



**BRIEFING PAPER**

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# Water meters: the rights of customers and water companies

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**Contents:**

1. Background, policy and legislation
2. Consumer questions and concerns
3. Further advice and information



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## Summary

The current charging system for water in England and Wales is based on a mix of metered charging or a fixed charge based on the rateable value of the property. Individual customers can check their water bills to see how they are being charged for water. This briefing primarily relates to England.

Environment Agency figures from March 2017 showed [50% of households in England](#) had a water meter fitted.

### **Can a domestic customer choose to have a water meter?**

Domestic customers who currently pay on an unmeasured (unmetered) basis have the legal right at any time to give their water company a notice requiring them to fix charges by reference to the volume of water supplied (i.e. on a metered basis). Tenants also have a right to ask for a meter but it is recommended that they ask permission from their landlord first. If a tenancy agreement is for less than 6 months a tenant *must* ask permission from their landlord.

A water company is not obliged to install a meter in response to a customer's request if it is not reasonably practicable to do so, or if it is unreasonably expensive.

### **Can a water company insist on the installation of a water meter?**

In practice, a water company can install a water meter and charge on that basis, if the household customer:

- uses an automatic watering device (such as a garden sprinkler);
- automatically fills a swimming pool or pond;
- has a large bath;
- uses a reverse osmosis softening unit;
- has a power shower;
- is the new occupier of a property (provided an unmetered bill has not already been sent to that occupier); or
- lives in an area which has been determined by the Secretary of State to be an area of serious water stress and subject to a metering programme as part of a plan to maintain secure water supplies.

### **Does this mean there is compulsory metering in some parts of the country?**

No water company is required to introduce universal metering. The legislation simply gives water companies the power to choose to use metering as a way of managing water resources in their area.

### **Which areas are classified as in "serious water stress"?**

The water company water stress designations were updated in July 2013, using evidence for determining the level of water stress for areas in England and Wales. The following water company areas were classified as areas of serious water stress by the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (2013 classifications):

- Affinity Water
- Anglian Water
- Essex and Suffolk Water
- South East Water
- Southern Water
- Sutton and East Surrey Water
- Thames Water

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### **Can a water company insist on a smart meter?**

It is at the discretion of the water company to decide which type of meter it proposes to use (e.g. whether it is a smart meter).

### **Can a customer refuse to have a water meter?**

If one or more of the conditions for metering outlined above applies to a customer, the water company can install a meter and charge on that basis. A customer cannot refuse a meter in these circumstances nor object to the type of meter (for example a smart meter).

### **Devolved Administrations**

This Briefing Paper relates to England only, unless otherwise specified.

For information on water meters in Wales, detailed advice is available from the [Citizens Advice Page on Water Meters](#), the [Welsh Water page on water meters](#) and [guidance on having a water meter](#).

For information specific to Scotland, detailed advice is available from the [Citizens Advice Page on Water Meters](#) and the [Scottish Water page on water meters](#).

For information on water meters in Northern Ireland, please refer to the [NI Water statement on water meters](#), NI Water webpage [your bill and our charges](#) and the [CCWater for Northern Ireland page on water charging](#).

# 1. Background, policy and legislation

A water meter is a device that measures how much water is used at a property and allows customers to be charged for water based on their consumption (metered charging).

The current charging system for water in England and Wales is based on a mix of metered charging or a fixed charge based on the rateable value of the property.

Environment Agency figures showed [50% of households in England](#) had a water meter fitted as of March 2017.<sup>1</sup> Individual customers can check their water bills to see how they are being charged for water.

Unlike the situation in the energy sector, there is no Government requirement for water companies to roll out smart water meters.

This briefing paper focuses on water metering; an explanation of rateable values is not provided. More information on rateable values can be found in the Library Briefing Paper on [Water bills and rateable values \(SN06647\)](#).

For more information on smart meters in the energy sector, see the Library Briefing Paper on [Smart Meters](#) (SN06179).

General information about water meters is available on the [Consumer Council for Water page on water meters](#).<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 Benefits and concerns

Water resources in England are known to be under pressure, particularly in the South East of England.<sup>3</sup> Water meters are one tool that water companies use to reduce water consumption, as meters can incentivise households to use less water to decrease their bills. Water meters also help water companies detect leaks, which helps tackle water waste. Government on policy water meters is discussed in section 1.3 below.

Concerns about water meters mostly relate to the impacts on consumer bills, particularly in areas that are moving towards universal metering (see section 3.2 below). Ofwat and the Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) consider that metered charging is the fairest way to charge for water services.<sup>4</sup> While some households may see a reduction in their bill when switching to metered charges, some households may see bills increase (see section 1.2 below for detail).

50% of households in England had a water meter fitted as of January 2018.

<sup>1</sup> [PQ 121058, 16 January 2018](#) [Water: Meters]. More detailed data for metering levels for each water company are available in Defra's [Water Conservation Report](#), 19 December 2018.

<sup>2</sup> CCWater, [Can you give me some general information about water meters?](#), updated 17 February 2017 [accessed 10 April 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Environment agency, [Environment Agency calls for action on water efficiency](#), 23 May 2018. [accessed 16 May 2019]

<sup>4</sup> CCWater, [Compulsory metering](#) [accessed 16 May 2019]; Ofwat, [Water meters – your questions answered \(pdf\)](#), October 2013 [accessed 12 April 2019].

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CCWater believes that where water companies can insist on metering this should be customer-focused and that customers should be given the option to postpone switching to metered charges for 2 years.<sup>5</sup>

Section 2.9 below points to resources for consumers who are struggling with bills.

### 1.2 Cost implications

Metered water bills are usually made up of:

- A variable charge based on actual water use; and
- A fixed standing charge that covers costs such as reading and maintaining the meter, billing and customer service (costs companies have regardless of water use).

According to [Ofwat](#), the extent of any savings arising from having a meter installed are likely to depend on:

- how much a customer currently pays;
- the number of people living in the property; and
- how much water the household uses.

A water meter is more likely to save money in houses with a combination of one or more of: high rateable values, low occupancy and/or low water consumption. For example, Ofwat notes that, generally, large families may be worse off with a meter and single occupiers are most likely to benefit.

More information for household customers, including advice on simple ways to save water, is provided in the Ofwat leaflet: [Water meters – your questions answered](#).

There is also a [water meter calculator](#) on the Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) website that can help customers predict whether they would save money by changing to a meter.

### 1.3 Government policy on water meters

The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) policy has been consistent in encouraging the use of water meters.

In 2008, Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government jointly commissioned an independent review to examine the system of charging households for water and sewerage services and to make recommendations for a fair and sustainable charging system.

The Final Report, [The Independent Review of Charging for Household Water and Sewerage Services](#)<sup>6</sup> was published in December 2009 (known as the Walker Review). Its main conclusions in relation to water metering included:

A water meter is more likely to save money in houses with high rateable values, low occupancy and/or low consumption.

<sup>5</sup> CCWater, [Compulsory metering](#) [accessed 16 May 2019].

<sup>6</sup> Defra, [The Independent Review of Charging for Household Water and Sewerage Services](#), Anna Walker CB, December 2009 [accessed 21 October 2015]

- The charging system needs to incentivise the efficient use of water to ensure that we have sustainable supplies for the future. Water also needs to be affordable for all.
- Charging by volume of water used (which requires meters to be installed) is the fairest approach to charging; and charging in this way can incentivise more efficient use of water.
- In evaluating the benefits, it is necessary to take account of both the potential water savings and the reduced costs of more systematic metering.
- There is a strong case for metering where water is scarce and the benefits therefore outweigh the costs; for high discretionary users (who may not be paying for what they use at the moment); and on change of occupancy. The case for metering is less compelling when water is not in short supply.

The 2011 [Water for Life](#) White Paper that followed did not contain any specific objective to increase levels of metering but encouraged water companies to actively promote metering to those who would benefit.<sup>7</sup> (The proposals in the 2011 White Paper were implemented through the *Water Act 2014*.)

## Recent calls for change

More recently there have been calls for the Government to take a stronger approach to water meters as part efforts to increase water efficiency and reduce personal water consumption in response to ongoing concerns about water shortages. For example, in May 2018 the Environment Agency predicted that without further action to increase water supplies, reduce demand for water and tackle water waste, many areas of England could see water supply deficits by 2050.<sup>8</sup>

Defra's [25 Year Environment Plan](#), published in January 2018, stated an intention to set a personal consumption target for water use in England and agree measures needed to meet it (no specific measures were articulated in the Plan):

We want to see water use in England fall - the average person currently consumes 140 litres per day. With the average bath using around 80 litres and each flush of an old-fashioned toilet using up to 13 litres, there is action we can take to ensure we are using our water supply most efficiently. We will work with the industry to set an ambitious personal consumption target and agree cost effective measures to meet it.<sup>9</sup>

The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), the Committee on Climate Change and the House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee have all since recommended that the Government allow compulsory metering UK wide as part of its strategy to reduce water demand. In April 2018 the [NIC recommended](#) that Defra should:

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<sup>7</sup> Defra, [Water for Life](#), December 2011, p65

<sup>8</sup> Environment agency, [Environment Agency calls for action on water efficiency](#), 23 May 2018. [accessed 16 May 2019].

<sup>9</sup> Defra, [25 Year Environment Plan](#), 11 January 2018, page 25.

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enable companies to implement compulsory metering beyond water stressed areas by the 2030s, by amending regulations before the end of 2019 and requiring all companies to consider systematic roll out of smart meters as a first step in a concerted campaign to improve water efficiency.<sup>10</sup>

The NIC's recommendations were supported by the EFRA Committee in their October 2018 report: [Regulation in the Water Industry](#),<sup>11</sup> and by the Committee on Climate Change in their February 2019 report: [UK housing: Fit for the future?](#)<sup>12</sup> The EFRA Committee made the following conclusions:

44. We consider that using meters to ensure customers pay for the water they use, rather than basing bills on the outdated system of rateable values, sends a strong message to customers about the value of water. There is strong evidence that metering helps to reduce water use and to detect leaks.

45. Allowing compulsory metering only in water-stressed areas causes regional disparities that are inappropriate given the national need to conserve water. We endorse the recommendation of the National Infrastructure Commission that Defra should amend regulations by the end of 2019 to allow all water companies to implement compulsory metering, using smart meters. Water companies should use these powers to help achieve ambitious PCC reduction targets, while also engaging customers about the value of water and the benefits of using a meter. Support for economically vulnerable customers should be strengthened should metering lead to significant bill increases.<sup>13</sup>

The EFRA Committee also expressed "disappointment" that the Government had not yet set a specific personal consumption target.<sup>14</sup>

The Consumer Council for Water responded to the EFRA Committee's report stating that while they preferred metering to be voluntary, they supported compulsory metering provided water companies have sufficient financial support in place for consumers who might struggle with increased bills.<sup>15</sup>

The [Government's response to the EFRA Committee's 2018 report](#) stated that the Government would launch a call for evidence to look at setting a target for personal water consumption as outlined in the 25 Year Environment Plan.<sup>16</sup> The Government's position was summarised in

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<sup>10</sup> National Infrastructure Commission, [Preparing for a drier future: England's water infrastructure needs](#), 25 April 2018, page 3.

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Regulation in the Water Industry](#), Eighth report of session 2017-19, HC1041, 9 October 2019, para 38-45.

<sup>12</sup> Committee on Climate Change, [UK housing: Fit for the future?](#), 22 February 2019 page 82.

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Regulation in the Water Industry](#), Eighth report of session 2017-19, HC1041, 9 October 2019, para 44-45.

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Regulation in the Water Industry](#), Eighth report of session 2017-19, HC1041, 9 October 2019, para 37.

<sup>15</sup> CCWater, [Statement on EFRA committee report on regulation](#), 9 October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> EFRA Committee, [Government and Ofwat Responses to the Committee's Eighth Report](#), Fourteenth Special Report of Session 2017-19, HC1856, 21 December 2019, para4-5.



response to a [Parliamentary Question](#) in April 2019, which stated that a call for evidence would be launched by mid-May 2019:

The Government expects companies to increase metering where appropriate. Currently, water companies can introduce universal metering if they are in an area designated as an area of serious water stress and have consulted on doing so with their customers.

We are launching a call for evidence on setting an ambitious target for personal water consumption by mid-May. Alongside this, we will hold a consultation to examine the policy options required to support the target. This will include exploratory questions around policy options such as the labelling of water-using products, improving building standards, and the future role of metering.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.4 Relevant legislation

By amending the [Water Industry Act 1991](#), the [Water Industry Act 1999](#) (and associated secondary legislation) provides the legislative framework for the switch to metered water services for domestic customers, including that water meters be fitted free of charge.

The [Water Industry Act 1991](#) (as amended) therefore includes provisions:

- To allow water companies to choose whatever methods they feel appropriate for charging (subject to various restrictions in legislation and Ofwat's rules about charges schemes).<sup>18</sup>
- To allow domestic customers who currently pay on an unmeasured (unmetered basis) to elect to be charged by volume, and have a water meter fitted free of charge (except where to install a meter would not be practicable or would be unreasonably expensive).<sup>19</sup>
- To allow domestic customers who have elected to have a meter the option of reverting to an unmeasured charge within 12 months (provided it is the first time they have elected to be charged by volume at that premises and that at least one person who was living at the premises at the time the meter was requested still lives there).<sup>20</sup>
- To prevent water companies from charging domestic customers on a metered basis unless:<sup>21</sup>
  - they have received a request from the customer to be charged by volume; or
  - there is a change in occupation at the premises (provided an unmeasured bill has not already been issued to the new occupier);<sup>22</sup> or
  - the premises has certain high water use devices (such as a garden sprinkler) or is in a designated area of serious water

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<sup>17</sup> [PQ HL15043, 15 April 2019](#) [Water: Conservation]

<sup>18</sup> Sections 142-143 Water Industry Act 1991. Section 143B Ofwat has the power to issue rules about charges schemes. Those rules are published on Ofwat's website: [charges schemes](#) [accessed 21 June 2019].

<sup>19</sup> Section 144A and 148 Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>20</sup> Section 144A, Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>21</sup> Section 144B Water Industry Act 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Change in occupation means all persons living at the premises are new occupants.

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stress where the company has an approved compulsory metering programme – circumstances described by the [\*Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) Regulations 1999\*](#).

- To allow the Secretary of State to make regulations in respect of water charges schemes providing targeted protection for vulnerable groups, such as those who are disabled or on low incomes with high essential water use.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Section 143A, Water Industry Act 1991

## 2. Consumer questions and concerns

### 2.1 Can a domestic customer choose to have a water meter?

Domestic customers who currently pay on an unmeasured (unmetered) basis have the legal right at any time to request a water meter (technically called giving their water company a notice requiring them to fix charges by reference to the volume of water supplied).<sup>24</sup>

However, a water company is not obliged to install a meter if:

- 1 it is not reasonably practical to fix charges in respect of the premises by reference to the volume of water supplied; or
- 2 to do so would involve incurring unreasonable expense.<sup>25</sup>

A domestic customer that requests to be charged by volume can revert to an unmeasured charge within 12 months, provided it was the first time they have requested to be charged by volume at that premises and at least one person living in the household when the request was made still lives there.<sup>26</sup>

This right to have a water meter relates to the consumer. Therefore, tenants living in rented accommodation also have the right to apply for a meter. Ofwat suggests that it is advisable that they contact the landlord to seek permission before applying for a meter. For fixed-term tenancy agreements longer than six months, Ofwat states that the landlord cannot stop a tenant from having a meter, but their consent may be required to alter/improve the property. If a tenant has a fixed-term tenancy agreement of less than six months, they must ask the landlord's permission.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.2 What if a water company cannot fit a meter?

Where a water company declines to fit a water meter on a customer's request on the grounds that it is not reasonably practicable or would be unreasonably expensive, Ofwat requires that the company offer the customer the choice of paying on the basis of an "assessed charge".<sup>28</sup>

[An assessed charge](#) means a charge that estimates as closely as practicable the metered charges that would apply based on the water likely to be used at that premises.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Section 144A(1), Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>25</sup> Section 144A(3), Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>26</sup> Section 144A(5), Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>27</sup> Ofwat, [Water meters – your questions answered](#), December 2013, p14 [accessed 12 April 2019]

<sup>28</sup> Ofwat, [Charges scheme rules](#) issued under sections 143(6A) and 143B of the Water Industry Act 1991, 20 December 2019, rule 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ofwat, [Charges scheme rules](#) issued under sections 143(6A) and 143B of the Water Industry Act 1991, 20 December 2019, rule 18.

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It is up to each water company to determine how the assessed charge is calculated, and the method must be applied consistently across all the company's customers. Water companies must consult with the Consumer Council for Water before making a proposed charges scheme.<sup>30</sup>

Ofwat advises that assessed charges are most commonly based on:

- The number of bedrooms in the property
- The type of property
- The number of people that live at the property; or
- A fixed charge based on the average metered bill in the company's area.<sup>31</sup>

One example of where an assessed charge may be applied is for blocks of flats where shared water supplies mean that it is not possible for occupants to have individual meters.

### 2.3 Can water companies insist on the installation of water meters?

Water companies can install meters in properties but cannot insist that the existing householder pays for their water on that basis (by volume), except in specified circumstances (known as prescribed conditions).<sup>32</sup>

In practice, a water company in England can install a water meter and charge on that basis, if the household customer:

- uses an automatic watering device (such as a garden sprinkler);
- automatically fill a swimming pool or pond;
- has a large bath;
- uses a reverse osmosis softening unit;
- has a power shower;
- is the new occupier of a property (provided an unmetered bill has not already been sent to that occupier);<sup>33</sup> or
- lives in an area which has been determined by the Secretary of State to be an area of serious water stress and subject to a metering programme as part of a plan to maintain secure water supplies.

These circumstances are set out in the [Water Industry Act 1991](#) (as amended) (section 144B) and the [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) Regulations 1999](#).

The Prescribed Conditions Regulations do not apply to any water company whose area is wholly or mainly in Wales.<sup>34</sup> The Welsh Water guidance on having a water meter states that customers with a

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<sup>30</sup> Ofwat, [Charges scheme rules](#) issued under sections 143(6A) and 143B of the Water Industry Act 1991, 20 December 2019, rule 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ofwat, [Assessed charges](#) [accessed 24 June 2019]

<sup>32</sup> The prescribed conditions are set out in the [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) Regulations 1999](#) as amended by the [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2007](#). These regulations set the prescribed conditions in which a water undertakers' right to charge by volume is restricted under Section 144B of the *Water Industry Act 1991*.

<sup>33</sup> Section 144B(2)(b), Water Industry Act 1991

<sup>34</sup> [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) Regulations 1999](#), Regulation 1(2)

swimming pool or using garden sprinklers must pay by metered charges. Otherwise, customers can choose to revert to unmeasured bills “any time up to two years from the date the meter was fitted”.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.4 Does this mean there is compulsory metering in some parts of the country?

No water company is required to introduce universal metering, even if it is in an area of severe water stress (or any of the other prescribed conditions apply).

The relevant legislation simply gives water companies the power to choose to use metering as a way of managing water resources in their area. Water companies in water stressed areas only have the right to insist on charging by volume if a water metering programme is included in their statutory Water Resources Management Plan, which must be approved by the Secretary of State (see Box 1 below).<sup>36</sup> Water companies’ metering programmes are also set out in business plans submitted to Ofwat as part of the 5-yearly [price review](#) process.

In response to media reports about compulsory metering for householders in August 2013, Defra issued the following [press release](#):

This week we removed several water companies from the list of companies covering severely water stressed areas first published in 2007. No new areas have been added, so nothing has changed for the vast majority of water companies and water users.

Any suggestion that this has made it more likely that customers will face compulsory water metering is not true.

No water company is required to introduce compulsory metering, even if it is in an area of severe water stress.

Metering is just one of many ways water companies can manage water resources in their area.

The government is doing more than ever before to tackle water prices, securing a £50 rebate off the exceptionally high bills of those in the south west, bringing in social tariffs for the first time and, through our water bill, bringing in competition for all non-household users.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.5 Which areas are classified as areas of “serious water stress”?

The Secretary of State may, after consulting with the Environment Agency, determine the whole or any part of a water company’s area to

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<sup>35</sup> Welsh Water, [A Guide to Having a Water Meter](#) page 6 [accessed 12 April 2019]. The pdf can be downloaded from the Welsh Water webpage [leaflets and publications](#), under the section ‘Water Supply’.

<sup>36</sup> Section 37A of the *Water Industry Act 1991* (as amended) requires water companies to prepare, publish and maintain Water Resource Management Plans that set out how the company will manage long-term demand for water in their area. Plans are approved by the Secretary of State.

<sup>37</sup> Defra, [Water metering: response to an article in the Telegraph](#), 10 August 2013 [accessed 12 April 2019].

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be as area of serious water stress pursuant to Regulation 4 of *Water Industry (Prescribed Conditions) Regulations 1999* (as amended).<sup>38</sup>

The Secretary of State must consider that:

- 1 the current household demand for water in that area is a high proportion of the current effective rainfall which is available to meet that demand; or
- 2 the future household demand for water in that area is likely to be a high proportion of the effective rainfall which is likely to be available to meet that demand.

The water company water stress designations were updated in July 2013 (see Box 1), using up-to-date evidence for determining the level of water stress for areas in England and Wales.<sup>39</sup>

The Secretary of State may revoke or modify any determination at any time. More information and the full list of classifications for all water company areas is available on Gov.uk: [Policy paper on water stressed areas](#) (2013 classifications).

### Box 1: Areas of serious water stress

The following water company areas were classified as areas of serious water stress by the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales (2013 classifications):<sup>40</sup>

- Affinity Water
- Anglian Water
- Essex and Suffolk Water
- South East Water
- Southern Water
- Sutton and East Surrey Water
- Thames Water

Five of these water companies (Southern Water, Thames, Affinity Water, South East Water and Anglian Water) are running or have run metering programmes in their regions.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) Regulations 1999](#) as amended by the [Water Industry \(Prescribed Conditions\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2007](#).

<sup>39</sup> Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales, [Water stressed areas – final classification](#), July 2013 [accessed 21 October 2015]

<sup>40</sup> Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales, [Water stressed areas – final classification](#), July 2013 [accessed 21 October 2015]

<sup>41</sup> For information, see the metering webpages on each company website: [Southern Water](#); [South East Water](#); [Affinity Water](#); ; [Thames Water](#); [Anglian Water](#) (Anglian Water does not require customers to switch to metered charging); [Essex and Suffolk Water](#); [Sutton and East Surrey \(SES\) Water](#).

## 2.6 Can a company insist on installing a smart meter?

A water smart meter is a device that records water meter readings automatically, usually hourly, and then relays them to the supplier. Traditional meter readings are taken manually, at most a few times a year.

It is at the discretion of the water company to decide which type of meter it proposes to use as long as they comply with relevant UK and EU requirements. This means that the meter installed may or may not be a smart meter. Box 2 provides some examples of companies that are rolling out smart meters.

A response in the Lords in March 2016 explained the situation as follows:

My Lords, the choice of meter type and frequency of meter readings is a matter for water companies and their customers. There is a trend towards smart meters. This varies by company and by customer, reflecting factors such as water scarcity and customer preference. Not all will benefit from sophisticated data and fitting new meters will affect the bills of all customers. Water companies therefore need to consider all the costs and benefits when taking any decision.<sup>42</sup>

There have been recent calls including from the House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee and others for the Government to require water companies to consider systematic roll-out of smart water meters (see section 1.3 above).

It is at the discretion of the water company to decide which type of meter it proposes to use.

### Box 2: Water companies installing smart meters

[Thames Water](#) is rolling out smart water meters to all its customers, starting in London. Thames Water says that installing smart meters is part of its plan “to protect water supplies for future generations, giving greater visibility and control to our customers to better understand and manage their water use”.<sup>43</sup> The Thames Water smart meter roll-out began in London in 2015 and by March 2018 had installed 253,000 smart meters across fourteen London boroughs.<sup>44</sup> For more information, see Thames Water’s [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about water meters.

[Anglian Water](#) has been trialling smart meters in Newmarket and Norwich in 2017 and 2018 and has proposed rolling out smart meters to all customers in its region in its draft 2020–2025 business plan submitted to Ofwat.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> HL Deb 3 March 2016 [c936](#)

<sup>43</sup> Thames Water, [Water Meters: Frequently Asked Questions](#) (“*why are you fitting smart meters?*”) [accessed 25 June 2019]

<sup>44</sup> Thames Water, [Draft business plan 2020-2025: Building a better future](#), April 2019 [accessed 15 May 2019].

<sup>45</sup> Anglian Water, [Smart Meters](#) [accessed 25 June 2019]

## 2.7 Can a customer refuse to have a water meter?

An Ofwat leaflet, [Water meters – your questions answered](#), offers little hope to customers wishing to overrule their water supplier. One of the questions contained in the leaflet is: “*I do not want a meter. What are my options?*” The response begins:

If one or more of the conditions for compulsory metering outlined above applies to you, your company is allowed to install a meter and charge you according to how much water you use.

If you are worried about having a meter, your company can offer help and advice about how to reduce your bill. It will also explain the many different ways in which you can use water more efficiently.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.8 Can a water meter be removed by a new occupier?

Customers moving into properties that already have a water meter cannot have the meter removed. Ofwat confirm that under the *Water Industry Act 1991* (as amended) a water company is not required to offer a new resident a choice of measured or unmeasured bills when they move into a property.<sup>47</sup> The water company is entitled to charge the new occupier on a metered basis (so long as no unmetered charges have already been billed to that customer).<sup>48</sup>

Water companies are required to set out the approach they will take to charging new occupiers and this information should be readily available.

## 2.9 What help is available for vulnerable customers?

There are no exemptions available for individual customers, but there are a number of payment schemes available for customers who struggle to pay their resulting bills.

A customer’s water company should provide advice on the options available for customer’s finding it difficult to pay their bills. Details should be available on the water company’s website.

Help for vulnerable customers includes:

- Providing information to help the customer use water more efficiently.
- Payment options – each company is required to offer various payment options.
- The WaterSure scheme – each company is required to offer a capped bill to qualifying low-income metered household customers.

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<sup>46</sup> Ofwat, [Water meters – your questions answered](#), December 2013 [accessed 12 April 2019]

<sup>47</sup> Ofwat, [Water meters – your questions answered](#), December 2013 [accessed 12 April 2019]

<sup>48</sup> Section 144B(2)(b), Water Industry Act 1991



- Charitable trust schemes – many companies offer trust funds or payment matching schemes.
- Water Direct (third party deduction schemes) – if a customer is in arrears and on specified means-tested benefits, it may be possible for payments to be made directly to the water company from the customer's benefits.

This briefing paper does not cover water affordability problems or the help available for vulnerable households in detail. Please refer to the Library Briefing Paper on [Water bills: affordability and support for household customers](#) (SN06596) for detailed information on this issue.

## 3. Further advice and information

### 3.1 Devolved Administrations

This Briefing Paper relates to England only, unless otherwise specified.

For information on water meters in Wales, detailed advice is available from the [Citizens Advice Page on Water Meters](#) (Wales) and the [Welsh Water page on water meters](#) and [guidance on having a water meter](#).

For information specific to Scotland, detailed advice is available from the [Citizens Advice Page on Water Meters](#) (Scotland) and the [Scottish Water page on water meters](#).

For information on water meters in Northern Ireland, please refer to the [NI Water statement on water meters](#) (November 2014) and the [CCWater for Northern Ireland page on water charging](#).

### 3.2 Water company

A customer's first port of call for further information should be their water company. If they have a complaint, they should try to resolve it through the company's complaints procedure (which should be detailed on their website).

### 3.3 Consumer Council for Water

The [Consumer Council for Water](#) can be contacted for independent information and advice on how to resolve any water or sewerage related problems. CCWater is an independent organisation that represents customers' interests. Its services are free.

[CCWater can be contacted](#) by telephoning 0300 034 2222 (England) or 0300 034 3333 (Wales) or through their [online complaints form](#).

See the CCWater webpage [How to make a complaint](#) for information about how to complain about a water company.

### 3.4 The Water Redress Scheme

The [Water Redress Scheme](#) (WATRS) is an independent adjudication service which has been set up to resolve disputes between customers and water companies. It should only be contacted if a complaint or dispute has not been resolved through the company's customer service team or by referring the matter to CCWater.

WATRS can be contacted by telephone: 0207 520 3801, by email: [applications@watrs.org](mailto:applications@watrs.org), or by their [online form](#).

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