



All Party Parliamentary Water Group

Co-Chairs: Angela Smith MP and Baroness McIntosh of Pickering
Vice-Chairs: Neil Parish MP, Lord Bird and the Earl of Selborne GBE FRS
Treasurer: Luke Pollard MP

Are we planning for the skills for the future?

Non-Verbatim Minutes

Tuesday 5 December, Committee Room 13, House of Commons

The All Party Parliamentary Water Group's December meeting was titled 'Are we planning for the skills for the future?'

Guest Speakers:

- David Elliott, Group Director for Strategy and New Markets, Wessex Water
- Andrew Dobbie, National Officer for Water, UNISON
- Nick Ellins, Chief Executive, Energy and Utility Skills Group
- Nigel Fen, Organisation & Employee Development Manager, South West Water

Co-Chair of the APPG, **Angela Smith MP** chaired the meeting, welcomed attendees and introduced the speakers.

David Elliot said that the water industry offers a rich pool of employment opportunity for people. However, water companies need to think about the future talent pool and the lack of wider investment in STEM subjects.

Describing the steps Wessex has taken to attract new employees and retain existing staff, he said that they have introduced more flexible retirement options, upskilled staff into new areas, developed career mapping and are increasingly working with young people through apprenticeship schemes. Going forward, he said the sector must seriously think about investing further in schools, particularly with regards to STEM subjects.

Andrew Dobbie said that UNISON has over 8,000 members working in water companies. He highlighted the work EU skills is doing in the area, and said there is an opportunity to exploit the apprenticeship levy and develop the skills the water sector needs. He said that each year, more skilled people are retiring, and argued that work needs to be done to catch this up. He said that UNISON uses a network of union reps within water companies to encourage workers to develop their skills. Through this network, UNISON is able to see where best practice takes place and can share this with other companies. More broadly, he said that investment in training will help the perception of water companies and ensure they contribute fully to society.

Nick Ellen said the water workforce is very mobile, however, workers are operating in a tightening market which is making the skills environment more and more competitive. He described the work of the Energy and Utilities Skills Partnership, which brings together 29 organisations and has established a number of overarching strategies for the sector to attract the necessary talent.



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Nigel Fenn said that both EU Skills and Water UK have galvanised the sector to address the skills gap. He said South West Water has seen significant improved in recent years having rolled out an apprenticeship programme. He described how the apprentices have helped to drive a culture change, fresh thinking, and greater innovation.

Angela Smith MP thanked speakers for their contributions and then opened the floor to questions.

Leanne Hilton from Middlesex University asked whether there are plans to work more closely with UK academia? The speakers agreed and said that most water companies work closely with the universities in their area.

Philip Nelson from Policy Consulting asked whether there are plans to work more closely with schools. David Elliott from Wessex Water said that Wessex is in dialogue with schools in the region, about how to invest in activities that are linked to the curriculum.

Angela Smith MP said she was surprised that the water sector isn't attracting young people, particularly in a period of instability. **Andrew Dobbie** agreed and said that there is a lack of careers advice, and often children think the best, and only pathway to employment is via university.