



Conferences and workshops

National Conference on the future of domestic metering

Opening remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the National Conference on the future of domestic metering.

My name is John Batty, and I am your Chairman for today's proceedings.

So why is domestic water metering such a vibrant issue at present? The current system of charging for water in this country is equitable and functional, isn't it? If it ain't broke, don't fix it!

Here are some facts that have taken me aback whilst preparing for this Conference:

Did you know that Water debt in the UK is nearly £1bn. Almost one in five families owe money to their water company.

The water industry is the single largest user of the court system in the UK with almost 250,000 claims per year.

Sadly, less than 3% of eligible households have successfully claimed the 'hardship relief' on offer. Water poverty is a real issue in 21st century Britain.

OK - So there may be one or two issues with functionality, but at least it's a fair system. Isn't it? I must admit I'd always perceived the current charges as largely progressive.

According to Water Voice's evidence to a Defra committee, a single pensioner on pension credit with an unmetered supply in the South-West of England will – by 2010 – be paying 11% of his disposable income in water and sanitation charges.

Furthermore, an OECD report states that water charging in the UK is more regressive than in any other country studied – with the exception of Mexico.

OK - So there are functional issues and possible concerns about the impact on some of the more vulnerable members of society. But at least we've always had sufficient water in the UK. There may have been occasional shortages due to droughts, but water is essential to life it has to be treated differently to other products such as gas and electricity – doesn't it?

Depending on what you read, in the 1990s per capita consumption of water in the UK increased between 5 and 10% and over the past 30 years the figure is nearer 70%. It's a commonly held position that one third of all domestic water consumption is used to flush the toilet.

There is currently no link between price and usage – no incentive to environmental sustainability.

And the likelihood is that future water supply problems will be magnified by climate change which will lead to erratic rainfall patterns and more storm events with rapid run-off of water exacerbated by urbanisation.

Possibly dysfunctional, occasionally unfair, and doesn't address the supply-demand balance. But the reason we don't have universal domestic water metering in the UK is down to technology, the cost of meter reading, and unnecessarily complex billing systems. Isn't it?

To slip into stand-up mode for a moment – 'What do Austria, Czechoslovakia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland have in common? The answer – near 100% domestic metering! And in Australia, Belgium and Italy the figure is over 90%.

So the technology is there. Surely, universal domestic metering is the answer. After all Unison described the present regime for paying for water and sanitation as, '...arcane, outdated, unfair and ultimately unsustainable'. Hardly a ringing endorsement!

Domestic water metering is a diverse and fascinating subject. It touches on so many of the key political and moral questions in society; it encompasses economics, technology, sociology and philosophy; it revolves around issues such as affordability, vulnerability, sustainability, revenue-neutrality, reliability, progressivity, universality and choice.

Fortunately we have with us today a group of distinguished speakers who will offer their thoughts and observations on the question of domestic metering. The speakers represent different stakeholders in the domestic metering debate – customers, the regulator, water companies, manufacturers, and independent researchers.

(Introduce Maurice Terry – keynote speaker)