

Yorkshire Forum for Water Customers
Minutes of Meeting
23 January 2025
Microsoft Teams Meeting

Attendees:

Chris Griffin	Independent Member
Dave Merrett	Independent Member
Fiona Morris	Environment Agency
James Copeland	National Farmers Union
Kursh Siddique	Independent Member
Steve Grebby	Consumer Council for Water
Tom Keatley	Natural England

Apologies:

Jodie Hall	Citizens Advice
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Guests:

Donna Hildreth	Yorkshire Water
Richard Hepburn	Yorkshire Water
Victoria Dart	Yorkshire Water
Rachel Barnard	Yorkshire Water

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1. Minutes

- a) The minutes from December will be circulated to Forum members for feedback and approval outside of the meeting by 31st January.

2. Actions

- a) Open and in-progress actions were reviewed.
- b) Actions from February:
 - i. *The Company to share data tables detailing benefits with the Forum [Working with Others PC]. The Company are commissioning a 6 capitals review to demonstrate the value generated across Yorkshire. This report will be a comprehensive external assessment of wider benefits and is due to be complete by March 2025 at which point it will be shared with the Forum. Currently **in progress**.*
- c) Actions from April:
 - i. *The Company to source additional information on Ofwat's consultation relating to the Innovation Fund and share with the Forum. Ofwat have updated that they intend to consult on this in future, but the specific detail has not been shared. Remains **open**.*
- d) Actions from September:
 - i. *Add Watermark report analysis to a future Forum meeting agenda. On January's agenda; however, postponed due to time constraints. Currently **in progress**.*
- e) Actions from November:
 - i. *The EA to investigate whether a pollution reporting performance industry comparison can be shared with Forum members, albeit recognising that this would represent unverified data. Remains **open**.*
 - ii. *The Company to share a graphical representation of the time to report potential pollution events, particularly where the 4-hour target has been missed. **Open**.*
 - iii. *Forum members to consider the call for evidence and writing their own response in February 2025. **Open**.*
 - iv. *The Company to provide further updates to the Forum when further details about the Cunliffe review are known. **Open**.*
 - v. *The Company to finalise decisions about the future of the Forum. **Open**.*

f) Actions from December:

- i. *Members to review minutes and advise of any issues or challenges by 17th January. **Complete.***
- ii. *The Company to extend the January meeting by one hour to accommodate discussions on the revised agenda. **Complete.***
- iii. *The Company to provide a fuller report on serious pollution incidents for debate at the January meeting. **Complete.***
- iv. *The Company to share the analysis of the FD with the Forum ahead of the January meeting. **Complete.***
- v. *The Company to share the proposed Stage 2 questions [regional perceptions research] and share the results of Stage 1 by the end of January. Stage 1 results are under review and will be shared soon. Stage 2 is currently on hold. **Open.***
- vi. *The Company to provide an update on the impact of the new complaint-handling systems and processes in February 2025's meeting. **Open.***
- vii. *The Company to investigate whether a Forum representative could occasionally attend the bi-weekly executive meeting where complaints deep-dives are undertaken. Check feasibility of attending complaints related meetings. **Open.***
- viii. *How does the Forum better engage with the senior team at the Company. **Open.***

g) New actions from January 2025:

- i. **Action 1** – Affordability and Vulnerability subgroup members to investigate the impact of the social tariff on non-household entities, especially considering upcoming changes to minimum wage and National Insurance.

3. Update on Affordability and Vulnerability Subgroup

- a) The Chair provided an update on Affordability and Vulnerability (A&V) subgroup meeting, held on 15th January, focussed on the new social tariff.
- b) The Chair informed members that positive news had been shared related to the new social tariff. They highlighted that 152,000 bill payers are currently receiving bill support, against a forecast of 145,000. Despite some duplicates, the numbers remain significantly higher than expected.
- c) The Chair added that the Company has begun preparations to transition approximately 60,000 customers to the new social tariff in April. He reassured that existing support for bill payers will continue alongside the new band system, ensuring no one loses out.
- d) Further, the Chair discussed the potential banding structures for the social tariff, emphasising the need for simplicity and certainty for customers. The banding will have three tiers, with income thresholds depending on household size. It was confirmed in the subgroup meeting that disability benefits will be exempted from income calculations.
- e) The Chair noted positively that larger households with a relatively high income of up to £28,000 could still receive a benefit.
- f) A Forum member raised a query regarding the impact of the social tariff on non-household entities, especially in light of upcoming changes to minimum wage and National Insurance in April.
- g) The Chair acknowledged the issue, noting that it has not been addressed by the A&V subgroup. However, he suggested Forum members to investigate the issue in more detail, emphasising the increased pressure businesses would face in April due to the changes.

Action 1: Affordability and Vulnerability subgroup members to investigate the impact of the social tariff on non-household entities, especially considering upcoming changes to minimum wage and National Insurance.

- h) The Forum member highlighted that the impact of minimum wage and NI changes extend beyond businesses, noting that resultant changes in employment status may affect customers' ability to pay domestic bills.
- i) The Chair then brought focus on to PSR performance, explaining that this is measured by three metrics: the number of people on the PSR, the number of contact attempts made to those on the PSR, and the number of successful contacts.

- j) The Chair added that there is a requirement to contact 95% of customers on the PSR annually to check that this is still relevant to their needs. The Company has achieved a 73% successful contact rate despite concerted efforts. The subgroup noted that this is reflective of the challenging circumstances of those customers.
- k) It was reported that the subgroup felt its focus should be on the numbers of customers on the register and the level of service they receive, especially during operational events, and that the 95% target is very high.
- l) Following a question from a Forum member about the feasibility of the 95% contact rate target, it was clarified that this measures attempted contacts rather than successful contacts, which have a different target is set.
- m) The Company updated that it plans to have representatives visit PSR customers in person to understand and clarify their ongoing needs.
- n) The Company recalled figures from the previous year's PSR performance, noting that while the attempted contact rate was 107%, the actual contact rate was 34% against a target of 35%. This means the overall target was not met that year.
- o) Additionally, the Company emphasised that the intention behind meeting the PSR target is purely to support vulnerable customers, rather than there being any financial incentives.

4. Further updates from the Chair

- a) The Chair updated the Forum on a consultation event hosted by CCW and Ofwat about new customer panels. He noted that a response based on members' feedback had been submitted, along with a separate response for a second consultation on the special measures bill, covering the fit and proper persons test and executive remuneration.
- b) The Chair elaborated that the event commenced with an introduction on future customer engagement and its effectiveness, followed by breakout sessions. He observed a prevalent scepticism among members regarding Ofwat's commitment to considering customer feedback, citing past instances where customer research had been disregarded.
- c) The Chair noted there were concerns that issues raised by customer panels might be beyond water companies' control, as many decisions are controlled by approved five-year business plans. Requests in AMP to change, would be severely limited.
- d) The Chair also noted that customer panels were presented as part of a broader strategy to gather feedback, alongside independent challenge

groups, which provide in-depth analysis and expert knowledge. It was mentioned that customer panels might consist of 50 to 75 independently chaired members, with meetings occurring once a year, however this not confirmed.

- e) It was noted by other attendees of the meeting that the specific requirements of customer panels has yet to be decided by Ofwat.
- f) A Forum member emphasised that the primary focus of the customer panels should be accountability, rather than merely gathering customer research. The member also highlighted past challenges in engaging consumers, the need for practical solutions to ensure representative participation, and the importance of providing a means for customers to scrutinise water companies while maintaining panel independence.
- g) Another Forum member inquired about the panel structure, asking whether there would be a national panel or individual panels for each company. It was clarified that there would be individual panels for each company. A Forum member also noted the complexity due to overlapping service areas, such as customers having separate water and wastewater providers.
- h) The Chair mentioned that he found it reassuring that existing mechanisms, including customer research and Independent Challenge Groups (ICGs), would remain integral to the process.

5. Ofwat's Final Determination

- a) The Company updated Forum members on its assessment of Ofwat's Final Determination.

6. Update on Serious Pollution Incidents

- a) The Company updated the Forum on Serious Pollution Incidents and its Improvement Plan.
- b) The Company highlighted the strategic importance of pollution management due to environmental, reputational, and financial impacts. The Company also acknowledged that 2024 pollution performance was not meeting expectations. Currently, there are around 150 total pollution incidents of which 7 are confirmed serious incidents, with another 9 under review. Final numbers will be confirmed by February 2025.
- c) The Company informed the Forum that in June 2024, it forecasted that total pollution incidents could exceed 185, with serious incidents at around 8, if trends continued.

- d) The Company outlined its review and improvement plan, including a six-week data-led sprint, a review by Cranfield University, and best practices from Water and Sewerage Company (WASC) working groups.
- e) The six-week sprint sought to develop initiatives to arrest the run rate and set a foundation for future improvements, focusing on sewage pumping stations, rising mains, wastewater treatment works, sewer network, and critical enablers.
 - i. Sewer Networks: The Company has targeted the problematic 15% of the sewer network by installing monitors on high-risk manholes to improve first response and investigation quality.
 - ii. Pumping Stations and Rising Mains: The Company has enhanced the reliability of 32 high-polluting assets using "hypercare", and applied proactive interventions to 85 additional pumping stations and 29 rising mains.
 - iii. Wastewater Treatment Works (WWTW): Addressing 41 sites responsible for 65% of all WWTW pollutions, "hypercare" was implemented to improve performance and maintenance of critical assets.
 - iv. Critical Enablers: Enhanced frontline team training, delivered the Above Ground Maintenance (AGM) program, and improved operational intelligence through increased monitoring.
- f) The Pollution Plan was reviewed by Cranfield University. The review concluded that the plan rebalanced efforts towards understanding asset behaviour and prioritising high-risk sites; and was fit for purpose.
- g) Cranfield University forecasted a reduction in total pollution incidents to 162, achieving green status.
- h) The goal of zero pollution incidents by AMP8 end and Top Quartile performance was rated amber – feasible but challenging, requiring adaptation and addressing data uncertainties.
- i) Sewage Pumping Stations & Rising Mains asset plans received an amber rating due to resource allocation potentially impact execution.
- j) Wastewater Treatment Works was allocated a green status.
- k) Sewer Network and Critical Enablers were both rated Green/Amber due to promising plans against resource or integration challenges.
- l) The Company updated that it participates in an industry code of practice group to standardise incident response and evidence capture, and share best practice. As a result, changes to standard practices were recently rolled out at the Company.
- m) Further, the Company informed that it has invested £70 million capital expenditure (CapEx) in its Pollution Escalation plan, including £22 million for

high-risk rising mains. £24 million has been invested in network monitoring and AI-based incident prediction.

- n) The Company identified focus on small WWTW and improving outfall maintenance, with hypercare applied to the highest risk assets.
- o) In terms of Serious Pollution next steps, the Company cited
 - i. World Class Pollution response – using ringfenced higher skilled resources specific to pollution incidents
 - ii. Operational Intelligence – greater use of AI to allow response before incidents become serious
 - iii. Total Pollution Plan – enhanced maintenance and management practices following a "pollution triangle" approach to reduce minor incidents and prevent them from becoming major incidents.
- p) The Company highlighted its future focus on delivery with continuous review and adaptation of the pollution plan, incorporating best practices from other water companies and integrating successful initiatives.
- q) A Forum member inquired about the common themes and customer impacts of serious pollution incidents, noting the difference between pollution in watercourses and incidents affecting homes.
- r) The Company explained that most serious pollution incidents impacted watercourses and ecology, with one affecting bathing water. The Company also noted that internal sewer flooding was excluded from these accounts and that further investigation is ongoing to understand customer impacts.
- s) Another Forum member highlighted the importance of cleanups after pollution incidents and also suggested involving external agencies, like the Environment Agency, in the best practice industry discussions for greater validity.
- t) The need for clear communication to customers about pollution reduction plans was also emphasised during the meeting.
- u) The Company acknowledged the feedback. It went on to mention an app developed with Rivers Trust for reporting pollution incidents, for use by the public and colleagues, as well as an "adopt your local CSO" initiative for staff members.
- v) The Company pointed out that customer-friendly documents, summarising the Pollution Reduction Plan (PRP), will be available on its website following a review by the Environment Agency.
- w) Another Forum member asked if the allocated funding and timescale are sufficient to address the resource challenges flagged by Cranfield University.
- x) The Company clarified that resources have been significantly increased, especially in the process and pumping areas. The £70 million allocated for

capital works is separate from operational budgets, which are being planned to ensure adequate funding.

- y) A Forum member highlighted the focus on environmental impact, noting that incidents are classified based on their environmental impact and the sensitivity of the discharge area.
- z) The Company confirmed that any new guidance from the Environment Agency (EA) will be adopted by the industry.
- aa) Another Forum member inquired about the impact of pollution incidents on customers, emphasising the importance of long-term investment in technology and avoiding resource gaps in different areas. The Forum member also asked about handling near misses and their effects on public perception.
- bb) To this, the Company explained that the rising mains program targets high-priority assets with frequent bursts, including those in remote areas not close to watercourses. The program's second layer addresses additional high-risk areas, ensuring comprehensive coverage.
- cc) The Company added that near misses are being monitored to prevent public perception issues and ensure overall network reliability. The Company also confirmed that the investment in technology and resources is ongoing and aligned with long-term goals.

7. AOB

- a) No further business was raised.

Actions tracker –

January 2025

Ref.	Action	Status
1	Affordability and Vulnerability subgroup members to investigate the impact of the social tariff on non-household entities, especially considering upcoming changes to minimum wage and National Insurance.	Open

December 2024

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1	Members to review minutes and advise of any issues or challenges by 17 th January.	Complete
2	The Company to extend the January meeting by one hour to accommodate discussions on the revised agenda.	Complete
3	The Company to provide a fuller report on serious pollution incidents for debate at the January meeting.	Complete
4	The Company to share the analysis of the FD with the Forum ahead of the January meeting.	Complete
5	The Company to share the proposed Stage 2 questions [regional perceptions research] and share the results of Stage 1 by the end of January.	Open
6	The Company to provide an update on the impact of the new complaint-handling systems and processes in February 2025's meeting.	Open
7	The Company to investigate whether a Forum representative could occasionally attend the bi-weekly executive meeting where complaints deep-dives are undertaken. Check feasibility of attending complaints related meetings.	Open
8	How does the Forum better engage with the senior team at the Company	Open

November 2024

Ref.	Action	Status
1	The EA to investigate whether a pollution reporting performance industry comparison can be shared with	Open

	Forum members, albeit recognising that this would represent unverified data.	
2	The Company to share a graphical representation of the time to report potential pollution events, particularly where the 4-hour target has been missed.	Open
3	Forum members to consider the call for evidence and writing their own response in February 2025.	Open
4	The Company to provide further updates to the Forum when further details about the Cunliffe review are known.	Open
5	The Company to finalise decisions about the future of the Forum.	Open

October 2024

All actions completed.

September 2024

Ref.	Action	Status
6	Add Watermark report analysis to a future Forum meeting agenda.	In progress

August 2024

All actions completed.

July 2024

All actions completed.

June 2024

All actions completed.

May 2024

All actions completed.

April 2024

Ref.	Action	Status
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2	The Company to source additional information on Ofwat's consultation relating to the Innovation Fund and share with the Forum.	Open
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March 2024

All actions completed.

February 2024

Ref.	Action	Status
5	The Company to share data tables detailing benefits with The Forum [Working with Others PC]	In progress