Flowing in the right direction:
Water use in the public sector
Foreword

With the ever-increasing focus on efficiency, environmental impact and social value in the UK, the importance of sustainability in the public sector has never been greater.

Although there are great examples of services being transformed while reducing their impact on the environment, there’s still more to be done – particularly when it comes to water efficiency and consumption.

Water efficiency may not have received a great deal of attention in recent years, but it provides the chance for the public sector to dramatically lower existing costs and contribute to their sustainability goals.

With an estimated 5.39 million people employed across the UK public sector, and countless more using their services, the sheer volume of users highlights the opportunity that water management offers for organisations to make a difference in driving efficiency, sustainability and lowering costs in the long-term.

We want to highlight how change can be delivered. Our independent research study has generated a snapshot of how people working across the public sector, and other businesses, are currently using water, how their attitudes to using water are changing and what initiatives and programmes are in place to reduce consumption.

The results paint a picture of a public sector workforce (along with its private sector equivalent) more in tune with its environmental responsibilities, but not acting with the same sustainable vigour as at home. The clear challenge for utility managers will be to harness the potential to inspire behaviour change and identify areas where significant savings can be made.

As well as providing insight into the mindset of people in your organisations and communities, I hope you find the findings in this report useful in your thinking around your own water management strategy – whether that is simply monitoring and managing your utilities infrastructure more effectively or engaging with those who use it to ensure they do so in a better, more conscientious way.

It’s our ambition to create a more effective, water-efficient and innovative water market in the UK. Partnering with organisations in the public sector, we can do just that.

Andy Hughes
Chief executive officer, Water Plus

“"It’s our ambition to create a more effective, water-efficient and innovative water market in the UK. ""
A shift in mindset

In the current challenging times it’s clear that the public sector is under greater pressure to cut costs and be more sustainable than ever before.

Those responsible for managing utilities will know all too well that a collective change in hearts and minds is essential if they are to address these challenges. Having the backing of those using their buildings is a major asset, and the good news is that progress is already being made in relation to water usage.

**Attitudes to water use are changing**

Our research shows that people working across the public sector, from central departments and local authorities to the NHS and emergency services, are changing their attitudes towards how they consume water. And it’s moving in the right direction.

Almost two-thirds (62%) of public sector workers in England and Scotland say they now take more care of the water they use at home than they did 12 months ago.

Significantly, it’s not all about reducing their bills. Clearly, concerns about the environment and the ‘Blue Planet effect’ are having an impact. In fact, our study found that more than half (52%) have reduced their water use because they are concerned about their impact on the environment, as opposed to the 32% whose motivation is to curb their spending.

Notably, three in 10 are concerned about the potential of water shortages in the future.

But while cost isn’t the primary driver, people aren’t as careful at work as they are at home. The key challenge for utility managers, therefore, will be to inspire their colleagues and those working in public sector buildings to be more aware of the water they’re using.

When looking at how people behave in the workplace, the shift in attitudes over the past 12 months is much less pronounced, with less than half (45%) indicating that they are consciously using less water. Some 53% say their attitude at work is the same as it was 12 months ago in comparison to just a third (36%) who haven’t changed their approach at home over the period.

**Reducing water use at home**

People working across the public sector are taking more care when it comes to reducing their domestic water consumption - but how are they doing it?

- Turning the tap off when brushing their teeth (63% when washing the dishes) - 72%
- Taking showers instead of baths - 62%
- Making sure washing machines and dishwashers are full before using them - 61%
- Recycling water - 24%
- Using a smart meter - 20%
Looking at the results through a geographical lens, the regional differences within the UK’s public sector are striking.

With 90% of the UK’s fresh water at their disposal, Scottish workers could be forgiven for being less concerned about how they use their H2O. Yet the gap between their English counterparts is wider than Scottish utility managers will care for.

While more than half (53%) of English public sector workers say they’ve cut back on water use at work over the period, that figure falls to just a third (36%) in Scotland. Focusing on those who say they are paying significantly more attention to their water use, one in five (22%) English workers are carrying the baton whereas just one in 10 (10%) are in Scotland.

The public sector should take heart that it’s not alone in the need to encourage people to apply the same conscientious approach to water usage at work as they do in their own home.

Half (50%) of the people we spoke to who work in businesses say they have actively reduced their water usage at work in the last year – but that figure increases to more than two-thirds (69%) at home.

**More is less?**

Public vs private – how do the sectors compare?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion of workers being encouraged to act sustainably at work</th>
<th>Proportion of workers who are paying more attention to their water use than 12 months ago</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Public sector</td>
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<td>61%</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
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<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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So, what’s driving the disconnect? Principally, there is a significant difference in the way that water conservation sits front of mind for people at home in comparison to when they are at work.

While two-thirds (67%) of public sector workers in England and 62% in Scotland say they have an employer who actively encourages them to consider the environmental impact of their actions, water is bottom of the list of priorities.

Of those public sector respondents whose employers promote sustainability across their workforces, just 28% of workers in England are encouraged to save water, with just over one in five (21%) in Scotland.

Notably, energy is also low on the agenda for public sector organisations in both England and Scotland. Great strides have been made in this respect over the last decade with new technologies designed to automate activity and reduce energy-intensive behaviours, which may explain why it is less of a priority now.

However, given the cost-savings associated with such initiatives, it’s clear that the majority are still missing a trick by not recognising the full impact that more effective management of their whole utilities portfolio can have on their longer-term sustainability.

**Public sector efficiency priorities**

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<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
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<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food waste</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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Stimulating change

With sustainability rising on the average employee’s agenda, there’s growing demand for organisations to implement sustainable practices in all areas – and water is no different.

However, less than a third (32%) of English public sector workers are aware of any water reductions targets in place at work, with just 17% in Scotland.

Of those we surveyed across the UK, more than two-thirds (67%) of the respondents feel their employer could do more to encourage them to cut their water use at work. Almost one in three (31%) feel that they could be doing significantly more.

Part of the problem is low awareness of, or the actual availability of, water-saving devices in the workplace. More than one in three public sector workers (35%) say they are not aware of anything being in place to reduce the amount water being used. This is far more pronounced north of the border, with 44% of Scottish employees saying they are unaware of any initiatives or devices in place, compared to 27% in England.

When it comes to people being aware of what’s going on in their workplace, 29% cite having instant boiling water taps installed. Similar numbers (30%) are aware of water efficient toilets and urinals being in place, while sensor taps (17%) are proving more popular than plunger taps (8%).

The qualitative data we gathered, highlighted that people appreciate being educated, stimulated and having visibility on their environmental performance. For water, this means more can be done around communicating your organisation’s goals, the actions being taken and achievements being realised, and ensuring all parties know how they can play their part.

Which cities are seeing the biggest shift in attitude towards more sustainable water use?

- **Southampton** 81%
- **Manchester** 90%
- **Birmingham** 83%
- **Glasgow** 60%
- **Edinburgh** 52%
- **Newcastle** 63%
- **Leeds** 71%
- **Nottingham** 89%
- **London** 76%
Conclusion

The key steps public sector organisations can take to reduce water use

Analysing the results of this study, it’s clear that there’s a huge opportunity for public sector organisations to make a big difference when it comes to water – both environmentally and from a cost-perspective.

Notably, and perhaps against conventional wisdom, the private and public sector continue to imitate one another – neglecting water in favour of driving sustainability in other, more consumer-friendly ways.

What’s evident though is that there is a direct correlation between those who are encouraged to reduce their environmental impact and those who act – and this can be applied across the board, including for water.

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Research methodology

To gather the data in this report, 500 people working in the public sector (250 from Scotland and 250 from England) and 500 people working in businesses (250 from Scotland and 250 from England) were surveyed in May 2019.

The research was conducted by independent survey consultant, Censuswide.
Want to find out more about water efficiency, and how Water Plus can help you?

Email communications@water-plus.co.uk and we’ll come back to you.