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Our Ref	MH/12102023
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Portsmouth Water: Consultation on Service for All - Vulnerability guidance for water companies supporting customers who need extra help.

Dear Customer Focus Team,

We are pleased to be able to provide our view on your consultation published in July 2023 “*Service for all – Ofwat’s draft vulnerability guidance for water companies supporting customers who need extra help.*”

As a company, we are supportive of ensuring that all customers who need extra help, receive it. That is why in this AMP we have achieved one of the highest number of households registered for our Priority Services at the end of 2022-23, reaching 10.5% of our billed properties.

This means that for the AMP so far, we will have overperformed, not just against our annual forecast, but against our end of AMP forecast in 2025.

We are also committed to ensuring that we provide the most appropriate support to our customers based on our understanding of their needs.

We have considered your consultation paper in detail and responded to each question, as outlined below.

Q1 – Do you agree that we should retain the vulnerability definition we set out in our 2016 Vulnerability Focus Report?

There has been many discussions and conversations that we have been a part of relating to the definition and despite this being a key focus for many, there has yet to be a definition that should replace the existing definitions.

We agree that the definition set out in 2016 by the Ofwat Vulnerability Focus Report remains relevant and can be applied to how we as a water company would consider our customers circumstances.

Q2 – Do you agree with our approach to nomenclature, particularly our use of the term ‘extra help’?

We recognise that this is a particularly difficult area and as we focus on providing customers with better tools and further support, their expectations are changing. It is essential for customers with additional needs to access services and be protected when things go wrong e.g. supply interruptions. These tools and enhanced support are often seen as a minimum service requirement by customers, and not extra help.

Despite this, it seems like the term is reasonable in defining the additional adaptations and service responses that water companies may provide and creates an understanding of what Ofwat means now and in the future.

Q3 – Do you agree with our proposed approach to applying the guidance to new appointees and the Welsh non-household sector?

It is clear from work across vulnerability and affordability that stakeholders particularly do not feel that customers requiring more support (for whatever reason) should receive different levels of support depending on where they live. We support this but also recognise that companies may face different challenges based on examples such as customer locations (rural v urban), scale of incidents etc.

As NAVs operate across a broad range of areas then it may be possible for support to be agreed through the incumbent operating around those areas through a charge based on wholesale scheme of charges. It would require ongoing sharing of data and relevant data agreements to be in place.

Q4 – What impact do you think our draft guidance will have on the experiences of customers who need extra help?

Based on our commitment to supporting our customers, it is unlikely to enhance our services to customers beyond those that we already provide. It will, however, help to provide a framework of expectations that will enable us to better assess on an ongoing basis our internal assurance on meeting regulatory expectations.

Q5 – Are there further lessons from other regulated sectors that could be incorporated into our draft guidance?

We do not feel that we are best placed to comment on other regulated sectors.

Q6 – Do you agree with our proposed approach to enforcing our customer focused licence condition by reference to our draft guidance?

We feel that this is an appropriate approach assuming that there remains the element of proportionality in the approach.

Additional elements relevant to questions above for consideration:

We would also ask for Ofwat to consider the following:

- (1) The overlap between the requirements of legislation, such as Disability Discrimination Act, and this guidance, ensuring that there is no conflict.
- (2) The current use of the term Priority Services Register – this is a particularly unhelpful term, and we know that customers who need additional support do not like the idea of being flagged on a ‘register’

Q7 – Do you agree that our draft objectives cover the broad areas of vulnerability support activities that companies should be considering?

We agree that the range of objectives covers at a high level all the key water company activities relating to vulnerability.

Q8 – Do you agree with the proposed list of minimum expectations we have set out?

Overall, we agree with the proposed minimum expectations that Ofwat has suggested although we would suggest concerning the framing of those expectations as proposed minimum.

We note that in **objective 1** you specifically refer to the siting of new meters in places that are accessible to customers. This potentially has impacts for both water companies regarding its requirements for new developers as well as the impact on company policies.

The above should be carefully considered in the context of the legal requirements of reasonable adaptations and expectations of customers.

In minimum expectation 1.3 we note the requirement to suggest that companies who have been let down should provide compensation through a policy, but that this remains voluntary. As this suggestion is enshrined within a minimum expectation, we find it difficult to see how this can be delinked from the guaranteed service standards. With the above in mind whilst we recognise what you are trying to achieve compensation outside of guaranteed service standards is based on company approaches and we would question the need to specifically try and document this aspect when other areas are not documented due to the unique elements of each circumstance.

In **Objective 2 - Identifying customers**, we feel there is a need to consider how capturing additional data aligns with the consistent approach that we are trying to achieve as an industry by aligning data codes with Energy Distribution Network operators. There is a risk that the 'tell us once' aspect may be diluted through additional data that we are not able to share if necessary.

Q9 – Do our draft minimum expectations offer a good balance between making clear the minimum standards we expect from companies and challenging companies to innovate and find new ways to meet the needs of their customers?

We do believe that, subject to the comments that we have made in this consultation response, that the approach offers a reasonable balance and cannot see how it would discourage innovation by companies to manage their customer service approach.

Q10 – Do you agree with the proposed approach and timeline around companies' vulnerability strategies?

We do not see any significant challenges with the suggested timeline of June 2024.

Q11 – Do you agree with the proposed approach to how water companies should use our guidance?

We agree that the intentions of Ofwat are clearly set out. We would, however, reiterate our comments relating to compensation payments set out and relating to minimum expectation 1.3.

Q12 – Do you agree with the proposed approach and timelines for setting out our detailed expectations around the design of priority services registers in a separate standards document?

We consider the proposed approach to be pragmatic and avoids the need to update, however, this does raise additional confusion for stakeholders and customers introducing multiple documents and guidance.

Additionally, from an optics perspective it can often look to those outside the industry, like standards and guidance have not been reviewed and adapted to the changing external environment with a heavy reliance on old documents. In fact, in this consultation paper, you signpost in section 1.3 to 7 individual documents which contain expectations. You may wish to consider a more appropriate and controlled approach may be a single document that is updated regularly. Not only will this make it simpler for customers and stakeholders but also companies.

Additional comment

Although not specifically relevant to any of the consultation questions we note that you reference the potential for Ofwat to undertake deep dive research with vulnerable customers (potentially after incidents). Whilst in principle we agree to this then Ofwat should consider any data requirements that may be asked to be provided by companies to ensure that company privacy notices could be updated, and any additional data requirements be considered from a data protection perspective.

We look forward to working with the regulator in evolving this guidance and adapting the final outputs into our delivery framework.

If you have any further questions in relation to our response, then please feel free to contact me in the first instance.

Kind Regards,

Matthew Hamilton
Chief Customer Officer