

# **Research Coordination Group**

## **Independent Operational Review**

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## A. Key findings

Stakeholders in Scotland's water sector have approached the Strategic Review of Charges 2021-27 with the renewed ambition to have a customer-centric price review and with the goal to increase cooperation and collaboration. With respect to research activities, this led to the creation of the Research Coordination Group (RCG), whose operations and impact form the subject of this independent review. In creating the RCG, stakeholders wished to coordinate their research programmes, identify gaps, avoid duplication, collaboratively agree on research priorities and, where possible, undertake research jointly.

Looking back, RCG stakeholders recognise that the Group has added value both to their organisations individually and the sector collectively: the latter is articulated in the Customer Insights Supporting Document to Scottish Water's Strategic Plan, showing the extent to which the evidence generated by RCG members has informed the long-term ambitions of the water industry. Participants also recognise specific studies as positive examples of collaboration, either in relation to the subject matter being explored and the novel methodologies adopted, or to the co-commissioning efforts that led to those studies. However, our assessment also finds a number of challenges and lessons learnt. These point to some inherent difficulties in shaping a common research programme and the risk that participants at times focused on gaining a common understanding of research outputs instead of coordinating research activities to ensure sufficient breadth, depth and triangulation of research methodologies.

Going forward, we recommend that the experience of the RCG continue in the next phase of Scotland's water sector transformation, acknowledging that this transformation will involve both research and engagement approaches. While relevant stakeholders will decide on the exact shape of a new forum for research coordination, we recommend that a renewed RCG take into account the following operational and strategic aspects:

- Make the Group's primary objective achieving synergies between research actors at the commissioning stage – without jeopardising each organisation's ability to commission its own research.
- Agree on an ex-ante research framework to shape a common programme subject to mid-term review and regular evaluations of progress.
- Link research efforts to the overarching goal of continuing to elicit customer and community views in synergy with Scottish Water's National Engagement Programme (NEP), informing the implementation of the Strategic Plan.
- Set out measures of success, outlining the benefits of customer engagement, common research standards, co-commissioning, open data and EBR/EBP.
- Consider providing the next Chair with both technical research and administrative support. More focused meetings could also improve the overall efficiency of the coordination process, while ensuring that a balance in the number of participants and their level of seniority is achieved.
- Against the expected benefits, appropriate resourcing to realise the ambition will need to be agreed.

## B. Why this report

### **Commissioning**

1. At its meeting on 21st January 2020 the members of the Research Coordination Group (RCG) for the Scottish water industry agreed that there should be an independent review of the Group to assess the effectiveness of its role in the Strategic Review of Charges (SRC) 2021-27 process and to identify lessons learned to inform future arrangements for planning and coordinating research by stakeholders. Lorenzo Casullo, supported by Fraser Stewart, was asked to carry out the review.

### **Remit**

2. The review aims to provide analysis and recommendations to all stakeholders involved in the SRC21 research programme, in order to inform future arrangements for planning and coordinating research by Scottish water industry stakeholders. Specifically, the review addresses the following four areas:
  - Operations: have the RCG's operational arrangements for the SRC21 research programme been appropriate and effective, according to those participating in it?
  - Evolution: to what extent did the Group's role evolve in response to ongoing SRC21 activities (and strategic planning in particular) and how successful was this evolution in the eyes of participants to both the RCG and the SRC21?
  - Impact: did research coordination activities add value to the SRC21 process (compared to previous SRCs as well as a hypothetical counterfactual)? What has been the impact on Scottish Water's Strategic Plan and the Minute of the Agreement between Scottish Water and the Customer Forum?
  - Looking ahead: which future arrangements for research coordination and potentially joint commissioning of research best suit the upcoming implementation phase of Scottish Water's Strategic Plan?

### **Methodology**

3. The review was undertaken by blending together a number of strands. First a desk-based review of the research materials was undertaken, along with RCG minutes and papers. Interviews were conducted with all relevant stakeholders involved in the RCG itself and the broader process of SRC21. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 emergency, all interviews were carried out by telephone or videoconferencing. A full list of the key documents reviewed and stakeholders consulted is available in Annex 1.

## C. Context: the creation and remit of the RCG

### **Background**

4. The origins of the Research Coordination Group (RCG) can be traced to being an outcome of the tripartite cooperation agreement (“the agreement”) between the Water Industry Commission for Scotland (WICS), Scottish Water (SW) and Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), which established the second Customer Forum (“the Forum”) in 2017.
5. The agreement established a principal role of the Forum to act as a conduit for the views of customers and communities in the Strategic Review of Charges (SRC) 2021-27. In addition, it also required the parties to the agreement and the newly formed Forum to “put in place operational arrangements to ensure the effective co-ordination of their research programmes in the context of the SRC 2021-27 process”<sup>1</sup>.

### **Mandate**

6. The tripartite agreement was attached to the WICS Methodology paper<sup>2</sup> for the SRC21 as Appendix 2. In the agreement, the role of customer research in the SRC21 process, including further detail on the Forum’s purpose, was elaborated (see Box 1).

#### **Box 1: The Forum’s purpose and the role of research in the SRC process**

- Working with Scottish Water on a programme of high quality, behavioural, quantitative and qualitative research within the context of the SRC to establish customers’ priorities for service level improvement and expectations in terms of the level of charges (the “SRC Research Programme”).
- Ensuring that the SRC Research Programme included a meaningful level of engagement from communities (in both a geographic sense and in the sense of persons sharing particular interests).
- Understanding and representing to the Commission and to Scottish Water the priorities and preferences of customers (as a whole) in the SRC21 process as identified through the SRC Research Programme.
- Seeking to secure, through its participation in the SRC21 process, the most appropriate outcome for customers (as a whole, both now and into the future) based on those priorities and preferences, in particular by seeking to establish an agreed Business Plan.

7. Early in the process long term considerations came to fore. In 2018 Scottish Water was asked to develop a Strategic Plan capturing its ambition to meet and exceed the expectations of

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 2.2 of the co-operation agreement.

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.watercommission.co.uk/UserFiles/Documents/SRC21\\_Innovation%20and%20Collaboration\\_Methodology\\_WICS\\_amended.pdf](https://www.watercommission.co.uk/UserFiles/Documents/SRC21_Innovation%20and%20Collaboration_Methodology_WICS_amended.pdf)

customers and communities for the long-term (as opposed to a six-year Business Plan as initially anticipated). In 2019, Scotland’s First Minister declared a ‘climate emergency’ and the Scottish Government introduced legislation through the Climate Change Act. By the end of the year, the bill had enshrined an ambitious climate target in law: for Scotland to meet the “net-zero emissions” target by 2045. The water industry was thus set to address long-term issues, as detailed in the new Commissioning Letter by the Scottish Government (July 2019) and the revised decision papers by WICS (throughout 2018-19).

8. To achieve the objectives set out in the co-operation agreement as well as the goals emerging from the dynamic policy and regulatory environment, Scottish water industry stakeholders recognised a need for a coordinated research programme that brought relevant stakeholders together at regular intervals. The rationale being that while many of Scotland’s water stakeholders had individually been doing research for a long time, to identify gaps in research, avoid duplication and to ensure research was as relevant as possible to the SRC21, research should be collaboratively agreed upon and, where appropriate, jointly undertaken.
9. To establish a Research Coordination Group (RCG), CAS drafted a Terms of Reference (ToR) on behalf of stakeholders with input from other interested parties. The ToR was agreed at the first meeting of the RCG in August 2017.
10. All stakeholders welcomed the idea of coordinating research in the water sector. A dominant view prevailed that a coordinated research programme, following a number of high-level principles, would provide a solid grounding for research to be undertaken. In interviews stakeholders suggested this was an improvement in comparison to SRC15, when organisations shared research initiatives and findings only bilaterally, and on an infrequent basis.

### ***Membership***

11. The ToR allowed for the RCG membership to comprise, as a minimum, representatives of the following organisations/bodies:
  - Citizens Advice Scotland
  - Customer Forum
  - Scottish Water
  - Optional: WICS
12. Each organisation was able to nominate two or three individuals as members of the RCG, though other individuals participated as and when required.
13. The agreement also allowed for the RCG to seek, invite and/or co-opt additional members and/or seek advice as required to achieve its work. In practice the RCG included representatives from CAS, the Forum and Scottish Water, plus the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), the Drinking Water Quality Regulator (DWQR), and more frequently in the later stages, WICS.

## **Ground rules**

14. At the start of the process, the RCG also established a set of “ground rules” which included sharing information about proposed research projects. To support this, CAS provided the Group with social research best practice guidance. This approach provided members with the tools required to be able to comment on other members’ research briefs and/or Specification of Requirement documents.
15. The stakeholders that established the RCG agreed that the chair would be a member of the Customer Forum. The view amongst stakeholders was that this would provide a degree of impartiality amongst the various bodies represented, and also allow the Forum to draw on emerging research directly, thus supporting their core functions.
16. The RCG held no own budget and members of the Group provided administrative support *ex gratia*. It was agreed that the RCG would meet regularly (roughly once every quarter) and would keep minutes of its meetings. The RCG was required to ensure that full and appropriate stakeholder engagement was undertaken.
17. From the outset it was agreed that the RCG would operate on an “open data” basis. This involved the Group’s membership sharing research findings with the rest of the RCG, unless any such research was “commissioned solely for the purpose of assisting one of the parties to the RCG develop its internal considerations”. Within this arrangement Scottish Water would provide the other parties “with the internally derived data they generate through their complaints and other internal systems”. It was also agreed that full technical annexes would be shared amongst members, as well as the research findings reports, presentations and summaries. Importantly the ownership and management of each individual project remained the responsibility of the commissioning organisation.
18. In addition to establishing how stakeholders could work together, the ToR also laid out the broad areas of research that could be focused on to support the SRC21 process. The research activities that were identified as being within the scope of the RCG’s work included:
  - Relevant CAS research intended to inform policy.
  - Scottish Water’s customer engagement programme.
  - Additional research commissioned by the Customer Forum.
  - Any other research highlighted and considered relevant by the parties, including the sharing of any secondary or industry research of relevance as well as identifying gaps in the industry research programme.
19. In setting the context of the RCG’s work, the ToR tasked the Group with “keeping under review and coordinating current and planned research to ensure as much synergy and benefit as possible from the research activities of each of the parties. It may identify additional research opportunities where there are gaps or opportunities for additional insight”.
20. All participants were expected to give high priority to the work of the Group. By joining the RCG, each stakeholder also accepted that other parties could commission their own research

work as they saw fit, notwithstanding the strong desire and commitment of each of the parties to collaborate closely together and coordinate on research priorities.

## D. Operational aspects of the RCG

### ***Working arrangements, chair and participants***

21. The Research Coordination Group largely implemented its working arrangements as presented in the RCG Terms of Reference (ToR). A member of the Customer Forum, Agnes Robson, was nominated to be the Chair of the RCG, a position that she held for the duration of SRC21. Meetings of the RCG, convened by the Chair, took place typically every 9-10 weeks and additional, smaller meetings were convened as necessary. This resulted in more frequent meetings than initially planned, but members sought to agree meeting schedules in advance to align with the timing of research projects. Participants received a detailed information pack ahead of every meeting, typically containing an agenda, draft suggestions for new research and/or draft outputs from ongoing research streams. Some participants we spoke to had judged the amount of material provided in advance of each meeting too large to process in the available time; for others, this was a sign of transparency among participating organisations.
22. Participation by CAS, the Forum, and Scottish Water was assiduous and often more than one member per organisation attended. In addition to the Chair, two further Forum members – selected for their research background – attended regularly as did the Chair of the Customer Forum and (after appointment) the Forum Director. Scottish Water was represented by members of the Customer Insights Team and the General Manager with responsibility for coordinating work on SRC21. The policy manager from CAS attended from its inception and throughout.
23. Among the other water sector regulators, WICS decided to attend meetings only when the research discussed was relevant to economic regulation. While other regulators did not always attend regularly, an increase in participation by representatives of DWQR and SEPA can be observed over time, contributing to the broadening of technical expertise and stakeholder participation in RCG meetings. However, their more regular attendance required more time and effort than they had originally foreseen. The Water Team at Scottish Government did not generally take part in RCG meetings, though they were provided with copies of the meeting papers and were invited to provide input as they deemed appropriate. This also reflects the overall role of the Scottish Government in the SRC21 process.
24. The authors of the research studies commissioned by RCG members - be it academic researchers or independent research partners - were not usually invited to attend scheduled RCG meetings to present their findings. It was more common for the RCG member organisation in charge of commissioning each study to report back to the Group at meetings. But additional sessions involving researchers providing debriefs to RCG members and other relevant stakeholders were organised on occasion and where innovative or unfamiliar methodologies had been deployed - for example, the online chatbot tool or behavioural insights experiments - the RCG did request the authors present their findings directly to the Group.

## **Coordination in practice**

25. Participation in RCG meetings was high, with consistently more than ten participants per meeting and at times more than fifteen. Large turnout meant that, at times, it was hard to find suitable rooms for the meetings and meetings took longer than planned in order to allow all participants to share their inputs and opinions.
26. Each participating organisation came to the RCG with its own ideas for research related to the SRC process. For example, Scottish Water's Engage21 programme was the company's research and engagement programme designed, with the support of the Customer Forum, to understand customer needs and priorities and inform service levels<sup>3</sup>. We have referred to the intention of identifying synergies, avoiding duplication and ultimately creating an *SRC Research Programme* to identify customer priorities and preferences as the motivating factor for the creation of the RCG. In practice, a common programme for all stakeholders did not emerge until later stages of the RCG activity. In our conversations with stakeholders, a number of reasons have been suggested:
- The lack of a high-level framework agreed at the outset of the RCG in order to guide individual organisations making their own plans for research
  - The need by individual organisations to complete research tasks that pre-dated the creation of the RCG and test their validity in the context of SRC21
  - Even for new research pieces, proposals emerged bottom-up and systematic coordination on e.g. defining common research questions did not occur.
27. In addition, some stakeholders have challenged the definition of coordination as adopted by the RCG. This criticism raises an important point about the purpose of the Group, which we will return to in later sections (see paragraph 42): that is, whether the initial intention to coordinate was at times superseded by a wish to understand, question and translate the outcomes of research into regulatory or policy recommendations. For some, those discussions were necessary in order to reach a common understanding of the research outputs. For others, it distracted the Group from its core tasks.
28. However, over time, some new research proposals emerged jointly from intense cooperation and collaboration, as detailed in Section E. In parallel, Scottish Water kept track of key pieces of research being undertaken under Engage21 plus other stakeholders. This was summarised in a "pipeline" visual used to communicate progress over time internally and with other sector stakeholders (see Annex 2). Despite these efforts, a common research programme guiding the work of RCG members as a whole, outlining the path linking objectives, research and outcomes, did not materialise.
29. All of the stakeholders we consulted recognised that RCG members adhered to the practice of open data. Participants in particular have praised the behaviour displayed by Scottish Water: they recognise that the company has been much more successful at sharing its research approaches and outputs in the context of the RCG than in previous price reviews.

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<https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/en/about%20us/what%20we%20do/legal/customer%20engagement>

RCG members regularly received full reports, including technical annexes, and the meeting minutes were distributed promptly to all. However, the minutes of the RCG meetings were shared among participants only.

30. There is less of a consensus as to what drove this positive change in behaviour by Scottish Water. According to some stakeholders, research is by definition an open data activity and the opposite behaviour - not sharing research methodologies and findings - would have been surprising. In their view, there is nothing extraordinary about the openness of the RCG. Others feel that greater transparency in the context of the RCG mirrors the increased openness of the SRC21 process compared to previous price reviews. In their view, the role of Ethical Business Regulation and Practice (EBR/EBP) throughout SRC21 has had a positive effect on research activities too. Upholding EBR/EBP principles will certainly require even greater transparency in the future (see paragraph 74).

## E. Evolution of the RCG

### ***From service research to strategic aspects***

31. We have recounted that the ToR underpinning the RCG also laid out some broad areas of research that could be focused on to support the SRC21 process (see paragraph 18). At the outset, these themes were already departing from those of previous price reviews in the Scottish water sector and are different from the topics typically addressed in the context of a regulatory review in other utilities sectors and jurisdictions.
32. By way of example, research programmes as part of a price review in other regulated industries would most often focus on operational and capital expenditure estimates and discussions over the efficiency requirements for the regulated companies. Some considerations of customer views may take the form of service-level requirements and issues of affordability for vulnerable consumers. How research is carried out also tends to differ in other sectors and jurisdictions, where regulators and regulated companies typically produce research on the same topic, either to reach consensus or provide evidence to their diverging views on specific regulatory parameters.
33. In this respect, the initial focus of activities of the RCG already contributed to placing Scottish Water's customers at the heart of the strategic review process. This was revealing of an innovative regulatory approach taking place in Scotland, ensuring that customer views are reflected and aiming to adopt a 'trust but verify' relationship between regulators and the publicly-owned company, Scottish Water. This approach, first pioneered by WICS, endorsed by the Scottish Government and supported by stakeholders, started with the creation of the Customer Forum in SRC15, continued with the establishment of the Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) meetings to share information transparently in SRC21 and culminated in the adoption of EBR/EBP principles and commitments to greater customer and community engagement by Scottish Water.
34. Despite these common objectives, at the outset, participants of the RCG devoted most time and effort to understanding customers' views on service level priorities and preferences, in part due to pre-existing research commitments as discussed in paragraph 44. During the price review, as described in paragraph 7, the need for a more holistic, long-term approach to Scotland's water sector was progressively adopted by stakeholders<sup>4</sup> and emphasis was placed on Scottish Water to develop a transformational Strategic Plan in close cooperation with all stakeholders.
35. RCG members were able to react to these contextual changes and to proactively adopt a more strategic focus in their respective research activities, looking amongst other things at customer views from a longer term perspective, as well as on a range of environmental and asset stewardship issues. At an independently facilitated workshop in December 2018, RCG

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond the scope of this review, it is worth noting the co-creation of a Vision for Scotland's water sector, endorsed by the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform.

stakeholders agreed on research priorities for the remainder of the SRC21 process. Stakeholders distilled 39 research priorities into three priority themes: pricing and willingness to pay, legacy and the relative importance of environmental impacts; and service quality considerations. It was felt that these topics would empower stakeholders to gather the best possible evidence that would materially influence SRC21 outcomes. For example, Scottish Water's research focus increasingly encompassed strategic questions like community engagement and the wider environment.

### ***Balance of activities and approaches***

36. The Strategic Plan Customer Insights Supporting Document<sup>5</sup> states that throughout the SRC21 process, 29 research or insight projects were completed, involving over 8,000 Scottish Water customers (p.4). In addition, over 16,000 customers were involved in the "Shaping the Future of your water and wastewater service" consultation undertaken by Scottish Water in 2018. The range of projects undertaken included individual householders, as well as Scottish Water's vulnerable customers, businesses, Licensed Providers, developers and community representatives from across Scotland (see the honeycomb diagram at Annex 3 for a summary of the key projects undertaken).
37. The Strategic Plan Customer Insights Supporting Document also shows that the research, insight and engagement programme that the RCG was involved in was conducted using a variety of well-established research methods, such as survey methods, focus groups and in-home interviews, as well as some less familiar innovative methodologies, such as deliberative research, behavioural insights and use of an online chatbot tool. Irrespective of the degree of success of each study, the variety of approaches signal the wish that many stakeholders shared of going beyond conventional and traditional research methodologies - a testimony to the potential that collective thinking has in yielding innovative outcomes.
38. However, a number of issues emerged over time. First, and almost inevitably in our opinion, the term 'customer research' to which all stakeholders would refer to in relation to their own research programmes may be understood differently depending on one's background. The RCG was exposed to research activities that encompassed a broad swathe of approaches, ranging from engagement initiatives (such as an initiative with online and in-person consultation of water users) to academic studies in a controlled environment (such as behavioural insights experiments). In between those extremes, insights came from many other approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, involving random sampling, addressing current and future users, etc. While none of the approaches mentioned here is inherently superior than any other in eliciting customer views, such diversity could have prompted the Group to agree upfront on a commonly agreed perimeter for customer research, at least distinguishing between research/insights and engagement activities.
39. In parallel, RCG members were exposed to research studies aiming to address both policy questions (such as those linked to the Ministerial Objectives) and regulatory (specific to the Strategic Review of Charges) questions. An upfront distinction between policy and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=www.scottishwater.co.uk/-/media/ScottishWater/Document-Hub/Key-Publications/Strategic-Plan/010420StrategicPlanCustomerInsightsDocV15.pdf>

regulatory questions, while not always possible to make, would have been beneficial to ensure that all stakeholders had a common understanding of the link between the research questions being addressed and potential policy *and/or* regulatory objectives.

40. Secondly, although the research programme developed over time and took on evermore stakeholder views and wishes, when stakeholders consider the research undertaken, a view prevails that most weight continued to be attributed to individual studies. Those tended to be undertaken in isolation, rather than being planned together. This was somewhat unexpected given that the stakeholders consulted, almost universally, were able to clearly articulate the idea of triangulating research methodologies to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of issues. We came across one significant, formal attempt to bring together in one place all of the insights/research findings on a particular issue central to the SRC process: a Customer Forum paper on pricing with an overview of findings from the different pieces of research on pricing undertaken in SRC21. It should be noted that more informal triangulation also took place, and the joint Scottish Water and Customer Forum Insight Document (see paragraph 36) towards the end of the price review period can be seen as an attempt to bring together in one place all of the insights gathered throughout the strategic review period.
41. A desire to triangulate research is commendable and consistent with research best practice for enhancing credibility. According to the SAGE Encyclopedia of Research Design, triangulation has the “potential to provide multiple lines of sight and multiple contexts to enrich the understanding of a research question”<sup>6</sup>. When done correctly, triangulation is able to indicate the direction of travel, rather than give one fixed insight or answer. However, to maximise its impact, it requires appropriate analytical capacity and making use of relevant expertise. The focus of triangulation needs not to be on research outcomes: consistent with the RCG mandate, members could have continued to focus on understanding the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies used to answer similar questions, for example.
42. Third, the discussions shifted over time from coordinating research plans and enhancing the quality of planned research to discussing the outputs of research activities. This shift is documented in the RCG minutes that we have had access to, and it is recognised by all stakeholders - but some view it as a positive and others as a negative. Besides raising questions about the ultimate purpose of RCG, we see this shift as potentially detracting available time from planning and coordinating research activities while resulting in discussions requiring decision-making powers beyond the RCG’s mandate. The converse of this shift is that RCG participants were able to scrutinise the regulatory and policy significance of research pieces and identify potential synergies and gaps in research that might be addressed further down the line.
43. Fourth, in the absence of a formal framework determining the relationships between the fora of SRC21 (e.g. SAG, working groups...), the process of information sharing across those different forums initially appeared to be done piecemeal and relied on the individuals attending and their ability to identify research gaps or needs. This certainly left room for flexibility when elements of the research programme, especially on prices and future

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<sup>6</sup> <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/encyc-of-research-design/n469.xml>

strategies, required the involvement of many stakeholders in a short period of time. But it also led to overlap of activities between the RCG, the SAG and some working groups. A transmission mechanism began to emerge over time, with key members of both the RCG and SAG reporting research findings from the former to the latter, but some ambiguity around the role and purpose of each group remained.

44. Finally in this section, the notion of co-creation began to appear in SRC21 in late 2018 as a working method. For research activities, this gave RCG members an extra incentive to look for potential co-commissioning of research projects and several examples of co-commissioned research (on Legacy, Wider Environment, Community Engagement Best Practice and Future Strategy) stand out as positive examples of collaboration among the stakeholders involved. Stakeholders agree that more co-commissioning and co-funding could have taken place earlier in the process. Despite numerous discussions, co-commissioning did not become the norm until later in the process, mainly due to existing commitments by participating organisations.

## F. Impact of the Research Coordination Group

### ***Value added by greater coordination***

45. The stakeholders who initiated the RCG and those who joined at later stages all recognised the value-added of research coordination to their individual organisations. The type and size of benefits vary for each organisation and can be summarised as follows.
46. For Scottish Water, the Group provided a unique opportunity to share ongoing research with interested parties, receive feedback and explore synergies in commissioning new research. Many stakeholders noted a shift in attitudes by SW staff, praising their willingness to share large amounts of information compared to the previous SRC in relation to their internal research activities. Discussion within the RCG also prompted the company to reflect on the internal organisation of research activities and to rethink internal communication channels. Going forward, a key issue for SW in this area will be how to identify synergies and interrelationships between research/insight activities and engagement activities when surveying customer preferences, recognising that these entail different methodologies. Additionally, SW engaged its senior management in the research agenda, including by providing input to the development of the wider environment and future strategy research studies.
47. The Customer Forum benefitted from participating in the RCG in different ways: Forum members were able to gain first-hand knowledge of research topics in a way that bilateral engagement with different organisations could not have provided. This strengthened their role in acting as a conduit of customer views, in line with the Forum's mandate. Secondly, the Forum took a leadership role by assuming the chairmanship of the RCG and keeping a close link between RCG activities, the SAG and the entire CF. The Forum was able to provide feedback and challenge as draft research inputs came in and put forward proposals for co-commissioning research that went ahead in partnership with other organisations. The expertise gained as part of their RCG participation enabled Forum members to exercise their role even more effectively.
48. For Citizens Advice Scotland, an organisation with substantial consumer research experience, the RCG provided a useful forum both to embed existing research principles, explore the effectiveness of policy options and to test new ideas. The high-level principles of consumer engagement promoted by CAS were well received by the RCG and influenced a number of studies. In addition, the Group offered CAS the opportunity to validate research findings with experts in specific domains touched by consumer research, such as from SW and DWQR for service quality and WICS for economic research. At times, a challenge for CAS was to process information and attend meetings given resource constraints.
49. For the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, the RCG initially did not appear to be a priority. Over time, RCG members called upon the regulator's expertise in economic and financial aspects more frequently. Even when the Commission's presence at the RCG increased in terms of both seniority and frequency, however, WICS continued to focus their

efforts on research items pertaining to the economic domain. This provided the RCG with valuable feedback for studies on affordability and price trajectories and gave WICS a chance to learn more about customer attitudes to prices in light of different research methodologies.

50. The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency also found that it became more valuable to attend RCG meetings over time, as more research activities began to look at environmental questions from a customer's point of view. SEPA provided valuable feedback on research items covering climate change as well as the deliberative research. The results from those studies validated the perception that customers are very interested in climate action.
51. For the Drinking Water Quality Regulator, attending RCG meetings also presented logistical challenges given the amount of effort required compared to the size of the organisation. Nonetheless, DWQR staff attended several RCG meetings and provided inputs into studies from the impact research through to the lead research and legacy research. Stakeholders also called on DWQR to validate some emerging research findings, and the regulator was able to access more of Scottish Water's customer research than it had done in the past.
52. It is also clear from reviewing the process and outputs of the RCG that some measures of collective added value can be extrapolated. A first measure is that a multilateral forum such as the RCG has cemented confidence and cooperation in the field of customer research among organisations taking part in SRC21. The Group's readiness to address strategic issues collectively and to respond to emerging questions from SRC21 discussions (e.g. in working groups) represents a step change in collaboration when compared to SRC15. A second measure of collective success is given by the research outputs that have emerged, described from paragraph 55 onwards.
53. Some critical voices within the stakeholder group question the additionality of both measures. Would stakeholders have cooperated more, and more transparently, even in the absence of a formal RCG setting, in line with progress with the remainder of SRC21? And would similar research outputs have emerged if individual organisations had pursued them separately? It is difficult to answer those questions in the absence of a counterfactual and given the novelty of the approach compared to SRC15, although it should be noted that co-commissioned research, with the parties contributing both to the research briefs and to the budget for the project, enabled in some cases a more extensive study than would otherwise have been affordable.
54. The overall perception among stakeholders is that having the RCG *did* add collective value, thanks to the open discussions and the collaboration that it promoted. It is also clear that the co-creation and co-commissioning of research studies would have been much more difficult, if not unfeasible, in the absence of regular exchanges at the RCG.

### ***Jewels in the crown***

55. We asked stakeholders which research outputs they were most proud of and which research processes had been especially innovative in their methodology and approach. The results are summarised in Table 1 below, showing that the Future Strategy and the Wider Environment

research pieces are the ones receiving most recognition by stakeholders when it comes to both the quality of outputs and the impact on SRC21.

56. The Future Strategy research, commissioned by the Customer Forum but with significant input from RCG stakeholders, and presented in September 2019, examined customers' views on the consequences and price impacts of Scottish Water's future strategy. It is based on deliberative research methodologies and workshops that involved a total of 120 customers. The Wider Environment research, co-commissioned by Scottish Water and the Customer Forum, concluded in May 2019, used a mix of qualitative and quantitative surveys to gauge customers' attitudes with respect to Scottish Water's approach to its environmental responsibilities. Both studies respond to the remit of the RCG, and the Forum specifically, to gather customer views and represent a joint effort by stakeholders - for instance, leaders in different organisations were involved in the preparation of research materials and deliberative panels and engaged directly with customers.
57. Some studies were recognised by stakeholders to also have been important in terms of the innovative methodology used. This is the case for the Lead Removal study, for instance, which saw involvement from both DWQR and Scottish Water and resulted in the first example of engagement with customers around a relatively technical issue. Although the direct impact of this work was limited given that it covered an area of policy not directly affected by SRC21 developments, it was useful to inform Scottish Water's customer engagement activities and practices. Behavioural approaches are novel in the area of customers' perceptions of regulated prices. Stakeholders agree that the two experiments carried out in Scotland showed the potential to design studies that control for bias and explore trade-offs between charges and service quality in the water sector. Given the timing of the experiments and the time it takes to run them, unfortunately it was not possible to design the research questions so as to match the final decision-making parameters of SRC21.

**Table 1: Studies stakeholders perceived in interviews as having the biggest impact on SRC21**

| Research projects                                  | Identified by...               | Main reason given by stakeholders for the perceived impact                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Future Strategy (Ipsos MORI)                       | CAS, CF, DWQR, SEPA, SW, WICS, | Innovative content<br>Collaborative effort<br>Innovative methodology<br>Strong design<br>Giving customers a voice |
| Wider Environment (Impact MR)                      | CF, SEPA, SW, WICS             | Fits with wider policy discussions<br>Collaborative effort<br>Innovative methodology<br>Strong design             |
| Behavioural insights: Studies 1 & 2 (ESRI)         | CF, DWQR, SEPA, SW, WICS       | Innovative methodology<br>Insights on price behaviour<br>Raised further questions                                 |
| Lead Removal (Turquoise Thinking)                  | CAS, CF, DWQR, SW              | Fits with wider policy discussions<br>Innovative methodology                                                      |
| Legacy (Trinity McQueen)                           | CF, WICS                       | Collaborative effort<br>Novel policy issues addressed<br>Innovative methodology<br>Strong design                  |
| Affordability Study (Fraser of Allander Institute) | WICS                           | Sound economic analysis<br>Economic expertise                                                                     |
| Community Engagement Best Practice (Ipsos MORI)    | CF                             | Collaborative effort<br>Giving communities a voice                                                                |
| Impact research <sup>7</sup>                       | SW                             | Wide-ranging research into customer views                                                                         |

### ***Impact on SRC21 outcomes***

58. The most visible impact of customer research on SRC21 is found in Scottish Water’s Strategic Plan, and in particular in the Customer Insight supporting document to the Strategic Plan. The document, signed by Scottish Water and the Customer Forum, explains the extent to which findings from the research coordinated by the RCG have been used to inform and underpin the Strategic Plan’s outcomes and objectives.

59. Perhaps surprisingly, the work of the RCG is not directly mentioned in either document, although the Customer Insight report refers to co-creation and co-commissioning of research by Scottish Water, the Customer Forum and other participating stakeholders (to the RCG). This may make it difficult for newcomers to the sector, irrespective of their organisation, to trace the steps of research coordination in SRC21. The narrative of the Strategic Plan and

<sup>7</sup> Part 1 - Trinity McQueen (Introduction to update customer views to inform SRC21 strategic planning process); Part 2 - Accent (Customers' prioritisation of service impacts); Part 3 - Turquoise Thinking (Licensed Providers research); Part 4 - Turquoise Thinking (Community Councils research)

annexed documents, and the way in which research outputs are used to support key objectives, however, confirm the stakeholders' sentiment that - at least in part - the RCG's work had a positive impact on the SRC21 outcomes.

60. Table 2 below presents an overview of key research outcomes mapped against the three strategic themes of Scottish Water's Plan. It should be noted that the studies in this table refer only to those clearly identifiable in the text of the Customer Insight Supporting Document. Other research not explicitly labelled in the document will also have influenced the development of the Strategic Plan (see diagram on p.5 of the Supporting Document for a full summary).

**Table 2: Research that has informed Scottish Water's Strategic Plan based on the content of the Customer Insight Supporting Document**

| Strategic outcome                                                                                                                          | Strategic objective                              | Key underlying research                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Service excellence</b><br>Adapting to a changing climate, dealing with our ageing assets & meeting our customers' evolving expectations | Delivering consistently excellent water supply   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future strategy research</li> <li>• Legacy research</li> <li>• Strategic projections consultation</li> <li>• Low pressure deep dive</li> <li>• Community councils research</li> <li>• Impact study</li> <li>• Removal of lead research</li> <li>• Pride in SW omnibus questions</li> </ul> |
|                                                                                                                                            | Transforming wastewater services                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider environment research</li> <li>• Future strategy research</li> <li>• Impact study</li> <li>• Pride in SW omnibus questions</li> <li>• Low pressure deep dive</li> <li>• Community councils research</li> <li>• Legacy research</li> </ul>                                             |
|                                                                                                                                            | Enabling sustainable & inclusive economic growth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider environment research</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                                                                                                                            | Empowering customers & communities               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future strategy research</li> <li>• Pride in SW omnibus questions</li> <li>• Legacy research</li> <li>• Impact study</li> <li>• Wider environment research</li> <li>• Community engagement best practice research</li> <li>• Community councils research</li> </ul>                        |
| <b>Beyond net zero emissions -</b><br>Showing leadership in mitigating climate change and enhancing Scotland's natural environment         | Transforming our emissions                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider environment research</li> <li>• Future strategy research</li> <li>• Pride in SW omnibus questions</li> <li>• Low pressure deep dive</li> <li>• Community councils research</li> <li>• Apptivism chat-bot tool</li> </ul>                                                             |
|                                                                                                                                            | Embracing the circular economy                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pride in SW omnibus questions</li> <li>• Legacy research</li> <li>• Wider environment research</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                                                                                                                            | Enhancing the natural                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider environment research</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

|                                                                                                                                                        |                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                        | environment                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Great value &amp; financial sustainability</b> -<br>Customers will receive great value, now & in the future, and we will be financially sustainable | Keeping service affordable & financially sustainable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioural insights (Study 1)</li> <li>• Behavioural insights (Study 2)</li> <li>• Future strategy research</li> <li>• Affordability study (Fraser of Allander Institute)</li> </ul> |
|                                                                                                                                                        | Making smarter investment choices                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• -</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                        | Transforming how Scottish Water works                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wider environment research</li> <li>• Legacy research</li> <li>• Future strategy research</li> </ul>                                                                                  |
|                                                                                                                                                        | Scottish Water's people <sup>8</sup>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future strategy research<sup>9</sup></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       |

61. The Customer Forum and Scottish Water have reached an agreement in which the Forum formally endorses the company's Strategic Plan as it considers that the Plan "has taken proper account of the evidence provided on the views and aspirations of current and future customers". In the associated Minute of Agreement, Scottish Water commits to undertaking further customer research to track and understand changes in legacy expectations and with regards to embedding customer feedback as part of the decision-making process.

62. It is more challenging to ascertain the linkages between coordination in customer research and the determination of charges. The agreement on price-setting has somewhat been decoupled from the agreement on the Strategic Plan. In the Minute of Agreement, the parties recognise that agreement on the Plan does not translate in automatic agreement on price profiles. Most stakeholders agree that research studies are unable to provide definitive answers but are certainly useful to shed light on customer attitudes to prices.

<sup>8</sup> Not listed as a strategic objective but appears in the Strategic Plan as being informed by research.

<sup>9</sup> The Insights Document (p.10) identifies the Future Strategy research in relation to Scottish Water's People.

## G. Recommendations: the future of research coordination

### ***Operational aspects***

63. Our operational review aims to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of the RCG as it happened in the context of SRC21. Lessons learnt from the experience accumulated over 2017-2020 can provide useful guidance to future research coordination activities in the Scottish water sector.
64. The biggest challenge mentioned by stakeholders has been the absence of an ex-ante framework for the RCG to operate in accordance with, which could give visibility on the strategic purpose of RCG discussions, and a system to prioritise research themes and formulate research questions based on their importance to SRC21. In the future, we recommend that stakeholders agree on a common framework linking objectives, research and outcomes and incorporating mid-term evaluations and backward-looking reviews, such as the one resulting in this report.
65. In parallel, all stakeholders recognise the benefits of avoiding duplication in research activities and closer cooperation leading to the co-commissioning of research studies. However, as more studies were completed, RCG meetings increasingly incorporated sharing of research outputs and, at times, participants held long discussions on the validity of such outputs as discussed in paragraph 42. This can be interpreted as a departure from the Group's original remit. In the future, we recommend keeping the Group's operational mandate under review and potentially adhere to a narrower remit in order to preserve overall effectiveness when time constraints emerge.
66. Another lesson learnt has to do with potential information overload and time allocation. Given the high levels of participation of key stakeholders, the duration and frequency of meetings, and the amount of information shared with participants (often full studies and results, rather than summaries and briefs), it is understandable that those representing smaller organisations may have felt overwhelmed. Consideration should be given in the future to facilitate participation by larger and smaller stakeholder organisations alike.
67. The imbalance in the level of seniority of participants emerged as an additional challenge for some stakeholders. The practical implication of having different seniority levels around the table is that some organisations were able to sign-off decisions (e.g. on research briefs) during RCG meetings, while others needed to bring proposals back to more senior colleagues in their organisations. Preparing information flows internally required additional efforts in identifying the appropriate channels of communication and summarising extensive amounts of information in digestible formats. It would be appropriate for future RCGs not to expect decisions to be made at each meeting, but rather devise a common route for decision-making for all organisations.
68. Lastly, openness and transparency have been recurring themes throughout this operational review. We invite all stakeholders to recognise the achievements of the RCG in this respect,

culminating in the online publication of all studies undertaken as part of the Strategic Plan's documentation. We also see room for considering even more open and transparent arrangements, for instance by giving access to all RCG documents to all SRC21 stakeholders and by inviting the authors of external research studies, perhaps soon after the commissioning phase, to present to the whole Group. Whether openness is attributed to an intrinsic research *ethos*, an open data approach, or to the influence of EBR/EBP, it is a feature worth preserving.

### **Strategic and impact aspects**

69. The present review of the RCG comes at the end of the SRC21 process, as stakeholders are discussing the institutional set-up that will guide the implementation phase of the Strategic Plan and price trajectories are being set – in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic impacts. As reviewers, we have seen the RCG as intertwined with the SRC21 process. The open question for all stakeholders to address is the future of research coordination in the next phase, building on the SRC21 legacy and beyond.
70. While the final impact of research coordination on the price-setting process remains to be evaluated once future charges are set, this independent review of the RCG shows that stakeholders have set forth an ambitious path for the water industry in Scotland by providing the evidence and insights informing Scottish Water's transformative Strategic Plan. The Vision, the Plan and associated Minute of Agreement, if properly implemented, represent a step change for both Scottish Water as a company and the water sector as a whole.
71. Scottish Water's Strategic Plan has committed the company to holding its "biggest ever", world leading national engagement programme (NEP) with its customers. The intention is to engage with the communities Scottish Water serves about "the rate of progress that they wish [us] to achieve and the associated cost, in the context of all their other expectations and financial priorities" (p.10). In delivering such an ambition, previous experience shows us that *how* public engagement occurs is important<sup>10</sup>. Therefore we recommend that Scottish Water ensure that an appropriate mechanism for research coordination exists, to be used to help shape and deliver the NEP.
72. A renewed RCG format could act both as guardian of the existing evidence base that has informed SRC21, and as a coordinating forum for future research efforts. In our view, shared by many stakeholders, a renewed space for collaboration and concerted planning of research activities will be challenging but necessary. It should be such that RCG members focus on analysing trade-offs between potentially competing research activities, avoiding duplication and guiding individual organisations in identifying the best ways to answer research questions as they emerge. Going forward, the goal of customer research is likely to further evolve in order to support this implementation phase. Rather than working towards informing a set of given outputs as was the case in SRC21, research will play a role in answering questions about investment priorities on a rolling basis, in informing short-term price adjustments within a long-term trajectory, and in identifying good practice in community and

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cas.org.uk/publications/engaging-hearts-and-minds-study-conducting-successful-engagement-communities-and>

customer engagement. For instance, stakeholders can compare practices of customer engagement found in other sectors and other jurisdictions<sup>11</sup>.

73. Given the rapidly evolving context, industry stakeholders will need to ensure that an appropriate mechanism for customer research coordination is flexible enough to accommodate changing priorities and research questions and feed into the transformation planning and strategic decision-making processes. Besides, continued coordination should not be seen as an impediment for individual organisations to commission their own research. Liaison with Scottish Government, as policymakers as well as actors in the research arena, would be valuable. More tactically calling on those organisations whose expertise can be relevant to address specific research issues will also be important.
74. Building on the experience of the RCG will require a joint effort by Scottish Water and its stakeholders, to be viewed in the context of an EBR-based regulatory framework. In broad terms, the company needs to take ownership of reporting its performance, doing so regularly and transparently, and providing stakeholders with appropriate assurance that it is making progress, building trust in the system. In the research field specifically, behaviour consistent with EBR/EBP principles would see Scottish Water sharing its research agenda, setting concrete research objectives against which it can measure success and effectiveness, earn the trust of its customers that their views are being taken into account and striving for continuous improvement to achieve excellent customer research.
75. There will be further benefits in stakeholders setting common research standards. The main benefit of common research standards is to guide the Group's activity as a whole when developing research questions, triangulating methodologies and sharing key findings. Innovation will be required in order to both maximise synergies of research activities in the dynamic landscape that is emerging post-SRC21, and to meet the ambition of continued co-commissioning of new research.
76. Should stakeholders wish to grant a "new RCG" these tasks, the level of resourcing needs to match its objectives. We see two main areas for investment: technical expertise in customer research and an executive/project management administrative support function. Stakeholders may wish to provide direct in-kind support where their expertise matches those needs, or consider giving a future Chair sufficient support by a research expert with no direct interest in investment and pricing decisions This reflects the need, mentioned by several stakeholders, to draw on independent customer research expertise for rigorously defining the best research questions and triangulating methodologies. In parallel, an executive or project management function providing dedicated support to the Chair would be beneficial to set the common research programme and to plan meetings as effectively as possible.

## ***Summary of recommendations***

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<sup>11</sup> See for example the UK gas distribution sector (<https://www.sgnfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SGN-CEG-Final-Report-December-2019.pdf>) and international experience in citizen deliberation (<http://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>)

77. In summary, we recommend that the experience of the RCG continue in the next phase of Scotland's water sector *transformation*. We recommend that a future RCG focus on maximising synergies in *customer* research, acknowledging that this involves both research and engagement approaches and links with both policymaking and regulatory questions. The new Group should also focus on coordinating research ex-ante, placing emphasis on a *framework* to shape a *programme* and making *synergy* between research actors its prime objective, with a view to supporting the NEP and Scottish Water's transformation in particular. These framework and objectives should be subject to mid-term review and regular evaluations of progress, and they should not jeopardise each organisation's ability to commission its own research. The Group could involve participants with a variable geometry, beyond core members from Scottish Water and designated customer representatives, and also call more frequently upon external research expertise when needed. The next Chair would benefit from both technical research and administrative support. More focused meetings could also improve the overall efficiency of the coordination process, while ensuring that a balance in the number of participants and their level of seniority is achieved. A future RCG should set out measures of success upfront, outlining in a more explicit way the potential benefits of customer engagement, common research standards, co-commissioning, open data, EBR/EBP to both individual organisations and collectively. Against the expected benefits, appropriate resourcing to realise the ambition will need to be agreed.

## **Annexes**

### **Annex 1**

#### **List of key documents reviewed**

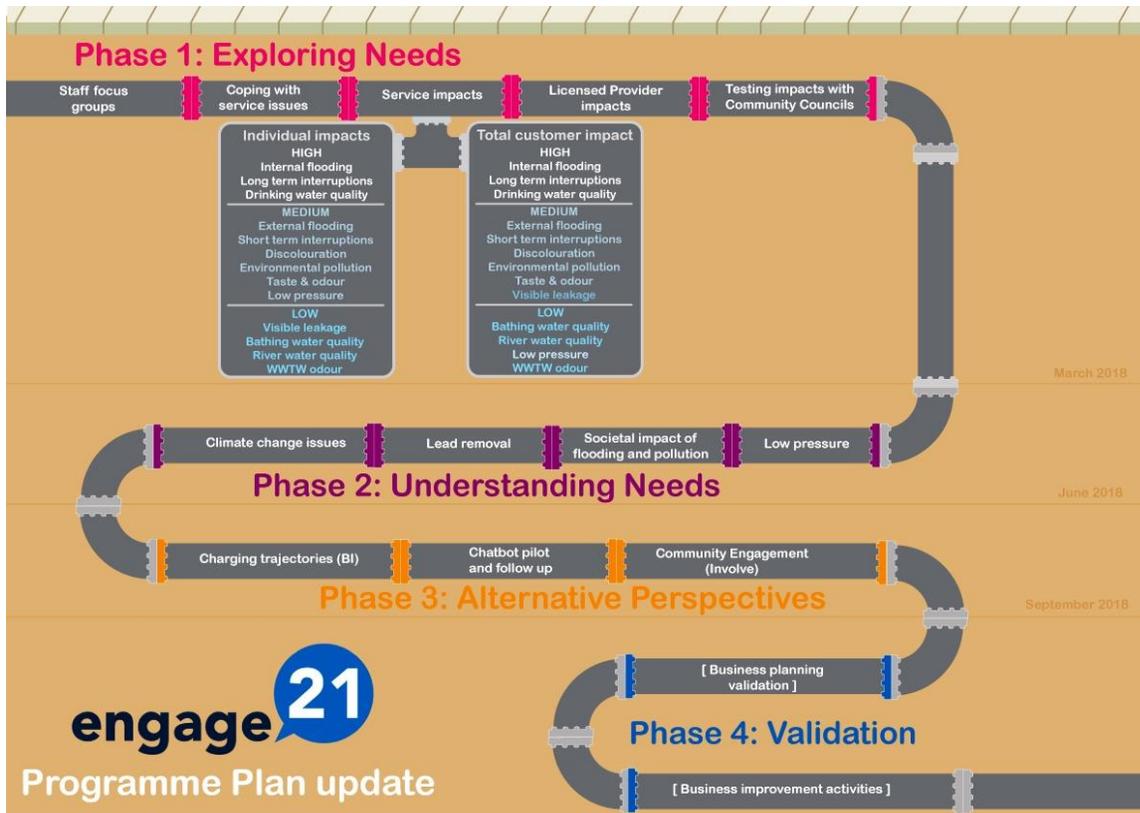
Customer Forum Position Papers  
Ethical Business Regulation Support Group: fourth stakeholder perception review  
Mapping of existing research report  
Minutes of RCG meetings  
OECD's Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions report  
RCG Research Timeline  
RCG Terms of Reference  
SGN's Customer Engagement Group Final report December 2019  
SRC21 High Level Programme and Supporting Documents Timeline  
Strategic Plan: Minute of Agreement  
Strategic Plan: Our Future Together  
Strategic Plan: Customer Insights Supporting Document  
Studies listed under the Customer Insights Supporting Document  
Tripartite Cooperation Agreement between CAS, SW & WICS  
WICS' Methodology paper for SRC21

#### **List of stakeholders consulted**

Citizens Advice Scotland  
Customer Forum  
Drinking Water Quality Regulator  
Scottish Environment Protection Agency  
Scottish Government  
Scottish Water  
Water Industry Commission for Scotland

## Annex 2

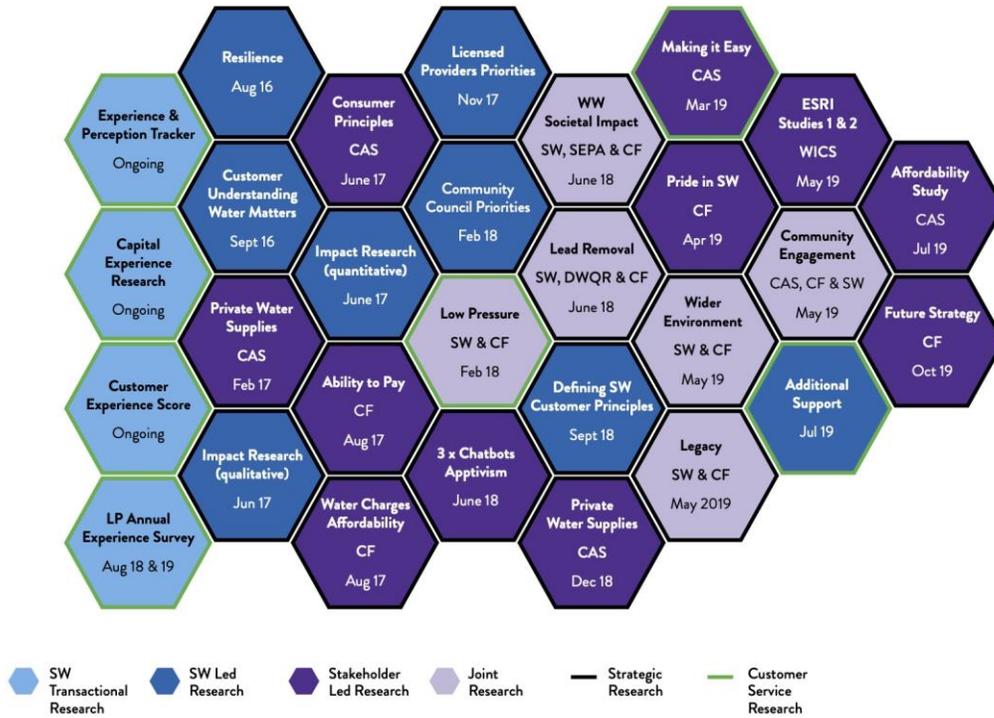
### Scottish Water’s Engage 21 “pipeline” diagram.



Source: Scottish Water

### Annex 3

### Honeycomb diagram summarising key research activities during SRC21



Source: Scottish Water Strategic Plan: Our Future Together (2020)