

# Saffron Walden

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## Water Hardness

Spring 2021

## What's happened?

We contacted you at the end of March 2021, to let you know that the specialised equipment we used to partially soften your water had come to the end of its life. This means that your water is now at the natural level of hardness that's common to your area.

We invited all residents to share their questions and concerns at our online customer events on Tuesday 20 April. Thank you to everyone who attended. The feedback you gave showed us how passionately you care about the hardness of your water and how the change has affected you.

The challenges that climate change, demand for water and a growing population is placing on the whole water industry is immense, and we really do have to make hard choices where investments are made to ensure long-term sustainable and resilient water supplies for our customers, whilst taking care of our environment.

We promised to listen to your views and share a decision with you.

## Our decision

We understand that we've partially softened the water in your area for a long time. We do not operate additional water softening treatment anywhere else, this arrangement was unique to your area. From 1963 to 2014, customers paid an additional charge on their bills for partially softened water. Although this charge was removed in 2015, many of you who attended the event told us that you'd be happy to consider paying a small additional charge to partially soften your water again.

In recognition that we have partially softened the water in the past, and our commitment to you, we've agreed that we will look at ways to **partially soften your water** in the future.

## Next steps

We've identified three potential ways that we would be able to look at to partially soften your water. You may be thinking, why can't we just switch the old water softening plant back on? The deterioration in the performance of the equipment occurred suddenly and there's no replacement available to us right now that meets required standards of our industry. This means any potential solution will need to be built from scratch.

Before we can decide which option is best, we want to engage with you and our stakeholders to ensure we make the right decision for now and into the future. Therefore, in May, we'll be starting a full consultation process with you, your fellow residents, representatives from your community such as the local councils, the Environment Agency, our regulator OFWAT and the teams here at Affinity Water.



## The consultation

The consultation will cover:

- Three potential ways to partially soften your water
- The environmental impact of these options
- Our regulatory requirements from OFWAT
- How this could be funded, including any additional charge for customers.

Once the consultation has been completed it may take around 12-18 months before new equipment can be installed. We know this may feel a long way off but, in the meantime, there are many ways you can reduce the build-up of limescale in your home. To find out how, please visit [affinitywater.co.uk/hardness](https://affinitywater.co.uk/hardness)

We really are sorry for the impact that the change in your water hardness has had on you. We didn't handle our communications and engagement with you the way we should have, and we're determined to put that right. We'd like to say sorry to you and the community by giving a donation to a local charity or community group of your choice. You'll have the opportunity to tell us about the causes that matter to you during the consultation.

## Our response to your feedback

### Communication from us

We're really sorry for the way the change to the hardness of your water was originally communicated. We've been working hard in the background, with manufacturers, the regulator (DWI) and other water companies to try and resolve the issue of availability of the equipment needed to partially soften your water. The deterioration in performance of the reverse osmosis membranes at Debden Road occurred suddenly and before we were able to conclude the negotiations on these issues.

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We'll be publishing monthly updates on this page and keeping you up to date with our progress.

## **The effect on appliances (small appliances and white goods)**

We're taking concerns around appliances on board when looking at alternative options.

You can use the water hardness information when you enter your postcode on our water hardness page to adjust the one-off settings on your dishwasher, washing machine and water softener appliances. This will help them perform at the right level according to the hardness in the water.

There are lots of easy ways you can reduce the build-up of limescale from your water. These include:

- Changing the settings on your dishwasher or water softener device by following the appliance instructions. This changes the amount of salt used during its use to counteract the amount of minerals in the water.
- Use water softening/limescale prevention tablets in your washing machine. This will improve the wash results plus provide protection to the inside of your machine, which will prolong its life.
- Use a water filter for your drinking water and to fill your kettle and iron. Or get a kettle with a built-in filter, which will make a clearer cup of tea too.
- Use a de-scaler for your shower head, iron and kettle if you notice any limescale build up.
- Clear off the water droplets from your shower screen after use with a squeegee. This will leave it looking clear from residue.

## **The effect on appliances (heating systems, internal plumbing and medical appliances)**

A heating system is what's known as a 'closed system' which means the same water is circulated through your radiators and internal heating pipework. The water inside this system will not change unless you need any maintenance done. When carrying out any maintenance, there are ways to protect this internal heating system that a plumber will be able to advise you on.

All heating, hot water and medical appliance manufacturers will have specific settings for their appliances to work with hard water. You'll need to ask any questions about the hardness of your water for your appliances from the manufacturer directly, who'll be able to advise you further.

We can't advise on whether heating systems will use more energy because of water hardness levels, but we're committed to working with you to help you save water. We'll help you discover easy ways to save water in your home and protect your local streams at our new Save Our Streams website here. You'll also be able to order free water saving gadgets, and book a free water saving consultation.

If you have a concern about any grit or sediment within your internal plumbing system or in your water supply, please contact us to arrange a visit where we'll investigate and take samples for analysis. You can [contact us here](#).

## **Water quality**

The water that we produce from our treatment works always meets the highest standards set by legislation. In fact, the water we supply has to meet higher standards than those required for bottled water. The water produced at Debden Road has always been of a high standard, within water quality regulations and is absolutely safe to drink and use as normal.

Some people have additional equipment to soften their water installed in their home, this can be for many different reasons and is down to personal choice.

However, we realise the change to the hardness of your water has caused concern amongst some residents in Saffron Walden, which is why we've decided to start a full consultation to look at ways we can continue to partially soften your water.

## **Domestic water softening devices**

You can consider installing a domestic water softener at your property. We're unable to offer advice on makes or types of water softener and recommend that you contact a Watersafe plumber, plus get some independent advice.

If you're thinking of installing a water softener, we'd recommend you keep a separate un-softened mains-fed tap for cooking and drinking purposes, as most softeners replace the calcium and magnesium with sodium. This can be a particular problem for babies and for people who are on a low sodium (low salt) diet. Artificially softened water may also be more aggressive to plumbing, causing increased leaching of copper and lead into water as it stands in the pipework.

There's advice from the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) on selection of water softening equipment available [here](#) and [here](#).

## **Health concerns**

Here in the UK, we have strict guidelines on supplying a high-quality water supply and your water is perfectly safe to drink and use. If you have any specific health concerns, we recommend that you to speak to your GP to get individual advice.

## Water pressure

The change to water hardness in this area shouldn't affect your water pressure. Any change could be due to the natural pattern of water demand throughout the day or season. Please contact us to talk about any concerns you may have and we'll do our best to help you. You can [contact us here](#).

## Our commitment to sustainability and the environment

Our primary focus at Affinity Water is to ensure the long term sustainability of water resources in our supply area and adapt to the challenges of climate change, a growing population and increasing demand for water.

We need to protect our precious countryside such as the regions globally rare chalk streams, these habitats are rarer than coral reefs and are relied upon by a vast range of wildlife. At the same time, we want to do the right thing by customers, which is why we've listened to concerns raised by residents and are starting the consultation in May 2021.

This year alone, we are set to invest £174 million to meet these challenges. We'll be investing in innovative technology to drive down leakage, with an ambition to have reduced leakage by 20% by 2025. We're replacing pumps to make them more efficient, installing innovative technology to help us detect problems faster and finding new and more sustainable ways to move your water from source to tap. Not only will this help to guarantee we have enough water to meet future demand it will also help to protect our beautiful and rare local chalk streams.

We do believe that every drop of water is precious and should be saved where possible. We'll help you discover easy ways to save water in your home and protect your local streams at our new Save Our Streams website. You'll also be able to order free water saving gadgets, and book a free water saving consultation.

Some Saffron Walden residents have told us that they have concerns about the environmental impact of increasing the amount of personal hygiene and cleaning products they may have to use with water that is not partially softened.

Residents also told us they are concerned if their energy use will increase as a result of harder water.

Whilst we have no scientific data to assess any potential environmental impact that hard water has on personal hygiene and cleaning products or increases in energy use, we'll be taking these concerns into account during the consultation.

## **Additional charge for water softening**

Residents in Saffron Walden used to pay an additional charge to have their water partially softened at our Debden Road Treatment Plant. This charge had been in effect from 1963 and it went towards the additional equipment needed for this.

However, this additional charge was removed in 2015 following an incident at our treatment works in 2014, where the water was unable to be softened for approximately 11 weeks. When partial softening continued following repairs at our treatment plant, the additional charge was not reintroduced.

Our teams will be looking at alternative options for partial softening, however we also have to consider affordability for all our customers in this area and their willingness to pay before any additional charge for softening is potentially reintroduced.

## **Concerns about the cost of the bill**

With more people at home over the past year due to Covid, household water use has gone up. For customers on a metered supply, who pay for what they use, this means bills will increase if consumption increases. However, we'd encourage you to visit our Save Our Stream website here to get tailored water saving advice, a free home water efficiency check and free water saving devices to help save water, which will also help to reduce bills.

For those struggling to pay, including those who have been affected financially by Covid-19, we have a number of different ways we can help such as our Low Income Fixed Tariff, payment breaks and spreading the cost of bills. You can [find out more information here.](#)

## **The historical agreement to partially soften water**

Records from 1963 show that the Water Company (then the Lee Valley Water Company) were able to supply an additional charge for softening the water at Debden Road. In 2003 a new reverse osmosis plant was commissioned to partially soften the water. In 2014, the plant experienced issues following a burst. The burst took 11 weeks to repair and the plant failed to soften the water. In 2015 new approved membranes were sourced, and we continued to partially soften the water, however the additional charge was then removed from our charges scheme.

We believe there is no legal requirement to continue to partially soften the water whilst the additional charge is not in place. However, regardless of the legal position, we do want to try and do the right thing by customers, which is why we've decided to start a full consultation to look at ways we can continue to partially soften your water.

## Compensation

We understand that it can be frustrating when appliances stop working, there are many reasons why this happens and unfortunately, we're unable to offer any compensation.

There are some things you can do to significantly reduce the build-up of limescale in your appliances, such as using water filter jugs to fill your kettle and iron and using water softening tablets in your washing machine. You can find out more information [here](#).

There used to be an additional charge on your bill for the water softening. Since 2015, we haven't asked you or your neighbours in the area to pay for this.

## New softening equipment options

Since 2003, the additional reverse osmosis treatment that was in place used specialised membrane modules to partially soften the water.

Unfortunately, there are no membrane modules that work with our existing equipment that are currently approved with the Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI).

A like for like replacement of this option may cost up to £5 million, with an additional cost of approximately £80,000 a year in day-to-day operational costs. This treatment option should last up to 10 years.

Once the consultation has been completed, it may take around 12-18 months before new equipment can be installed. You may be thinking, why can't we just switch the old water softening plant back on? The deterioration in the performance of the equipment occurred suddenly and there's no replacement available to us right now. This means any potential solution will need to be built from scratch.