

What standard of service can I expect?

Customers are entitled to guaranteed standards of service, as laid down by the Government. The **Guaranteed Standards Scheme** sets out the standards and the conditions under which customers are entitled to compensation. Ofwat monitors the scheme and recommends changes. Ofwat publishes details annually about payments made under the scheme.

The scheme applies to all customers of water and sewerage companies, including potential customers (those who are about to take on the responsibility for paying water and sewerage bills), non-household customers, tenants and those in debt. The water and sewerage companies must inform billed customers of their rights under the scheme every year. If a company fails to meet any of the guaranteed standards, customers are entitled to a compensation payment. Details of these are shown under each service standard below.

Some companies operate compensation schemes that go further than the Guaranteed Standards Scheme (GSS). For example, where a written claim is normally required under GSS, the company may make an automatic payment or accept a claim made by telephone. In some cases a higher level of compensation than that offered under GSS may be paid for each service failure.

The standards which companies must meet are as follows:

Making and keeping appointments

If a company makes an appointment to visit a customer on a particular day it must specify whether the appointment will be in the morning (before 1pm), or afternoon (after 1pm). Where a customer so requests, the company must specify a two-hour period during which the visit will be made. It must keep the appointment, or give at least 24 hours notice of cancellation. Compensation entitlement is £20 for household and non-household customers.

Responding to account queries

If a customer writes querying the correctness of his/her account, the company must reply within ten working days from the date of receipt of the letter. If a customer writes asking to change payment methods and the company cannot comply with the request, it must reply within five working days from the date of receipt of the request. Compensation entitlement is £20 for household and non-household customers.

Responding to complaints

If a customer complains in writing about water or sewerage services, the company must reply within ten working days from the date of receipt of the letter. Compensation entitlement is £20 for household and non-household customers.

Interruptions to the water supply

Planned interruptions

If the company plans to interrupt the water supply for more than four hours, it must tell the customer, in writing, at least 48 hours before it cuts off the supply. Failure to do so will

entitle compensation of £20 for household customers and £50 for non-household customers.

In the event of a planned interruption to the water supply the company must tell the customer in writing when the supply will be restored and must keep to that time. If the supply is not restored by that time compensation entitlements are £20 for household customers plus a further £10 for each 24 hour period the supply remains unrestored; and £50 for non-household customers plus a further £25 for each 24 hour period the supply remains unrestored.

Unplanned interruptions

If there is an unplanned interruption to the supply, due to a burst main for example, the company must restore the supply within 12 hours unless the burst or leak is in a "strategic main" in which case the company has up to 48 hours. A "strategic main" is a major water main, which supplies the area. In addition to these guaranteed standards, companies must also, as soon as possible, take all reasonable steps to inform customers:

- where an alternative supply may be obtained;
- the time it proposes to restore the supply;
- a telephone number where the customer can obtain more information.

If the supply is not restored within the time(s) given above, household customers are entitled to a compensation payment of £20 plus a further £10 for each 24-hour period the supply remains unrestored. Non-household customers are entitled to £50 plus a further £25 for each 24-hour period the supply remains unrestored.

Flooding from sewers

Where wastewater from a company's sewer enters a customer's property, customers may be entitled to receive a refund of their sewerage charges for the year, up to a maximum of £1,000, for each flooding incident. If, however, sewer flooding has been caused by severe weather (eg, widespread flooding) or third party actions then a payment is not due.

Low pressure

Customers are entitled to a payment if the company fails to maintain minimum water pressure. This is defined as pressure falling below seven metres static head in the communication pipe.

If a customer is affected by low pressure on two occasions, each lasting an hour or more in a period of 28 consecutive days, then the company must pay the customer (or credit to his/her account) the sum of £25. Claims must be made in writing within three months of the latest of the two

occasions of low pressure. Only one claim will be accepted in any one year.

Payment

If the company fails to meet the standards for keeping appointments or responding to account queries and written complaints, the company must automatically make a compensation payment within 10 working days of the incident. If it does not do so and the customer claims this payment within three months, the company must pay an additional £10. If at the time of the incident the customer owes money to the company, and has done so for more than six weeks, the company will normally credit the customer's account rather than make payment by cheque.

Legal rights

The scheme does not affect any other legal rights to compensation that customers may have.

Exclusions to the scheme

There are certain exceptions to the scheme. Different exceptions apply to different standards, but they include failure to comply because of circumstances beyond the company's control (such as unforeseen events, industrial action or severe weather conditions).

Disputed claims.

Either the customer or the company can refer any disputed claims for payment under this scheme to Ofwat. Ofwat's decision is binding upon both parties.

Compensation in the event of drought

All companies have agreed to licence changes requiring them to pay compensation to customers where essential household water supplies are interrupted as a result of emergency restrictions authorised by drought orders. This includes water supplies for purposes such as cooking, washing, drinking, flushing the toilet etc – it does not include uses such as garden watering, washing the car or filling a pool.

Although this measure is not part of GSS it does mean that customers now have access to compensation if essential supplies are not maintained. The licence change commits the companies to accept Ofwat's decision in the event of any disputes about entitlement.

Household customers can claim £10 for each day (or part day) that the supply of water is interrupted or cut off. The maximum compensation entitlement is equal to the company's average household bill for the previous year.

Non-household customers, in the same circumstances, can claim £50 a day (or part day). The maximum amount payable is the water charge paid by the customer in the previous year. If, however, the customer has not paid a full year's water charge, or a third party is responsible for the water charges, the maximum is set at £500.

There would be no entitlement to compensation if the circumstances were so exceptional that it would, in Ofwat's view, have been unreasonable for the company to have avoided the interruption or cut off.

For further information about GSS contact your local water company. A description of GSS (and any company specific enhancements) will be provided to you on request. Details are also contained in the company's Code of Practice for Household Customers.