

Water Support FAQ's

In June 2012 the government issued guidelines to the water industry to help customers facing severe financial hardship.

Q: What is the Water Support charge of £2 on my bill?

A: The Water Support charge directly funds our Water Support scheme which provides a 50% reduction to the water bills of customers who are facing severe financial hardship and need additional support.

The government (DEFRA) issued guidance to all water companies on how they should provide Social Tariffs to customers.

All water companies within England and Wales have introduced similar schemes. Most companies incorporate the charge within their standing charges. We have chosen to be transparent and open about this charge so customers can see exactly what they are paying for.

Q: Is the charge compulsory or can you remove it if I request you to?

A: The charge is included within our Water Charges Scheme which is approved by our industry regulator, Ofwat. Therefore, it will not be removed from any customer's water accounts unless they are accepted onto the scheme.

Q: What is the legal basis of the charge?

A:

- The charge was introduced in accordance with S44 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010.
- The legislation needed to be supplemented by government guidance to advise water companies on how it should be implemented.
- This was provided by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in their guidance of June 2012. The main requirement of this guidance was that companies must obtain the 'broad support' of their customers before implementing such a scheme.
- The amount of the charge is based on customer research carried out by the Company prior to the introduction of the scheme in which approximately 75% of customers surveyed supported the charge. The level of support we received was deemed sufficient to implement the charge for the 2015/16 year.
- We continue to track customers' support by carrying out quarterly surveys.

Q: Why wasn't I contacted when you carried out your survey?

A: It is not practical to contact every customer, so in accordance with standard market research practice, we survey a sample of our customers (chosen at random) to represent the views of the majority.

- It began with a series of workshops where groups of customers were questioned about our proposed scheme and gave their views on its introduction.
- The output from these groups was used to design the Water Support scheme itself.
- This was then described in telephone interviews to approximately 600 customers. In which, approximately 75% gave their support to the scheme.
- We continue to track customers' support by carrying out quarterly surveys.

Q: How long has the charge been on my bill?

A: The Water Support Scheme has been running since 1 April 2014. However, the first year of the scheme was funded entirely by our shareholders, from our own profits. This included providing a 25% discount on water charges to over 2,700 of our most vulnerable customers.

Our shareholders have also agreed to 'underwrite' the scheme now it is receiving contributions from customers. Should there be a higher number of customers eligible to receive the charge, they will add in funding as necessary to make up the shortfall.

Q: Will the charge increase next year?

A: The annual charge of £2 will remain the same throughout the next 5-year period (2015-2020.)

Q: Will the charge increase after five years?

A: Any adjustments at that time are likely to reflect the movement in charges in the subsequent 5-year period (to 2025). If inflation remains at its current low levels then there would be no need for it to increase noticeably, if at all.

Q: Is it a charitable donation?

A: It is not a charitable donation as it forms part of our Water Charges Scheme. We acknowledge that it will directly fund the reduction of water charges for a group of customers who find them difficult to afford. The charge is included in our Water Charges Scheme as approved by our industry regulator, Ofwat.

Q: Am I just paying for those that choose not to pay their water bills?

A: No, the scheme is targeted at those in society who find it extremely difficult to pay their annual water charges. Those who choose not to pay are dealt with through a variety of debt recovery processes.

Nearly half of the customers approved onto our scheme in 2014 were pensioners. Further to this, a quarter of the customers had a disability.

We understand that some of those accepted onto the scheme may have a history of not paying their water charges. However we do our best to ensure that the right support is available to any customer who is eligible for this scheme, or other schemes, to help them.

Q: The government already provides support for those in need through taxes, so why should I also pay the Water Support charge?

A: Those in other utility industries have their own social support schemes. Many of these schemes are funded through general taxation, such as the Warm Homes initiative, free TV licences for the blind and winter fuel payments for the elderly.

The government has made it clear that there is no 'benefits' based subsidy available for the water industry and has therefore asked us to implement our own schemes. All water companies operating in England and Wales will be subject to this legislation and will have introduced or are introducing similar schemes.

Q: What are the criteria to receive the Water Support discount and could I be eligible?

A: There are two different ways to be eligible for the Water Support scheme. You or someone in your household must be receiving either:

- Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)
- Income Support
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Pensions Credit
- Universal Credit (Equivalent of JSA, ESA or Income Support)

OR

- You must have a household income of less than £16,105 per year

AND

You, or someone in your household must:

- Be aged 62 years or over
- Receive Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
- Have parental responsibility for a child under the age of 5.

Q: I think I meet these criteria, so how do I apply?

A: There are several different ways to apply for the Water Support Scheme to suit everyone:

1. You can call our Customer Service team on 01737 772000, who will send you a form within the next 5-10 working days for you to fill out and return in the freepost envelope.
2. You can request a form is sent to you by going to www.seswater.co.uk/watersupport.
3. If you have access to a printer, you can download an application form by going to www.seswater.co.uk/watersupport You will need to address your own envelope (which doesn't need a stamp) to:
"Freepost SESW WATER SUPPORT AND WATERSURE PLUS"
4. If you live in the Leatherhead area, you can request an application form from the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB). If needed they will help you to fill out the application form.

Q: This is the first I have heard about this scheme and if I have been eligible for a long time, will you backdate the discount if I am accepted?

A: Eligible customers will receive the discount on their charges for the year in which they apply. The Water Support Scheme runs within the tax year. This means that if you are accepted from 1 April to 31 March, then your application would automatically be backdated to 1st April at the beginning of that particular tax year.

For example, if you apply for the scheme on 1 October 2016 then the discount would be backdated from 1 April 2016.

Or, if you apply for the scheme in May 2017, the discount will be applied from 1 April 2017 until 31 March 2018.

Q: What is the application process and how do you make sure those getting the discount are eligible for help?

A: If customers think they might be eligible for the Water Support discount they must complete and return an application form to us. Their application will be assessed to see if they are eligible or not.

We write to a random selection of eligible customers and ask them to provide evidence in support of their application for audit purposes. Customers who have been chosen need to provide evidence before the discount is applied to their account.

Q: Do you remove the discount from customers' accounts that are no longer eligible?

A: We write to those customers who are in receipt of the discount each year and ask them to confirm if their circumstances are the same or not. However, it is the customers' responsibility to let us know if their circumstances change and a result may mean they are no longer eligible for the scheme.

During the annual review we select some customers to audit and ask them to provide evidence of their eligibility. Any customer, who does not return their renewal form or no longer meets the eligibility criteria, will be removed from the scheme.