



ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

The voice for water consumers

We're here to help you

ccwater.org.uk

A large, stylized, light blue 'CCW' logo is positioned in the background on the right side of the page. It is rendered in a thick, rounded, cursive font, appearing to have a slight 3D effect with a darker blue shadow behind it.

ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Bridging the gap: Awareness and Understanding of Water Issues

Report by Yonder, November 2022

ccwater.org.uk

Foreword



An almost endless stream of stories on everything from drought, hosepipe bans and leaks to company profits, sewage pollution in rivers and bathing areas, means water-related issues have rarely been out of the public eye lately.

With this in mind, CCW commissioned Yonder Consulting to carry out a combined quantitative and qualitative study of water customers' views across England and Wales, with the aim of gauging current levels of awareness and understanding on these topics. We also wanted to understand how the water companies might engage better with its customers on these topical issues. By developing a clearer picture of how this increased scrutiny of the sector has shaped peoples' perceptions of their water company and the industry more generally, it provides a steer as to how the sector can start to better engage with people on these issues.

Increased negative coverage of water industry issues, whether in the news, social media or elsewhere, exacerbate discontentment and frustration that many customers already feel due to the cost of living crisis and recent political turmoil.

As these findings show, awareness of these issues may have grown, but understanding of the reality of what are often complex issues remains low. It is therefore more important than ever for water companies to reassess how they engage with their customers, becoming more open and transparent in their communication; and more accountable for their performance and plans to put things right. People want honest and transparent information on key issues from their water companies.

Our findings show that some of the issues, in particular river water quality, have both high awareness levels and strongly influence peoples' perceptions of water companies. It is paramount that the sector works together to engage with customers on the key issues in order to inform them on the facts in an accessible way and explain what they are doing to tackle them.

These findings present a challenge for water companies, but also an opportunity to improve how they shape their relationship with their customers in the months and years ahead.

Mike Keil
Senior Director of Policy, Research and Campaigning

Research objectives & methodology

- CCW understand several key topics have been prominent in the British media within the last few months. These key topics include drought/hosepipe bans, pollution of river and bathing water, water leaks, water company profit/dividends and Water company pay/ bonuses.
- The objective of this research was to:
 - gauge current levels of awareness of these key topics
 - how they influence consumer perceptions of their water company
 - and ultimately how the industry can have a meaningful discussion with customers on some of these topics

CCW commissioned Yonder Consulting to carry out a combined quantitative and qualitative study to address these objectives. The quantitative fieldwork was carried out from September 21st – 23rd and the qualitative fieldwork 13th - 21st October

Quant: Omnibus survey	
2209 online interviews with water consumers	England/Wales
464 boost interviews with water consumers	Wales
Qual: 5 x 1.5 hour group discussion with short pre-task	
1: Mix of young family older family	England/Wales
2: Pre-family	England/Wales
3: Empty Nesters	England/Wales
4: Older family	England/Wales
5: Younger family	England/Wales

This document is a strategic overview of key findings that encompass both research streams

A large, stylized, light blue 'CCW' logo is positioned in the background on the right side of the slide. It is rendered in a thick, rounded, cursive font, appearing to have a slight 3D effect with a darker blue shadow underneath.

ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Key findings

Key findings

1

Engagement with the water industry is low and **perceptions** are heavily impacted by **negative** press headlines. When asked in general terms, people are more neutral about their water company than when they are asked to think of a specific issue. Whilst most people's perceptions of the water industry **has not changed in the past 3-6 months this is reflective of their ambivalence rather than their positivity.**

2

Consumers have an **impression that all of the issues discussed are within the control of the water companies.** There is a damaging cycle which stems from leakage and storm overflows which **influences negative views** on other issues.

3

Awareness (real and latent) of storm overflows and river pollution is high but actual understanding is extremely low. However, **consumers are unlikely to ever engage fully on the detail of storm overflows and river pollution** so the focus should be upon a single, simple, message which challenges the narrative around storm overflows.

Key findings

4

There is a **causal link made between leaks and hosepipe bans**. The amount of leakage frustrates consumers and **it undermines any calls to action from water companies** to play their part by reducing water use and observing hosepipe bans.

5

Profits and bonuses are not actually that top of mind but contribute to disempowering and frustrating consumers within the context of all other issues. There feels like there is a **lack of transparency and openness over how water companies as private businesses operate**.

6

Whilst people can get frustrated about topical issues they are issues which are **given little consideration or time in their daily lives**. If people are presented with **open and simple information** from their water company about **what the challenges are and what can realistically be achieved with a greater push on collective responsibility** then this may begin to challenge negative perceptions which filter through from press coverage.

Leakage is one of the most emotive topics – and one that exacerbates most others

- Consumers feel very strongly that leaks are with the control of water companies and that they are a fundamental responsibility in terms of the day to day running of a water company.
- So, when issues such as droughts and profits/CEO salaries are raised this triggers further negative emotion towards water companies.

Consumers feel:

- **Drought** could be avoided if less water was wasted through leakage.
- This leads to resentment at being called upon to help save water as they feel strongly that water companies should prevent leakage in the first place
- That water companies efforts to reduce water use feel insignificant compared to the vast quantities lost through leakage
- Profits are even more unjust considering the perception that water companies are not even performing on a fundamental level by wasting so much water



A large, stylized, light blue 'CCW' logo is positioned in the background on the right side of the slide. It is rendered in a thick, rounded, cursive font, appearing to have a slight 3D effect with a darker blue shadow underneath. The letters are interconnected and flow from top-right to bottom-left.

ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Broad context for topical issues

Broad awareness of issues varies and is largely driven by media coverage at the time

39%

Higher awareness = greater degree of negativity

- People who are **currently under a hosepipe ban** (26%), live in the South East (23%) and South West (19%) were more likely to state their views had become more negative compared to the total (14%).
- More respondents in England (14%) said their view of their water company had become 'more negative' in the last 3-6 months than in Wales (7%).

48%

Sewage and pollution is the issue driving most negative opinion

- Without prompting, most identify **pollution and "dumping" of sewage into water ways, rivers and oceans** (48%) as the reason for their views becoming negative.
- Other reasons include issues with water leaking (20%) and price increases (10%).

67%

Highest Awareness around drought and hosepipe bans

- **Drought and hose pipe bans** (67%) was the most heard about key topic. Followed by pollution of river and bathing water (including pollution from companies) (52%) and leaks (44%).
- Those living in Wales (75%) are more likely to have heard about drought and hosepipe bans compared to the total (67%).
- *Those aged 55+ were more likely to have heard about all key topics, compared to other ages.*

17%

Very few consumers have little to no awareness

- Just under a fifth (17%) said they had **not heard about any of the key topics, with individuals without a water meter significantly more likely to claim this** (21%) compared to those who have (13%).
- Across all key topics, most people were made aware by the TV and newspapers/magazines, with these generally being the most trusted channels

Engagement with water (and water companies) remains low, in spite of topical issues being in the media

Most people (**76%**) report their views of their water company had not changed in the last 3-6 months despite marked awareness of topical issues: drought/ hosepipe bans (**67%**), pollution (**52%**) and water leaks (**44%**)

WHY?

Individual perspectives

Passive audience who only engage when there's a problem

Have a sense of **entitlement** and **expectation** that everyone should have access to water

Exacerbated by not having a **choice** over who their water provider is – **embeds disengagement**

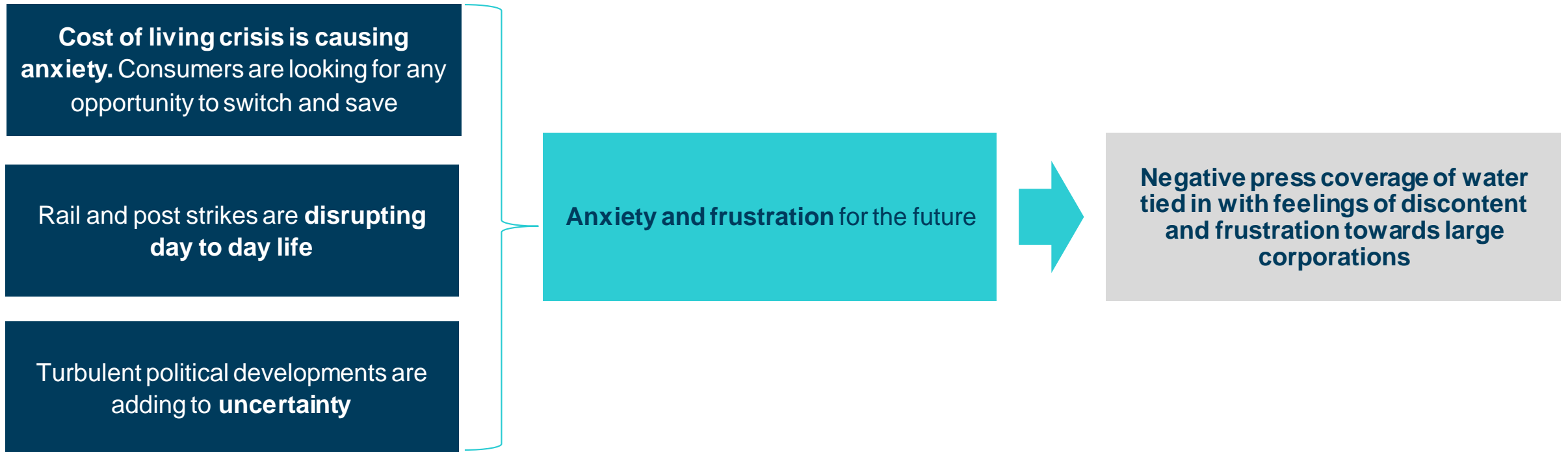
Collective perspectives

Feel like they as individuals can have **little impact** on issues

Deeper perception that there **isn't actually an issue** – an island where it rains all the time

Water is plentiful, cheap and experience largely positive (relatively few issues) so somewhat **disconnected**

However, the cost of living crisis and the summer of strikes has exacerbated feelings of disengagement



Lack of engagement is a challenge in itself, consumers believe issues are within the control of the water companies

Understanding and awareness of the practicalities around topical issues is extremely low. Media (& particularly TV) coverage is therefore extremely impactful as it is often the only information source that consumers engage with. By association media coverage seen as pointing finger at water company (even if reality is more balanced)

56%

Over half of people felt the responsibility of tackling drought/hosepipe bans lies with the service providers/water companies

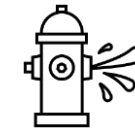
87%

Most people believe the service providers/water companies/sewerage companies should be responsible for water leaks

Factors outside of water company control



**Drought/
Hosepipe bans**



Leakage

Factors within water company control

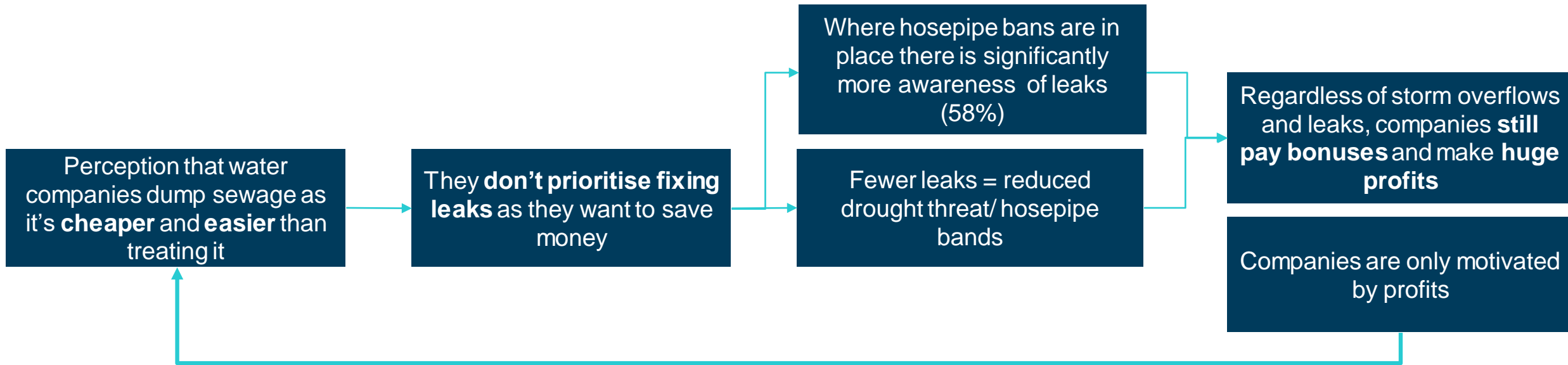


**Storm
Overflows**

60%

Most people believe the service providers/water companies should be responsible for tackling the pollution of river and bathing water

Whilst leaks and storm overflows are the most obviously damaging to perceptions, collective impact contributes to negative opinions



On the one hand, **somewhat ambivalent** about topical issues
But, this is not a good thing, **opinion is not positive**



ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Storm overflows

71% of consumer say that pollution has negatively affected their perceptions of their water company



Pollution of river and bathing water / SOs

52%

Over half of people had heard about the pollution of river and bathing water (including pollution from companies).

- People with a water meter (58%) are more likely to have heard of this key topic compared to those who do not (47%)

71%

Among those who had heard, a majority (71%) felt it had negatively affected their perceptions of their water company. Compared to a quarter (26%) who said it had no effect and only 3% positively.

60%

Most people (60%) believe water companies should be responsible for tackling the pollution of river and bathing water, while three in ten (30%) believe the Government/Government departments are responsible.

- Only 7% thought it should be the responsibility of the environment agency

70%

Most had heard about this key topic on the TV (70%), followed by newspapers/magazines (34%). Less than a quarter had heard on social media (24%) and radio (21%).

- Under one in ten (8%) said they had heard through Government/CCW/Citizens Advice sources
- Overall, people trust the TV (37%) most for information on the pollution of rivers and bathing water, followed by the Environment Agency or other Government departments (18%)
- Only 5% said they trust their water company's website for information on this key topic

Storm overflows and pollution are complex and consumers do not understand the detail they just find it shocking

Over half (52%) of people had heard about the issue. Among those who had heard, a majority (71%) felt it had negatively affected their perceptions of their water company.



"My understanding of raw sewage is that it's literally what comes out of the toilet." Female, Wales

However, consumers are unlikely to proactively engage with the detail and practicalities of storm overflows



“A lot of the headlines suggest that they're doing it as they can't be bothered to treat the water, oh, it's too expensive to treat that so we'll just get rid of it. That's what he often sounds like when you read it, whereas this makes it look as if it's actually a bit more out of their hands.” Female, Wales

A large, stylized, light blue 'CCW' logo is positioned in the background on the right side of the slide. It is rendered in a thick, rounded, cursive font that overlaps itself, creating a sense of depth and movement.

ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Drought and leaks

67% had heard about drought and hosepipe bans in the last few months



Drought / hose pipe bans

67%

Most people (67%) had heard about drought and hosepipe bans in the last few months.

- Those living in the East Midlands (77%), Wales (75%) and South East (75%) are more likely to have heard about drought and hosepipe bans compared to the total (67%)

67%

After hearing about this, a majority (67%) felt it had no effect on the perception of their water company. While around a fifth (22%) said it had a negative effect, and one in ten (11%) felt it had a positive effect.

- Those in the South East (30%) are more likely to say this had a negative effect compared to the total (22%)

56%

Over half of people (56%) felt the responsibility of tackling drought/hosepipe bans lies with the service providers/water companies, compared to a fifth (20%) thought it was the responsibility of the Government/Government departments.

- Just over one in ten (12%) feel it is the responsibility of everybody and people generally

67%

Most heard about drought and hosepipe bans through the TV (67%). A further quarter were made aware by newspapers/magazines (26%) and the radio (25%).

- Less than one in ten (6%) heard through Government/CCW/Citizens Advice, however those in the South East (11%) and under a hosepipe ban (11%) were more likely to hear this way
- A third (33%) trust the TV most when getting information on drought and hosepipe bans. While a fifth said their water company's website (22%) and Government/CCW/Citizen's advice sources are the most trustworthy (20%)

While hosepipe bans are the most known topic, understanding of drought is low



But willingness to comply with hosepipe bans is low

Among those currently in a hosepipe ban, over half (55%) state they use the same amount of water, compared to two fifths (41%) who use less water

Enforcement of hosepipe bans

- There is scepticism over how hosepipe bans are enforced due to limited evidence / awareness of enforcement
- Questions were raised as to whether the only way to enforce them is to 'sneak on your neighbours'?
- This approach does not feel supportive of community and 'being in it together' and is at odds with water companies' communications

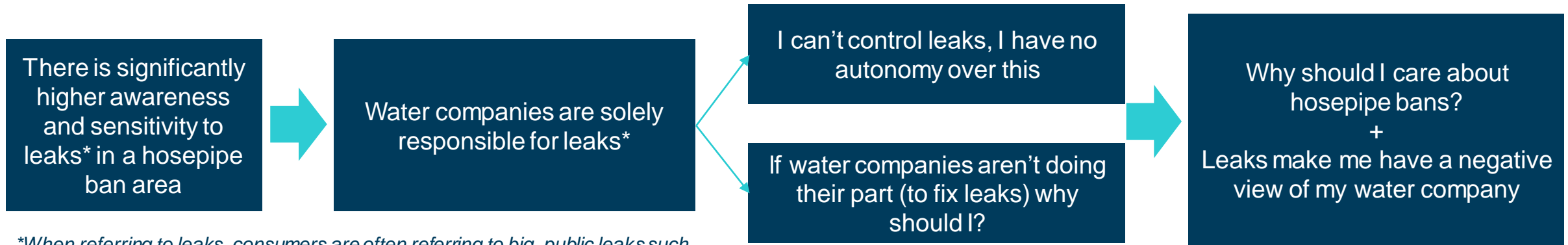
"It comes up was more of a comic thing like all I've seen on social media about hosepipe bans is the image of neighbours peeping over their fences. It downplays it too much. It's too much of a joke." Female, England

Impact within different areas of the country

- Understanding of the mechanisms of drought and the actual value of hosepipe bans are limited
- Why some areas of the country avoid hosepipe bans and others have them every year is confusing
- Leads to feeling that these water companies must be doing something different / better, rather than considering the geographical implications

"We live in one of the driest areas of the country in East Anglia and we didn't have a hosepipe ban. So there's something going on in terms of what Anglian water did right that we didn't have a ban when everyone else did." Female, England

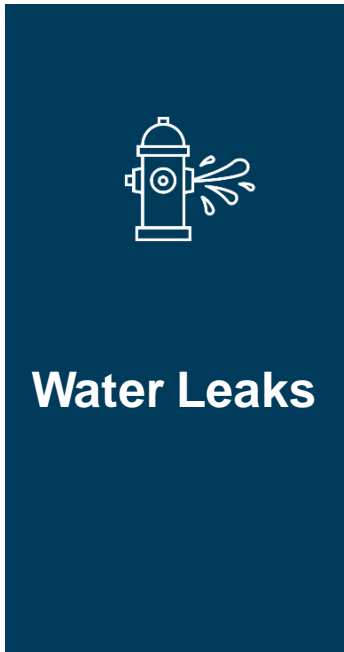
Not addressing leakage appears to undermine education, communication and efforts to address drought



**When referring to leaks, consumers are often referring to big, public leaks such as burst mains. This is opposed to leaks on their property (which they are more aware that they are responsible for)*

“This feels like a slap in the face - how much are we saving versus how much they’re leaking? They won’t want to tell us that.” Male, England

While fewer had heard of leaks (44%) the majority feel it is water companies' responsibility



44%

Just over two fifths (44%) had heard about water leaks in the last few months, with those in the Southeast (55%) and under a hosepipe ban (58%) significantly more aware of this key topic compared to the total.

- Those with a water meter (48%) are more likely to have heard about water leaks compared to those who do not (42%).

67%

Two thirds (67%) felt hearing about water leaks had a negative effect on the perceptions of their water company. In comparison, three in ten (29%) said it had no effect and for a minority (5%) a positive effect.

87%

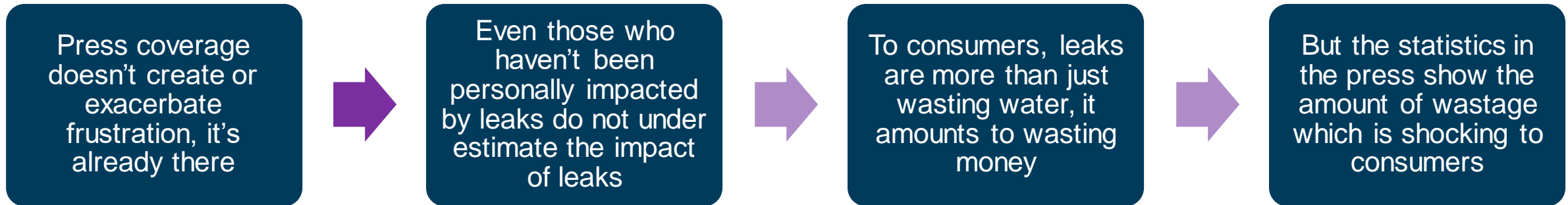
Most people (87%) believe the service providers/water companies/sewerage companies should be responsible for water leaks.

58%

Most people heard about water leaks on the TV (58%), followed by newspapers/magazines (28%).

- Around a fifth heard about this key topic on the radio (22%) and social media (20%)
- Three in ten (30%) claim they trust the TV most for information on water leaks, followed by Government/CCW/Citizen's advice (21%)
- Just over one in ten (13%) trust the water company's website most

Leakage is a tangible source of frustration to consumers

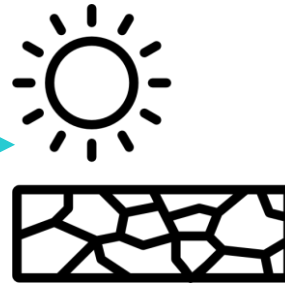
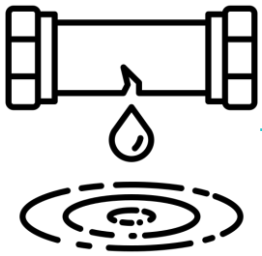


“They are leaking so much money – what have they been doing?” Male, England



Despite consumers under a hosepipe ban being significantly more aware of leaks, their behaviour is not changing

Just over two fifths (44%) had heard about water leaks in the last few months, with those in the South East (55%) and those under a hosepipe ban (58%) significantly more aware of this key topic compared to the total.



- Consumers have an impression that water companies are **not playing their part to prevent** drought by fixing leaks
- This diminishes any feelings of individual responsibility

- The information that more focus is given to fixing leaks during drought is damaging
- Gives an impression that they **only do the minimum** unless forced by extenuating circumstances

- In order to encourage and inspire a better response in a drought, companies need to show that they **also** doing what they can do address leakage **before, during and after a drought**

Water company communications around leaks in general are not providing reassurance or building trust



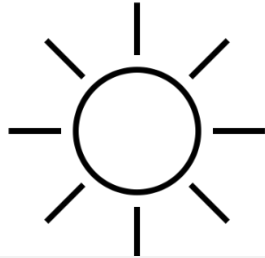
Demonstrating how leakage is being tackled needs to be done in an **accessible and tangible way through simple communications** which show how many leaks were fixed, within what time frame, how pipes were proactively replaced and how many litres of water were saved.



There also seems to be a desire for greater **accountability and ownership of the issues through honesty and transparency**. Avoiding perceptions that issues are being hidden, explanations not forthcoming in order to cultivate greater understanding. Clearly stating why something has happened, acknowledging it and setting out what the plan is to address it.

If water companies show they are tackling leaks, consumers may be open to engaging more with drought

Involving consumers in the wider issue of drought and giving them a role to play which they can see to be impactful may encourage engagement with drought. There is an openness to 'being in this together' if the issues are explained/communicated in the right way.



Why drought happens and what the impact of climate change is

What the impact is beyond domestic households e.g. farming



What impact a hosepipe has and why now is the right time to introduce it

Explain why not earlier / why not later



Clarity over how hosepipe bans are enforced - by who and how



Sharing learnings from other parts of the country / other water companies be shared



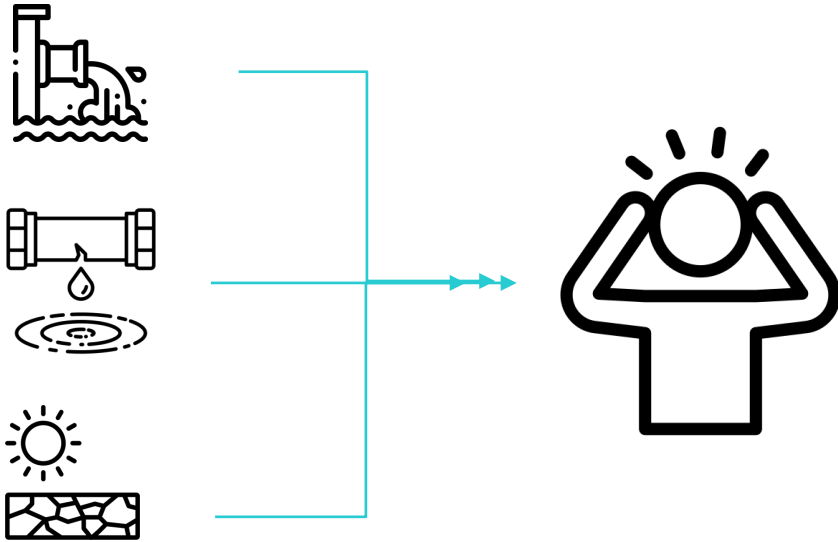
ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Profits and CEO salaries

Profits and bonuses are a sore point for consumers, but awareness and engagement in the day to day is low

Over a fifth (22%) of people had heard about water company profits/dividends. A majority (70%) said hearing about water company profits/dividends had a negative effect on their views of their water company. Less than a fifth (18%) of people had heard about chief executive pay and bonuses in the last few months. A majority (76%) said hearing about this key topic had a negative effect on the views of their water company.



- Hearing about profits and bonuses within the context of pollution, storm overflows, leaks and hosepipe bans is frustrating
- Feels akin to rubbing 'salt in the wound' and that they don't care about their customers as they still pay big bonuses regardless

- However, in actual day-to-day life, little thought is given to the issue
- Newspaper headlines stoke a general feeling of disempowerment, but actual engagement is very low

"These bonuses are going ahead and you know that they're going straight through but yet they're wasting all this water." Female, England

Limited understanding of how water companies work, coupled with other issues, leads to huge levels of negativity

Only 13% awareness around ownership of water companies

- **Awareness:** Just over one in ten (**13%**) had heard about the ownership of water companies in the last few months. Those with a water meter (14%) are more likely to have heard about this topic compared to those who do not (10%).
- **Impact:** However, among those who had heard, more than half (**53%**) said this had a negative impact on the perception of their water company. While over a third (37%) said this had no effect and only 10% positive.
- **Sources:** Half of people (**50%**) had heard about this key topic through the TV, followed by newspapers/magazines (35%). Three in ten (29%) heard through the radio and a further quarter (25%) on social media. Only one in ten (10%) had heard through Government/ CCW/Citizen's advice sources. When getting information on the ownership of water companies, people trust the TV (26%) and newspapers/magazines (22%) the most. A further 18% trust Government/CCW/Citizen's advice sources.

76% say water company Chief Executives pay/bonuses has negative impact on perceptions

- **Awareness:** Less than a fifth (**18%**) of people had heard about chief executive pay and bonuses in the last few months. Those who have a water meter (21%) are more likely to have heard about this topic compared to those who do not (16%).
- **Impact:** A majority (**76%**) said hearing about this key topic had a negative effect on the views of their water company, compared to 18% who said it had no effect, and 6% a positive effect.
- **Sources:** Over half (**56%**) heard about this key topic through the TV, followed by newspapers/magazines (41%). A further quarter heard through the radio (26%) and social media (24%). Only 7% heard through Government/CCW/Citizen's advice sources. A third (33%) said they trust TV the most, followed by newspapers/magazines (28%). A minority (4%) felt their water company's website was a trusted source for information on this key topic.

70% say water company profits/dividends has a negative impact on perceptions

- **Awareness:** Over a fifth (**22%**) of people had heard about water company profits/dividends. Those with a water meter (24%) are more likely to have heard about this topic compared to those who do not (19%).
- **Impact:** A majority (**70%**) said hearing about water company profits/dividends had a negative effect on their views of their water company. Compared to just under a quarter (23%) who felt it no effect and 7% said it had a positive effect.
- **Sources:** Most people (**58%**) had heard about water profits/dividends through TV, followed by newspapers/magazines (36%). Only 8% heard through Government/CCW/Citizen's advice sources. A third of people trust the TV (33%) most, followed by newspapers /magazines (22%). 13% trust Government/CCW/Citizen's advice source and only 5% trust their water company's website most.

When water companies perform as they should, profits and bonuses are tolerated

Profits/bonuses are not of great interest aside from when the industry gathers negative attention

- As a utility provider, water companies **feel like a public service** and yet are private businesses
- Consumers pick up on a **lack of transparency** over operations and profits when considering the issue

Ofwat do not appear to hold water companies accountable missed targets

- This causes consumers to feel even **further disenfranchised** and less and less like paying customers

Consumers would respond well to water companies being proactively open and transparent

- Demonstrating that they **recognise and value the need for accountability** could be very impactful
- Consumers are highly sensitive to any suggestion of spin or attempting to deflect or avoid mistakes / problems

“With other utilities, we can choose who supplies our electricity, gas, etc. but we can’t with water. This whole business of getting a bonus, a huge bonus... And they’re not as far as we are concerned as customers reaching their targets.” Female, Wales

“They’ve got to be transparent. They’ve got us in a bind and we have to pay. And all I would like is no more lies. There’s wastage and all that stuff and they need to be open with us, be honest with us?” Male, England



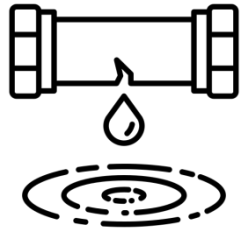
ccw

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

How to move the
conversation forward on
these issues

ccwater.org.uk

Engaging consumers will be a long process, but in the short term the immediate focus should be on leaks



Leaks* are the sole responsibility of the water company – even if consumers wanted to get involved there is no role for them

Not tackling leakage undermines everything else that a water company may be trying to do

For consumers, leaks = waste (both water and money)

**When referring to leaks, consumers are often referring to big, public leaks such as burst mains. This is opposed to leaks on their property (which they are more aware that they are responsible for)*

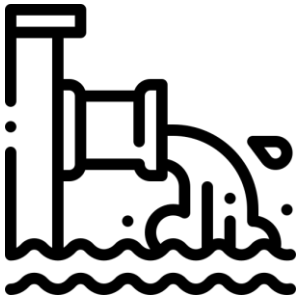
“I think being asked to save water while there's so much leakage going on is difficult for people to take on.” Male, England

Key principles that water companies should apply to leakage in practice

- 1 Show an understanding of how leakage is a crucial, fundamental issue to get right because of the knock on effect to everything else
- 2 Demonstrate how leaks are being prioritised and proactively invested in all year round, not just when there is drought
- 3 Have digestible and accessible measures such as targets and progress reports which are accessible to consumers
- 4 Take accountability for missing targets on leaks and show that there is a direct correlation between hitting targets and bonuses being awarded

Pollution is a complex an issue and consumers are disengaged with profits

- Consumer responses to storm overflows and profits are largely dictated by coverage in the media
- Outside of press coverage, consumers are not spontaneously thinking about these issues

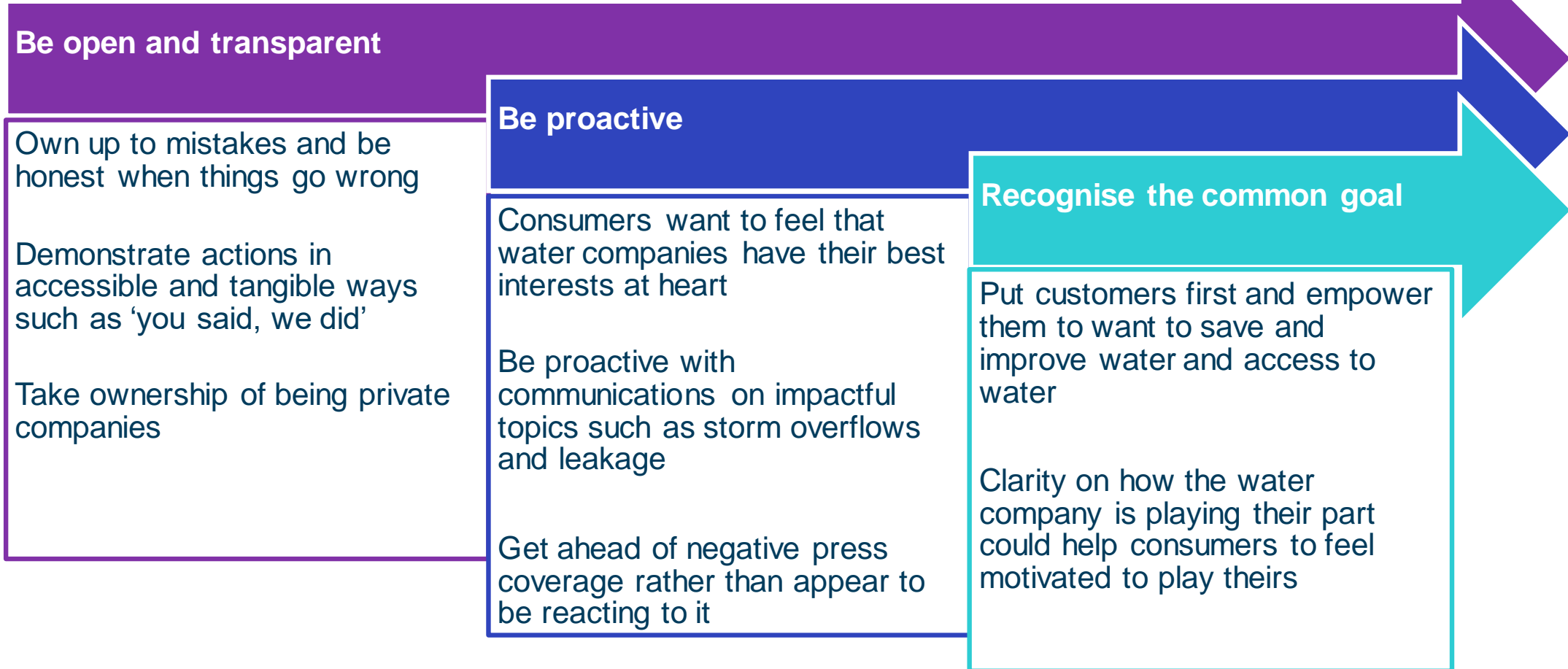


Even when consumers do engage with storm overflows it is through an intensive educative session which is unrealistic to replicate on a large scale

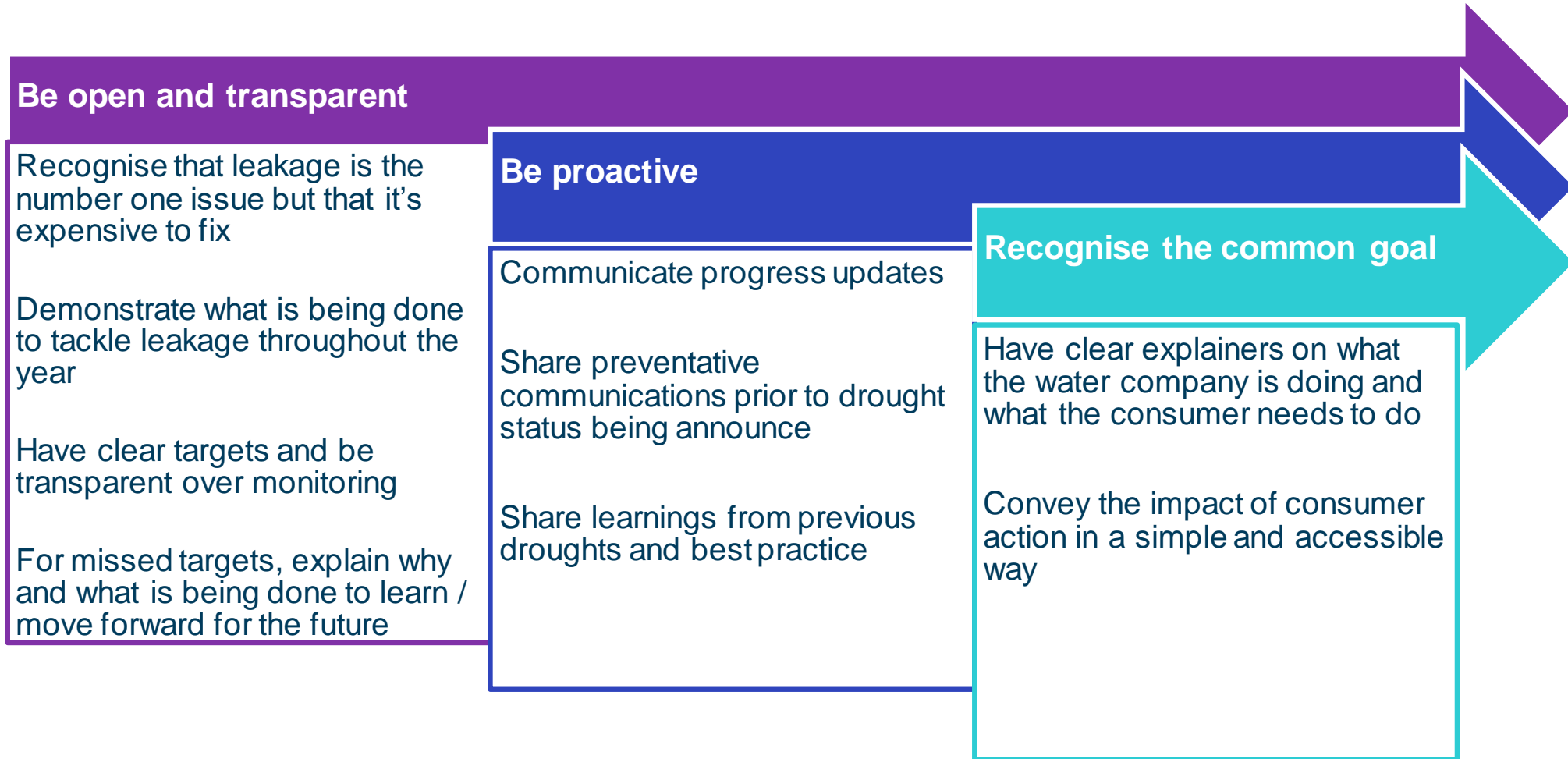


Although consumers feel frustrated and hard done by when they actively engage with profits/bonuses, in the day to day they are not engaged

Going forward, communications should be underpinned by a commitment to being open and transparent



How these principles could work for leakage and drought



How these principles could work for pollution

Be open and transparent

Have a clear, single message that water companies are taking responsibility for improving Storm Overflows

Have clear targets whilst being realistic that this is a complex problem which cannot be addressed by water companies alone

Don't be defensive or appear to be blaming others for the issue

Be proactive

Communicate targets and progress against them

Demonstrate wanting to work collectively with other organisations to tackle the issues (e.g. set up a task force with EA/ Ofwat / DEFRA)

Highlight what consumers can do to contribute and what impact their help will have

Recognise the common goal

Tailor any feedback or impact reports to local areas so that it feels relevant and tangible

Acknowledge that water companies may need to rebuild trust in this area (specifically those which have been fined)

Longer term, awareness of the collective responsibility of other agencies needs to be raised

Awareness raising and empowering consumers

- Raising awareness of the wider issues e.g. If consumers have a better understanding that storm overflows are intended to protect homes in storm conditions – they may be more open hearing about the other complexities which factor into storm overflows
- Empowering consumers so they have a reason to care and can see the impact of their actions

Raising the profile and role of Ofwat and the Environment Agency

- Show how work is being done collaboratively and collectively to tackle complex issues such as pollution
- Raise awareness of the importance and impact of regulations
- Be transparent around what happens if targets are not met and how this impacts profits and bonuses

A large, stylized, light blue 'CCW' logo is positioned in the background on the right side of the page. It is rendered in a thick, rounded, cursive font, appearing to have a slight 3D effect with a darker blue shadow underneath. The letters are interconnected and flow from the top right towards the bottom left.

CCW

The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

CCW

23 Stephenson Street

Birmingham

B2 4BH

www.ccwater.org.uk

enquiries@ccwater.org.uk

ccwater.org.uk