

# How do water companies engage vulnerable customers?

## A case study of Northumbrian Water

# Stream

The Industrial Doctorate  
Centre for the  
Water Sector

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### Background

- We are in the seventh year of imposed austerity, which is a form of "voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness" (Blyth, 2013 p.12) achieved through a reduction in economic and social policies, which are claimed to decrease the state's budget, debts and deficits (Greer Murphy, 2016, Konzelmann, 2014).
- Austerity leads to an increase in the number of people experiencing water poverty which differs regionally and is gendered (CCwater, 2009; the Money Advice Service, 2013). The Money Advice Service, Ofwat (the England and Wales water regulation body, 2016) and other bodies predict that austerity will further increase, leading to a rise in the number of citizens living in water poverty (see Figure 1).

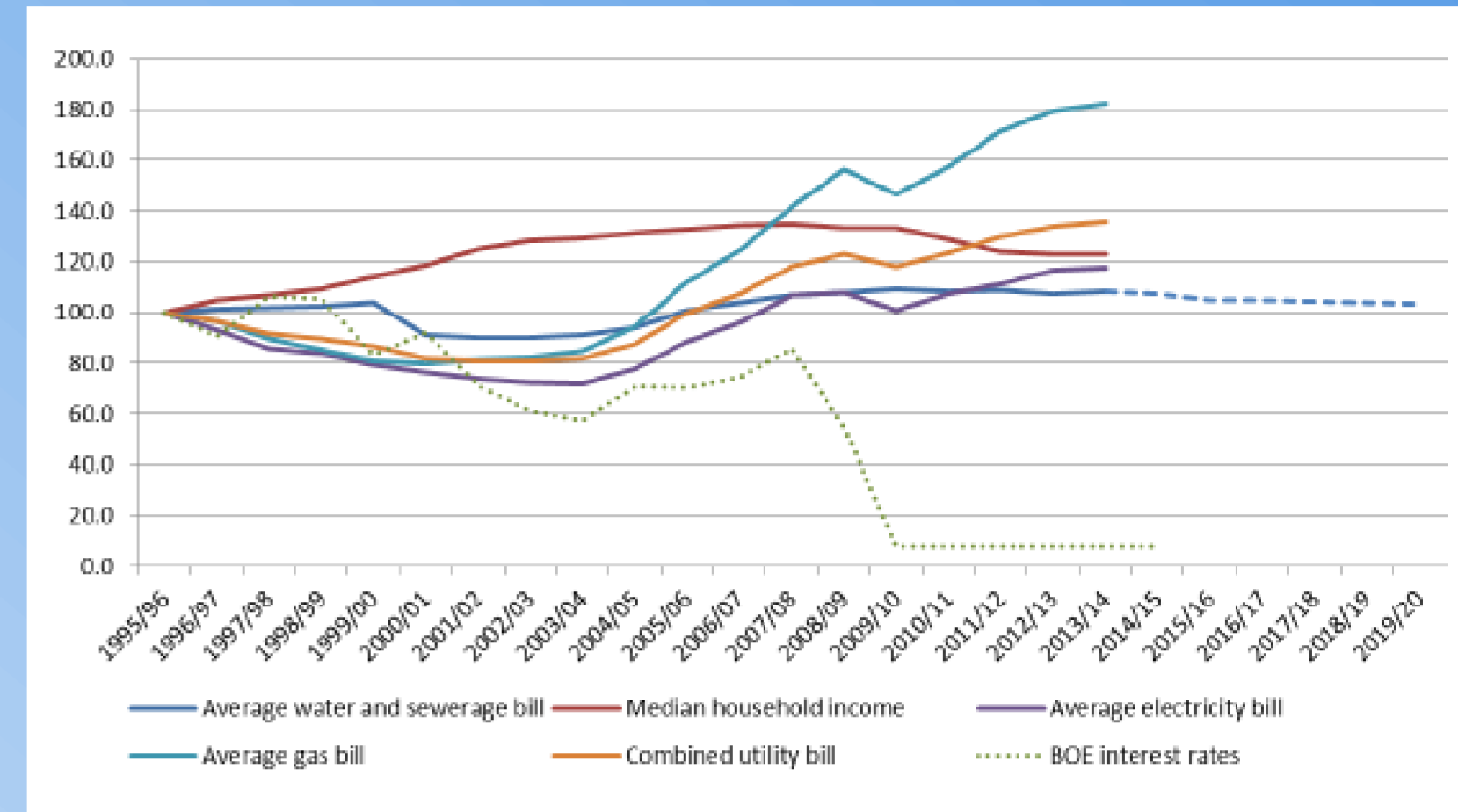


Figure 1: Graph displaying average household incomes against average utility bills (Ofwat, 2015 p.2)

- From 2009 water companies have been required by Ofwat to engage customers in helping make their overall strategy. The subject of 'vulnerable' customers was largely missing from Ofwat and water company policy processes until 2015, now there is a pressing need to ensure 'vulnerable' customers are included within the engagement process. Ofwat released a detailed report on customer vulnerability in 2016 in which it states that vulnerability should be understood as situations rather than customers (Figure 2).

*"Tackling customer vulnerability is central to maintaining trust and confidence in water" (Ofwat, 2017)*

*"A key challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and institutions...which affect their lives" Gaventa (2002)*

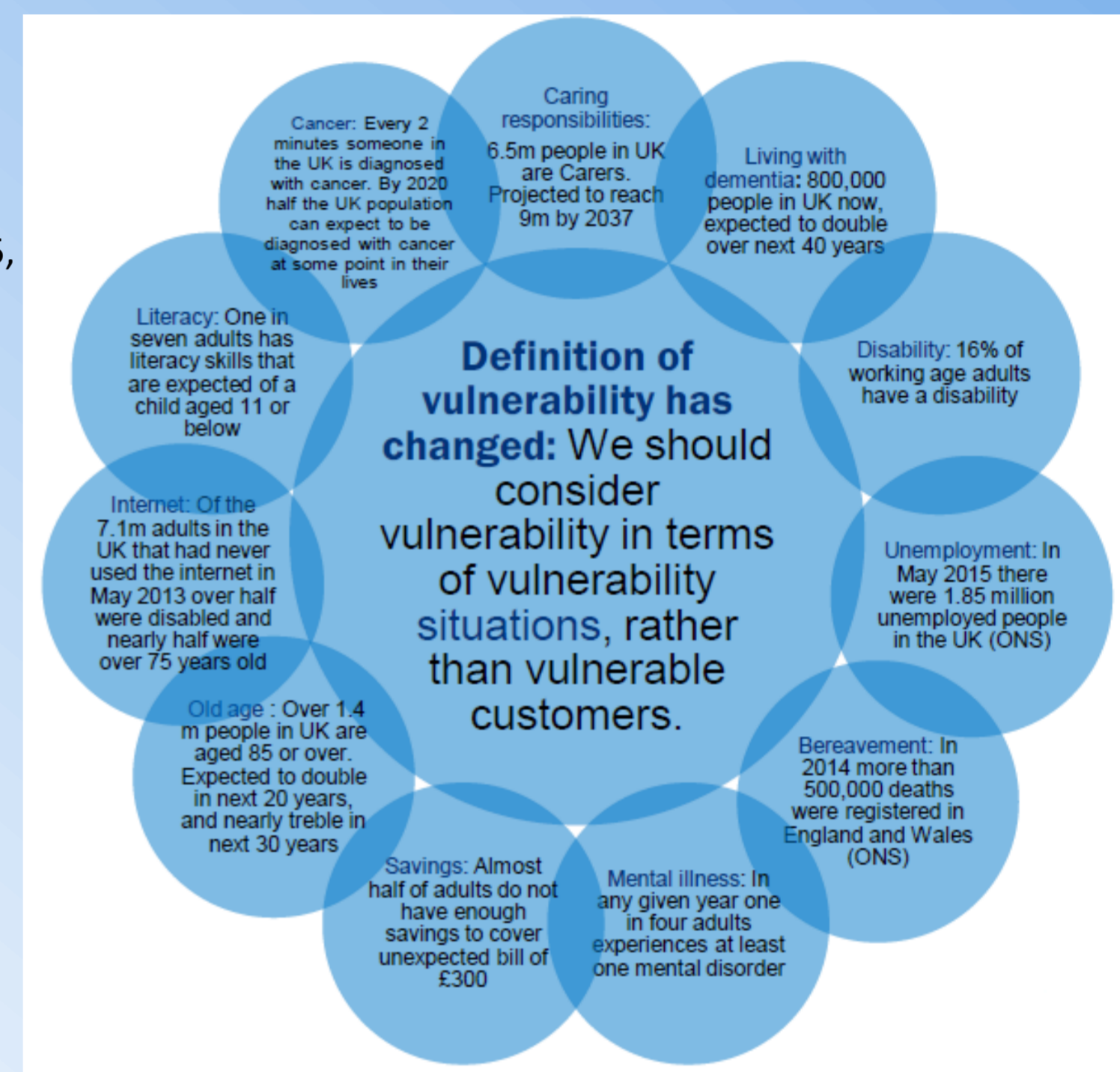
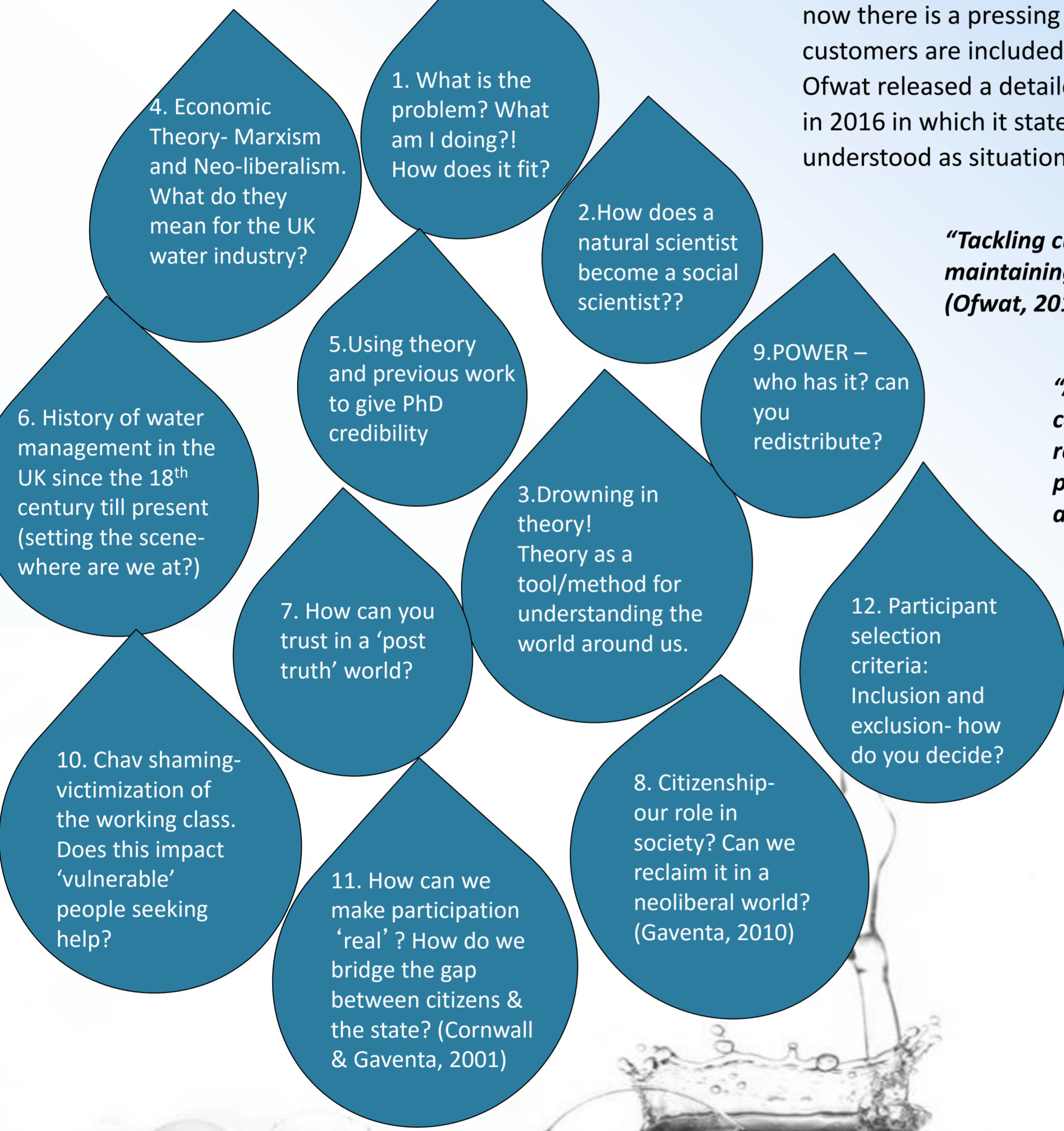


Figure 2: The drivers of vulnerability Ofwat 2016 p.2



### Aim

*'To contribute to an understanding of the steps water utilities take to engage with their vulnerable customers'*

### Objectives

- To explore options for how 'vulnerable' customers are defined in NW.
- To examine how socio-economic vulnerability is framed and discussed in NWs communications.
- To assess mechanisms which enable 'vulnerable' peoples lives to influence NW policy & practice.
- To review findings of a-c in the light of a focus group from one category of 'vulnerable' customers.

### Findings

- Will be used to help Northumbrian Water improve its engagement with 'vulnerable' customers by demonstrating what changes to participatory processes might enable greater citizen empowerment (knowledge and action) over water.
- Will contribute to improving Water governance by giving citizens/customers a voice.

### Methods

- Use feminist methodology
- Mixed methods approach- quantitative and qualitative
- Use gatekeepers from volunteer, community groups and contacts in the water industry
- Documentary analysis
- Purposive sampling- 'snowballing'
- Semi structured interviews and focus groups
- Analysis- transcription and coding in NVIVO

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