

**Title:** Changes to water charges

**Discussion Report**

**Recommendations:** The DMC is asked to note and to comment on the report

**Report Summary:** Thames Water have told the Council they wish to end the arrangement under which the Council collects water charges from tenants on their behalf. The report sets out the communication plan for this change.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 Most council tenants currently pay their water charges to the Council with their rent. The water is supplied by Thames Water and the Council has an arrangement with them to collect the charges on their behalf.
- 1.2 The agreement allows either Thames Water or the Council to bring it to an end with six months notice. Thames Water have told the Council that they want to start collecting water charges directly from tenants from April 2019. They have given similar notice to other London councils.
- 1.3 This report sets out the Council's plan for communicating this change. Suggestions from September District Management Committees (DMCs) helped officers develop this plan and other suggestions are very welcome.

## **2. How are we going to communicate this change to tenants?**

- 2.1 The communication plan is summarised in the table below. It began with information to September DMCs followed by a message to tenants on their October rent statement. The next step is a letter we plan to send tenants at the beginning of December. There will be a feature in the tenant newsletter at the same time.
- 2.2 This is an important change for tenants and the Council is looking at making use of all our communications channels to try and make sure that everyone knows that who they pay their water charges to is changing. We think short and clear messages at regular intervals will help get that across.
- 2.3 There will be challenges, especially as tenants are used to paying for their water with their rent. Some people also find letters difficult. The communication campaign started early to help us identify tenants who will need more help. It steps up in the New Year, after Thames Water ask tenants for their details and preferred payment method. This is because people are more likely to notice messages when they have been told there is something they need to do.

<b>Timetable</b>	<b>Headlines (in grey) and activities</b>
<b>The way you pay for your water will change next year</b>	
<b>October 2018</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Message on rent statements</li> <li>• Council teams and Camden Advice Partners briefed so they can start to introduce the change into advice conversations with vulnerable residents</li> </ul>
<b>The way you pay for your water is changing. You don't need to do anything yet</b>	
<b>December 2018</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications packs to Tenants' Associations (TRAs)</li> <li>• Feature in tenant newsletters</li> <li>• Letter to tenants with tear off and keep section</li> <li>• Easy read version with infographics for people with a learning disability and others who find letters more challenging</li> <li>• <a href="http://camden.gov.uk/payforwater">camden.gov.uk/payforwater</a> webpage goes live</li> </ul>
<b>The way you pay for your water is changing soon. Look out for letters from Thames Water</b>	
<b>January 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Postcard included with rent statements. Will also be widely distributed for handing out, including to TRAs.</li> <li>• First letter from Thames Water is expected</li> </ul>
<b>Update your details and payment preferences with Thames Water</b>	
<b>February 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updated communications materials to TRAs, council teams, advice partners and carers groups.</li> <li>• Customer services officers, advisors and caseworkers encouraged to weave the change into dialogue with tenants and to identify those who will need more support.</li> <li>• Targeted communications begin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Letter to tenants who pay by standing order</li> <li>- Review of tenants with history of rent arrears and /or support needs steps up with personalised approach</li> <li>- Personalised communications begin with tenants who rely on communication methods other than letters</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Letter to tenants with their new weekly council charge</li> </ul>
<b>March 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Article in spring newsletters reminding tenants to update their details and payment preferences with Thames Water</li> </ul>
<b>Look out for your first water bill from Thames Water</b>	
<b>April 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder with rent statement – the council no longer collects your water charges</li> <li>• Staff run reports from the rent accounting system (Northgate) to identify tenants still paying the Council and make contact in the way that best suits the tenant.</li> </ul>
<b>May-June 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff continue to identify any tenants still paying the Council, making contact to establish if they need help</li> </ul>
<b>July 2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder with rent statements that water charges are now collected by Thames Water</li> </ul>
<b>Throughout</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Messages on Camden Account and gov.delivery emails</li> <li>• Regular emails to tenants who have signed up to our email distribution list</li> <li>• Messages reinforced at council events and in council communications</li> <li>• Posters for use on estates and elsewhere</li> </ul>

- 2.4 The communications plan has two main strands. Clear written messages in plain English sent out to all tenants regularly and identification of tenants who need extra help so that they can be contacted in a way that best suits their particular needs. Both of these approaches will be backed up by exercises to make sure we identify anyone still paying their water charges to the Council after the end of March 2019.
- 2.5 The Council is fortunate in having a range of services already providing support to more vulnerable tenants. This includes our housing officers, rent service staff and staff in our welfare rights, partnerships and floating support teams as well as staff in Adult Social Care and children's services. This project will draw on these resources, and the understanding they have of who needs help, to manage this change. Sheltered housing staff will make sure that their tenants receive support if they need it.
- 2.6 The Council already promotes schemes like WaterSure Plus. This provides support with water charges for people on very low incomes or means tested benefits like housing benefit and Universal Credit. We will use this communications campaign as an opportunity to raise awareness of this scheme and of money advice services like the one below. There is more information about WaterSure Plus in Thames Water's leaflet [How to get help paying your bill](#) on their website.
- 2.7 Citizens Advice Camden are running a new Make Water Sense project which is funded by the Thames Water Trust fund. This project is for people who live in the Cantelowes, Gospel Oak, Camden Town & Primrose Hill and St Pancras & Somers Town wards and is for people who have debts or money problems or who need advice on paying water and other bills. Residents in these wards can self-refer by ringing 020 7554 3581 or by email at [makewatersense@camdencabservice.org.uk](mailto:makewatersense@camdencabservice.org.uk)

**Report ends**