

THE WATER REPORT EXPERT FORUM

Please help us get fast feedback on key industry issues and policies by joining our The Water Report Expert Forum. The process is simple, easy and completely anonymous. You will be emailed a survey once every few months by our research partner Accent, to complete online. Accent send us aggregate, anonymised data which we report in the following issue.

We are actively seeking new members, so if you are working at a reasonably senior level in the sector, within a company or at another stakeholder organisation, please email karma@thewaterreport.co.uk to join. Thank you very much to our existing members.



HARD TIMES

From death threats and violence to challenge down the pub, workers are feeling the human consequences of the negative public discourse about water. And there are consequences for the sector as a whole too.

Anecdotal, hostility to water staff has sharply increased amid the negative public discourse – which could have both human consequences and consequences for companies and the industry as a whole – particularly as it comes at a time when the sector needs to attract thousands more colleagues and partners to deliver ambitious improvement plans for the future.

We asked The Water Report Expert Forum members to share their insights on the experience of working in or with the water sector at the moment, and for their thoughts on forward skills / talent prospects. The research is small scale, more akin to a focus

group that a mass survey. But the findings nonetheless raise real cause for real concern.

Human consequences

Around half of our respondents said they had some personal experience of challenging or negative sentiment because they work in or with the water sector, while nearly two-thirds said they know of other water colleagues who have experienced challenging or negative sentiment.

In the worst cases, the severity is alarming. One respondent shared: “I haven’t had direct abuse yet but my predecessor... had targeted death threats... I therefore have significant additional security at my home provided by the company.” Furthermore: “There have been some very aggressive incidents in the team – someone was nearly run down in a worksite when a car drove through, another was threatened with physical sexual violence from someone who didn’t like the answer they were receiving, another was threatened with poo being delivered to them at their workplace for example. Some of my colleagues face quite aggressive questioning in parish and local council meetings – including with finger pointing and other direct personal criticism.”

There was a sense from a number of respondents that open criticism is becoming commonplace. One said: “We are all experiencing the same thing and I have heard that some

front line colleagues are getting quite a bit of flak to the extent now that if they can, they tend to not mention that they work for a water company.” Social media was flagged as a particular issue. One remarked: “Media interviews and discourse on social media generally [is] more challenging these days, again because of misinformed views.” Importantly, quite a few Forum members shared that the negativity is also affecting personal lives. For instance:

“My colleagues are regularly challenged in their social lives (e.g. at the pub).”

“There has been a material shift in perceptions, including from family members.”

“There is much more awareness with the general public than ever before so at social events, I quite often get asked my view and people willingly share their views which is quite negative.”

“Almost every time I’m asked where I work, the response is firstly to complain about sewage ‘dumping’, secondly to complain about polluted rivers, and thirdly to criticise what is seen as profiteering.”

“Those in my extended circle are nervous of talking about what I do and on occasion have ridiculed the way that the industry works.”

Some had simply not come across anyone making negative comments or actions at all, and others did not seem to categorise any challenge they have experienced as an issue. For

instance: “The general experience of colleagues and myself is that people are willing to engage to understand the facts.”

Some, however, clearly felt angry about the whole situation: “Those who slate the industry NEVER acknowledge the contribution of people in it. There’s huge commitment, most of it unseen, i.e. emergencies, working in all weathers, worked through Covid etc. These ill-informed people and politicians – where were they????”

Some saw need for employers to do more: “We need to do more to protect current employees from abuse – it is not acceptable for people to be threatened when all they want to do is help customers and support the environment.”

Change over time

We also asked about how experiences have changed over time. Just over half of Forum members had a sense that levels of hostility towards water workers have increased over the past two years, while just over a quarter felt hostility levels had stayed about the same and the rest were unsure (see chart 1).

Comments from those identifying an increase included that there had been “a step change” and that the experience had “absolutely” changed. Some specific observations were:

“It has increased in line with the rise in media scrutiny, hyperbolic commentary and the increased transparency of operational performance.”

“There have been an increase in operational colleagues experiencing negative verbal and threats of physical violence, and damage to property.”

“It feels like the starting point very often now is that water industry employees are turning up to events and... representing ‘the bad guys.’”

Others, however, pointed out that some hostility had long been a serious issue. For instance: “Our front line teams... have always faced abuse. When I was seconded into front line teams 20 years ago, there were people who carried baseball bats in their vans for self defence if called to unblock sewers at night in rough parts of town.”

At the other end of the spectrum, some said outright they had no knowledge of hostility increasing – for instance: “I have had no reports of any negative comments or hostility towards staff.” For others, our choice of the word ‘hostility’ was too

strong, or was appropriate selectively rather than generally:

“Reduced levels of support, respect and willingness to cooperate yes, but not hostility.”

“A definite hostility towards the companies rather than anything against employees.”

“I have not heard reports of any hostility towards frontline workers – it tends to be directed towards higher paid senior management like myself. Certainly when I share what I do for a living, it prompts responses of ‘that must be a tough job’. I wouldn’t have heard that so much five years ago.”

Cost to the sector

Turning to the sector-wide impacts, we asked whether the negative public narrative and its knock-on consequences was likely to have a material effect on retention and recruitment. The Forum felt the impact on recruitment would be far more material; around two-thirds felt the negative narrative would impact efforts to attract staff to the sector, whereas only around one-third thought it would impact keeping hold of staff, and even that was caveated by references to it affecting a limited number, notably younger colleagues and new recruits.

Comments on retention included that respondents had seen little evidence of people leaving for this reason; that many staff are motivated and committed (“many people who have worked in the sector for a long time are driven

by purpose and generally love what they do and are very dedicated to it so I’m not sure they are leaving due to this negativity”); and that other issues such as pay and pensions were more material considerations.

Regarding recruitment, however, many reported already seeing an impact. Comments included:

“Definitely having an impact on recruitment. I have heard of many water companies really struggling to hire particularly younger demographic because of the negativity and poor brand of the sector and similar stories for those working in the supply chain.”

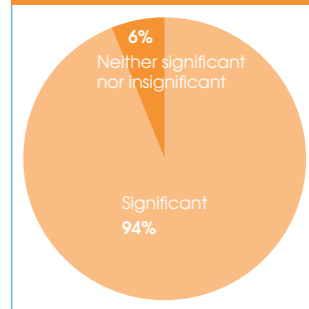
“Definitely we have had more difficulty recruiting, especially more towards the top end of the organisation where the financial and reputational pressures are very much at the forefront of the consideration of senior individuals.”

“We are already seeing this. In a jobs market with choice, the reputation of the sector becomes ever more critical.”

For some, the negative discourse was more a compounding factor than a cause. One contributor said: “It is already hard to recruit in the water sector because of continued poor performance and appalling communications from water companies.”

For those who did not feel recruitment was particularly affected, this was variously because of no sight of this; that only a minority of roles might be affected (“regulation, en-

CHART 2: HOW SIGNIFICANT AN ISSUE WILL ATTRACTING AND RETAINING STAFF THIS DECADE BE?



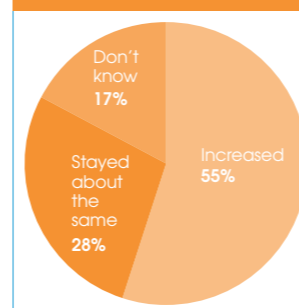
vironmental”); and that other factors are more material – for instance “It is still a reasonably well paid sector, with good training and security of tenure.”

Understaffing

Whatever the cause, virtually all respondents (94%, see chart 2) said attracting and retaining all the staff the sector needs this decade will be a significant issue. Three key factors stood out: the sheer scale of the delivery programmes coming down the line; the growing need to attract talent from highly competitive sectors, notably data and digital;

I haven’t had direct abuse yet but my predecessor... had targeted death threats... I therefore have significant additional security at my home.

CHART 1: HAS HOSTILITY TOWARDS WATER WORKERS OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS



and significant numbers retiring. Reputation was also cited, as was a critical view of the actual nature of the sector, with one commenting: “The main issue is, why would anyone want to work for a business without a clear environmental purpose and whose corporate structure and culture is out dated and not fit for purpose?”

The Water Report Expert Forum widely thought the consequences of not attracting all the people the sector needs this decade would be dire. Chiefly, delivery would suffer, prompting more service failures, environmental consequences, financial penalties, trust problems and staff burnout. Many cited some kind of vicious circle or negative downward spiral resulting. For instance: “Failure to deliver the level of investment which politicians and customers expect simply because of lack of staff could be terminal for the sector’s reputation. It would also mean that the environmental improvements which are needed urgently will be further deferred, and the risk of supply failure will increase. Back to the 1970s!”

One thought understaffing might jolt change: “In a way, it will force the transformation in how we work that is needed.”

What to do about it

We asked the Forum to suggest any strategies or ideas to improve the sector’s attractiveness to talent. Unsurprisingly, there was no silver bullet. Many put forward practical suggestions, including increasing apprenticeships; recruiting from non-traditional pools – e.g. ex-offender schemes; and reducing boom/bust cyclical-

ity and bureaucracy. Other responses can be grouped into three key categories:

›Shift the narrative

“I think we need more narrative about the social purpose of the sector and a much stronger unified voice around the good work that the water sector does and more emphasis on the value of water in our lives.”

“Strident challenge to misinformed activists; our people are some of the best environmentalists in the country.”

“Develop and promote a narrative around the people who work day in, day out to protect public health and the environment. Though there is a risk that some might view them as lions led by donkeys...”

“Less opaqueness about what challenges are faced. More community engagement in BAU rather than being seen only in a negative light of bills, roadworks and leaks. A positive but honest presence in the press would also help. It’s time we had a national conversation about water and mobilise our communities to help (not treat them like idiots and then ignore them).”

›Role of regulation

“A fresh approach to the sector and a more cooperative relationship between regulators and company leadership. In my experience there are plenty of leaders in the water industry who really want to make a difference, including me. When we invest time and effort into trying to make a difference, it’s very disheartening to feel the regulators are unresponsive to these efforts.”

“A good regulatory settlement ensuring that the operating and capital costs of the businesses can be covered over the full five years so that all the work required can be delivered effectively. That would allow a breathing space for reputations to be improved as well.”

“Change in political and regulatory sentiment – need to recognise the issues are cross sector, and encourage cross-sector work to solve them (water companies, agriculture, industry, urban and rural planning). That way it is a shared challenge people will want to be part of.”

›Corporate change

“The water companies need to start behaving more responsibly and focus on the needs and concerns of customers and for the environment.”

“Change everything but it starts with leadership.”

Collective response?

We also asked whether a sector-wide, collective response is needed to tackle talent challenges. There is already sector-wide activity, for instance that coordinated by Energy and Utility Skills (see for example recent work relating to water workforce requirements for nature-based solutions, net zero and AI/digital <https://www.euskills.co.uk/2024/03/11/water-industry-workforce-resilience-research/>) and professional membership bodies including the Institute for Water and CIWEM. But we pressed on whether a concerted, wide-ranging, sector-scale response would be desirable. 83% said yes, and 17% no (see chart 3).

Those who were reticent pointed out companies: need to differentiate rather than be “all tarred with the same brush;” compete for skills, especially as part of AMP8 mobilisation; and are simply not that great at collaborating – “the sector is terrible at working collectively on these issues”. One cautioned: “Sector wide responses will almost certainly backfire and look like a distraction to operational failures.”

Those in favour of concerted collective action cited factors

including better reach, more impact, and the need to get on the front foot with this critical challenge. A few argued that independents and third parties should lead, rather than the sector itself:

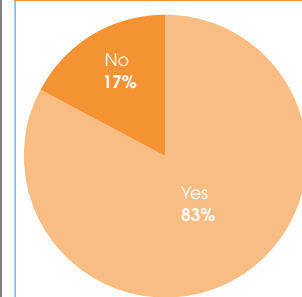
“A sector-wide response is needed but not one that is led by the utilities or the regulator. Everything negative in the press sits around these two entities. Let’s have a national conversation led by the supply chain, NGOs and academia which is where the passion and energy exists.”

Final thoughts

Asked for any final thoughts, a few Forum members said it was important to learn lessons from how the sector arrived at the point of being widely criticised. Regarding CSO monitoring, one said: “It should have realised that just because it knew this was happening, others did not, and might be appalled. And that shining a light into the murky waters of sewage spills would encourage scrutiny of other aspects of operational and financial performance that people outside the sector would think were unacceptable. The result was that the sector quickly lost control of the narrative and has been on the back foot ever since.”

Seizing back control of the narrative was seen as at least part of the solution to the talent crisis. **TWR**

CHART 3: IS A SECTOR-WIDE, COLLECTIVE RESPONSE NEEDED?



“There has been a material shift in perceptions, including from family members.”