



Appendix D.4: Water Recycling Communications

Standard Gate two submission for London
Water Recycling SRO

Notice – Position Statement

This document has been produced as the part of the process set out by RAPID for the development of the Strategic Resource Options (SROs). This is a regulatory gated process allowing there to be control and appropriate scrutiny on the activities that are undertaken by the water companies to investigate and develop efficient solutions on behalf of customers to meet future drought resilience challenges.

This report forms part of suite of documents that make up the 'Gate 2 submission.' That submission details all the work undertaken by Thames Water in the ongoing development of the proposed SRO. The intention at this stage is to provide RAPID with an update on the concept design, feasibility, cost estimates and programme for the schemes, allowing decisions to be made on their progress.

Should a scheme be selected and confirmed in the Thames Water final Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP), in most cases it would need to enter a separate process to gain permission to build and run the final solution. That could be through either the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 or the Planning Act 2008 development consent order process. Both options require the designs to be fully appraised and, in most cases, an environmental statement to be produced. Where required that statement sets out the likely environmental impacts and what mitigation is required.

Community and stakeholder engagement is crucial to the development of the SROs. Some high-level activity has been undertaken to date. Much more detailed community engagement and formal consultation is required on all the schemes at the appropriate point. Before applying for permission Thames Water will need to demonstrate that they have presented information about the proposals to the community, gathered feedback and considered the views of stakeholders. We will have regard to that feedback and, where possible, make changes to the designs as a result.

The SROs are at a very early stage of development, despite some options having been considered for several years. The details set out in the Gate 2 documents are still at a formative stage.

Disclaimer

This document has been written in line with the requirements of the RAPID Gate 2 Guidance and to comply with the regulatory process pursuant to Thames Water's statutory duties. The information presented relates to material or data which is still in the course of completion. Should the solutions presented in this document be taken forward, Thames Water will be subject to the statutory duties pursuant to the necessary consenting process, including environmental assessment and consultation as required. This document should be read with those duties in mind.

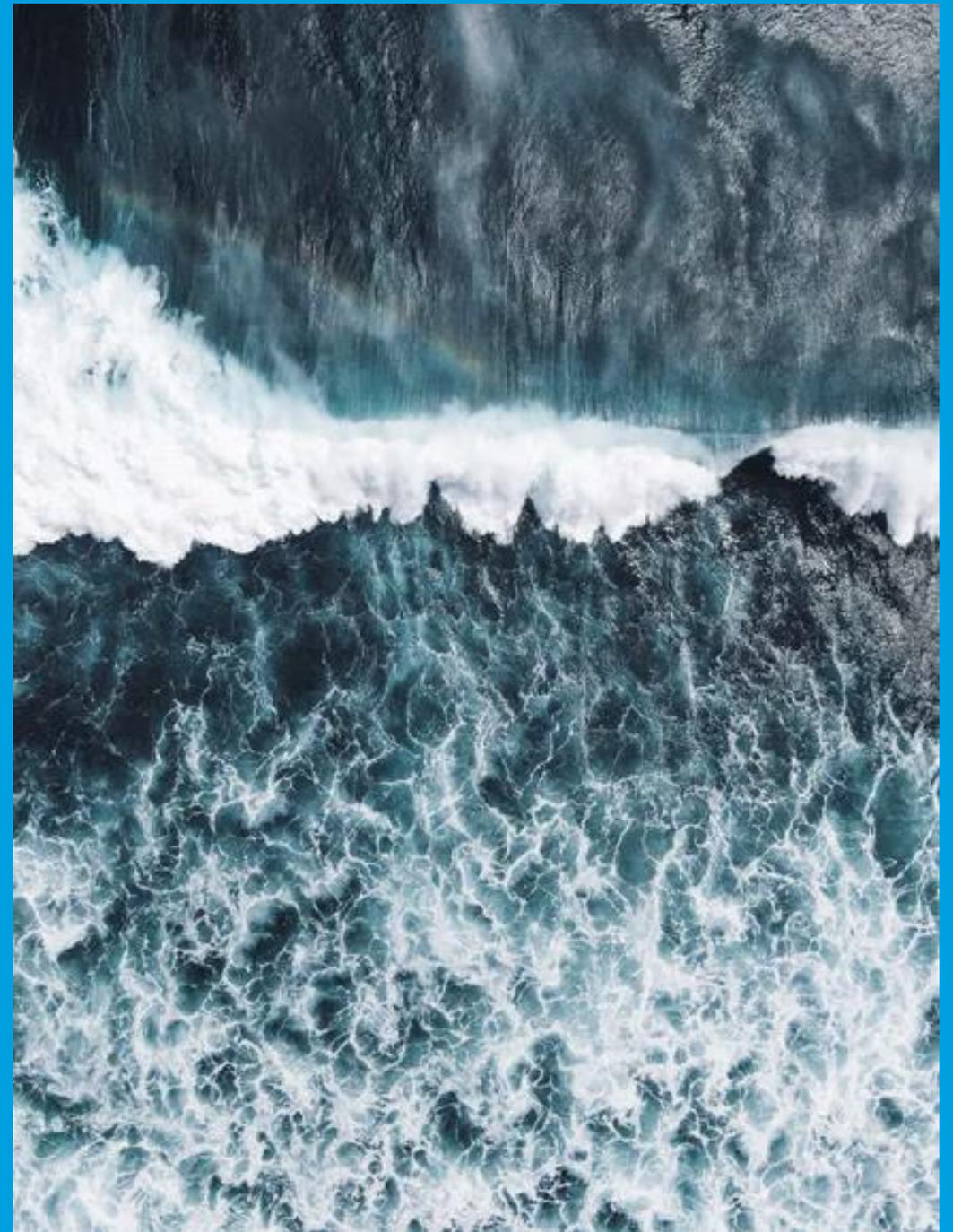


Water recycling communications

Qualitative findings

June 2022

Report prepared by Verve



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Background, objectives and methodology

Executive summary

Detailed findings

- General themes in message perceptions
- What is the situation?
- What are the solutions?
- What are the consequences?
- Channel delivery and next steps

Appendix



Background, objectives and methodology

Background and objectives

Background

Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource in the Thames Water region. With the uncertainties of climate change coupled with rising population there are issues with both the supply and demand for water. Pressures to reduce the environmental impact of the water supply also means the business needs to find new and sustainable ways of meeting demand.

Water recycling is one approach that is being looked at with a view to potentially building a new water recycling plant in circa 10 years' time. Water recycling is the process of using treated effluent from sewage treatment works, undertaking further treatment and then using it as a resource for drinking water supply.

A change of water source can be a controversial issue for customers, and water recycling is shown to raise the most concern for customers of all potential new water sources for a number of reasons. Therefore, research is required to understand customers' reactions to water recycling and to develop a framework for communicating such a change in a way that increases acceptance and minimises objections.

Objectives

Thames Water wishes to test a communications framework, developed as part of a SRO collaborative research project, with a cross section of London customers, which is where the water recycling scheme would most likely be introduced.

Specific aspects to be examined were:

- the style of language that works best and minimises alarm/objections
- the best 'messenger' for this information (and is there a 'trusted voice' in the community that could best share this message)
- timing of communications and the approach to implementation
- additional information requirements (what else do customers want to know, where do they want to see this)
- exploring the comms channels that work best for customers

Methodology and sample

Three-day online pop-up community with London customers

The community took place 14th – 17th June 2022

- 60 participants
- 31 female and 29 male
- Spread of ages between 20 and 75 years old
- Spread of social grades
- Mix of attitudes towards water quality and water scarcity
- 27 from BME backgrounds
- Geographical spread across London

What we did...

Participants were split into three groups and shown a different communications that were designed to test a different messaging framework. They were then briefly shown three other versions to feedback on. The letters were colour coded to avoid order bias and were rotated (however the 'wildcard' message was always shown last)

Participants also kept a diary of communications there were sent via post, email and social media to understand what type of messaging they are most likely to engage with. All activities were private to avoid group think.

What we asked our community members...

Day 1 Introductions and look at primary communication

- Participants completed activities designed to encourage a natural response (such as answering quickly or recalling the message from memory)
- Participants also asked to keep a diary of any communications they receive

Day 2 Discussion topics

- Other versions of the communication were shared and participants were asked to decide which one they find the most impactful

Day 3 Discussion topics

- Communication diaries discussed to understand what messages are most likely to get engagement
- A look at what they believe they would do if water recycling was to happen in the near future
- A final discussion about effective communications and thoughts around water recycling

Stimulus

Customers were shown different messages; these were colour coded and rotated to avoid order bias

Orange - The control



Orange

Your reference number
123456
thameswater.co.uk
0800 XXX XXXX
Our lines are always open
26 May 2022

We're ready to recycle water

Hello,

Your region is home to over 20 million people and one of the driest areas in the UK. Add in a growing population and changing climate, and it's no wonder taps are under more pressure than ever. Alongside other water companies, we're determined to tackle this. We're hard at work exploring new ways to safeguard your water supply for the future. Recycling water is just one of these solutions.

What is water recycling?

Right now, we source your water from local rivers as well as deep underground. We clean it to meet strict public health standards before we deliver it to millions of homes and businesses. After water goes down your drain, we clean it again and return it to rivers. It's a cycle that never ends!

Our water recycling process transfers your water to a different facility instead. It produces **high quality** water to return to our rivers and reservoirs. This makes it easier to source, treat and deliver enough world-class water for everyone to use.

We rely on water recycling during very dry periods or times of drought. The rest of the time, we source your water as normal.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

Best regards,

The Water Recycling team

Thames Water Utilities Limited, a company registered in England and Wales with company number 02399951.
Registered office address: Clearwater Court, Vauxhall Road, Reading RG1 8DB, VAT registration number: GB 537-4569-15.

Blue - Social Norms



Blue

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26 May 2022

Water recycling information

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Alongside other water companies, we're determined to tackle this. We're hard at work exploring new ways to safeguard your water supply for the future. Recycling water is just one of these solutions.

We're joining millions of other people who already use recycled water

In some parts of the world, using recycled water is commonplace.

For example, in Singapore, nearly all of its drinking water is provided by water recycling. Major cities like Brisbane also rely on it. And in California, the state has been recycling water for over 40 years.

That's an estimated **45 million people** who use recycled water around the globe in these three examples alone.

What is water recycling?

Right now, we source your water from local rivers as well as deep underground. We clean it to meet strict public health standards before we deliver it to millions of homes and businesses. After water goes down your drain, we clean it again and return it to rivers. It's a cycle that never ends!

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Green - Positive Framing



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We rely on water recycling during very dry periods or times of drought. The rest of the time, we source your water as normal.

What does recycled water mean for me?

Recycled water is pure and healthy and has all the benefits as the water you have in your home now. It is unlikely that you will notice the difference, although some people report that there is a slight difference in taste to water that has been through this process.

Recycled water is safe to drink as tap water, brush your teeth with, give to pets, use in cooking, wash clothes with or bathe with. There is no need to boil it first.

It is also helping the planet. By putting this water back in the environment, we're giving back to nature by helping to protect natural habitats, instead of taking scarce water supplies from vulnerable rivers and streams.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

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Purple - Wildcard



Purple

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26 May 2022

Water recycling information

Hello,

Your region is home to over 20 million people and one of the driest areas in the UK. Add in a growing population and changing climate, and it's no wonder taps are under more pressure than ever.

The South East is one of the driest regions in the UK. There is significant pressure on our water supplies. The unrelenting pressure is driven by population growth, our changing climate, and the need to protect our environment.

This is a serious problem. Water scarcity because of droughts and extremely dry periods may mean you experience shortages and restrictions to your supply.

Thames Water, alongside other water companies, is currently exploring a range of potential solutions to ensure we have the water we need for generations to come. Water recycling is one of the potential solutions.

What is water recycling?

The water we provide for our customers is taken from the environment. After our customers have used it, the water is subject to a biological treatment before it is returned to the environment again.

If we recycle water, what will happen is that some of the treated used water (called "treated waste water effluent") would be captured before it is released back into the environment.

The wastewater would then be treated in a water filtration and conditioning facility, then transferred into rivers and reservoirs. Once the treated water is back in the environment, it's then ready to be taken out and treated with chemicals to produce drinking water (otherwise known as "potable water").

Essentially, this means that your water goes "from waste to tap".

Water recycling is not a new process. We already recycle water as part of our existing water supply system.

Water recycling is a scheme we are exploring to ensure a secure water supply, but it would only be used in extremely dry periods, or times of drought, for example. Otherwise, your water supply will stay as it is now.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

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Our Methodology

Messages were developed using the following framework

Blue - Social Norms

- This helps normalise using recycled water as something that everyone else is doing, and we want to be seen as 'in with the crowd'

Green - Positive Framing

- Framing a message to be focused on a positive outcome (e.g. environment) and not drawing attention to what they perceive they might lose feels impactful

Purple - Wildcard

- There's value in testing what we think won't work, like using lots of jargon and drawing attention to the treatment process – to see if there are any hidden gems

Digital pop-up communities

What is a pop-up community?

- A pop-up community is a secure portal online whereby respondents log on and respond to questions and tasks in their own time via comments, photos, video, links etc.
- Full moderation allows us to probe the most interesting responses.

The benefits of a pop-up community?

- Breadth of opinion – recruiting to an online community gives us the opportunity to speak to a broad mix of people, but without losing the depth of qualitative response. Conversations happen at the same time, giving participants the opportunity to complete activities at their own pace at a time and place that suits them.
- Creative tasks – the interactive platform includes a number of tools that allows us get the best out of our participants
- Rich outputs –participants can upload photos and videos as well as text responses which help bring the findings to life.
- Immersive – Thames Water stakeholders can view the discussions with the opportunity to ask additional questions through the moderator.

The screenshot displays a user's profile page titled "My Page". It features several sections:

- My Activities:** A list of tasks including "1.1 Getting to know you (G2)", "2.1 Sewer Blockages", "2.1 Sewer Blockages (G2)", and "1.1 Getting to know you".
- Community Updates:** A section with a search bar and a dropdown menu set to "everyone's".
- Community Comments:** Three comments from users Sparkyev, Yvoricia, and Jodie Holland, all discussing the importance of messaging about blocked drains.
- Poll:** A poll titled "What would be the most important message to tell people about to encourage them to 'Bin it, don't block it'?" with a pie chart showing results: 53% for "The potential cost to the individual of blocked drains in their home", 32% for "Images of fatbergs and the cost to remove these", and 5% each for "The impact on the environment", "The impact on the community", and "Something else".
- Community Managers:** Profiles for Ronan Hegarty and Jodie Holland, both offering to moderate the community.

Executive summary

Executive summary

An effective communication combines honest information and reassurance

Messaging needs to feel honest in order to be believed

- In an age of misinformation, customers have become more sceptical and will scrutinise messages more thoroughly before they are believed
- Messages about their water supply are only likely to be accepted if they feel genuine rather than seemingly hiding the truth
- For this message, customers want to know what the problem is, what is water recycling and how will it affect them and where they live

Water recycling is a difficult concept to understand

- Customers are likely to only have a basic understanding of how the water cycle works
- Introducing a change to that means careful explanation using non-ambiguous language to avoid misinterpretation
- Failure to explain in a clear and transparent way leads to misunderstanding and potential spread of misinformation

Understanding the impact on individuals is key

- Knowing what impact water recycling has on individuals is likely to be a priority
- Therefore, clear messaging detailing how things may change for people is key to reassure and avoid upset
- Key questions for those most unhappy with the concept of water recycling are 'will it taste good', 'is it safe', 'will it impact my bill' and 'will it impact the environment'

The right message format takes elements from all versions

There are elements from each of the messages that explain water recycling in a reassuring and clear way

Message preference order



Social norms

Reassures safety concerns by explaining that it is widely used around the world without consequences



Wildcard

Feels more honest and transparent than the other messages which means that it is more trusted



Positive framing

Explains the benefits to individuals (a consistent water supply) and dials up the quality of the water that will be provided



Control

Is concise and uses clear language which makes it easy to read and understand

In order of preference based on which is most easy to understand, memorable, would want to find out more and the best to receive

Detailed findings

General themes in message perceptions

All messaging needs to feel honest

With a culture of misinformation and untruths, many instinctively look for the subtext in their communications. Some felt that all comms shown had 'something to hide'

- There is a watch out for striking a balance between honesty vs too honest. 'Why am I being told about Recycling now?' 'Why are TW telling me about this?' 'It must be a bad thing!'
- Many customers looked for subtext within the message and there was an assumption that something was being concealed
- A few individuals went to look up their own information on the topic and reference 'Wikipedia' and news sites as their source as well as looking for further information on Thames Water
- Therefore, the key aim of the messaging is to feel honest and credible with nothing to hide

"I was initially sceptical about the need for water recycling, upon reflection, the arguments for its use are all valid"
Female, 55-64, C2DE, BME

In a real situation, customers are likely to discuss what they have read with neighbours, family and friends where there are opportunities for misinformation to spread

Communications can be easily misunderstood...

...leading to a spread of misinformation

- In one activity, participants were asked to read the comms as naturally as possible and then to 'tell a friend' what they have read from memory
- Here, a number of participants misunderstood the information which in reality would have the potential to spread misinformation to others
- This was caused by skim reading, misunderstanding the use of words such as 'switching' and 'options' and having only a basic understanding of how the water cycle currently works

I was surprised at the end of the letter where it mentions, 'if I choose to switch' so people have to actively do 'something to switch'? Female, 55-64, AB, BME

Thames Water is having great vision for every customer. for great assurance that every home will have quality water, that will be good for health. Male, AB, BME

Majority of Covid misinformation came from 12 people, report finds

CCDH finds 'disinformation dozen' have combined following of 59 million people across multiple social media platforms



Customers individual views on water quality and availability impacts their response to the communication

Those who always drink bottled water, or are sceptical about water shortages, are more negative and have more questions about the plans

- Those who will typically drink bottled water or regularly filter their tap water are unsurprisingly more likely to have questions about household water quality and safety
- Those who are unaware or sceptical about water shortages are more likely to be worried about the communications and have a more negative response to Thames Water
- These groups were also more likely to look up further information than those who were aware of water shortages in the area or happy with their water quality

“I'd rather not drink treated sewage but it seems we have no choice. I guess it's reassuring to know it is safe, but still”
Male, 35-44, ABC1, Water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic

Communicating as early as possible will give those who are most negative time to adjust

What do customers want to know?

There is a lot of new information in the letters but the three key areas that are important to customers are...

What is the situation?



London could potentially experience an interruption in water supply if no action is taken by Thames Water

What is the solution?



A clear explanation of water recycling is and what that involved

What are the consequences?



What this means for individuals, the wider community and the environment

What is the situation?
Explaining why water
recycling is necessary

Learning that London's water supply could run out is new news to many customers

Although many already feel they do their bit to conserve water, the news that London may run out of water is a surprise to many

- Customers already do a number of things to conserve water such as collect rain to water the garden, reuse grey water and have shorter showers/fewer baths
- However, the news that water could be scarce was news to many and was the main takeaway from the communications – it pulled focus away from the recycling aspect for some
- There may be some scepticism over the scale of the problem and therefore the information they receive needs to be credible and backed with clear data

“With the ice cap melting, won't there be more water sloshing about ? I think I heard of big receptacles for storing water being de commissioned, and the land being used for house building? Is that true ?”

Female, 55-64, C2DE

Believing that there is a water shortage will be the first hurdle to communicating the need for interventions

The message about water scarcity causes worry about the future of their supply

Opening paragraph used in all versions

- Across all versions, a key takeaway is that London is in danger of running out of water and this was a cause of concern
- Those who were not already conserving water say that a letter like this would encourage them to think more carefully at how they use water at home

Key

- Social norms
- Positive framing
- Control version

I'm very concerned that we are at a higher risk of drought or similar (Male, 25-34, ABC1, water quality sceptic)

Running out of water is a concern for us and the environment (Female, 25-34, ABC1)

This is worrying because of the security of supply and larger bills (Male, 55-64, ABC1, water quality sceptic)

This worries me about what will happen in the future (Male, 65+, ABC1, water volume sceptic)

Your region is home to over 20 million people and one of the driest areas in the UK. Add in a growing population and changing climate, and it's no wonder taps are under more pressure than ever.

Alongside other water companies, we're determined to tackle this. We're hard at work exploring new ways to safeguard your water supply for the future. Recycling water is just one of these solutions.

Climate change is worrying (Female, 45-54, ABC1)

I don't like the idea of running out of water (Male, 65+, C2DE, water quality sceptic)

Concerned about the growing population and what that will mean (Female, 25-34, C2DE, water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic)

I would be concerned to find out my areas was classified this way and I would be worried about the future (Female, 25-34, C2DE, water quality sceptic)

The wildcard version caused the most alarm referencing more explicitly that water supplies could be interrupted

The direct language around water shortages and restrictions caused alarm but conversely for some, the honesty in the messaging resonated well

We need to know the true extent of the problem (Female, 55-65, ABC2, water quality sceptic)

It emphasises the seriousness of the situation (Female, 65+, C2DE, water quality sceptic)

Concerning but necessary message about how our water is becoming less reliable (Female, 25-34, ABC1)

Water recycling information

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This is a serious problem. Water scarcity because of droughts and extremely dry periods may mean you experience shortages and restrictions to your supply.

Thames Water, alongside other water companies, is currently exploring a range of potential solutions to ensure we have the water we need for generations to come. Water recycling is one of the potential solutions.

Good that it explains the seriousness of the problem (Male, 25-34, water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic)

Worrying, presenting the facts (Female, 45-54, C2DE)

May mean shortages! Yikes! (Female, 55-64, ABC1)

The direct messaging is more alarming but the meaning is unambiguous and the honesty is appreciated

Positive framing and social norms make the message of water scarcity feel less urgent

Although the first paragraph is the same in all versions, the change in emphasis and tone across the communications made customers feel that the situation is less urgent

- The 'positive framing' language dials down the urgency of water scarcity and reassures customers that the issue is in hand
- The reference to the environment also implies that this move would be a positive move overall and should be permanent
- In the context of 'social norms' having to use a different water source feels less of an issue due to other people in the world already using this

"I feel more confident in Thames Water to provide me with safe drinking water and at the same time being sustainable. It also proves to me that this provider is innovative and in line with recent trends to reverse the adverse effects of climate change"

Male, 35-44, ABC1, Water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic

There needs to be a balance between communicating the seriousness of the situation to encourage a change in habit and reassurance that there is a solution

Customers need to understand the situation in order to accept the solution, and so the introduction should be direct

Although customers should feel reassured that there is a plan in place, underplaying the seriousness of water scarcity makes it difficult to understand why measures are being taken

- Understanding that water supply may be interrupted if no action is taken is a key message to understand – and right now there's mixed clarity on this
- The information about the causes (climate change and overpopulation) are helping customers to understand why this is happening
- Using indirect language (e.g. “taps are under pressure”) can cause some to misinterpret the message, particularly those who speak English as a second language

“Over time water availability in my area is at risk if we don't take actions now to ensure a good supply which meets a changing environment and changing population sizes”.

Male, 25-34, ABC1, water quality sceptic

Once customers accept the problem, they will be ready to understand the solution...

What is the solution?
Explaining water recycling
in an honest way

Customers are reassured that plans are in place to tackle water shortages

Across all communications, customers feel positive about Thames Water for planning ahead to assure that they do not lose their water supply during dry periods

- Many feel positive towards Thames Water for future proofing the water supply by using different methods such as water recycling
- Although not all like the idea, they appreciate that it is better than losing their water supply altogether
- However, the concepts is not fully understood and should the system be implemented now, they would have a lot of questions

“I think that given the realities of climate change, increased population growth and the negative impact of the built environment in most cities and urbanisations, water recycling is going to become increasingly prominent. So, although I'm not 100 per cent at ease with the idea, I will have to get used to it.”
Female, 55- 64, C2DE, BME

There are a number of questions about water recycling that are not addressed in any of the communications

Customers do not necessarily understand the water cycle which can lead to them misunderstanding water recycling

Don't we already recycle water?

The concept of water recycling is not fully understood and many struggle to understand how this process is different to the normal water cycle

Recycling is a positive thing

There is a positive association with the word recycling and being kind to the environment, therefore some believe that water recycling is a future goal and not a measure put in place to manage dry periods

There is a physical switch that can be turned off and on

Some interpreted the word 'switch' to mean a physical mechanism that would turn water recycling on and off allowing there to be a mix of recycled water and non recycled water

We get to choose if we want recycled water

The phrase 'recycling is one of these solutions' was initially interpreted by a few individuals to mean that they would get to choose if they had recycled water or not

Misunderstandings are likely, so clear language will be key to making sure the messages get through

A more factual explanation of water recycling including a diagram would aid customers in their understanding

Many ask for a visual aid to be included or a link to further information as they struggled to understand how water recycling was different to how they get their water now

- Not understanding water recycling would encourage some to look for their own information where they may find inaccurate accounts
 - Thames Water has this opportunity to control the narrative and therefore should be more clear about what water recycling involves
- Some preferred the 'wildcard' version due to the more detailed description of what water recycling means
- Although this version goes too far (using phrases such as "wastewater effluent") and has the potential to communicate poor quality water – some felt that they had a better idea of the process after they read this version

"I'm think it's all a bit confusing. They emphasis the 'recycling' aspect of the process but isn't the water we use already recycled? I think there's something unpleasant involved and they are using the term 'recycling' because of its positive connotations."

Female, 55-64, C2DE, BME

If the explanation isn't clear, some will interpret this as a deliberate attempt to conceal the truth

Social Norms

The best ranked message as most reassuring and informative

Water recycling information

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We rely on water recycling during very dry periods or times of drought. The rest of the time, we source your water as normal.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

Best regards,

The Water Recycling team

"It is reassuring to know that people in other parts of the world recycle a large amount of their water."

Female, 65+, ABC1, water quality sceptic

How is it interpreted

- The social norming messages were picked up and learning that other countries already use water recycling was comforting
- This version was also easy for customers to understand and majority customers were likely to find more information about the topic.

Ranking against other messages

	4th	3rd	2nd	1st
Easiest to understand	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Memorable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Would like to find out more	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Best to receive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Worst to receive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2.3 Which one is the easiest to understand? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the most memorable? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one would you like to find out more? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the best to receive? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the worst to receive? (n=60)

What does it do well?

- Demonstrating to customers how 'water recycling' has been used successfully and is a safe process
- The water recycling explanation was more in depth and it made it clear that water recycling was only used when needed (not as a permanent solution)

What can be improved?

- Using hotter countries as examples of where water recycling has been a success confused the message of water scarcity in London (How can London be the same as California?)
- Using phrases such as 'world-class water' was felt to be manipulative and made a few question the real motive of the letter

Wildcard

Polarising direct language that is honest but disgusting

Water recycling information

Hello,

Your region is home to over 20 million people and one of the driest areas in the UK. Add in a growing population and changing climate, and it's no wonder taps are under more pressure than ever.

The South East is one of the driest regions in the UK. There is significant pressure on our water supplies. The unrelenting pressure is driven by population growth, our changing climate, and the need to protect our environment.

This is a serious problem. Water scarcity because of droughts and extremely dry periods may mean you experience shortages and restrictions to your supply.

Thames Water, alongside other water companies, is currently exploring a range of potential solutions to ensure we have the water we need for generations to come. Water recycling is one of the potential solutions.

What is water recycling?

The water we provide for our customers is taken from the environment. After our customers have used it, the water is subject to a biological treatment before it is returned to the environment again.

If we recycle water, what will happen is that some of the treated used water (called "treated wastewater effluent") would be captured before it is released back into the environment.]

The wastewater would then be treated in a water filtration and conditioning facility, then transferred into rivers and reservoirs. Once the treated water is back in the environment, it's then ready to be taken out and treated with chemicals to produce drinking water (otherwise known as "potable water").

Essentially, this means that your water goes "from waste to tap".

Water recycling is not a new process. We already recycle water as part of our existing water supply system.

Water recycling is a scheme we are exploring to ensure a secure water supply, but it would only be used in extremely dry periods, or times of drought, for example. Otherwise, your water supply will stay as it is now.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

Best regards,

The Water Recycling team

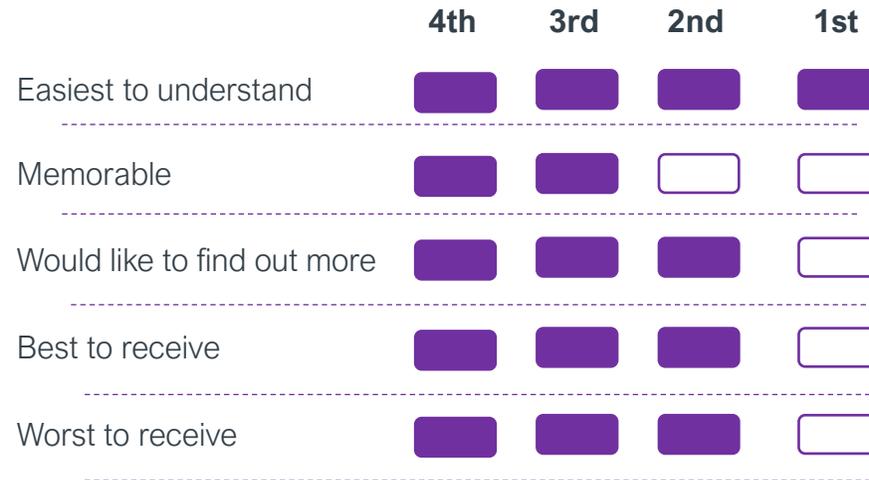
'From waste to tap - makes me think of floating poos.'

Female, 55-64, C2DE

How is it interpreted

- An honest account of what will happen to the water supply
- This version received more polarising responses with some customers very concerned about the phrasing.
- A majority of customers who viewed this letter as their alternative message ranked it as the worst version

Ranking against other messages



Q2.3 Which one is the easiest to understand? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the most memorable? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one would you like to find out more? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the best to receive? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the worst to receive? (n=60)

What does it do well?

- The message felt very honest and therefore many trusted this over the 'positive framing'
- The language was thought to be much simpler and many felt that they understood what water recycling involved after reading this version

What can be improved?

- The term 'from waste to tap' is not well received and alarms customers about the safety of the water
- The description has a 'yuck factor' and customers would be very concerned about how the water would taste

Positive framing

Is more complex and the least trusted message

Water recycling information

Hello,

Your region is home to over 20 million people and one of the driest areas in the UK. Add in a growing population and changing climate, and it's no wonder taps are under more pressure than ever.

Alongside other water companies, we're determined to tackle this. We're hard at work exploring new ways to safeguard your water supply for the future. Recycling water is just one of these solutions.

What is water recycling?

Right now, we source your water from local rivers as well as deep underground. We clean it to meet strict public health standards before we deliver it to millions of homes and businesses. After water goes down your drain, we clean it again and return it to rivers. It's a cycle that never ends!

Our water recycling process transfers your water to a different facility instead. It produces high quality water to return to our rivers and reservoirs. This makes it easier to source, treat and deliver enough world-class water for everyone to use.

We rely on water recycling during very dry periods or times of drought. The rest of the time, we source your water as normal.

What does recycled water mean for me?

Recycled water is pure and healthy and has all the benefits as the water you have in your home now. It is unlikely that you will notice the difference, although some people report that there is a slight difference in taste to water that has been through this process.

Recycled water is safe to drink as tap water, brush your teeth with, give to pets, use in cooking, wash clothes with or bathe with. There is no need to boil it first.

It is also helping the planet. By putting this water back in the environment, we're giving back to nature by helping to protect natural habitats, instead of taking scarce water supplies from vulnerable rivers and streams.

What do I need to do now?

Don't worry, you don't need to do anything – we just wanted to keep you in the loop.

If we switch your supply to recycled water, it'll happen within a month from the date on this letter. We'll make sure this doesn't interrupt your water supply or pressure.

Best regards,

The Water Recycling team

"The [positive framing] version mentions how it protects the environment, which is also worth knowing."

Male, 65+, ABC1, water quality sceptic

How is it interpreted

- The environment is a key part of this message which made some believe that water recycling was going to be the new normal
- This is therefore seen as a positive move that should be done straight away, rather than a way of ensuring a consistent water supply

Ranking against other messages

	4th	3rd	2nd	1st
Easiest to understand	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Memorable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would like to find out more	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Best to receive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worst to receive	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2.3 Which one is the easiest to understand? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the most memorable? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one would you like to find out more? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the best to receive? (n=60)

Q2.3 Which one is the worst to receive? (n=60)

What does it do well ?

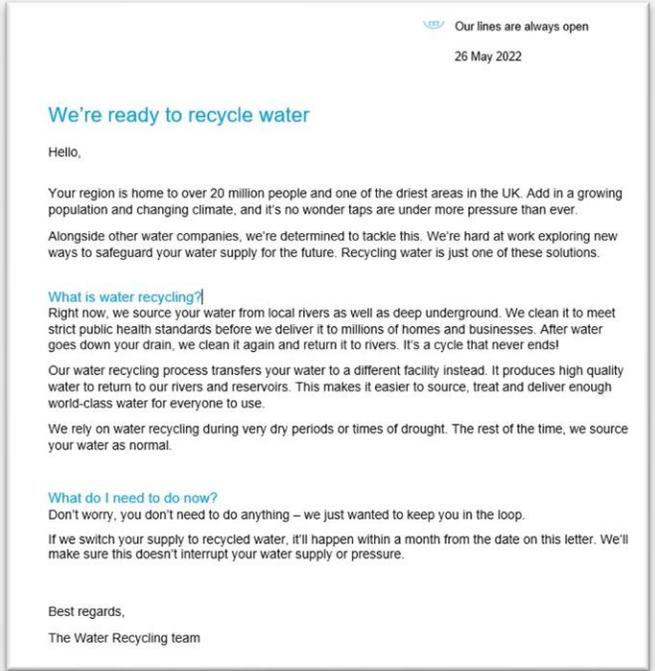
- The positive phrasing worked well at reassuring customers that they will have a consistent water supply
- The word 'pure' works well to communicate good quality
- They were more likely to be reassured that the taste and quality would be the same as what they are used to

What can be improved?

- The positive tone made some customers suspicious of why they needed to be informed by it
- Some were suspicious about the references to taste which made them believe that the quality of water would be harmed by this process

Control version

Easy to understand but lacks depth of information

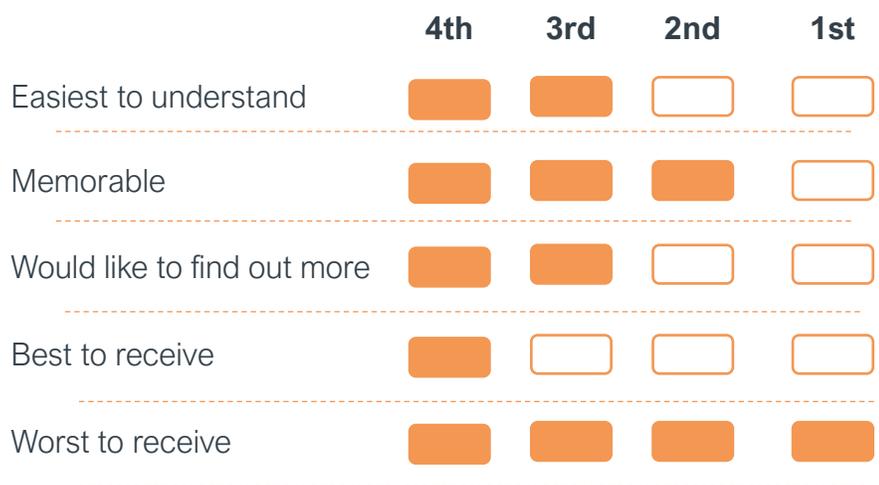


"I am happy that solutions are being thought about before major issues occur"
Male, 25-34, C1

How is it interpreted

- The main takeaway for most was that London is at risk of running out of water in the near future
- Some misunderstood entirely and thought it was a message about ensuring that only clean water was returned to rivers
- Comparatively this version wasn't as well received against its counterparts and voted the worst after viewing alternative messages.

Ranking against other messages



Q2.3 Which one is the easiest to understand? (n=60)
 Q2.3 Which one is the most memorable? (n=60)
 Q2.3 Which one would you like to find out more? (n=60)
 Q2.3 Which one is the best to receive? (n=60)
 Q2.3 Which one is the worst to receive? (n=60)

What does it do well?

- It is short and concise which means it is more likely to be read in detail
- Some are reassured about the safety of the water through phrases like 'strict public health standards'

What can be improved?

- Some customers wanted more detail about the water recycling process and were left confused on how this scheme is different to current water cycle
- The letter lacks the detail they need to feel properly informed and therefore is the least reassuring

Constructing the best message to communicate water recycling

From the examples so far, the communications around water recycling should include the following

A clear descriptions of how water recycling is different to the normal water cycle

Include a diagram of water recycling to help with the understanding

Include facts about the process and be direct

Continue to avoid words such as 'effluent', 'chemicals' and phrases such as 'waste to tap'

Use social norms to reassure customers that the process is safe

Demonstrating that this process is used by lots of people is reassuring

However, ensure that there is some context as to why London is using the same system as places that are significantly hotter

Positive framing helps to improve perceptions of water quality

Positive framing works well to reassure that the water is good quality and good to drink

Use carefully to ensure that customers do not interpret positivity as disguising the truth

What are the
consequences for
individuals and the
community?

Customers say they are unlikely to make any big change to their water usage behaviour

As long as their water supply is not interrupted, most feel they are unlikely to change their behaviour however if they were to make changes, they are likely to do the following...



Buy more bottled water for drinking, if the taste is different



Do more to conserve water in the home/continue to conserve water



Do research into what water recycling means and who's to blame for the drought

After reading the messages only a few were concerned about the safety of the water, but those who feel that taste would be an issue say that they would buy bottled water for drinking

The news that London could be at risk of drought is alarming and would inspire some to be better at reducing their own usage – however many are sceptical that London as a whole would do this

The biggest threat would be from those who believe that Thames Water are to blame for the situation (through poor leakage management) and they would take to social media to look for reasons why this has become necessary

A minority were not reassured by the communications and their concerns are around four specific themes



Will it taste good?



Is it safe?



What's the impact on bills?



What is the impact on the environment?



Will it taste good? References to taste make customers question how different it will be

Any reassurances around taste ring alarm bells that the quality will be impacted by this process

- The communications should be careful to reference taste as customers assumed that if it is mentioned, their water is likely to taste bad
- A better explanation of the water recycling process and how the taste may be altered may help to improve perceptions
- Being told that the water will taste different may lead to some believing that they can notice the change so if it is not a requirement it would be better not to mention it at all

“The only downside is that it may taste slightly different... I am concerned that this could become a permanent feature of our water supply.”

Male, 45-55, ABC1, water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic

Those who believe they would be able to tell the difference believe they will switch to bottled water for drinking



Is it safe? A small minority have questions around the safety and would like more reassurance

A clearer explanation of the process may help to reassure customers how their water will be safe and how contamination is unlikely

- Many customers are cautious to accept a process which could implicate the health of themselves and others
- Those with small children or elderly relatives were more likely to think about the safety of the water
- Mentioning taste in messaging suggests that the water would be different and therefore some wonder if that means they should be concerned about the cause

“I would just like to be given full information on the enhanced water-cleaning process. As long as I was provided with that, I think I’d be happy with a couple of days notice to enable me to buy bottled water if that’s what I’d decided to drink”
Female, 55-64, C2DE, BME

Those who read the ‘social norms’ message were less likely to worry about safety than the other messages



Will it cost more? As this involves using a different process, some are concerned that prices will rise

The current cost of living crisis immediately made some think about what would happen to them if their water bill increased

- Being clear that the use of water recycling will not be reflected in their bill could be important as if it coincides with a natural uplift in costs, customers will assume that use of water recycling is the reason
- If costs were to rise, a transparent breakdown of where funds would be allocated would allow customers to feel more in the loop of what Thames Water are currently doing

“ I would like to know where these new plants will be built, cost, will it affect our water bills, and if it is a workable alternative. ”

Female, 45- 54, C2DE, Water volume sceptic, water quality sceptic

Believing that they are being charged directly for the use of water recycling would make customers feel very negatively about the changes



Is it good for the environment? Messages in the positive framing message could be misleading

As climate change is a very topical issue, many customers are very keen to do their bit for the environment but water recycling may not be as good for the environment as the positive framing suggests

- Phrases like 'driest', 'scarcity' and 'severity' has illuminated to many customers of the very real prospect of water shortages in their area
- The use of the word 'recycling' and the environmental benefits mentioned in the positive framing message has led some to believe that this is something that would tackle climate change
- This could be a problem if the connection between energy usage and water recycling is made so environmental claims need to be very transparent

"It is better for the environment this way, and helps to ensure that we will always have water even in times of drought."

Female, 65+, C2DE, water quality sceptic

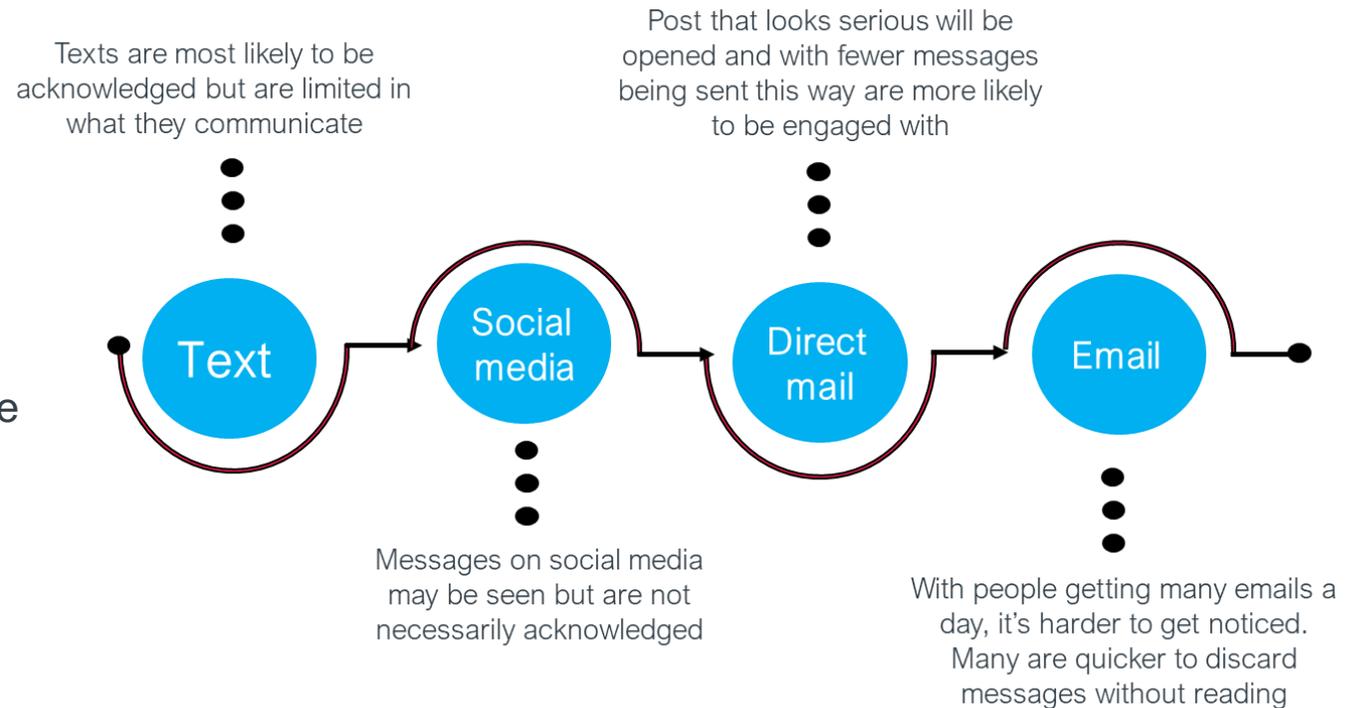
Transparency about the environmental benefits are important as some will be looking for the 'hidden truth' and may feel that the energy use factor was purposely left out of the message

Channel delivery and next steps

Multiple channels will be needed to communicate the use of water recycling

We asked our participants to keep a diary of the communications they received over the community including which ones were read vs which ones were binned

- Customers say that emails are their preferred methods of receiving information but their diaries revealed that they are more likely to discard messages via this channel without reading, vs other channels
- To create the initial awareness, text messages and social media will be best, however they are unlikely to read lots of text in this way
- Direct mail is a key way to send information as although it is considered 'old fashioned' customers receive less post (meaning less competition) and always look at post that seems important



Recap: The right message format takes elements from all versions

There are elements from each of the messages that explain water recycling in a reassuring and clear way

Message preference order



Social norms

Reassures safety concerns by explaining that it is widely used around the world without consequences



Wildcard

Feels more honest and transparent than the other messages which means that it is more trusted



Positive framing

Explains the benefits to individuals (a consistent water supply) and dials up the quality of the water that will be provided



Control

Is concise and uses clear language which makes it easy to read and understand

In order of preference based on which is most easy to understand, memorable, would want to find out more and the best to receive

We suggest that the communication should read something like this...

Hello,

This letter is just to keep you informed about a change to your water supply.

Your region is home to over 20 million people and is one of the driest areas in the UK. If you also consider that it has a growing population and changing climate, it's no wonder that our water supply is under pressure.

What is water recycling?

Right now we source your water from local rivers as well as from deep underground. After water goes down your drain, we clean it again and return it to rivers. It's a cycle that never ends.

Our water recycling process transfers your water to a water filtration and conditioning facility, then transfers into rivers and reservoirs. This ensures that there is enough water going back into the environment during this time of drought to support wildlife. Once back in the environment, it's then ready to be treated to produce pure and healthy drinking water for everyone to use. We rely on water recycling during very dry periods or times of drought. The rest of the time, we source your water as normal.

We're joining millions of other people who already use recycled water

In some parts of the world where the climate is hotter, using recycled water is commonplace. For example, in Singapore, nearly all of its drinking water is provided by water recycling. Major cities like Brisbane also rely on it. And in California, the state has been recycling water for over 40 years.

That's an estimated 45 million people who use recycled water around the globe in these three examples alone.

What happens now?

On [insert date] we will start to use water recycling. There will be no interruption to your water supply or pressure and it is likely that you will not notice any difference (although a minority of people may notice a slight difference in taste). We also want to assure you that your bill will not be affected by the change in water supply.

Best regards

Controlling the narrative

With 10 years before water recycling will be necessary, Thames Water have an opportunity to start communicating about difficult issues now

- Customers are largely unaware that London is in danger of having an interrupted water supply and learning that Thames Water are making plans to combat this was a wake up call
- Communicating early on that plans are in place makes the prospect of water shortages more of a reality and may nudge people to be more responsible with their water usage
- Explaining the process earlier will give customers time to understand it and ask questions long before it will become necessary to use
- There is trust that if Thames Water is investing in water recycling to ensure a reliable water supply then it is the right thing to do. Therefore messages about water recycling should be from Thames Water directly

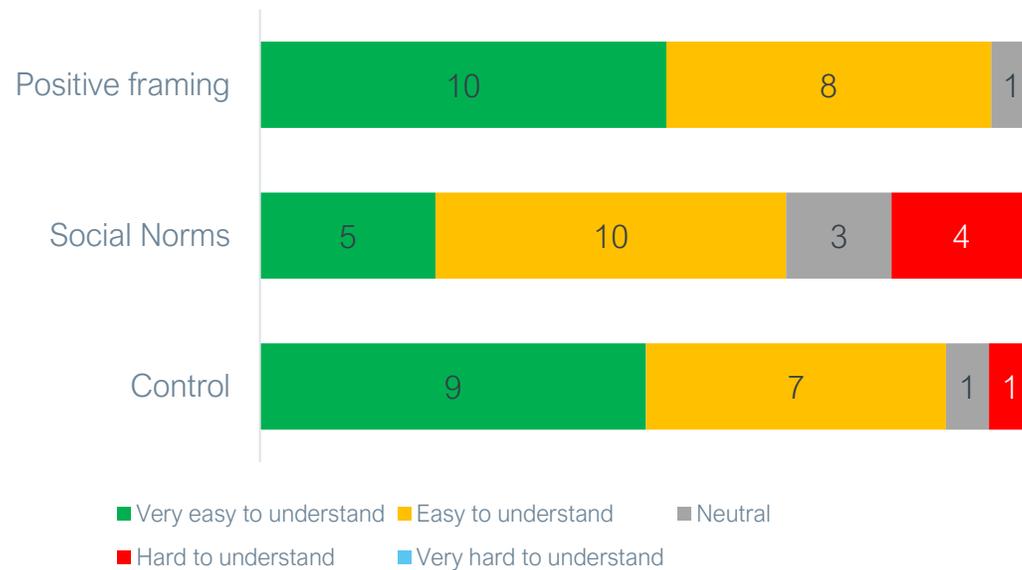


Appendix

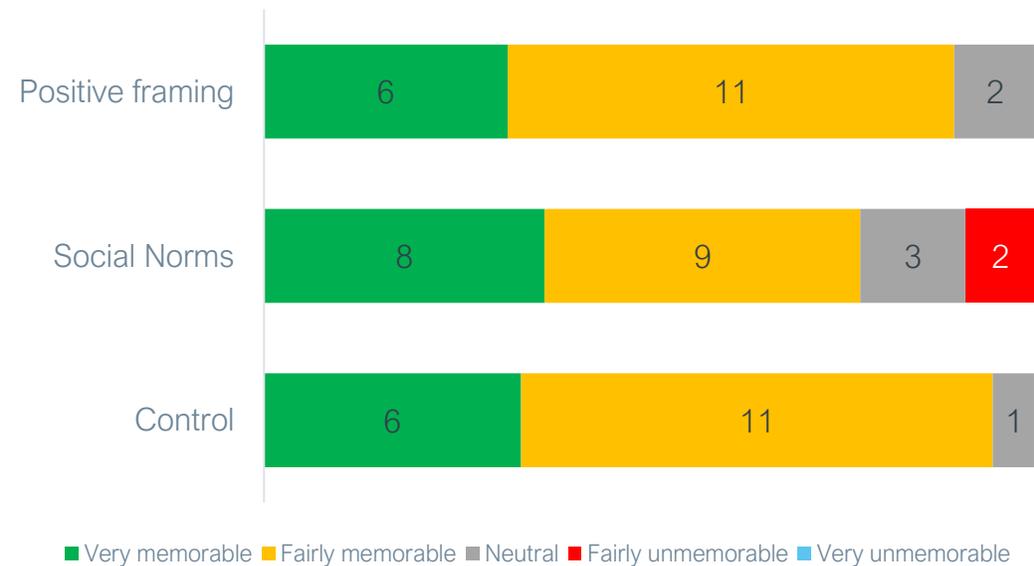
Results from polling questions

Participants rated the message they saw first and were asked to answer quickly

How easy/difficult is the message to understand?



How memorable is the message?

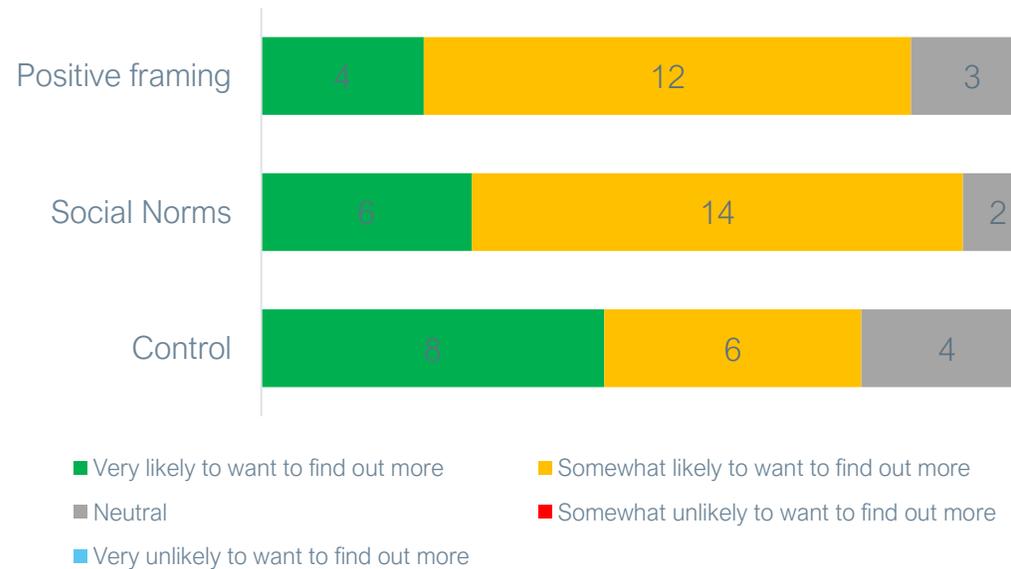


Q1.2c "How easy/difficult is the message to understand" Base control (n= 18) Social norms (n= 22) Positive framing (n=19)
Q2.3 "How memorable is the message" Base control (n=18) Social norms (n= 22) Positive framing (n=19)

Results from polling questions

Participants rated the message they saw first and were asked to answer quickly

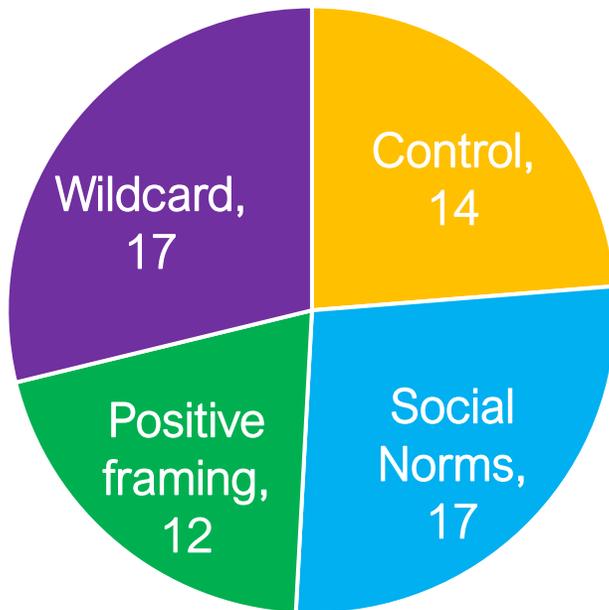
How likely would you want to find out more?



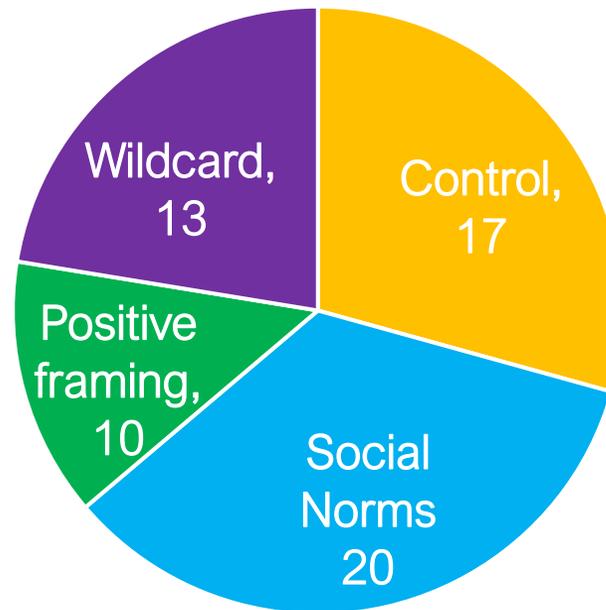
Results from polling questions

Participants were asked to compare all the messages including the wildcard

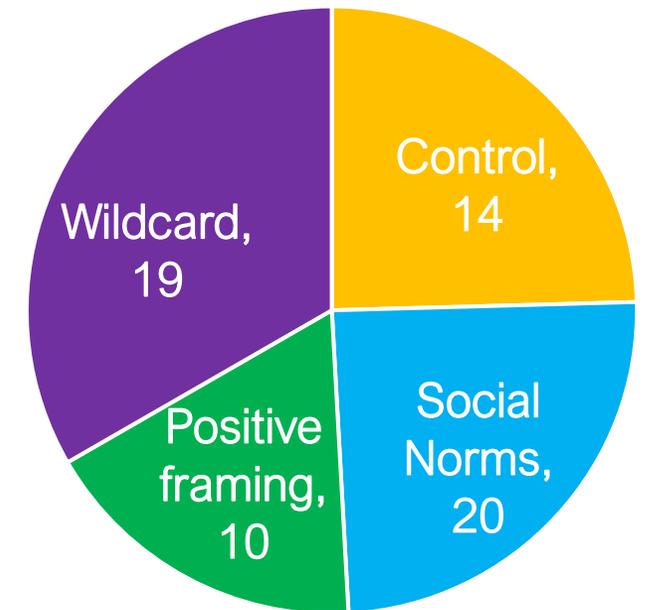
Easiest to understand



Most memorable



Would want to find out more information



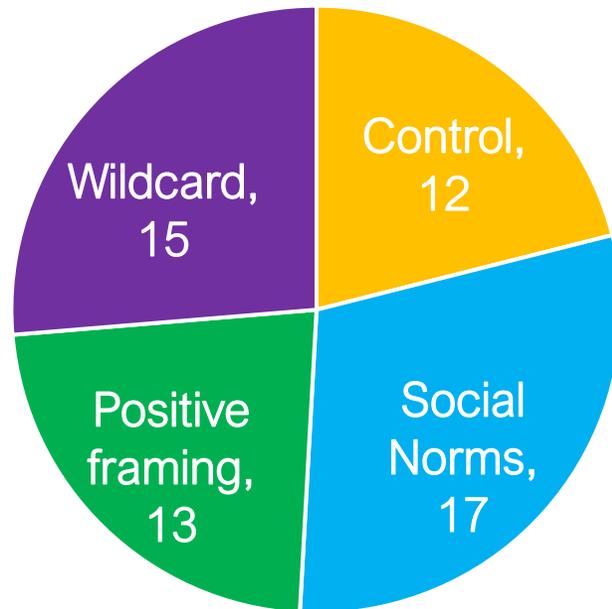
Q2.3 Which one is the easiest to understand? (n=60)

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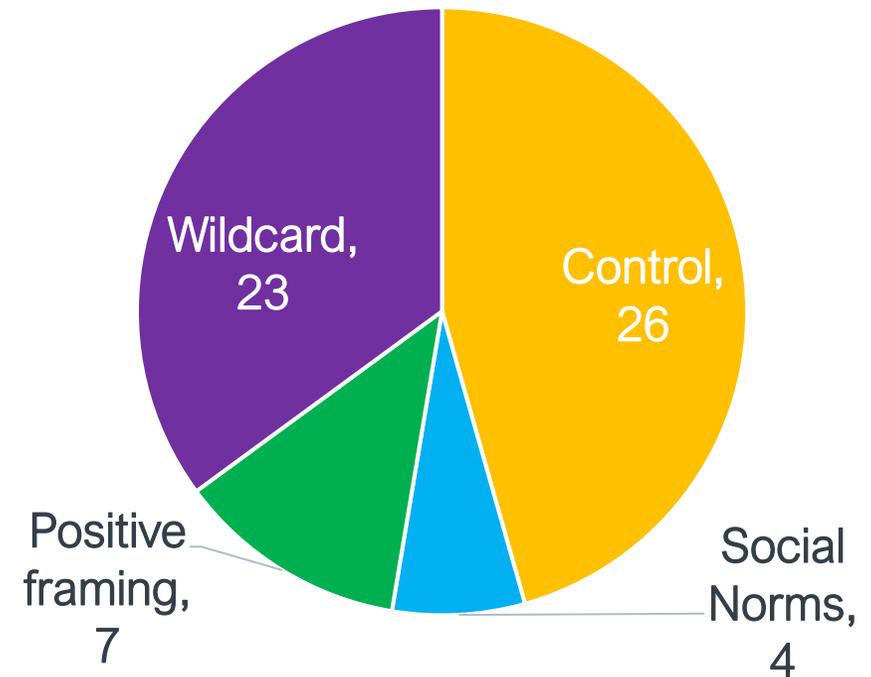
Results from polling questions

Participants were asked to compare all the messages including the wildcard

Best to receive



Worst to receive



Q2.3 Which one is the best to receive? (n=60)
Q2.3 Which one is the worst to receive? (n=60)



Thank you