Alistair Carmichael MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committe

6 January 2026

By email: EFRACOM@parliament.uk

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your letter of 26 November about debt collection practices.

We are fully committed to supporting customers who struggle to pay their bills, particularly at a time when bills are rising to pay for necessary investment into our water and wastewater systems. We offer a range of payment schemes and social tariffs programmes to ensure that vulnerable customers can continue to access services and keep bills affordable for those who need it. On our website, you can find our Code of Practice, which includes our process for customers who struggle to pay their bills (page 40), as well as a dedicated page for customers who are struggling to pay to find appropriate support.

We are able to provide the information that you have requested relating to enforcement visits from 2016, when we began collecting data. Since that time, there have been 55,059 cases where enforcement agents were instructed, with 13,120 of these being in respect of judgment debts under £1,000. We have never sought Suspended Committal Orders (SCOs) as we do not use this as a method of enforcement.

I'd also like to share some more information that the Committee might find useful in understanding our early-stage and debt collection practices:

- If a customer is suffering from dementia or a critical illness, they will not be pursued for a debt via litigation.
- In the early collection stage, we make every effort to engage with cash-paying customers (i.e. those not paying by direct debit or other mutually agreed payment scheme) to offer them options for repayment and/or to signpost them to support organisations, such as Citizens Advice, Money Advice Centres, and Step Change.
- Our engagement includes multiple written correspondences, phone calls, SMS, and emails.
- If the customer pays their balance or sets up a payment scheme, then their progression through collections will cease.
- The length of the early collection journey typically lasts between 110 and 125 days. If this time passes with no resolutions in place, the debt will then be passed on to an external debt collection agency.
- If customers fail to engage with the debt collection agency or Southern Water, they will be assessed for litigation suitability.
- If litigation is suitable, a formal letter is sent before issuing the court claim. This provides the customer with a period of 30 days to pay the debt or set up a payment plan.
- After the 30 days have passed and where no resolution is in place, arrangements will be made to issue a claim in the County Court.

We make every effort to support customers in times of hardship through regular engagement and communication. Collecting a debt through litigation would be a last resort, after providing extensive opportunities to rectify the debt through other options. In addition, all the third-party organisations we use in debt collection are trained to deal with vulnerable customers and can assess whether they may be eligible for one of our social tariffs.

We hope this provides the Committee with the information in seeking to understand how we recover unpaid, overdue debts and the programmes and tariffs we provide to those who are struggling to pay their bills. Please let us know if you have any further questions, or we can provide any further information that would be useful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Lawrence Gosden
Chief Executive Officer