

2021 – 2022

Yorkshire Forum for Water Customers

A statement from the Yorkshire
Forum for Water Customers on
Yorkshire Water's performance



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About us

We, the Yorkshire Forum for Water Customers, were set up in 2012. We are made up of key groups and independent members in Yorkshire who together represent Yorkshire Water's customers.

We make sure that Yorkshire Water fully consult you, to learn your views and priorities and deliver the services you want. We meet regularly to monitor Yorkshire Water's performance against the commitments they made to customers (performance commitments) for 2020 to 2025 and make sure they involve us.

We play a vital role in helping Ofwat (the industry regulator) monitor Yorkshire Water's business plans, and are responsible for:

- challenging how well the company involve customers;
- challenging how the company's business plan reflects your views and priorities;
- monitoring the company's progress against their performance commitments; and
- providing an independent evaluation of how well customers' priorities are reflected in the company's business plans.

For more information about us or our terms of reference, or to see the minutes from our meetings, please visit:

yorkshirewater.com/about-us/yorkshire-forum-for-water-customers

Membership

Our Forum is made up of a number of customer and stakeholder representatives and independently chaired by Andrea Cook OBE. Information about all of our members is set out below.

Andrea Cook OBE

Independent Chair

A consumer and regulatory specialist with a successful track record in the energy, financial, legal and water sectors and particular expertise in complaint handling. Substantial experience of chairing boards and senior-level working groups and as a non-executive director. Significant knowledge of stakeholder engagement and a commitment to principles of independence, fairness, proportionality, diversity and transparency. Excellent judgement and analytical skills, the ability to assess complex material, and experience in producing high-quality reports aimed at customers.

Janine Shackleton

Policy Manager Consumer Council for Water

The Consumer Council for Water is the independent organisation representing household and business customers across England and Wales. It was set up in 2005 to represent customers, including making sure their interests are at the heart of decision-making in the water industry.

It works with customers to listen to their views, answer their enquiries and sort out their complaints about water companies.

It uses evidence from customer research, information from water companies, comparisons with other water companies, complaints and information on company performance, as well as feedback from household and business customers, to guide its work on behalf of all water customers. Its duty to vulnerable customers and the need for sustainable development (balancing economic, environmental and social responsibilities) supports all its activities. As well as its formal duties, it focuses on getting the balance right in the long term on affordability and making sure future water supplies and sewerage services are reliable and delivered to a high level of service. There is a balance to be struck between the cost of bills now and the cost of bills for future generations.

Janine has over eight years' experience of speaking up for water customers through her work with local water and sewerage companies.

She challenges their services from the customer's point of view and encourages them to put the customer at the centre of their plans and decision-making. She is also the lead policy manager on debt and vulnerable customers nationally.

Her work presses companies to offer an affordable, easy-to-access and inclusive service that's right first time.

Tom Keatley

Senior Adviser Water and Land Use Natural England

Natural England is the Government's adviser for the natural environment in England, helping to protect England's nature and landscapes for people to enjoy. It is sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and is responsible for making sure that England's natural environment – including its land, plants and animals, freshwater and marine environments, geology and soils – are protected and improved.

Tom's role covers the Yorkshire area, with lead responsibility for Ofwat's 2019 price review. He has a long-established overview of Natural England's work with us, which dates back over 10 years. He has helped promote the environmental benefits and public value of ecosystem services, which aim to provide positive and affordable outcomes to society. Tom is a member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management and a chartered environmentalist. He aims to create and strengthen relationships between Natural England and our members to see how best we can contribute to the natural environment while meeting the needs of customers.

Chris Griffin

Independent Member

Chris has worked throughout the charity and voluntary sector in Yorkshire and the East Midlands as a welfare benefit specialist and Operations Manager at Citizens Advice. Chris sits on the Forum as an independent member, with a particular interest in affordability and vulnerability. Chris has more than 10 years' experience of welfare benefit policy, working in the charity and voluntary sector to tackle poverty and discrimination.

James Copeland

National Farmers Union

The NFU is the only organisation that supports all farmers and growers in England and Wales. They are here to give you a voice and protect your way of life now and in the future. Their purpose is to support British agriculture and horticulture, to campaign for a stable and sustainable future for British farmers and to get the best possible deal for their members. Their strength is in their numbers. With more than 55,000 members, they are heard when it counts – locally, nationally and internationally. Every single member matters and makes the NFU stronger. A stronger NFU can be more influential, achieve more and have a more powerful and unified voice. Today, the NFU is the most successful representative of agriculture and horticulture, with members coming from two-thirds of the agricultural land in England and Wales.

James is the Environment and Land Use Adviser for the NFU in the North East region (Yorkshire, County Durham and Northumberland). The role includes taking an overview on matters relating to managing land and the environment, including the availability and quality of water, flood risk, land use, environmental schemes, planning, infrastructure, waste, climate change and adaptation.

He works closely with (to name but a few) the Defra family (Natural England, the Environment Agency, Marine Management Organisation and the Forestry Commission), local authorities, commercial companies, parks, environment, non-government organisations and catchment partnerships (groups that work with key stakeholders to agree and deliver the objectives for the catchment area and to support the Environment Agency to develop an appropriate river-basin management plan, which is needed under the Water Framework Directive). He is passionate that agricultural businesses are given the opportunity to develop and that the NFU pushes for a landscape that allows this to happen, making sure that policy is rooted in the real world.

Dave Merrett

Independent Member

Dave acts as an independent member of the Forum, on which he previously represented local authorities in Yorkshire (2012 to 2015).

Professionally, he is a chartered civil engineer and member of the Institution of Civil Engineers. He is currently employed part-time by Amey Consulting and Rail as a principal engineer, working on Network Rail's 2014-2019 London North Eastern and East Midlands Bridge Assessment contract.

Dave's civil-engineering background gives him the experience to help examine our significant capital-investment programme. He also has considerable knowledge of transport, planning, environment and sustainability, flooding, policing, health and children's services and local government issues generally.

He had senior roles at York City Council and its successor (City of York Council), on which he served from 1982 to 2015. Dave also served at different times on the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Assembly, the Local Government Association (he was Deputy Chair of the Environment and Regeneration Board) and Yorkshire Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, with obvious links to water industry issues.

Finally, he also brings experience of knocking on people's doors, listening to their concerns and problems – the pressures on their budgets, concerns about the risk of flooding, the environment – and has experience of working with disadvantaged communities and individuals.

Pam Warhurst CBE

Independent Member

Pam Warhurst CBE is a community leader, activist and environment worker best known for founding Incredible Edible in Todmorden, West Yorkshire. As well as chairing Incredible Edible she currently chairs the Town Deal board for Todmorden and has led or held a number of senior board positions, including leader of a local authority, chair of a hospital trust, chair of Pennine Prospects (a landscape partnership in the north of England), deputy chair of the Countryside Agency, and chair of the Forestry Commission of Great Britain. Pam has also served on several regeneration bodies and social enterprises. In 2005 she was made a Commander of the British Empire.

Melissa Lockwood

The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency work to create better places for people and wildlife and support sustainable development. They are one of the water companies' environmental regulators and one of the statutory members of all water companies' customer challenge groups (CCGs).

They use the opportunity of working with us to review and challenge our next five-year plan so that we achieve the best possible outcomes for both customers and the environment.

Melissa has more than 30 years' experience in the Environment Agency in a range of roles, and is also a member of the Northumbrian Water Forum.

Statement from the Chair

We are fully independent of Yorkshire Water. We challenge their activities through our members, who have skills and experience in customer relations, economics, local government, the environment, farming, regulation and working with vulnerable households. Our challenges and the minutes of meetings are published on our website. At the end of this report we have highlighted the main areas we have looked at in 2020 - 2021.

We act as a strong and independent voice and a supporter for water customers in the Yorkshire and Humberside region.

This regional view gives us a unique level of knowledge. Our members come from Citizens Advice, Consumer Council for Water, the Environment Agency, the Natural Farmers Union, Natural England and Pennine Prospects, together with independent experts on the environment, local government, and affordability and vulnerability.

Our role is to understand the challenges Yorkshire Water face when providing their services within the economic framework and regulations set by Ofwat. We comment on the company's business plans and express views about key policy and operational issues and priorities.

We also consider the challenges and priorities set by the Environment Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. We are supported by the work of our subgroups on affordability, communications and the environment.

We review how Yorkshire Water deliver their business plans and comment on research methods, sample sizes, discussion guides, online questionnaires and presentation materials.

Usually by this stage in the funding cycle we would be reviewing the company's progress against their 2020-2025 performance commitments (PCs). This would include proposing levels of rewards and penalties (for over and underperformance) for the next delivery period, and challenging the company to continue to deliver the business plan and the targets within it. We would also be advising and challenging the company on how to deal with the financial effects of meeting or not meeting their commitments, and reviewing Yorkshire Water's annual assessment of risks, strengths and weaknesses in reporting against each measure of success. It is important not to delay this further and to continue to make sure the company are accountable.

However, this has been an unusual year, as the normal timescales for our work have been influenced by significant changes in company staff and management, uncertainties about our future as Ofwat considered potential changes to customer challenge, and the company having been referred to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

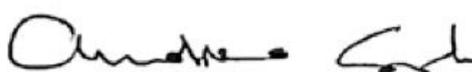
The CMA concluded that Yorkshire Water should still face a challenging set of performance targets, but it has adjusted Ofwat's allowed rate of billing to reflect best regulatory practice, with a view to making sure there is continued investment in the sector. It also partly reduced the company's exposure to financial risk to achieve what it considers to be the right balance between allowing profit once service levels have been guaranteed and making sure the company can finance themselves and meet all statutory duties. There will be extra investment to deal with leaks and flooding in Hull and Haltemprice and to remove phosphorus from farming and industry from our water.

There is a need for a balance between lower bills and risk. We believe that Yorkshire Water recognise and act on their responsibilities towards customers experiencing financial difficulties and have a wide range of schemes that provide help. We expect Yorkshire Water to continue to identify and meet the needs of customers struggling to afford to pay their bills and we welcome the range of services that help them to do so. Our Affordability and Vulnerability Subgroup will continue to monitor whether the company are meeting their performance commitments in this area.

At our meetings, we have also discussed:

- the increase in pollution incidents linked to extreme weather;
- whether the company have met their performance commitments and how they present this information on their website;
- the effect of Covid-19 on customer behaviour and finances (including debt), for instance as more customers work from home;
- monitoring the Yorkshire Water land strategy (including reductions in carbon, gains in biodiversity and improvements in water quality); and
- the Working With Others Community Benefit Fund, which aims to support successful applicants.

We have been receiving more and more emails asking for help. You can continue to email us, but please only send us general enquiries (for example, about water pressure) when you feel you have tried all other options. We encourage emails about how Yorkshire Water involve you, and their levels of service. We hope that you will continue to have a high level of trust in Yorkshire Water and we will continue to challenge the company in the areas you have told us matter most to you.



Andrea Cook OBE

Independent Chair,
Yorkshire Forum for Water Customers

Affordability and Vulnerability Subgroup

Affordability

This past year has continued to see the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on people’s finances. We are also starting to see additional financial hardship due to rising costs of energy, fuel and food, which has taken more customers into a cost-of-living crisis.

So it is vital that Yorkshire Water play their part in helping customers to be able to pay their water bills. They can do this by keeping bills affordable and price increases to a minimum, and by offering support for those who are struggling to pay their bills.

We are pleased to note that Yorkshire Water kept the average bill increase down to 0.61% from the previous year. We are also very pleased that there have been significant increases in the numbers of customers who are receiving help from the company to pay their bills.

We will be pressing Yorkshire Water to continue to find ways of making sure that those who need support are aware of it and can easily access it.

One of the ways we will do this is by monitoring how they are putting in place the recommendations from the [Consumer Council for Water’s independent affordability review](#).

Type of support	Number of customers receiving support in 2020/21	Number of customers receiving support in 2021/22	Increase from previous year	Value of support
WaterSure – bill cap	9,726	12,355	27%	£6,597,570
Social Tariff – reduced bills	27,140	35,236	30%	£7,465,451.32

Customers in vulnerable circumstances

Yorkshire Water are demonstrating their commitment to customers facing vulnerable circumstances (for example, those struggling to afford their bills, older people and people with disabilities) by having appropriate performance commitments in their business plan (as well as those set by Ofwat).

Each year, a panel of experts from national and regional charities assesses how inclusive Yorkshire Water's service is. The results show a 20% improvement from the start of the 2020-2025 period and particularly show that their services meet a wide range of customer needs.

Yorkshire Water also researched how satisfied customers on their priority services register were with their services. The results showed 80% of customers registered were satisfied with the services compared with the target of 84%.

As well as this, Yorkshire Water want to make sure that people know about the support they can offer customers and how to access that support. Their performance against this is shown in the table below:

Yorkshire Water Performance Commitment	2020/21	2021/22	Percentage above or below target
54% awareness of Priority Services	43%	42%	-12%

In early 2021, Yorkshire Water consulted us on their engagement programme to raise awareness and take-up of support they offer.

Resulting from this, we were pleased to see the company launch their first Vulnerability Partnership Fund. The fund's purpose is to support charities and organisations in raising awareness of Yorkshire Water's priority services register (PSR) and encourage people to sign up to this free service. Last year, seven charities encouraged over 1,500 people to sign up. In January this year, the company launched their second Vulnerability Partnership Fund, which will allocate up to £35,000 to local charities and organisations working with vulnerable people. We will be monitoring the success of this.

The engagement programme also looks at initiatives to involve and support people living in socially disadvantaged communities. We have been disappointed and frustrated at the delay in getting the pilot schemes of these first initiatives live. We note the pilot scheme in Sheffield has now gone live (April 2022). We will be keenly monitoring its progress and pressing the company to use what they have learned more widely, to increase awareness and take-up in other similar areas.

Yorkshire Water's performance against the common performance commitments set by Ofwat is set out in the table below:

Performance commitment	2020/21	2021/22	% increase	% household customers on the PSR	% difference to Yorkshire Water target of 6%
Number of customers on the priority services register (PSR)	77,395	88,701	14.6%	3.77%	-2.33%

Performance Commitment	2020/21	2021/22	Percentage above or below target
Actual contact 35%	17.3%	14.35%	-20.65%
Attempted contact 90%	46.30%	47.29%	-42.71%

While we are pleased to see that Yorkshire Water continue to increase the number of households on the priority services register, we are disappointed that for the second year in a row they have not met their target. Some other water companies have already beaten the targets set by Ofwat, and we are urging Yorkshire Water to quickly get back on track to put in place the good practice that others have used to reach and go beyond the targets.

We are extremely disappointed and concerned to note that we have seen little improvement regarding the performance commitment set by Ofwat on contacting customers on the priority services register to check that the details the company have are up to date.

Yorkshire Water need to significantly change their processes to stop the decline in contact with customers and show their customers the improvements they have made in this performance commitment by next year's report.

Janine Shackleton

Consumer Council for Water

Environment Subgroup

We have continued to work with Yorkshire Water, focusing on environmental aspects of their operations, forward planning and investment, and how they meet their new performance commitments.

We have considered a number of issues arising from various government and Ofwat initiatives in the run-up to the company producing their business plan for the next five-year regulatory period (PR24). These include the new Environment Act 2021, the next Drainage & Water Management Plans (DWMPs) and developments around the next Water Industry National Environment Programme (WINEP).

We have also followed up public concerns about inland bathing waters (such as at Ilkley) and the measures needed to meet bathing-water standards, sewage discharge standards and so on.

And, we have tried to make sure we use customers' concerns and priorities, as supported by the company's research, in our discussions.

We have continued to focus on how the company deal with the risks of pollution incidents. We are concerned at the increased number of incidents in the latest year's figures, given previous assurances from the company.

We were pleased that the company gave us an early look at their new interactive maps and web pages showing the location and details of sewerage discharges. We made a number of suggestions about how the maps and web pages could be made easier to access and more user-friendly for customers and the general public, which the company then took forward.

We recognise the major challenge for the company (and the water industry in general) is dealing with significant future investment demands in this area and the effect this could have on future bills. We welcome and are looking forward to seeing the results of recent customer research on this. We also note and share some frustration about the delay in being able to fund the full range of measures needed to meet these challenges before the next five-year regulatory period, though investigations and some short-term works are underway.

We continue to monitor how Yorkshire Water are taking a more complete approach to tackling environmental challenges, including climate change, and using more economic and nature-based (rather than traditional chemical-based) approaches. We helped test and consider the value to customers of this type of forward-thinking approach to managing Yorkshire Water land and supporting environmental initiatives through the company's Better Land, Better Lives - Our Land Strategy.

The company's continuing development of their pioneering Six Capitals approach (which takes account of environmental, social and other aspects when evaluating spending decisions) and how they use this when assessing different options is very welcome.

We are pleased to see further signs of support from the Government and Ofwat for this change in approach, and welcome the proposed emphasis on environment and achieving sustainable service levels in the Ofwat guidance for the next five-year regulatory period.

This short report cannot do justice to the vast range and depth of the issues we have covered at our meetings. We are very grateful to Yorkshire Water, and particularly their staff, for supporting our work. I am equally grateful to my colleagues on the subgroup and the expertise they bring to its discussions. We'd particularly like to record our appreciation to two long-serving company employees, Miles Foulger and John Hayley, who supported our work over many years and have now retired.

We hope the current review of the Forum and its role will make sure that the environmental aspects of Yorkshire Water's work continue to be monitored independently on behalf of customers.

Dave Merrett

Independent Forum Member

Thank you

For more information
please contact
theforum@yorkshirewater.co.uk



Yorkshire Forum for Water Customers