

1 Introduction

SA Water's vision is 'delivering trusted waters services for a sustainable and healthy South Australia'. Key to delivering this vision is our commitment to driving customer outcomes by providing safe, smart, reliable, and affordable services.

As determined by legislation, our relationship is with property owners as bill payers and we do not currently have a direct relationship with tenants. Our Customer and Community Corporate Strategy aspires to prioritise the customer's point of view and recognise the responsibility we have to all types of customers including consumers of our services such as tenants.

In recent years we have sought to better understand the needs of tenants as related to the services we provide and explored how we might best develop a service model to address these needs within the bounds of our legislative and regulatory obligations. Ultimately however, SA Water does not hold any responsibility or input to the individual tenancy agreement and arrangements between the property owner (as the financially responsible bill payer) and their tenant.

2 Tenant research

Research to further understand tenant needs has taken place in the context of:

- Pricing reform options put forward by the Essential Services Commission of South Australia (ESCOSA) in 2013
- Review (still underway) of the Water Industry Act (2019)
- Amendments to the Water Retail Code in 2020, and
- Ongoing review of the operation of interstate water utilities.

Research was undertaken to better understand our relationship with tenants and determine how we could adapt our service model to better recognise tenants as customers. Initial research was undertaken in 2019/2020 with follow up research occurring in 2021.

2.1 Research outcomes

Key themes and related insights emerged from the research:

Water usage & bill

- 78% of tenants think it is important to see their water usage/ bill.
- Property owners don't always pass on bills. There is a lack of trust that property owners are doing the right thing.
- Lack of visibility of usage is an issue when bills are high. Tenants want to be able to control usage.

Payments and supports

- 74% of tenants are interested in the option to request extra time to pay their bills when struggling.
- 71% are interested in having a payment plan to spread the cost of high bills.
- Regular payments towards utility bills to alleviate bill shock would be useful for some tenants. Of those experiencing bill stress 34% were more likely to want weekly/fortnightly payments and 27% would prefer monthly payments.

- 68% would like to deal directly with SA Water as they are uncomfortable asking the property owner for support for fear of losing their tenancy.
- 60% of respondents indicated they experience bill stress.

Faults and maintenance

- 83% of tenants would like texts or emails when their water supply is interrupted.
- 77% of tenants would like text or email alerts about the progress of faults.
- 73% of tenants would like improved water efficiency in rentals by having rules for property owners around installing water saving devices before they can pass on charges.
- 76% of tenants would like rules for property owners to maintain water devices before charging tenants. For example, timely attendance to leaks that can leave tenants out of pocket.

2.2 External engagement

Our tenant research has been widely socialised across key stakeholders including:

- South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS), Uniting Care Wesley Bowden (UCWB), and Uniting Communities.
- Department for Environment and Water in relation to the review of the Water Industry Act
- SA Civil and Administrative Tribunal (SACAT)
- Rent Right SA

3 Response to discussion paper

Our response addresses Sections 6 and 10.

3.1 Section 6 Housing standards and retaliatory evictions

Should the RTA include further complimentary provisions to those proposed under Section 1 of this paper to ensure tenants can exercise their rights without the risk of a retaliatory eviction or rent increase?

Our research found that tenants can be reluctant and fearful of seeking water bill payment arrangements/extensions via their landlords due to fears of eviction or future ability to secure rental agreements. SA Water supports further provisions under the Residential Tenancies Act to reduce risk of retaliatory eviction or rent increase.

Should the RTA impose minimum energy efficiency standards in rental properties

SA Water recognise an opportunity to impose minimum water efficiency standards, both for the financial benefits to water consumers but also to reduce the waste of a precious resource.

In the research we saw that tenants feel they have no control over the maintenance of properties. Poorly maintained properties which can result in unattended leaks or poor water efficiency can impact water bills and leave tenants out of pocket.

Introducing standards making properties more water efficient through installing water saving devices and addressing leaks in a timely manner could be a consideration. This would bring

South Australia in line with New South Wales and Queensland where water saving devices are a requirement of rental agreements and provide assurance to tenants of a minimum standard of quality.

3.2 Section 10 Water billing

Should the RTA require landlords to provide tenants with a copy of any water bill the tenant is required to pay within 30 days of receiving the water bill?

Through our research we learnt of inconsistent practices regarding property owners on-charging of water and sewerage fees and bill information provided to tenants. Tenants (who did not receive a copy of the bill) indicated a lack of visibility over water use and had limited information about fees on charged.

Where landlords require tenants to reimburse them for water bills, SA Water supports changes that require property owners to provide tenants with a copy of the SA Water bill. We note that the liability for payment of the bill remains that of the owner of the property.

SA Water notes that any changes made that require SA Water to bill tenants directly, or be required to provide them with a copy of the bill, will have a substantial change requirement to our billing technology, processes and supporting systems with associated timeframes and costs. Under our regulatory framework this work would be subject to the conditions of regulatory planning and the costs would be passed on to our entire regulated customer base as a bill increase.

Should responsibility for the payment of the water supply fee be paid by the landlord, as is the standard practice in other jurisdictions?

SA Water notes that this potential change would bring SA into line with some other jurisdictions. Should this proceed, provision of a copy of the bill to tenants also supports transparency around what charges are to be paid by each party.

Should landlords have a full or partial obligation to pay the excess water charges resulting from a reported water leak that remains unrepaired, noting this would require the RTA to define how excess water charges are identified?

SA Water's research found that tenants felt vulnerable and at fear of losing their tenancy should they need to ask for water leaks to be repaired or request support to pay their water bill by instalments.

In SA Water's view all water leaks should be dealt with as soon as possible to avoid bill shock and the waste of a precious resource. Any requirement or standard that helps address this in a timely manner is welcomed.

Where allowances may be provided for service interruption or leaks, clarifying the property owner responsibility to pass allowances on to tenants could be a further consideration.

4 Conclusion

SA Water is supportive in principle of the proposed changes to the Residential Tenancies Act as discussed above, within the context that the property owner remains the ultimately liable party for payment of water and wastewater services provided to a property they own.

Version History

Version	Date	Author	Comments
0.2	23/11/2022	Corrina Mercure	First draft addressing feedback to outline

1.0	28/11/2022	Corrina Mercure	Final version approved by General Manager
1.1	2/12/2022	Corrina Mercure/ Helen Spencer	Final version with minor amends following review by CE

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