

Smart meters - customer journey and hypercare

PR24 research

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Summary conclusions





Sample & methodology



- Portsmouth Water plans to install smart meters in 50% of properties in the region by 2030 as part of its PR24 business plan.
- This research was commissioned to understand customer needs, expectations, and preferences for smart meter services before, during, and after installation.
- It focuses on household customers, and includes households on WaterSure or PSR, those living in house shares, and digitally disenfranchised customers.



Key objectives:



To understand the **consumer context**: experiences of service from utilities generally, and Portsmouth Water specifically.



To investigate **hopes and concerns** about the rollout of water smart meters and expectations about their impact on water usage and bills.



Test customer **responses to messaging and customer communication** about the smart meter rollout.



Understand customer **needs and expectations** around communications before, during, and after smart meter installation, including smart meter data and notifications.



- **8 online group discussions x 90 minutes – each comprising 4-5 respondents**
- Recruited via regional field recruiters

	Under 40 single/dual occupancy	Families (mix of older and younger age profiles)	Over 40 single/dual occupancy	House share (NB no SEG quota)
BC1C2	1 online group (x5)	1 online group (x4)	1 online group (x5)	1 online group - students (x5)
DE	1 online group (x5)	1 online group (x4)	1 online group (x4)	1 online group - working (x4)
(Total sample sizes in brackets)	10 customers	8 customers	9 customers	9 customers

- **15 depth interviews x 60 minutes – conducted face to face and online** (according to customer preference and necessity in the case of digitally excluded sample)
- Recruited by regional field recruiters, both free-find (digitally disenfranchised) and via customer lists provided by Portsmouth Water (PSR/WaterSure)

Special audiences: no age or stage quotas

Digitally disenfranchised	5 customers: face-to-face depth interviews in Bosham and Gosport (2 male, 3 female; ages 52-70)
PSR – health related	5 customers: one face-to-face in Portsmouth and 4 online depth interviews (2 male, 3 female, ages 48-82)
WaterSure customers	5 customers online depth interviews (1 male, 4 female; ages 35-44)

Fieldwork dates: 18th – 31st July 2023





Photo by Peter Chiykowski on Unsplash

Customer context



Customers' negative experiences with energy companies and phone/ broadband providers were often front of mind

- Recalled experiences are often negative, conditioning customers to expect poor service from all utilities.
- Less true for PSR or WaterSure customers however, who often have more interaction with their water providers than with their other utilities – so see water companies in a better light.

Lack of transparency with billing and difficulty communicating with the company are frequent frustrations.



- Customers dislike having to put in the leg work to resolve an issue e.g.
 - Having to repeat the issue to multiple people or across multiple systems
 - Having to chase up the company when an issue remains unresolved
 - Having to actively search for the correct information when conflicting statements are given.
- Chatbots were unpopular, giving answers which were too broad to be useful on most occasions.

Good/Expected service



- User-friendly digital channels.
- Quick / timely issue or problem resolution - considered particularly important for essential utilities.
- Clear communications esp. around billing.
- Importantly, all types of customers put emphasis on the ability to talk to a real person without having to wait on hold for a long time. This was true of younger 'digital natives' as well as older age groups
 - Friendliness and positive tone of voice from staff often mentioned in examples of good customer communication.
 - Customers want to feel like they are not being rushed and that the person at the other end of the line is willing to discuss and resolve the issue with them.

"Not getting pushed from pillar to post..."
Family Group, DE

"If I can phone someone, they can talk to me and we can resolve what the issue is, then that's perfect, that's all I want really."
WaterSure, Male, C2

"Transparency; I like to know what I'm paying, when I'm paying, and I like to be able to organise it."
PSR, Female, C1



Most customers have good impressions of Portsmouth Water however this is often a default position based on having no direct contact or service issues.

Mainly positive often because there has been no direct experience

- Low expectations of utilities...no issues equates to good service.
- No hosepipe bans; no issues with water supplies.
- Compare well next to Southern.
- But limited experience or knowledge (mostly fine because people do not want/need more).
- Associations with low bills.
- Individual mentions of good call centre service; good engineer service following supply failure.

Some confusion/concerns often rooted in confusion about the roles of Southern and Portsmouth Water

- Portsmouth vs. Southern: who does what?
- Some anger about Southern with sewage leaks – occasionally confused with PW.
- Also examples of assigning water quality problems to SW.
- Re Havant Thicket: concern that water will not be treated properly (Southern Water link).

Poor impressions are usually single mentions.

- No response to WaterSure enquiry.
- Water quality issues in halls of residence.
- Want better info about support for vulnerable customers.
- Meter installed (compulsorily – when moved) – initially frustrated.
- Too many letters about general matters – or selling insurance.
- Charge too much.

"Portsmouth Water give great service by not giving terrible service..."

18-40 Group, BC1C2

"They're fine, no complaints at all."

PSR, Female, C2

"I think we're all so grateful in the area we're with Portsmouth Water because we're not under any hosepipe bans."

PSR, Female, C1

"If I want them, I know where the website is...I'm very happy for them to leave me to my own devices and [I'll] contact them if I need them."

PSR, Male, E

"One of the providers I never hear from. Because it's not a provider you can change, rarely hear from them."

Family Group, BC1C2

"The last conversation I had with them was not positive. I think they charge way too much for what they do."

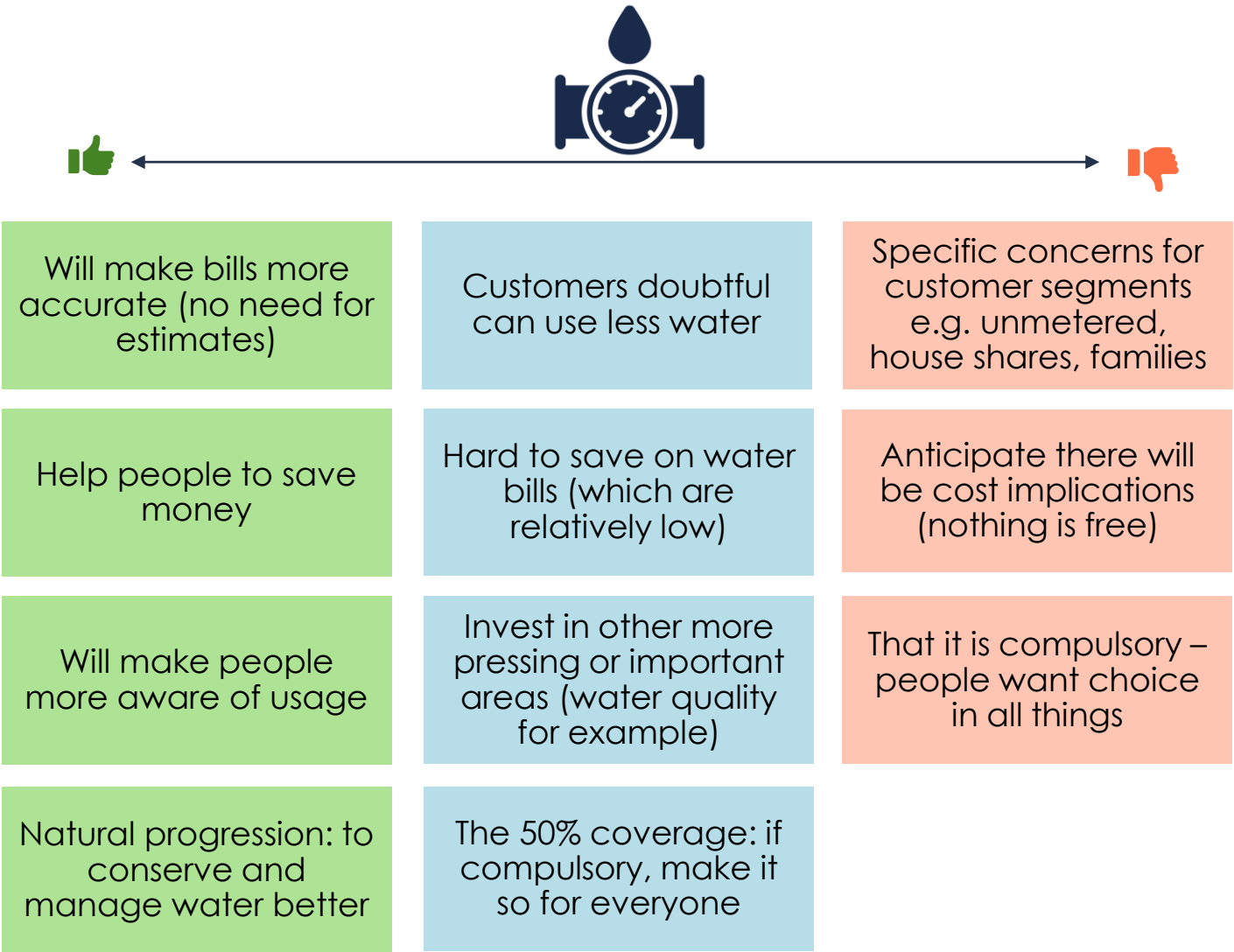
PSR, Female, C1



There are a range of perceptions relating to the introduction of smart meters

Very mixed views: a minority are actively pleased about smart meter introduction; many fairly ambivalent and a significant minority concerned.

“ Like other water companies in the UK, Portsmouth Water submits a business plan every 5 years as part of a 25-year forecast. As part of their business plan, they are planning on rolling out smart meters into 50% of properties in the region by 2030. The roll out of smart meters is compulsory. ”



“I don't want to be in a situation where I'm frightened to use the water, so it's not something I think is wonderful.”
PSR, Female C2

“Smart meters are a good idea...you will then see how much you're using. Because ... unless you're on a meter, you don't know and you don't care, ... you just pay that bill either monthly, quarterly or annually, and that's it.”
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, C1

“I wouldn't object, but I'm not desperately keen.”
PSR, Female, E

Digitally excluded

- Digital exclusion is usually part of wider circumstances: financial hardship, mental health struggles
- Also associated with being housebound or socially excluded
- NB some have smartphones if not computers (e.g. given by offspring) but often used in basic way



- Nervousness about smart meters: often related to lack of trust, even paranoia, about the government and companies

Low-income households

- Cost of living anxieties are acute
- Some see smart meter as another bill 'in their living room' – additional stress
- Others happy about smart meters as actively manage finances want reassurance of knowing what the bill will be



"We use what we use."
WaterSure, Male, D

PSR

- Predominantly retirees over 65; one on PSR for health: diabetes
- Tend to be a high-knowledge group (more interaction with companies)



- Complete mix of views about smart meters reflecting the wider sample

"For me, a smart meter means use less water and pay just as much money."
PSR, Female, C1

WaterSure

- Adult households e.g. disability (MS) and chronic health condition (IBS)
- Family household: 3 children; children with learning disabilities




- For these respondents, positive acceptance of smart meters
- Specifically for one household in providing a visual aid to encourage children

"I'm trying to educate my daughters about how long they're in the shower, a visual thing to show them how much they've used would be good for them. Especially because they have additional needs."
WaterSure, Female, C2



Older vs younger

- There is an age dynamic around smart meters:
- 
- Older assume younger will like smart meters... but is this true?
 - Some younger anxious on behalf of older people who they think will make unreasonable sacrifices (not washing etc)
 - Younger customers showed more anxiety about stress of seeing usage
 - Digitally reluctant/older customers were more concerned about possible fraud risks associated with smart technology.

"If one person likes a long bath, and another quick shower. I think where that was to happen, it could get quite hostile."

Working house share

Unmetered



- Unmetered anticipate bill increases with smart meters esp. for larger households
- Some value the fact that their water use comes without the stress of paying for what you use – and some use water liberally.
- Metered less anxious about this

House shares

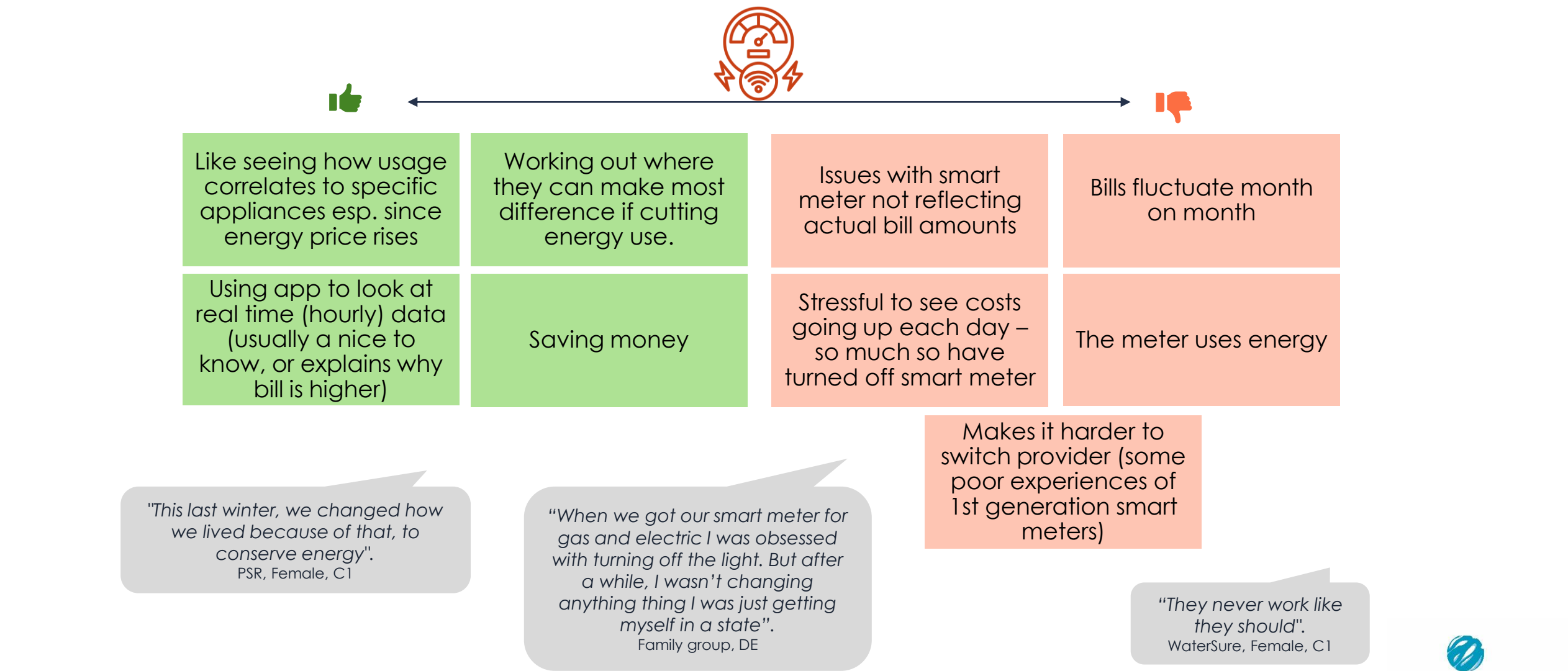
- Often landlord pays bill: distanced from cost of water bills
- Appeared to be very high-water users



- House share consumers are concerned about the potential for conflict where they have no control on how water efficient others are.
- Will they see the data or will that go to the landlord?



- Many who have an energy smart meter like the fact the can see their usage and manage bills better.
- However, others have not liked the stress of seeing spend creeping up each day, often choosing to discard or hide them.



Drivers for water smart meters

- Ability to save money
- Ability to see what wasting/stop people wasting NB assumption of real time usage
- To be able to see the cost of specific uses
- Enabling targeted changes: to do less of some activities or being more careful
- A good visual aid for parents to educate children / others in household



Barriers to water smart meters

- Bills might go up for some households (unmetered)
- Bills not large enough for smart meters to incentivise change (especially true of small households)
- Currently unclear how customers can meaningfully change their water use
- The presence of a smart meter could cause tension (constant reminder of bills; or amongst house mates)
- Data/security fears



It will be important to account for perceptions of energy smart meters when communicating PW's plans for smart meter rollout: Potential to disappoint if:

- Financial wins are seen as small.
- Data doesn't allow for customers to identify the cost impact of specific usage.



Response to positioning statements about smart meters



“

As a region, the Southeast must extract less water from sensitive environments, such as the rare chalk stream we are lucky enough to have in our area.

Pure, clear, constant water from underground chalk aquifers and springs, flowing across flinty gravel beds, make chalk streams the perfect sources of clean water – and ideal for lots of wild creatures to breed and thrive. The majority of the world's chalk streams are found in England.

To reduce abstraction from natural environments, Portsmouth Water wish to enable customers to make small habitual changes to reduce the amount of water they use.

Smart meters can make people aware of how much water is being used in their household, empower customers to take control of their usage, and see the results of their efforts.

”

Contextualising in local environments/local impact is thought provoking and can resonate strongly

- ✓ Detail about chalk streams interesting...but may not change habits alone
- ✓ Idea that PW is enabling customers to help local environments is positive: especially for those interested in natural world
- ✓ Can make sense of mandatory introduction if it enables PW to stop taking water from sensitive environments

Most unaware of chalk streams so are having to assimilate new information

- ✗ Focus on nature/environment perceived not as strong as money saving messages (perception that people less bothered by climate change/environmental issues)
- ✗ Message feels too specific, even conflicting for those who have bought into idea that climate change is at the root of the issue
- ✗ Description makes smart meters sound less necessary: suggests there is plenty of water available
- ✗ Puts onus on consumers to change: can feel blamed. Some believe industry should change before consumers, and that there are other options e.g. desalination

Messages about environmental benefits tend to reinforce the views of those already supportive of smart meters but doesn't prompt others to reassess their views.

"I think they should look in the mirror before they start telling us to do something. They are just greedy and selling water off."
Family Group, DE

"People can get tired of climate change whereas if it hits more locally, sometimes it wakes them up."
PSR, Female, C1

"If my water was pure and clear, like they're advertising, then I don't mind being on a smart meter, but it's bloody well not."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, E



“

Climate change and population changes are reducing the amount of water naturally available.

Portsmouth Water wish to enable customers to make small habitual changes to reduce the amount of water they use.

Smart meters can make people aware of how much water is being used in their household, empower customers to take control of their usage, and see the results of their efforts.

”

Climate change and population growth feel like universal issues

- ✓ Widespread support for the need to combat climate change – and prepare for population growth
- ✓ Feels important, pressing – some aware of more extreme impacts already happening in other countries
- ✓ Empowering customers to do their bit (but has to include company response as well as customers)
- ✓ Tonally better than some other statements as it doesn't appear to lay blame with customers

Climate change is often not a compelling reason for smart meters

- ✗ Climate change is too impersonal, too big, seen to be about natural events – beyond an individual's control
- ✗ Familiar statements: easy to ignore? desensitised?
- ✗ Stronger links needed re supply issues and climate e.g. rainfall levels
- ✗ Doesn't overtly argue for smart meters: some deduce issue requires better management of water (by PW)... nor convince that smart meters would enable reduction in usage

While seen as important, broad statements about climate change tend to be overused and easy to ignore – and don't come across as personally relevant.

"Honestly, I couldn't care less."

WaterSure, Male, D

"We can't change population size, but we can make small changes but if we know we are making our personal sacrifices that's all that matters."

Family Group, BC1C2

"I don't think specifically it's changed my views on smart meters. I think stuff on climate change you know it's happening. When you live in Portsmouth in an urban area, we're living in an area where we're not feeling the effects."

Working house share



“

Portsmouth Water customers use around 10% more water than the rest of the country.

Portsmouth Water wish to enable customers to make small habitual changes to reduce the amount of water they use.

Smart meters can make people aware of how much water is being used in their household, empower customers to take control of their usage, and see the results of their efforts.

”

This claim has strong impact

- ✓ A new and startling fact which hits home for some. Credible to some when linked to no hosepipe bans (customers allowed to use more water?)
- ✓ Starts with a strong fact – guilt inducing
- ✓ The issue needs addressing – this can motivate customers
- ✓ Could encourage parents to persuade kids to use less water

The tone of this message left some feeling blamed for their actions

- ✗ People question the fact: there's no explanation and a lack of evidence – for some it lacks credibility
- ✗ This messaging made participants feel 'blamed' for household water usage
- ✗ Raise the issue of water company waste
- ✗ This doesn't speak of the benefit and how much water could be saved
- ✗ A disabled participant felt marginalised by the suggestion of activities that only able-bodied can do

Statement tends to reinforce existing views: those not in favour of smart meters find this lacks credibility or don't like the hint of blame, whilst those in favour see it as a valid call to action.

"If we are using 10% more water than the rest of the country, then I'd say meters tomorrow – definitely."
PSR, Male, E

"Is this because we're down on the south coast? Is it because the area is warmer? Having this info might make it more persuasive."
18-40 Group, DE

"[It] makes me feel guilty...which isn't very nice, but it's probably doing its purpose."
Student House share

"The language is alienating - makes me think I need to do things the same way able bodied people do them, but that's not possible."
18-40 Group, DE



“

Smart meters share real-time data (up to 1 day delay) and personalised water use.

As such, smart meters make it quicker and easier to detect leaks within the water network as we can see continuous water flow through data.

”

Leak detection is an unknown benefit which redresses the idea that meters are all about changing consumer habits

- ✓ Gives new perspective on why a water company would introduce smart meters
- ✓ Motivating statement which can improve perceptions of meters
- ✓ Sounds similar to smart energy meters which reassures some who understand the technology
- ✓ Reinforces potential to be aware of consumption & save money

Some unclear about how a smart meter can detect leaks... or even doubt they can

- Ambiguity about which leaks: can it detect leaks inside the home too?
- Raises concerns about who pays for the leak? Want more detail on what happens next: speed of fixing leaks; Are there cost benefits for leak reduction?
 - New fear: fear of finding out about a leak.
- 1-day delay is not real time: potential to disappoint.
- Doesn't change resistance to mandatory installation.

There is general ambiguity about what leaks in a property mean, but this statement bridges the gap between the environment and money... everyone cares about leaks.

"A lot of onus gets put on the user for how much water they're losing - what's the end goal of fixing leaks? Do I get a cheaper bill?"

18-40 Group, DE

"Most of the pipes are Victorian so think it would benefit."

Family Group, BC1C2

"That's positive if it can detect leaks underground, because we are always complaining about leaks."

Over 40 Group, BC1C2

"I just think they're doing this to make money really. I know there's the whole eco-side, but there's also the money side."

WaterSure, Female, C2



“

Smart water meters is a new technology, installed in the ground and unlike the smart meters many customers will be familiar with from their energy supplier.

”

Positives from this statement are fairly weak

- ✓ Participants anticipated that this may mean an app
- ✓ New technology is reassuring for those who have experienced faulty meters in the past
- ✓ A plus that they don't need to fit them inside the house

Mentioning the meter sits in the ground creates confusion

- ✗ How can it work out usage? How can consumers see their usage? Start to doubt whether they can see useful personal info – like the cost of a bath.
- ✗ What about flat dwellers?
- ✗ Sounds expensive: replacing existing meters? Earthworks? Cost to consumer? Disruption?
- ✗ Triggers thoughts about roads being dug up by different utilities providers not working together.

Message doesn't resonate or appear to relate to personal usage. Communication mentioning meters in the ground raises lots of questions and concerns about the cost and disruption of installation.

"I do like the idea of a smart meter...and I do believe they save water ... as people do like to see where their money is going. I think there's going to be so much cost before that ultimately, we'll be paying for it."

Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, E

"I'm in a flat – two floors up ... I'm just really confused. If it's in the ground and it's outside, how do they know which water consumption is from my neighbour?"

Family Group, DE

"I think the mandatory part applies here, at least it's happening outside the house and take the pressure of tenants in getting someone to come in and fix it in the house."

Working house share



“

There is no cost to customers to have a smart meter installed.

”

Participants assumed something that is compulsory would have to be free to customers: they couldn't charge

- ✓ Reassuring for some – a cost would be off-putting
- ✓ Positive response for those most positive about smart meters generally

Often seen as a disingenuous claim

- ✗ There might be hidden costs e.g.
 - If they have to be home for installation
 - The meter runs on electricity
 - If it results in bill rises
 - If landlords pass on costs
- ✗ Older participants queried data protection and fears about hackers
- ✗ If it breaks, will the replacement be free?

Promising free smart meters falls flat: customers approach the topic of smart meters from the perspective that they aren't expected to pay for them.

NB: WaterSure customers want specific reassurances around the changes to their bills.

“They couldn't charge for it.”
18-40 Group, BC1C2

“If they want us to have it,
then they shouldn't charge
us.”
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female,
D

“Of course there is! There will
be a cost, it'll be added to
our water cost!”
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, E

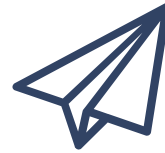
“I know that my landlord will
feed those fees down to me
through the bills.”
Group: student house share

“There's so much
information about the
water you're using. None of
us are flush, we just have
good personal hygiene.
And I'm not having this
smart meter.”
Family Group, DE



The most compelling messages relate to:

- Real time data and the ability to see usage patterns
- Smart meter role in leak reduction: redressing the idea that this is all about consumer behaviour and providing a stronger rationale for the programme.
- New technology (with inherent customer benefits – though these need clarifying)



Things to avoid

- Suggesting smart meters are 'free': however reassurance about no installation costs is part of detailed messaging
- Headline messages that hint at potential disruption
- Tone that conveys blame – or creates defensiveness

None of the messages address potential cost savings directly – a gap?

- Communicating behaviours that can impact cost of water
- Need to explore affordability / financial support messaging for specific groups

Wider rationale for smart meters (long term demand management) not tackled... a strategic message, developed over time?





Response to tariff structures



BLUE MARBLE

Tariffs: Peak rate

While easy to grasp, many concerns about the rationale for this tariff – and potential negative impacts.

Peak rate

Higher rates during peak times and lower rates at other times of the day/year to reduce strains on the network and potential supply issues.

Customers find it easy to understand the tariff.

- Some are on similar tariffs for their energy meters, which aided comprehension.
- Seen as the best tariff option by those already convinced by smart meters.
- Good for those with flexibility to use water out of peak times e.g. retired.
- Fine to be rewarded for good behaviour but don't want to be penalised for bad...

Participants were resistant to being told when they can use water.

- Concerns about impact on working families - many assume they will be hardest hit.
- People penalised for legitimate lifestyles e.g. nightshift workers.
- Some interpret as a way for Portsmouth Water to charge more rather than to help customers save money i.e. the 'lower rate' will be today's rate, the higher a means to increase bills.
- Compared to off-peak electricity tariffs, not seen as easy in a water context, and antisocial or even risky to do, e.g. running a washing machine at night.

"This is a much better idea...Putting incentives out there for using water at different times. If you use it at this time, you get better incentives and not charging for water usage."
Family group, DE

"If you are a new family and have a newborn, you'll be doing a lot of washing at peak times - why should you be penalised for trying to raise a child?"
18-40 group, DE

"We don't want to pay more for water, we should keep it the same and have incentives for using it at off peak times."
Family group, DE



This was the favoured tariff, though participants were wary of what excessive usage would look like, and how larger households would be impacted.

Volume based

Rates based on volume used that reward customers who use water responsibly and penalise excessive use.

(e.g. a household would be charged a low rate for a certain usage in a day, and then a higher rate for water above that).

Participants felt this tariff would have the most impact.

- Most participants preferred this tariff, provided it takes into consideration household size and any specific needs, e.g. high usage due to a disability.
- People genuinely thought this would make customers think about their water use in a more responsible way.

Customers struggle to understand water usage and questioned the mechanics behind tariffs.

- Participants struggled to picture what would be considered an excessive amount of water usage.
- Some questioned the means by which the rate would be calculated/set.
- What if there is an accident, or a change in household number, e.g. leaving a tap on, or family visiting?

"I think they also need to take in account how many people they have in the house- if that aligns, then I think it's a good idea."
WaterSure, Female, C2

"If you don't use too much, you get a reward...I agree with that."
WaterSure, Male, D

"Depends where the bar is set."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, C1

NB: Concerns that customers could be worse off ultimately (in the way that tariffs in e.g. mobile phone context are complex and seen to be setting traps for consumers)





Smart meter journey



BLUE MARBLE

- Prior warning and clear communications throughout are important to customers.
- People expect different channels depending on the type of communication.

Pre-installation



Strong preference for **an initial letter several weeks ahead** – this is new and a big change, therefore a detailed letter is the best way for Portsmouth Water to clearly set out its intentions.

"A bit more of a record that way, you've got an audit trail."
PSR, Male, E

"I don't answer my phone unless it comes up with who it is."
PSR, Male, C2



Following this, **email is the preferred method for arranging installation**, and to remind customers of the letter contents.
NB Implication for customers with no digital contact details

This was true for **PSR/WaterSure** customers, most of whom had recently switched over to email bills and felt confident about this channel.



Closer to the time, most customers envisage **reminders are best issued via text messages**.
NB Implication for customers with no digital contact details

However, **digitally disenfranchised** (and some **older PSR**) customers wanted a phone call or house visit where someone can explain one-to-one what is happening.



Customers had questions about the process, which need to be answered as part of the pre-installation comms:

- Will their water supply be affected, and for how long?
- Do engineers need access to the property or not?
- How does installation work with flats?
- Expected levels of disruption with installation?



Pre-installation: Making your appointment



One month's notice seen as ideal (longer risks them forgetting, a week is too little to get organised). NB: Tenants not bothered. For many, however, if the installation did not require access to the house, a full months' notice was unnecessary.

But even when no access required:

- A month allows time to ask questions and get used to the idea (which many felt was a big change)
- To complain and challenge the installation if they'd like to.

"Depends on what's involved, ... if it's going to be an inconvenience – I think a good month."
Family Group, DE

"As long as they're outside my house, I don't care."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, D

Customers want to choose their own appointment time

- Via a call or online
- With a range of weekend and evening slots available to allow for different work hours.



It's important for the engineers to come at the scheduled time, otherwise it's more frustrating than having no choice of appointment.



Level of desired interaction varies.

- No interaction: if access to property not required.
- Courtesy knock: to let them know they are there, and definitely if the water supply needs to be cut off.
- On completion: a card through the letterbox to include a contact info to seek help/more information.

"I would expect them to knock on the door on the day they are arriving, and as a courtesy to let me know when they are finished and a number to call if you have any issues."
Over 40s Group, DE



Aftercare desired by a minority of customers

- Esp. vulnerable customers who want extra information about the service (and how to use it) from the installer.
- Potential to request at appointment booking for installer to follow up once installed

At installation





Customers want the reassurance of comms post-installation.

- A text is most appropriate to let them know their smart meter is now active.
- The text should also provide the contact number for a dedicated helpline to serve the needs of all customers who want to speak to someone.
- Customers also requested the opportunity to give feedback on the installation, the app and the instructions.
- Initially they would like bills to have a comparison to pre-smart meter bills so they can see the impact.

"I can't be bothered with loads of communication, as long as you have a phone number I can call."
Family Group, DE

"I would like a follow-up rather than us chasing."
Family Group, DE

"I think what people will be worried about is that it goes wrong, and the first thing they know about it is their bill's doubled. I think an early comparison would be a [good] idea, so people are comfortable with the new metering."
PSR, Female, C1

Post installation



Customers want an information sheet explaining how to get the app, and how to check and make sense of their data.

- They'd be happy with this in a letter or email form.
- If in email form, older customers especially would like it to be easy to print, so they can have a physical copy to hand.
- Customers were wary about the reliance upon a QR code or link for information - these are too complicated, and a barrier to communication for some.
- The information needs to be visually appealing, with arrows and graphics to keep it simple and easy to understand.





Ongoing smart meter engagement



BLUE MARBLE

There is a balance to be struck about the frequency of notifications following smart meter data installation. Most prefer to access information on their terms via an app or website – rather than frequent push communications from PW.

Customers don't want to be overwhelmed by multiple notifications per day – lower frequency for greater impact.

- Day to day data is not worthy of notifications – they want to be able to access it if they'd like but otherwise to forget about it.
- They do however want to be notified if there is a change in their usage which is unusual (and could indicate a leak).
- However, notifications regarding higher water usage have the potential to cause guilt or anxiety if triggers are overly sensitive.
 - E.g. do not want a notification because one day they fill a paddling pool, or have guests staying)
- However, an anomaly which lasts longer than a few days should be flagged to them.

On the app, they would like to be able to access the hourly breakdown of the data.

- Those logging on and looking at usage breakdown are doing so to identify a behaviour they can cut down on.

"Give me the tools so I can check when I want."
Family group, BC1C2

"I think notifications need to be kept to a minimum, and relevant."
PSR, Female, C1

"I probably wouldn't look at it at all to be honest unless I got some trigger warning that it wasn't working as normal."
PSR, Male, E

App preferred to an online account.


- By younger customers generally, who find Apps quicker to access and less likely to forget log ins.
- Older and even digitally disenfranchised customers also: often more likely to have a smart phone than a computer (or the choice made little difference to them).
- No consensus about whether a monitor would be beneficial: some do want one but many don't want more tech.
- Concern (especially digitally disenfranchised) about how data could be used by hackers, who would know their habits, when their homes were empty etc. Comms would need to reassure on this front.

Prefer notifications on the app, not texts.

- Gives the option to ignore them; they won't build up - also seems less likely to be scam.
- Emails only appropriate for monthly or quarterly summaries.




You have used 150 litres of water today.

- Perceived as unhelpful due to lack of context or understanding of what this equated to – customers weren't sure whether it was a normal or excessive amount to use. 
- Amount in litres is meaningless to people who have no idea how much they use daily.


"Do I go into my kitchen now, see what a litre looks like, and then imagine that 150 times?"
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, E

You have used 160 litres of water today. This is about the same as 2 full baths.

- Seen as improvement – and some people found the comparison interesting (surprised how many litres in a bath). 
- While easier to visualise the quantity, customers still didn't know whether that's a normal amount to use.
- Many felt instinctively that they used much less than that – which could lead to ignoring the message.

"This better, in terms of visualising and quantifying, but would still be good to compare that to an average usage."
PSR, Female, C1

Use water wisely, your household uses 2 times more water than average for your area.

- People felt lectured to. 
- Assume household size and other factors not correctly considered when making comparison.
- Concerned larger families will be unfairly targeted.
- In general, comparison to neighbours or others in the community seen as irrelevant and unhealthy.
- Repeated concerns that one-off excess usage shouldn't warrant 'guilt-trip' notifications.



"I don't care how much they're using, as long as I'm not paying for it."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, C1

"I don't compare myself to other people, I just try to do the best that I can do. What they do in their house is none of my business."
18-40 Group, DE

"You can't tell people they're using too much water if they're paying for it...."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Male, D



You are one of the most water efficient households in your area, well done!



- Received polarised response – some people thought this would be a really positive, motivating message and would be happy to see reward for their efforts. 
- However, others felt it was patronising. 

"Everyone likes a little compliment!"
WaterSure, Male, D

"Would be brilliant...would make you feel your efforts were working."
PSR, Female C2

"I feel like a child, this is a bit condescending."
Family group, DE

We are experiencing high levels of water demand in your area right now, please use water wisely.

- Mixed response: many found useful and important as a preventative measure. 
- However, many felt it would not personally change their usage: barrier is the perception can't cut down usage – or that the issue lies with companies. 
- To be effective, customers believed they needed more of an explanation of why there is high demand – and why this is the responsibility of the paying customer.

"That's your problem, not my problem."
Digitally Disenfranchised, Female, E

"I'd cut back, and would hope other people would do as well."
PSR, Female, C1

"Okay, but I know what I already should be doing anyway, so it's not gonna make me stop doing anything like washing my clothes or having a shower."
WaterSure, Female, C2

And what about water saving tips?

- Most did not want to receive any water saving tips – as they believed they already only used what they needed.
- Could comms play on this idea to spike interest i.e. do you really think there's nothing else you can do to save water? - and give novel tips to overcome this barrier.

"It sounds a bit smug but I think I already know most of those things."
PSR, male, E A



Summary conclusions



1

Customers have mixed feelings about water smart meters.

While a minority actively welcome them, there are many barriers that Portsmouth Water will need to help customers overcome through its delivery and communications. These barriers to water smart meters can vary by customer segment and call for targeted communications where possible.

2

Energy smart meters often set the context which can be both positive and negative.

Positive for those able to actively monitor their usage and save money, but for others highly stressful watching the dial move. Real time monitoring is a benefit that customers anticipate for water smart meters: expectation management may be required on this point.

3

Positioning statements reveal there is a risk of over-promising the potential of smart meters to pinpoint specific usage; and creating new barriers by raising e.g. disruption or no installation costs.

Behaviour change messaging always risks causing a defensive response so getting the right tone of voice is vital. Their role in leak reduction is more compelling – as well as cost saving potential.

4

Usage based tariffs will require clear positioning and targeting.

While a volume-based tariff has some merits for customers, there are more general concerns that choosing the wrong tariff can lead to higher bills.



5

Timely forewarning & clear communications are expected throughout the smart meter journey – across multiple digital channels depending on the nature of the communication.

Some (often vulnerable) customers desire more personal service including house visits. There are implications for delivering the desired service levels where PW does not hold full contact details.

6

There is a balance to be struck about the frequency of notifications following smart meter data installation.

Most prefer to access information on their terms via an app or website – rather than frequent push communications from PW. But alerts when anomalies show up are welcomed.

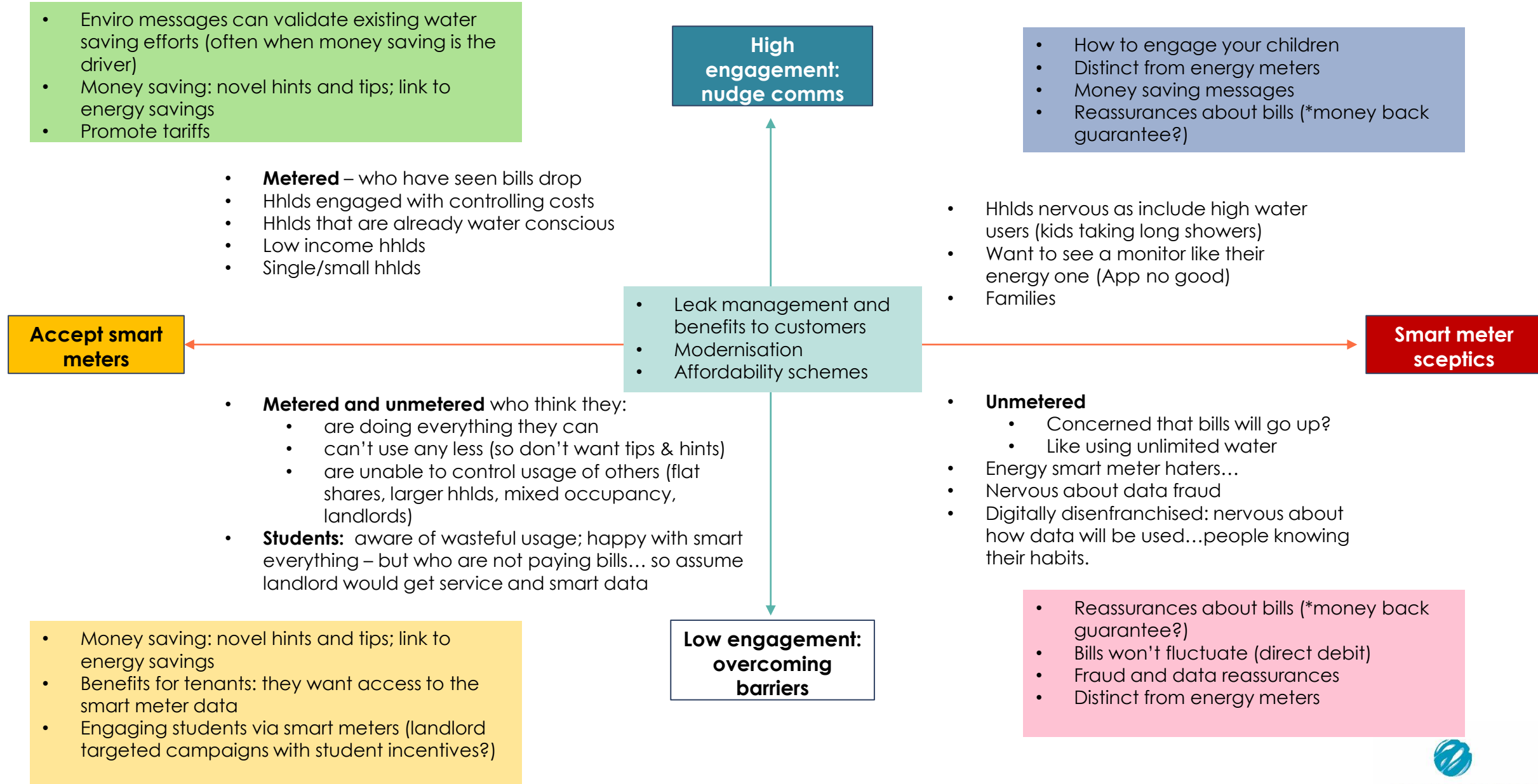
7

Alert messages clearly have the potential to annoy so further testing advised.

Alerts work best where volume usage is contextualised (number of baths etc.) Notifications to use less water during peak demand could be a useful nudge – but recipients need to appreciate the reasons.



Segmenting communication needs





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73. PW Smart Meter Hypercare Research FINAL REPORT 160823	
Standards for high-quality research:	How addressed in this project:
Useful and contextualised	This research was commissioned to understand customer needs, expectations, and preferences for smart meter services before, during, and after installation. For respondents, they were provided with stimulus materials to help understand the question context and in some cases, to help them articulate their preferences.
Fit for purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear objectives that sat within the wider research and engagement programme agreed at the outset• Purposefully recruited sample to reflect Portsmouth Water customers likely to be impacted by smart meters: It focused on household customers, and included households on WaterSure or PSR, those living in house shares, and digitally disenfranchised customers. Recruited by regional field recruiters, both free-find (digitally disenfranchised) and via customer lists provided by Portsmouth Water (PSR/WaterSure)• Sample size proportionate for a qualitative project focusing on a single topic relating to the whole HH customer base: 8 group discussions with a cross section of customers; and 15 depth interviews with customers in vulnerable circumstances• Method to reflect the nature of the objectives: online groups to allow for open-ended, personal reflections with depth interviews for those with specific perspectives or for whom the group method would not be suitable
Neutrally designed	Blue Marble designed research materials including the discussion guides, group activities and stimulus materials. These are all designed with impartiality.
Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stimulus produced in plain English – all mediated by a research moderator• Sample included households with vulnerability indicators• Option for respondents to bring a supporter to the sessions (to help navigate online tech and/or the research questions – who would also be paid an incentive)
Continual	While this was a one-off project it forms part of an ongoing commitment to conduct research with a wide cross section of customers.
Shared in full	Portsmouth Water to publish this report and supporting appendices on its website.
Ethical	Blue Marble is a company partner of the MRS, senior team members are all Members of the MRS and/or SRA. All Blue Marble's employees abide by the MRS Code of Conduct and as such all our research is in line with their ethical standards.
Independently assured	This report assured by Sia Partners

