



JFA Purple Orange

**Water Consumers Research Project
A Consultation for the South Australian Department of Communities and
Social Inclusion**

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Authors

Dr Nicole McCallum, Project Officer
Jackie Hayes, Leader Social Policy and Initiatives
Robbi Williams, Chief Executive Officer

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Bob Tinker
Michelle Hagarty
Louise Braybon
Vanessa Musolino, South Australian Council of Social Service
Heather Merran, Uniting Care Wesley Bowden
Mark Henley, Uniting Communities
Sharon Maslen, The Salvation Army
Glenda Lee, JFA Purple Orange

Agency details

JFA Purple Orange
104 Greenhill Road
Unley SA 5061 AUSTRALIA
Telephone: + 61 (8) 8373 8333
Fax: + 61 (8) 8373 8373
Email: admin@purpleorange.org.au
Website: www.purpleorange.org.au
Facebook: www.facebook.com/jfapurpleorange

JFA Purple Orange is a non-government, social profit organisation. Anchored on dialogue with people living with disability, their families, service providers, government and other stakeholders, we seek to identify policy and practice that has the prospect of advancing peoples chances of a good life. Our work is anchored on the principles of Personhood and Citizenship. Our work includes research, evaluation, capacity building, consultancy, and hosted initiatives.

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1 Executive Summary

Several consistent and broad themes emerged across the questions posed to participants. These key themes included tenant issues, accessibility of information, awareness and suitability of entitlements, payment for unused services, and lack of technology. Some of the issues raised were specifically related to the needs and experiences of water consumers living with disability, while other issues may also impact water consumers in the wider community. Accordingly, responses to the issues may involve targeted strategies for water consumers living with disability, as well as mainstream strategies that impact all water consumers. A full outline of our recommendations can be found in section 4.

Tenants

Issues experienced specifically by tenants were common and were in response to a range of aspects of water consumption including billing, communication, cost, and concessions. Underlying many of these issues was the crossed responsibility between tenants and property owners or other third parties in relation to the payment of water bills and the resolution of water related issues. While tenants are required to pay for water, they have no direct relationship with the water company. Rather, they must pay their landlord who has the legal responsibility to pay the water supplier. However, as landlords can recover water debt from tenants, they may not be motivated to fix leaks or dispute costs with the water company. This arrangement often left tenants feeling confused and disempowered.

Accessibility of information

Accessibility of information also affected the consumers involved in this project across several aspects of the water service provided. The mode through which information is distributed, the way in which this information is presented, and the communication options available for consumers are not accessible to everyone. Paper mail is not accessible to people that live with visual impairment, billing language may not be accessible to people living with intellectual disability, voice recorded numbered menus are often not accessible for people with acquired brain injuries and impaired memories, and tolled phone numbers may not be accessible to people on fixed and limited incomes. Further, the processes necessary to access concessions and various rebates are often not accessible, blocking people out of these systems.

Lack of awareness of entitlements

The lack of awareness of entitlements, as well as whether these initiatives are fit for purpose, also consistently arose in responses. Despite reporting that at times they could not afford to pay their water bill, some participants were unaware of the concessions and discounts for water available to them, and the majority of consumers were unaware of the hardship programs available for use during times of financial difficulty. Additionally, in some cases, these programs were not suitable. The water cost structure seems to incentivise

limiting water use, however additional water use is often required for many disabilities (i.e. hydrotherapy, hot showers for pain relief, and frequent bathing and laundry for incontinence). In these situations, people living with disability are penalised for their necessary water consumption through higher tariffs for excessive water use, and concessions that are not tailored to disability and the water use related to living with disability.

Paying for unused services

Another theme that emerged throughout the project was payment for services that were not provided. Participants voiced frustration over paying a proportion of a shared water bill that was not related to own use, paying for unused water through leaks, burst pipes and the action of others, paying water and sewerage service fees though the services are not provided, and paying for subsidies that did not provide benefits for the individual. These issues were particular distressing for participants as the income of many of the consumers involved in this project was limited to the disability support pension. Accordingly, many participants were not able to, or did not want to, pay for services that they did not use.

Lack of technology

Lastly, the lack of technology within water services emerged throughout consultations and online survey responses. The use of technology in water supplier communication such as an option for online billing, text message notifications and online accounts would improve the accessibility of information within water services. The use of technology to develop a system that could alert consumers to a significant increase in water use would also be of great benefit. Such a system would aid the early identification of water leaks, reduce the cost of unused water, and limit the stress felt by consumers in these situations. Further, the implementation of adaptive technology could greatly improve the accessibility of water meters for consumers.

2 Background

2.1. Project aim

The South Australian Department for Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) currently contracts the South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) to identify priority projects for potential funding under the Consumer Advocacy and Research Fund constituted within Section 87 of the *Water Industry Act 2012*. SACOSS identified consultation with people living with disability as water consumers as a priority and JFA Purple Orange was commissioned by DCSI to deliver the project.

The six month project was to research and document the particular issues arising for people living with disability in respect of the use of, cost of, quality of or access to water in South Australia. Consumers of water living with a range of disabilities were engaged, in both metro

Adelaide and regional areas of South Australia, using appropriate qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The intended outcome of the project was to promote the interests of people living with disability as consumers of water and to provide a forum through which consumers living with disability could have their voices heard on essential services issues. This project was intended to provide comprehensive understanding of the issues faced by consumers of water living with disability to ensure effective policy and regulatory mechanisms exist which give full consideration to stakeholder concerns and provide for the needs of all water consumers in South Australia.

2.2.Methodology

This project was developed through a process of co-design in which stakeholders from various backgrounds with differing experiences work together to design the methodology and project materials, monitor the progress of the project, provide feedback, and contribute to the report. Ten individuals, including people with lived experience of disability as well as representatives from key stakeholders: Uniting Communities, Uniting Care Wesley Bowden, The Salvation Army, SACOSS and JFA Purple Orange, formed the co-design group for this project. The co-design group met three times across the duration of the project, with some written feedback on documents provided from group members outside of the meetings.

The project included a combination of face-to-face consultations and an online survey. A paper version of the survey and an option to participate via a telephone interview were also available. All of the questions posed to consumers during the face-to-face consultations were included in the online survey. Online respondents provided additional demographic information that could not be obtained during the consultations due to time restraints. Participants were asked about their experiences and views on a range of water and sewerage related issues including billing, communication with their water supplier, cost, concessions and discounts, hardship programs, water service issues, water restrictions and exemption criteria, sewerage issues, and accessibility. A number of the questions prompted open ended responses fostering discussion, while yes/no responses were suitable for other questions. All participants were asked to rate how important five key issues were to them:

- (1) Billing
- (2) Communication with their water supplier
- (3) Cost
- (4) Assistance programs and concessions
- (5) Water supply and sewerage issues.

Participants made these ratings by selecting the number that best represented their answer on the 7-point scale where 1 indicated not very important and 7 indicated very important.

Additionally, participants rated their consumer satisfaction with their water service as well as the sewerage service provided to them. Again, a 7-point scale was used with 1 indicating not at all satisfied and 7 indicating very satisfied. Symbols were presented with the scale anchors on all rating scales to improve understanding and increase accessibility of the measures. All of the survey questions and measures are presented in Appendix 1.

Prior to commencing the consultation or completing the online survey, background information about the project and research ethics were provided to participants and participants provided informed written consent. All consultations were audio recorded, after verbal consent to record was received from participants.

2.3.Consultation details

Eleven face-to-face consultations were conducted with existing peer groups from various disability organisations. The date and location of each of the consultations, as well as the disability group and peer network through which the consultation was conducted, is presented in Table 1. Consultation duration ranged from 30-45 minutes. The number of people attending the consultations ranged from 3 to 15 people, with an average of 10.1 attendees (standard deviation = 4.2) per consultation. People were also able to attend community consultations arranged in Unley, Murray Bridge, Berri, Kangaroo Island, Barossa Valley, Mount Gambier, Port Lincoln, Whyalla and Ceduna. However, due to limited registrations for these events, interested individuals were contacted about participating in another way to ensure that project resources were used in an optimum way.

	Date	Location	Disability Group and Peer Network
1	7/4/17	Mount Gambier	Families 4 Families Mount Gambier Group 1
2	7/4/17	Mount Gambier	Families 4 Families Mount Gambier Group 2
3	7/4/17	Mount Gambier	Families 4 Families Mount Gambier Group 3
4	21/4/17	Unley	JFA Purple Orange Communities of Practice Group
5	26/4/17	Enfield	Families 4 Families Enfield Group
6	2/5/17	Sellick's Beach	Families 4 Families Southern/Fleurieu Group
7	2/5/17	Unley	JFA Purple Orange Confidence and Capability Group
8	8/5/17	O'Sullivan Beach	My Time O'Sullivan Beach Group
9	16/5/17	Unley	Julia Farr Youth Group
10	18/5/17	Murray Bridge	Carers SA Murraylands Support Group
11	28/5/17	Murray Bridge	Families 4 Families Murray Group

Table 1: *Face-to-face consultation details*

3 Data Evaluation

JFA Purple Orange conducted an evaluation of the data captured through the consultations and online survey. Qualitative analysis was performed separately, for each open ended

question, as well as overall, indicating the broader themes that emerged across questions. These broad themes are presented above in the executive summary. Corresponding quantitative descriptive statistics are presented with the qualitative findings. Additional information about the quantitative analyses conducted and the inferential statistics are available in Appendix 2. Due to the nature of the face-to-face group consultations, not every participant answered every question. Accordingly, unless otherwise specified, results reflect information for respondents only. Full data patterns, reflecting both respondents and non-respondents, are available in Appendix 3.

3.1. Participant information

One hundred and twenty-nine people participated in this project, with 66.7% of participants attending a face-to-face consultation and 33.3% completing the online survey. Of the participants who responded, 85.4% were living with disability and 77.0% had a family member living with disability¹. Some participants both lived with disability themselves and had a family member living with disability. Fifty-two percent of responding participants lived in suburbs across Adelaide and 48% lived in more regional areas of South Australia including Murray Bridge, Mount Gambier, Sellick's Beach, Victor Harbour, Strathalbyn and Mount Barker.

The following participant information reflects only those who participated via the online survey. Online participants lived in range of situations, with 41.7% of respondents owning their own home, 33.3% renting, 10.4% living in community housing, 8.3% living rent free with family or friends, and 6.3% living in residential care. The vast majority of responding participants (93.3%) were connected to water mains, with 16.6% using water from rain water tanks and 6.7% using bore water. Some participants accessed water from a combination of sources. SA Water supplied water to 80.6% of respondents, 3% of respondents had a different water supplier and the remaining responding participants were unsure who their water supplier was. Regarding sewerage systems, 82.9% of respondents used the mains sewerage system, 9.8% used a septic tank and the remaining 7.3% of respondents were unsure what sewerage system was in place in their home.

3.2. Consumer satisfaction and the importance of raised issues

As outlined in the methodology, participants rated how satisfied they were, as consumers, with their water and sewerage services. Satisfaction scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. Average satisfaction with water supply service, across participants, was 5.11 (standard deviation = 1.45) and average satisfaction with sewerage service was 5.28 (standard deviation = 1.56). This indicates that people were reasonably satisfied with both of the services provided to them. There was no statistically significant

¹ Online participants were required to answer these two questions. While face-to-face consultation participants were not required to respond, they were a part of a peer group either for people living with disability or for people caring for a family member living with disability.

difference in satisfaction with either service between people who were living in Adelaide compared to those living regionally, or people who owned their homes compared to those who were not home owners.

Participants also rated how important five key issues were to them. Average importance for each of the five issues is presented in Figure 1, with the standard deviations available in Appendix 4. Again, ratings ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater importance. As Figure 1 indicates, all five issues were reasonably important to participants. Cost was rated as the most important issue followed by water supply and sewerage issues, concessions and hardship programs, billing, and communication with the water supplier.

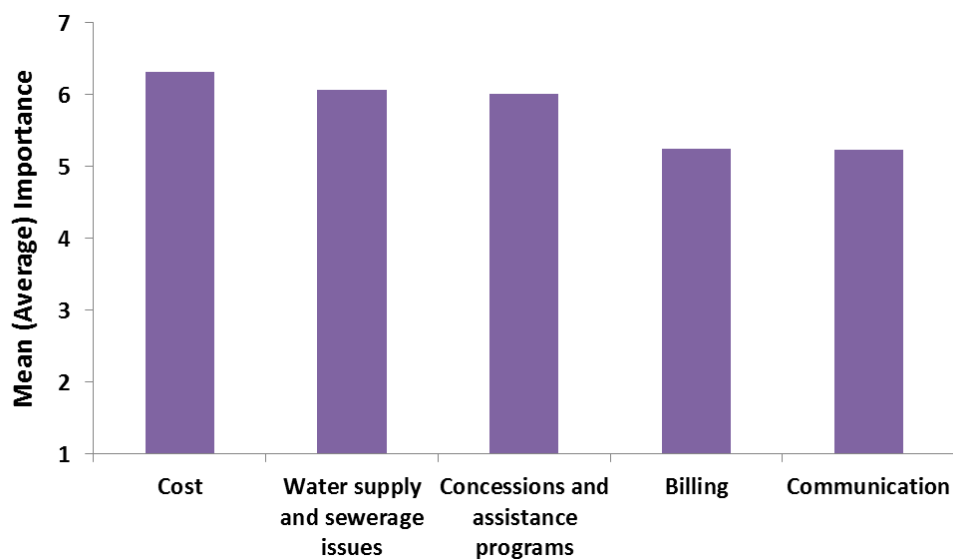


Figure 1: Mean importance of the five key issues

3.3. Specific issues of interest

3.3.1. Billing and communication

Participants reported experiencing communication issues with their water supplier and provided valuable suggestions for how such issues could be addressed in the future, with specific proposals to improve billing.

Some participants reported difficulties with navigating voice recorded numbered menus when attempting to contact their water supplier over the phone. Participants noted that it can often be difficult for people living with an acquired brain injury, and/or memory impairment to identify which menu option relates to their query, to remember this option, and to then select the correct menu number within the limited time frame provided.

Other participants spoke about frustration with wait times, delays in connection and responses when speaking over the phone, as well as experiencing some difficulty with understanding the person that they were connected to. Several consumers were frustrated

about receiving canvas calls asking them to adjust their bill smoothing arrangements. Many participants spoke about the difficulties associated with being a tenant and not being able to communicate with their water supplier directly, including not receiving bills and not being able to contact their water supplier about issues being experienced.

Lastly, one participant reported a communication issue with The Natural Resources Management Authority over a water matter. After being informed that bores would shortly have meters put on them, the participant decided to not replace their collapsed bore. However, six years later meters still have not been put on bores and the uncertainty around this has been an issue for the participant and her family as they are investing in water capturing and on a fixed income.

Communication issues were frequent with 20.0% of respondents indicating that they did not know how to contact their water supplier and 79.5% reporting that they had never visited their water supplier's website.

Participants had many constructive suggestions on how communication with water suppliers could be improved. The issues experienced with numbered call menus could be addressed by introducing a separate phone number to be used by people with complex communication needs to liaise directly with a person. Similarly, a voice activated menu that does not require physically pushing a numbered button and does not require people to recall the menu number corresponding with their query could be helpful. A 24 hour toll free phone number was also proposed as many people living with disability are on limited fixed incomes, sometimes with limited phone credit which they cannot afford to spend on lengthy call wait times.

Discussing communication more broadly, several participants noted that postal mail is currently the favoured mode of communication by water suppliers. However, postal mail is not accessible for everyone. People living with visual impairment are completely reliant on other people to read their postal water bill, notifications of service disruptions, and any other communication from their water supplier, to them. As there is technology available to convert digital text into audio files, receiving information from water suppliers in other formats, such as email billing or text message alerts of supply disruptions would ensure that communication from water suppliers was more accessible.

Consistent with this, it was also suggested that people be able to access their water usage information, costs and trends online. It was noted though, that other people may not have access to this technology or may not have the capacity to engage with technology. For these people, mail and verbal communication may be optimal.

Such comments highlight the importance of water suppliers providing different communication options. As one participant stated, "*if [water suppliers] have multiple ways*

[of communicating] they are more likely to suit more people than just favouring one particular [communication] style”.

These comments are reflected in online participants’ preferred method of contact. Of those who responded, 38.1% preferred email contact, 23.8% letter, 14.3% through a landlord, property manager or carer, 11.9% phone call, 2.4% text message and the remaining respondents were unsure.

Lastly, participants, specifically tenants, spoke about a desire to have a direct relationship with their water supplier, where their water supplier could provide information to them directly and they could have access to their bill rather than just being told the amount by a landlord or other third party. Tenants spoke about wanting to be able to contact their water supplier to dispute a bill or report a leak rather than having to rely on someone else to represent their interests. Consistent with this, participants desired for their water supplier to better understand the complexities of being a tenant.

Many participants spoke about billing as one particular form of communication. Several people spoke positively about the visual indicators on water bills, stating that the figure comparing the current water bill amount with previous bills was helpful and appreciated the chart indicating likely lifestyle based on water use. One person commented *“I find [the water bill] clear, it’s good”*.

Some suggestions for improvements to billing were provided, including providing an Easy English version of the water bill with simpler wording that is easier to read and understand. It was suggested that perhaps bigger font could be used, with more symbols and additional lifestyle options within the chart. Accessibility of water bills was clearly an issue for a proportion of people, as 6.3% of respondents indicated that they did not know how to pay their water bill, 23.3.% reported that they did not understand the costs of their water bill, and 19.6% found that the format of their water bill was not accessible.

3.3.2. Cost, concessions, and hardship programs

Many of the consumers involved in this project experienced issues with cost, concessions and the hardship programs available through their water suppliers. Several participants spoke about the need to use extra water because of the disability that they live with and the additional costs associated with using extra water.

Of the 30 responding online participants who consumed extra water because of the disability that they or their family live with, 73.3% used the water for extra laundry, 16.6% for additional or longer bathing, and 3.3% for an assistance animal. Face-to-face consultation participants also reported using extra water for pain relief and hydrotherapy.

Other participants spoke of frustration over rising bill costs even though their water use had remained consistent or in fact reduced. Others were affected by having to pay for services

that they did not use. This included paying for water and sewerage services because the pipes run past their home even though they do not use mains water or the main sewerage system. Similarly, one participant noted that they had been required to pay the Murray River Levy subsidising the city even though they were living in a more regional area of South Australia.

Tenants also reported paying for services that they did not receive. Instead of paying for their own water use, many tenants reported paying a proportion of a shared water bill for all residents in the same complex. This was problematic for many people, with one participant reporting that she paid a third of their water bill even though she lived alone and the two units either side of her were occupied by families.

Other cost issues for tenants included feeling responsible for the water bill even though they are not the bill holder, and frustration over not being able to dispute the cost of the water bill with the water company directly. Tenants reported incidents of their water bill increasing dramatically (i.e. from \$17 a quarter to \$300 a quarter) depending on the third party involved. Other participants reported receiving, and in some cases having to pay, exorbitant bills (i.e. \$3000) caused by leaks, even though the leak was on the non-house side of the water meter or the leak was reported to their landlord but never fixed. Another participant reported receiving a \$900 water bill for a property that his family had lived in previously. They received the bill as the water had not been turned off in between owners. Lastly, participants reported having to pay someone from SA Water to investigate a broken water meter or were asked to pay to repair or replace a broken meter even though they were not responsible for the damage.

The cost issues reported by participants in this project also included experiencing limits to the frequency of applications for reimbursement associated with leaks, having to pay several water bills at once after not receiving bills for a period of time, and difficulty accessing systems like financial rebates because they were unable to cognitively process the applications. There was also a sense among participants that price of water was almost irrelevant because with no choice in provider, people had no bargaining power.

Consumers also frequently spoke about the now obsolete cost structure in which a certain amount of water is provided to all consumers for free and consumers are only charged for water consumed beyond this amount (excess water). It was clear that many participants were not fully aware that this cost system was changed some time ago, and did not understand that consumers now pay for all water use with the price of water changing between stepped tariff blocks.

While many of the cost issues experienced by the consumers involved in this project may not be unique to people living with disability, it was made clear that the income of many people living with disability is often fixed and sometime limited to the disability support pension. For people in these financial positions, strict budgeting is often necessary and they

may not be able to pay water bills of increasing cost, unexpected large water bills or for services that they are not receiving. In fact, 58% of respondents reported sometimes being unable to pay their water bill, and 38% reported that the amount of their water bill varies.

When asked what happened when they could not afford to pay their water bill, several participants spoke about financial arrangements that they made with their water supplier including payment plans, paying in instalments, paying fixed regular amounts, making a minimum repayment and extension of the payment due date. However, some participants reported that they have gone into debt to pay their water bill either because they live in community housing and their water bill is taken directly from their account, putting them into debt with their rent, or because the consumer had borrowed money from family or friends. In one case, a participant took out a loan advance of expected future Centrelink payments to pay for their water bill. Other participants reported paying their water bill even though they could not afford it and as a consequence went without food or ate poorly, walked everywhere instead of paying for public transport and had to put medication on pharmacy accounts.

Participant suggestions for what water suppliers could do in situations of financial hardship included payment plans, partial payments, paying small amounts gradually, later instalments and concessions. Participants also suggested more regular billing with smaller more manageable bill amounts, reducing delays before receiving bills, and longer time frames between receiving bills and payment due date.

Other participants suggested that perhaps fixed fees could be reduced or the base amount of water that people can use before paying a higher tariff could be increased. One participant suggested that perhaps the water supply fee could be temporarily waived. She acknowledged that of course such a program would require stringent rules and could only take effect in a number of particular conditions, but noted how difficult it was to get back on top of all of their bills after her husband's motor vehicle accident caused an acquired brain injury and led to the subsequent loss of both household incomes.

Other participants noted how valuable price estimates provided by their water supplier could be in terms of budgeting and indicated that the provision of information about reassessing behaviours in the home to limit water use would be beneficial. While costly, it was suggested that individual water meters could be installed at all homes so that tenants do not have to pay for water that they did not use. Lastly, several consumers suggested that a system could be developed that alerted people when their water use changed considerably in an attempt to identify potential significant leaks early before too much water is wasted and consumers are asked to pay large and unnecessary water bills.

It was noted that, despite the fact that many participants had experienced times of financial hardship, very few people were aware of the assistance programs available to aid them in such situations. While 75.7% of respondents were aware that concessions or discounts were

available for water, only 5.2% had heard of or used the hardship program through their water supplier. The representative from one disability support organisation noted that *“when we run topics like crisis support [...], in every group there is always at least half a dozen people that are like I didn't know about that. So they have all been missing out on something, which shows that the system is not working.”*

Not surprisingly, the most common suggestion to improve assistance programs and concessions was promotion and awareness. Many participants noted these programs need to be better promoted as people need to know that these options are available to them. This is particularly pertinent as it could prevent people from taking out loans, which would put them in further financial hardship, to pay their water bills. This could also prevent situations in which people stop eating or using transport because they have spent the money that would fund these necessities to pay their water bill.

As one participant explained, finding yourself in a situation where you cannot afford to pay your bills can be very stressful so finding out about these programs before you need them might help to take away some of that stress.

Other suggestions for improving the hardship programs included putting the information about the policy on the front of the bill and in larger font, and being able to apply for the assist program without having to navigate the numbered menu. Suggestions for improving concessions included increasing the amount of the discount as water costs increase, and having a percentage discount for customers that pay their water bill by the due date.

It was also suggested that concessions could be tailored to meet individual needs, and that perhaps in the case of some disabilities that require significant water use, a further concession could be provided. Similarly, it was suggested that water could be incorporated into the cost of living allowance for people who need to use excessive amounts of water for their disability. Participants suggested that concessions should apply to utilities for children over the age of 18 that live with disability, for people that are not on the disability pension, and for people that own investment properties.

It was suggested that there should be a shorter delay between submitting a bill and receiving the rebate, or perhaps an automatic rebate could be applied or paid into the consumer's bank account instead of the person receiving a cheque. Lastly, ease of access to concessions was noted. It was suggested that there should not be a lot of paperwork to complete in order to receive a concession and that people should not have to go to a specific location to submit their application. The process of arranging a concession should be accessible to all and in some cases perhaps assistance could be provided to complete the concession application process.

3.3.3. Water and sewerage service issues

Many of the consumers involved in this project experienced issues with their water and sewerage services. Specifically, 27.5% of respondents had experienced a significant disruption to their water supply or an issue with their water service. Participants experienced poor and inconsistent water quality, weak water pressure, long periods of time for water to reach temperature, water leaks, burst mains and pipes, and blockages of household drains. In one case, a participant's bathroom drain was frequently blocked by hair that was not hers and she experienced variation in both water temperature and cost, despite living alone.

Some water supply disruptions were notified while others were not notified, with disruption lasting from short periods of time through to several hours on a daily basis. Participants noted non-adequate mains management and frustration that the cost of water as a service has increased but the maintenance on water mains seems to have reduced.

Others experienced people turning their water on and off at the meter, and not having access to water or hot water during power blackouts as they use an electric pump to get water into their home or their home is completely supplied by electricity. One participant described receiving a high water bill and being told by their water supplier to monitor their meter to ensure that it corresponds with their use of water. While this advice was reasonable, the participant found it difficult to complete this task because of their acquired brain injury.

The water service issues reported had a number of consequences for participants. In addition to the financial stress described above, participants also reported that their mental health, risk of personal injury, and personal hygiene and the management of health conditions were also affected.

Several participants reported experiencing significant stress while undergoing issues with water. One participant described *"the stress [that paying for a large bill caused by a leak on the non-property side of the meter] causes, it's always in the back of your mind"*. Similarly, another participant described not wanting to appeal a case in which they were required to pay a large water bill caused by a leak that they had reported to their landlord but the landlord had not fixed. The participant explained that the stress of having to go through an appeal process was too much for them. A third participant also voiced distress over a dispute with their water supplier regarding a bill for several thousands of dollars. The participant explained that people were turning on the tap situated on the side of her home without her knowledge, leading to the waste of water and an exorbitant bill. However, she was unable to prove that she did not use the water.

Several participants also reported that their negative water service experiences had significant consequences for their mental health. Several participants described their experiences as *"anxiety provoking"*, with one participant explaining that his acquired brain

injury was accompanied by an obsessive compulsive disorder. While he acknowledged that his water service experiences did not cause this disorder, after receiving a large bill associated with a water leak he now compulsively checks his water meter daily.

Other participants spoke about the risk of personal injury related to issues with their water service. One consumer spoke about her high risk of having a fall, as someone who uses a wheelchair and showers unassisted, when her drain blocks and bathroom floor floods. Restricted access to drinking water was also reported, with bottled water perhaps not always as easy to access for people living with physical disability. Others spoke about the impact of water supply disruptions on their personal hygiene and ability to manage their health condition. Some consumers indicated that the disability they live with can be messy, while others reported experiencing incontinence. In these situations, not being able to bathe or clean during water service disruptions would obviously be problematic.

Of those who responded, 6.4% had medical equipment in their home that would be affected during a disruption to water supply. Participants indicated that the sterilizing of catheter equipment and peg feed syringes, the use of CPAP machines, as well as pain relief showers, would all be impacted.

Some participants, specifically 16.7% of respondents, experienced issues with their sewerage service. Some consumers experienced sewerage leaks on their property outside of their home. One participant reported experiencing a backyard flooded with waste and described how a large proportion of their property had to be dug up to resolve the issue. Another participant indicated that a blocked pipe down the road from her home would lead to sewerage matter frequently flooding her driveway. She reported that this happened on a regular basis and that she contacted her water supplier a dozen times about the issue. While water supplier representatives would come out and clean up the waste, it took four years before the issue was permanently fixed and the pipe was replaced and sealed.

Other participants discussed sewerage issues within the home. While several consumers had experienced backed up or overflowing toilets, one participant reported that the only toilet in her home overflowed with sewerage waste. She described having to personally empty the 90 litres of faecal matter that came up through the drains in her home. It took a plumber three attempts to flush out the pipes with a high pressure hose. Not only did the consumer have to pay for the large amount of water used to clean the pipes on a fixed income, but the participant had no working toilet for a week. During this time, the participant and her son had to relieve themselves in their backyard. Some consumers were satisfied with the service provided to them when reporting sewerage issues, while others found the whole situation to be horrible and frustrating.

3.3.4. Water restrictions and exemption criteria

Of responding participants, 24.6% reported being adversely affected by the water restrictions that were imposed on South Australians in response to the shortage of water during times of drought.

Participants living with varying disabilities spoke of being unable to water their gardens during the acceptable times. Some participants were physically unable to water their garden with a hose or carry buckets of water across their garden, while others had a significant caring role during that time of day. While exemptions from water restrictions were available on several grounds, including disability, 80.8% of respondents indicated that they did not know how to apply for such an exemption.

One participant voiced frustration over other people violating the water restrictions without exemption because they could afford to pay any fine provided to them, with little regard for the limited and essential resource that they were overconsuming. In contrast, another participant reported being accused of violating the water restrictions by a neighbour and having this claim be investigated even though they were adhering to the restrictions.

Lastly, one participant reported that she was refused a Special Needs water restrictions exemption and consequently made a complaint under the Disability Discrimination Act to the Australian Human Rights Commission. The complaint was upheld. She had applied to use a watering system during the times in which gardens could be watered as she was unable to water using a hand held hose or buckets. The participant also indicated that the person who evaluated her application gained access into her backyard without her consent. This left the participant feeling disrespected and undervalued because of her disability. The participant also felt that her privacy was violated and reported frustration that exemptions were automatically awarded to others, such as older people, who in some cases were more able-bodied than herself. She felt that her water provider did not understand their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act and noted that water supplier staff could benefit from training in disability awareness and inclusion.

3.3.5. Accessibility

Participants also experienced issues with accessibility, including ability to physically get to the water meter, ability to turn the water meter off, and ability to read the water meter. Accessibility issues were frequently experienced, with 30.2% of respondents indicating that they were unable to access the water meter in their home.

One consumer reported that the only way he could access the water meter on his property was to remove his prosthetic leg and crawl across the ground. The danger associated with accessing water meters was a clear concern to participants with one consumer indicating that he would have fallen downhill in the wheelchair that he uses if he tried to access his

water meter. Several other participants also reported that their water meter was positioned in a hazardous location.

Other participants described that they were unable to turn off their water at the meter after a pipe had burst in their home because the arthritis that they live with restricted their movement. Another participant living with some visual impairment reported that they were unable to read their water meter. This would lead to difficulty when trying to track water usage to determine the presence of a water leak.

Suggestions for improving accessibility included the provision of accessible water meter handles that do not require a twisting motion for use, improving the readability of meters, and in some cases adjusting their height. Participants also suggested that in some situations, water meters could be relocated to a more accessible and safe position. Lastly, several participants suggested that the technology associated with water meters could be improved, including the introduction of smart meters and the ability to turn water off remotely.

4 Summary and Recommendations

Following analysis of the data captured during the consultations and online responses, findings indicated that while consumers were reasonably satisfied with the water and sewerage services provided to them, issues with multiple aspects of these services were experienced.

Our findings indicated that consumers living with disability experienced issues related to communication with their water supplier and billing, cost, concessions and assistance programs, services, water restrictions, and accessibility. These issues had consequences for financial wellbeing, health and safety. Across questions, broader themes relating to tenant experiences, accessibility of information, awareness and suitability of entitlements, payment for unused services, and lack of technology, emerged. Based on these findings, we are making a number of recommendations to improve disability awareness and accessibility.

Underlying the findings reported here is the sense that disability, and the experiences and needs of people living with disability, are perhaps not well understood. The result of this is that some of the services provided by water suppliers are inaccessible, poorly communicated, and inflexible.

Recommendation 1: introducing a 24 hour toll free phone number so that people with complex communication needs have the option to liaise directly with a person regarding water services rather than having to navigate an automated system.

Recommendation 2: provision of an Easy English version of the water bill with simpler wording that is easier to read and understand. It was suggested that perhaps bigger font could be used, with more symbols and additional lifestyle options within the chart.

Recommendation 3: review of water law/tenancy law/housing standards regarding the crossed responsibility of tenants and landlords with water suppliers, and consider implementing a direct relationship between tenants and water companies.

Recommendation 4: improved promotion and awareness of assistance programs. This could be clearly stated for example on the first page of the water bill.

Recommendation 5: review of water cost structures and consider reforms for consumers living with disability for which extra water usage is required.

Recommendation 6: review the accessibility of water meters and look at the availability of assistive technology to make them accessible.

Recommendation 7: the process of policy and regulatory decision making gives full consideration to stakeholder concerns in this report.

Recommendation 8: that the SA Government put in place an advisory group through SACOSS to oversee the implementation of these recommendations. The advisory group membership should include the perspective of a range of disabilities and its remit should include co-design.

5 Concluding Remarks

We found that this project was a good use of the Consumer Advocacy and Research Fund as constituted within Section 87 of the *Water Industry Act 2012*. The water consumers who participated in this project were pleased to be involved and enthusiastic about being asked about their experiences with, and attitudes towards, essential services. We found that the consumers involved in this project were very constructive in their contributions and provided valuable suggestions on how current practices could be improved in the future. Accordingly, we believe that consultation and communication should continue with people living with a disability as a consumer group, and that their contribution could be beneficial in future priority projects.

6 Appendices

6.1. Survey questions

Note. Items with an asterisk were not asked during face-to-face consultations due to time restraints however some of this information (i.e. location) was apparent.

Welcome to the JFA Purple Orange Water Consumers Survey!

Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback is important to us.

This survey consists of questions about you, your thoughts and attitudes, and the experiences you have had with your water supplier, water supply and sewerage.

This is a chance for people living with disability to have their voice heard as consumers of water.

We know that water doesn't seem like the biggest issue in people's lives but from speaking to a handful of people involved in the project, there are definitely some issues being experienced.

We think that this survey is an excellent forum for these issues to be heard and is really the first project that we know of to give a voice to people living with disability on essential services issues.

General Consent

PROJECT TITLE : Water Consumers Research Project

RESEARCHERS' NAMES : JFA Purple Orange

- I understand the purpose of the project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that my involvement in this project may not be of any direct benefit to me.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time and that my water service will not be affected if I choose not to be involved.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal information will remain confidential.
- I understand that any feedback by way of compliments, concerns or complaints can be directed to Mr Robbi Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Julia Farr Association telephone 8373 8302; email: robbiw@purpleorange.org.au or in writing to the Chief Executive Officer, PO Box 701, Unley Business Centre SA 5061.

Name of Participant:

Signed:

Date:

Signature of Witness:

Printed name of Witness:

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

Survey

About You

1. Do you live with disability?*

- Yes
- No

2. Do you have a family member that lives with disability?*

- Yes
- No

3. What is your postcode?*

Please write your answer in the box

4. What is your living situation?*

Please tick one of the boxes

- Own your home (paid off mortgage)
- Own your home (still paying mortgage)
- Renting
- Living rent free with parents/friends
- Living in community/public housing
- Living in residential/home care accommodation
- Living in paid student accommodation
- Other (please specify by writing your answer on the line)

- Prefer not to say

5. Where do you get your water from?*

Please tick all of the boxes that apply to you

- Connected to mains water
- Bore
- Rain water tank
- Other (please specify by writing your answer on the line)

- Don't know

6. What is the name of your water supplier?*

Please write your answer on the line or tick don't know

- Don't know

7. In relation to the disability that you or your family member lives with, what do you use water for?*

Please tick all of the boxes that apply to you

- Dialysis
- Extra washing
- Spa bath
- Other (please specify by writing your answer on the line)

- Prefer not to say

8. What sewerage system do you have?*

Please tick all of the boxes that apply to you

- Connected to mains sewerage
- Septic tank
- Waste water treatment system
- Don't know

9. What is the best way for your water supplier to contact you?*

Please tick one of the boxes

- Letter
- Phone call
- Email
- Text message
- Other (please specify by writing your answer on the line)

Don't know

Issues with Water Supply or Water Supplier

Is this section we will ask you about any issues you have had with your water supply, water supplier or sewerage.

10. Do you know how to pay your water bill?

- Yes
- No

11. Do you understand the costs in your water bill?

- Yes
- No

12. Is the format of your water bill accessible?

- Yes
- No

13. How could your water bill be improved?

14. Do you know how to contact your water supplier?

- Yes
- No

15. Have you visited your water supplier's website?

- Yes
- No

16. How could communication with your water supplier be improved?

17. Does the cost of your water change much?

- Yes
- No

18. Are there times when you cannot afford to pay your water bill?

- Yes
- No

19. If yes, what happens if you cannot afford to pay your water bill?

20. What could your water supplier do to help in this situation?

21. Have you heard of or used pensioner discounts or concessions?

- Yes
- No

22. If yes, how could these concessions be improved?

23. Have you heard of or used the customer assist program?

- Yes
- No

24. If yes, how could this program be improved?

25. Have you ever experienced significant disruption with your water supply?

- Yes
- No

26. If yes, what impact did that have on you?

27. Do you have any medical equipment that would be affected if your water supply was temporarily stopped?

- Yes
- No

28. If yes, please tell us the impact on you.

H

29. Have water restrictions adversely impacted you?

- Yes
- No

30. Do you know how to apply for an exemption from water restrictions?

- Yes
- No

31. Are you able to access the water meter in your home?

- Yes
- No

32. What adaptive technology would help you to turn off the water meter?

33. Tell us about any other issues you have had with your water supply or sewerage system.

Importance of Issues

Is this section we will ask about how important different things are to you.

For the next five questions please rate how important these issues are to you. Please use the rating scales provided.

34. How important is billing to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not very important						Very important
!						!!!

35. How important is communication with your water supplier to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not very important						Very important
!						!!!

36. How important is the cost of water to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not very important						Very important
!						!!!

37. How important are assistance programs or concessions to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not very important						Very important
!						!!!

38. How important are water supply and sewerage issues to you?



1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not very important						Very important
!						!!!

Consumer Satisfaction



In this section we will ask about your overall satisfaction with your water supplier and sewerage.

For the next two questions please rate how satisfied you are. Please use the rating scales provided.

39. I am satisfied with my water supplier's service.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all satisfied						Very satisfied
						

40. I am satisfied with my sewerage service.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all satisfied						Very satisfied
						

6.2.Descriptive and inferential statistics from independent samples *t* tests determining whether service satisfaction differed across location and home ownership

	Service	Metro <i>M (SD)</i>	Regional <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Location	Water	4.92 (1.51)	5.32 (1.36)	-1.49	111	.139	0.28
	Sewerage	5.42 (1.42)	5.12 (1.71)	1.01	109	.315	0.19
	Service	Home owner <i>M (SD)</i>	Non home owner <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Home ownership	Water	5.22 (1.44)	4.83 (1.80)	-0.76	39	.451	0.24
	Sewerage	5.50 (1.10)	4.70 (2.06)	-1.61	34.96	.117	0.54

Note. An alpha level of 0.05 was used for these analyses.

6.3. Frequency of each response to each of the quantitative questions

Question	Responses		
	No	Yes	No response
Disability	13	76	40
Disability in family	20	67	42
Know how to pay bill	5	74	50
Understand costs	14	46	69
Bill format accessible	11	45	73
Know how to contact supplier	12	48	69
Visited supplier's website	62	16	51
Cost change	21	34	74
Times when can't afford to pay	40	29	60
Heard of/used concessions	18	56	55
Heard of/used assist program	91	5	33
Water disruption	58	22	49
Medical equipment affected	88	6	35
Sewerage issues	40	8	81
Impacted by restrictions	52	17	60
Know how to apply for exemption	59	14	56
Meter accessible	26	60	43

	Metro	Regional	No response				
Location	66	61	2				
	Own home	Renting	Family	Community	Residential	No response	
Living situation	20	16	4	5	3	81	
	Mains	Rainwater	Bore	Don't know	No response		
Water source	56	10	4	1	69		
	SA Water	Other	Don't know	No response			
Water supplier	54	2	11	62			
	Extra washing	Extra bathing	Assistance animal	Prefer not to say	No response		
Water use	22	5	1	7	99		
	Mains	Septic	Don't know	No response			
Sewerage source	34	4	3	88			
	Letter	Call	Email	Text	Third party	Don't know	No response
Preferred contact	10	5	16	1	6	4	87

6.4. Mean importance and standard deviations of the five key issues

Issue	Mean (average) importance	Standard deviation
Billing	5.25	1.87
Communication	5.23	1.93
Cost	6.31	1.38
Concessions and assistance programs	6.01	1.65
Water supply and sewerage issues	6.07	1.46