



Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee

25 November 2025

Summary

Attendees:

- **Committee:** Dan MacDonald (Chair), Hazel Browne, Michael Turner, Jayesh Patel, Jacqueline Cale
- **Southern Water:** Antonia Barton, Alexis Knight, Nicky Chitty, Nick Eves, Laura Scott (Secretariat)

Apologies: N/A

Summary

1. Welcome & Introductions

2. Apologies of absence

- None.

3. Declarations of interest

- None.

4. Incident update – Camber Sands

- Antonia Barton (Chief Customer Officer) provided an update on the beads washed ashore at Camber Sands.

Key discussion points:

Financial Impact

- Southern Water confirmed that this incident will have no financial impact on customers.

Customer Communication

- The Committee emphasised the need for enhanced customer messaging during incidents. It was noted that a website statement alone is insufficient; a stronger social media presence is required. Southern Water should actively respond to customer posts rather than remaining silent.
 - Southern Water advised that a project to revamp the social media strategy is currently underway, with improvements expected to be in place within the next few months.

Technology and Monitoring

- Southern Water confirmed that current technology does not allow for automatic detection and flagging of this issue. A full review is in progress, and appropriate mechanisms will be implemented to prevent recurrence.

Actions Agreed

- **Local Witness Feedback**

At the next meeting, the Committee would like to hear from a local resident about their experience of how the situation was managed.

- **Director of Wastewater Update**

The Director of Wastewater will attend the next quarterly meeting to provide:

- An update on this incident.
- An overview of the wastewater infrastructure and planned investments to improve resilience.

5. Customer Services Overview

- Antonia then provided an overview of Southern Water's customer service challenges and transformation plans.

Key points:

Context

- Serves 4.8m customers across a complex multi-provider region.
- High volumes: 86k calls/month, 47k online transactions/month, 2.5m bills/year, 340k PSR customers.

Operating model

- UK contact centre for operational issues; South Africa (~200 advisors) for billing; back-office support in UK and India.
- Specialist teams include Vulnerability, Customer Experience, and partnerships with contractors (e.g. Lanes, Clancy).

Industry context

- C-MeX scores across the industry declining; Southern Water currently 16th.

Current challenges

- High call wait times
- Inconsistent query resolution
- Complaint backlog (reduced from 1,200 to ~600)

Actions & improvements

- New performance metrics
- Backlog reduction
- Blended training for advisors
- Focus on reducing failure demand

Future vision

- "Leapfrog Strategy" aiming for top-tier customer service through digital transformation, improved contact-centre model, and insight-driven improvements.

6. Q&A – Key themes:

- **Training & customer-centric behaviour:** Southern Water have expanded training for new advisers, increased coaching based on call listening, and reduced reliance on rigid scripts through a blended learning approach
- **Empathy & customer experience:** Southern Water have embedded empathy into the quality framework and incentives, introduced coaching and call-listening reinforcement, and deployed AI tools to guide agents while preserving the human touch.

- **Complaint escalation:** Southern Water acknowledged the rise in escalations due to billing issues and committed to providing the exact percentage of complaints escalated to CCW as an action.
- **Customer Experience team:** Southern Water have adopted a data-led approach analysing feedback from over 50,000 customers, focused on fixing broken processes, and improved customer communications including virtual leak inspections.
- **Water efficiency segmentation:** Southern Water have used demographic, attitudinal and regional segmentation to tailor education, and will align their approach with the new national £75m Ofwat campaign.
- **Cost to serve:** Southern Water have plans to reduce one of the industry's highest contact costs through digital self-service, better right-first-time resolution, and a smaller, more skilled contact centre.
- **Digital exclusion:** Southern Water have maintained call centres for those unable to self-serve, continue working with charities and local partners, and intend to build a more localised customer service presence.
- **Website accessibility:** Southern Water have undertaken accessibility audits, run pop-up surveys, carried out specialist testing, improved SEO, and achieved Inclusive Services accreditation for vulnerability needs.
- **Trust:** Southern Water measure trust through C-MeX and reputation trackers, and are focusing on transparent communication, consistent delivery, and increased community engagement to rebuild trust.
- **Financial vulnerability:** Southern Water have already enrolled 175,000 customers on the Essentials tariff and are expanding support through data-sharing, partnerships, and better promotion of assistance options.
- **Recent customer improvements:** Southern Water have improved communication across drought, efficiency and billing support topics, introduced radio and video campaigns, and delivered more transparent updates despite high service demand.

7. Future meetings and topics

- Customer insight highlights three priority areas for upcoming sessions:
 1. **Wastewater management** (storm overflows, pollution, flooding)
 2. **Future water supplies** (long-term resilience, restrictions, investment)
 3. **Transparency & accountability** (trust, governance, scrutiny)
- **Suggested topic for next quarterly meeting:** Wastewater management, inc. storm overflows and pollution.
Key attendees: Managing Director of Wastewater (John Penicud) and Director of Environment & Innovation (Nick Mills).

8. AOB/Close

- No AOB.
- The Chair thanked Southern Water for transparency and encouraged continued robust questioning.
- Future topics should include wastewater, water supply resilience, and governance.
- A commitment was made to log, publish, and track all actions and questions.

9. Next meeting

- **12 January 2026** - with the Chair of the Board, Keith Lough and Non-Executive Director of the Board and Partner at Macquarie, Will Price.

Action Points

1. Local witness feedback

- At the next meeting, the Committee would like to hear from a local resident about their experience of how the situation was managed.

2. Director of Wastewater update

- The Director of Wastewater will attend the next quarterly meeting to provide:
 - An update on this incident.
 - An overview of the wastewater infrastructure and planned investments to improve resilience.

3. Laura Scott (Committee Secretariat) to confirm complaint statistics.

4. Southern Water to continue the development of a case management tool for single accountability.

5. Southern Water to continue their plans to expand the segmentation strategy for water efficiency messaging.

6. Southern Water to share future plans for digital inclusion and local call centre presence.

7. Southern Water to monitor and report progress on trust and transparency initiatives.

Independent Customer Scrutiny Committee

25 November 2025

Full meeting minutes

Committee	Attendee	Apologies
Independent Chair	Dan MacDonald	
Independent member	Michael Turner	
Independent member	Jacqueline Cale	
Independent member	Jayesh Patel	
Independent member	Hazel Browne	
Southern Water	Attendee	Apologies
Chief Customer Officer	Antonia Barton	
Customer Operations Director	Alexis Knight	
Affordability & Vulnerability Lead	Nicky Chitty	
Head of Customer Strategy, Insight & Performance	Nick Eves	
Strategic Engagement Advisor & Committee Secretariat	Laura Scott	

No.	Minute
1	Welcome / Introductions
1.1	Dan MacDonald (Independent Chair) chaired the meeting.
1.2	Attendees introduced themselves, highlighting their professional background and relevant expertise.
2	Apologies of absence
2.1	None.
3	Declarations of interest
3.1	None.
4	Chair update
4.1	Future meeting topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">The Chair encouraged customers to contact the committee with any topics they would like to see discussed in future meetings.Committee email address: info@accountablewater.co.uk

	<p>New members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The committee is still seeking additional members, particularly representatives from Hampshire, Hastings, or the Isle of Wight. • Several interviews with potential candidates are scheduled over the coming weeks. • If you are interested in joining the committee, please email us at: info@accountablewater.co.uk <p>Consultations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ofwat invited the committee to respond to two consultations, one on Scrutiny and the other, Customer Voice. • The Chair confirmed that the committee has submitted responses to both consultations.
5	Incident update – Camber Sands
5.1	<p>Antonia provided an update on the beads washed ashore at Camber Sands.</p> <p>Key discussion points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Southern Water confirmed that this incident will have no financial impact on customers. • Customer communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Committee emphasised the need for enhanced customer messaging during incidents. It was noted that a website statement alone is insufficient; a stronger social media presence is required. Southern Water should actively respond to customer posts rather than remaining silent. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Southern Water advised that a project to revamp the social media strategy is currently underway, with improvements expected to be in place within the next few months. • Technology and monitoring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Southern Water confirmed that current technology does not allow for automatic detection and flagging of this issue. A full review is in progress, and appropriate mechanisms will be implemented to prevent recurrence. <p>Actions agreed:</p> <p>8. Local witness feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ At the next meeting, the Committee would like to hear from a local resident about their experience of how the situation was managed. <p>9. Director of Wastewater update</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Director of Wastewater will attend the next quarterly meeting to provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An update on this incident. – An overview of the wastewater infrastructure and planned investments to improve resilience.
6	Customer Services overview
6.1	<p>Antonia Barton (Chief Customer Officer, Southern Water) provided an overview of Southern Water's customer service operations, current challenges, and future plans for improvement.</p> <p>Key points:</p>

- **Context & scale**
 - Southern Water serves 4.8 million customers, but the region is complex with multiple water companies (e.g. South East Water, Portsmouth Water, Affinity, Bournemouth).
 - Customer confusion is common due to overlapping responsibilities for water and waste billing.
 - Operational stats:
 - 86,000 calls/month
 - 47,000 online transactions/month
 - 2.5 million bills/year
 - 340,000 customers on the Priority Services Register
- **Customer service structure**
 - Contact centres:
 - UK-based for operational issues (e.g. pollution, water outages)
 - Billing contact centre primarily in South Africa (~200 staff)
 - Back-office teams in UK and India
 - Specialist teams:
 - Vulnerability team (complex case handling)
 - Customer Experience team (Voice of Customer, process improvement)
 - Key partnerships:
 - Clancy, Lanes (pollution response, high CSAT scores)
 - Kappa Brown (civil works)
- **Industry Context**
 - C-MeX scores (customer service metric) declining across the water industry due to service and reputation issues.
 - New methodology links C-MeX to UKCSI (Customer Service Index).
 - Southern Water currently ranks 16th (bottom tier) for customer service.
- **Current Challenges & Actions**
 - Billing and reputation are critical focus areas.
 - Issues include:
 - Long call wait times
 - Agents not always resolving queries
 - High complaint backlog (peaked at 1,200; now reduced to ~600)
- **Actions taken:**
 - New performance metrics introduced
 - Significant progress in reducing complaints backlog
- **Future Vision – “Leapfrog” Strategy**
 - Aim: Move Southern Water from bottom to top of C-MeX rankings
 - Key priorities:
 - Digital transformation (self-service app, improved website)
 - Contact centre model review
 - Failure demand reduction
 - Customer insight-driven improvements
- **Goal:** Deliver easier billing, better communication, and improved reputation through transparency and collaboration.

7	Q&A
7.1	The Chair acknowledged improvements in support for vulnerable customers and highlighted the ongoing challenge of high call volumes and delays in answering calls.
7.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions were put forward by the committee to Southern Water attendees. <p>Question 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer-centric behaviour is core to good customer care. What training reinforces this? <p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large-scale training delivered for 190 new advisors in South Africa. • Tactical retraining introduced based on call listening and feedback. • Shift from long classroom sessions to blended learning (short theory + practical application). • Southern Water experts deployed on-site for 4 weeks to support advisors. • Future plans: enhanced training methodology with Learning & Development team. <p>Question 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers report lack of empathy and willingness to help. How is this addressed? <p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy embedded in quality framework and advisor incentives. • Reduced reliance on rigid scripts; agents encouraged to bring authentic selves. • AI tools assist agents by guiding next steps without losing human touch. • Coaching and call listening used to reinforce empathetic behaviour. • Recognition and reward for exceptional customer care. <p>Question 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What percentage of complaints are escalated to CCW annually? <p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exact figure not available during meeting; action logged to provide data. • Acknowledged increase this year due to billing challenges. <p>Question 4:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 people in Customer Experience team—what do they do? <p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data-led approach: analyse feedback from 50,000+ customers annually. • Focus on broken processes and pain points; partner with water/waste teams. • Manage service communications (letters, PSR customers, debt support). • Support capital projects and community engagement. • Example: Introduced virtual inspections for leaks—reducing delays and improving efficiency. <p>Question 5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are customers segmented for education on water efficiency?

Response summary:

- Multiple segmentation models: attitudinal, demographic, metered/unmetered, regional.
- Regional segmentation most impactful—tailored messaging for coastal vs inland communities.
- National £75m water efficiency campaign led by Ofwat.
- Southern Water to dovetail with campaign and develop targeted messaging for high-use areas (e.g. golf courses).

Question 6:

- What is the average cost of contact now and post-transformation?

Response summary:

- Currently second highest in industry; aim to reduce significantly.
- Transformation plan focuses on:
 - Digital self-service (web/app).
 - Right-first-time resolution.
 - Smaller, more skilled call centre for complex queries.
- Empowerment and case management tools to reduce repeat calls.

Question 7:

- How will digitally excluded customers be supported?

Response summary:

- Always maintain call centre backup.
- Partnership work with charities and local organisations.
- Field agents target digitally excluded customers.
- Future aspiration: localised call centre presence.

Question 8:

- How is website usability tested across demographics?

Response summary:

- Accessibility audits and specialist reviews.
- Ongoing pop-up surveys and independent research on key journeys.
- SEO optimisation for Google searches.
- Inclusive Services accreditation for vulnerability considerations.

Question 9:

- Independent benchmarking shows Southern Water below sector average for trust. How is trust measured and improved?

Response summary:

- Trust measured via C-MeX and reputation trackers.
- Improvement strategy: deliver on promises consistently, communicate transparently.
- Community engagement and proactive communications key.
- Acknowledged slow progress due to historical reputation issues.

Question 10:

- How many financially vulnerable customers remain unidentified?

	<p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 175,000 customers currently supported via Essentials tariff (45–90% discount). • Initiatives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Data-sharing with local authorities for auto-enrolment. – New partnership role to identify hidden hardship. – Website and call centre briefed to promote support options. <p>Question 11:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What tangible change will customers have experienced in the last year? <p>Response summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant improvement in communications (drought, water efficiency, bill support). • Radio campaigns and videos addressing customer concerns. • Service improvements limited due to high demand from bill increases. <p>7.3 Action points</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Laura Scott (Committee Secretariat) to confirm complaint statistics. 2. Southern Water to continue the development of a case management tool for single accountability. 3. Southern Water to continue their plans to expand the segmentation strategy for water efficiency messaging. 4. Southern Water to share future plans for digital inclusion and local call centre presence. 5. Southern Water to monitor and report progress on trust and transparency initiatives.
8	Future meetings and topics
8.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nick Eves (Head of Customer Strategy, Insight & Performance, Southern Water) noted that Southern Water will capture all actions, challenges, and questions raised during meetings. These will be published on the website and tracked at future sessions. As part of this, we have identified areas/topics that the committee may wish to cover – shown in slide 13 of the presentation. • Based on customer insight data, the following are the three main priorities for customers, and therefore, we may want these to be the focus of the next few meetings: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wastewater Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Storm overflows and pollution issues. ○ Investment in infrastructure and flooding prevention. 2. Future Water Supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Long-term investment for water security. ○ Water quality restrictions and resilience planning. 3. Transparency & Accountability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Corporate governance, reputation, and trust. ○ Responding to increased scrutiny in the water sector. • Suggested area of focus for the next quarterly meeting in March: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Wastewater, including storm overflows and pollution. ○ Key individuals to attend: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – John Pellicott, Managing Director of Wastewater, Southern Water

	– Nick Mills, Director of Environment and Innovation, Southern Water
9	AOB/Close
9.1	No AOB.
9.2	<p>Final comments from the Chair:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledgment and appreciation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Thanked the executive team for their openness and honesty in responding to challenging questions, emphasising that transparency is key to the scrutiny process. • Future meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Next meeting will involve the Chair of the Board and the shareholder/investor. ○ Suggested future topics include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Wastewater management, including storm overflows and pollution. – Future water supply and infrastructure investment. – Transparency and accountability, covering reputation, trust, and governance. ○ Recommended inviting key operational leaders (e.g. MD of Wastewater and Director of Environment & Innovation) for deeper discussions. • Committee engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Expressed disappointment that CCW was not present and proposed arranging a future session with them. ○ Suggested including a customer panel in upcoming meetings for direct insights. • Action tracking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Confirmed that all questions and actions will be logged, published on the website, and revisited in future meetings. • Commitment to purpose <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reiterated the committee’s role in ensuring transparency, fairness, and accountability within Southern Water, focusing on real customer experience rather than internal metrics. • Closing note <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Encouraged ongoing constructive and robust questioning, highlighting progress seen so far and commitment to continuous improvement.
10	Next meeting
10.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 January 2026, 10:00-12:00 - additional meeting for the committee to meet with Chair of our Board, Keith Lough and Non-executive Director and representative from Macquarie, Will Price.