic research and PR19 research 2017). HVM is involved in a range of research and engagement programmes which engage those who are vulnerable in society, including the National Lottery Community Fund's Help through Crisis grant programme.

2. About our response

Having read Ofwat's paper on reflecting customer preference in future price reviews, we would like to respond to two of the questions you raised:

Q1: Do you agree with the goals we have proposed for customer engagement at future price reviews? If not, why not?

We agree that the goals are a useful reflection of learnings from customer engagement and industry response from the previous two Price Reviews. We are particularly supportive of the goals to foster collaboration and to broaden value.

Having worked on research into topics such as customer vulnerability for water companies, we can see that a **collaborative research approach** on universal issues of this kind would have the following benefits:

- Enable high quality research to be accessed by all water companies, regardless of their size or research budget.
- Save money by avoiding duplicatory research: money that could be put to better use e.g. to help customers in vulnerable circumstances, environmental sustainability etc.
- Encourage more cross sector collaboration where relevant for the issue: for example in the Anglian water research into customers in vulnerable circumstances, water bills were seldom discussed in isolation from other utility bills.

The goal to **'broaden value'**, particularly resonates for us. We spent much of 2020 running public dialogue research projects discussing the National Food Strategy (Defra) and consumer views on the shape of the UK's future trade deals (Which?). In both discussions, participants, drawn from a cross section of society, balked against any proposition that they were sharing their 'consumers' voice'. Throughout, there were rich discussions on how they expected government, industry, as well as themselves, to play a stronger role in creating a fairer society and in reducing stresses on climate and the environment. We believe that people's views on public value have evolved significantly in the last 5-10 years, as evidence of climate change (UK floods/Australian bush fires etc) and signs of economic disparity (increase in food bank usage, zero hour contracts etc) intensify. Looking ahead to PR24, we believe that

creating the space for customer engagement on broader measures of value will be essential to understanding people's true values as citizens in the context of the Price Review.

Q11: Do you think there are other ideas we should be considering for shaping customer engagement at future price reviews? If so, how would these ideas help deliver on the goals proposed in this paper?

In line with our response to Q1, the goals for greater collaboration and broadening understanding of what customers value, we are pleased to see the idea of Citizens' Assemblies included. Citizens' Assemblies are one form of a range of deliberative techniques that help to generate insights into public views on important and complex issues. Citizen Assemblies are by their nature large scale in order to be representative and longer term (4days+ spread over several weeks or months) to enable sufficient time for learning, deliberation and decision making. Depending on the issue, other forms of deliberation could also be useful: such as citizens' juries, citizens' panel, deliberative polling, public dialogue and other forms of deliberative workshop.

As Ofwat shapes its approach to customer engagement for PR24, we would be delighted to join a forum discuss the value of these and other methods to ensure that "water companies act in the long-term interests of society and the environment while still providing the very best service for customers today."¹

¹ Time to act together: Ofwat's strategy <https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Time-to-act-together-Ofwats-strategy-1.pdf>