

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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# Water governance on the streets of Scotland: How frontline public workers encounter and respond to tensions in delivering water services with communities

Kirsty Holstead<sup>1,2</sup> | Shona Russell<sup>1</sup> | Kerry Waylen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Management, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Scotland

<sup>2</sup>Social Economic and Geographical Sciences, James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland

## Correspondence

Kirsty Holstead, School of Management, North Haugh, St Andrews, Scotland.

Email: [kh38@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:kh38@st-andrews.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

We explore the activities of frontline workers situated in public bodies responsible for water service provision. We use Scotland as a case study. Here, like in other parts of Europe, there are greater expectations and responsibilities placed on communities to tackle water concerns. In this context, frontline workers are required to collaborate closely with communities to encourage their involvement in public services whilst being more attentive to their needs and concerns. Doing so brings the relationship between frontline workers and communities into focus. In water services, a research gap exists as to how frontline workers interact with communities and influence engagement. Although frontline workers in water services have a highly influential role, evidence of how they perform their daily duties remains limited. This gap hinders understanding the challenges that frontline workers experience and how they can be overcome. Responding to this gap, we look to administration and policy studies, where a tradition of studying frontline workers exists in diverse public policy areas. Using the concepts of biasing, aligning and negotiating, we explore the activities of frontline workers. Using interview and observational data, we demonstrate how they (i) bias services to limit and control engagement, (ii) align resources and people to enhance opportunities for engagement and (iii) negotiate with colleagues and communities to deliver goals. We unpack the role of frontline workers and explore their pertinent position in water governance as they work inside and outside their organisations. We finish with conclusions and future avenues for research.

## KEYWORDS

community engagement, frontline workers, state-citizen interactions, water governance, water services

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition that far-ranging and systematic change is required to respond to water challenges caused by depleting water

quality, water scarcity and flooding issues, all of which will be further exasperated due to climate change in the future (IPPC, 2018; Konapala et al., 2020; OECD, 2017). Holistic, integrated and risk-based approaches to water and flood management are increasingly

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common, based on the premise that water challenges cannot be entirely prevented, but their impact can be reduced through adaptation and preparation (Aguar et al., 2018; Bubeck et al., 2017; Dewulf et al., 2015). This cross-cutting agenda has led to a gradual paradigm shift that presupposes that technical responses alone are no longer appropriate to address environmental issues. Instead, aside from governments, other actors, such as communities, are recognised as central to rethinking how we govern water (Forrest et al., 2021; Johnson and Priest, 2008; Nye et al., 2011; Sharp, 2017). As such, a reorientation of responsibilities for water concerns is occurring in various European countries. Water services (i.e. domestic drinking and wastewater supplies and flood risk management) is an area where governments encourage citizens to take up more responsibility (Alda-Vidal et al., 2020; Duijn et al., 2019; Forrest et al., 2021; Grecksch, 2021; Snel et al., 2021). Communities are increasingly encouraged to express their interests to influence decisions around service delivery and hold decision-makers to account as well as practical actions to steward water, and reduce water consumption and flood risk (Bakker, 2008; Forrest et al., 2019; Mees et al., 2016; Sharp, 2017). While this can lead to environmental improvements, strengthen democratic outcomes and perceived success of policies, others express concerns around the shirking of state responsibilities, inequalities and the extent to which radically different results are achieved (Begg et al., 2015; Waylen et al., 2015; O'Hare & White, 2018; Wamsler et al., 2020).

Thinking about water governance brings the relationship between the state and citizens into focus. To facilitate change, civil servants working at the frontline of water services (henceforth referred to as frontline workers) must demonstrate an ability to be more collaborative and responsive. They are expected to have meaningful relationships, be more outward-focused, and come into contact with communities more frequently to encourage and facilitate their involvement in, and enhance the value of public services (Grotenbreg & Altamirano, 2019; Kruijen et al., 2019). In this context, frontline workers are important for three reasons. First, they mediate between communities and public organisations. They are often tasked with collaborative working and interacting with communities, thus are central to shaping how engagement occurs (Escobar, 2015; Klein et al., 2017). Second, due to their position at the interface of the state, they affect how communities experience public bodies and the distribution of public services (Bartels, 2017; de Winter & Hertogh, 2021). Finally, frontline workers interpret and 'ground' policies into an already congested landscape of organisational, personal and professional pressures. This can lead to discrepancies and variation in policy implementation and notably give rise to frontline workers having autonomy and influence over how communities are involved in public services (de Winter & Hertogh, 2021; Funder & Mweemba, 2019).

Although frontline workers have a highly influential role, evidence of how they carry out their daily duties remains limited in water services. We lack accounts and explanations of frontline work, which are attentive to how they interact with communities and ultimately influence water governance (Klein et al., 2017; Mees et al., 2019). This gap hinders understanding the challenges that frontline workers experience and how they

can be overcome. Also, while communities are encouraged to take up new responsibilities in water services, there are thought to be only limited empirical manifestations of this taking place in some settings, so interrogating how these interactions occur may support practical work in this area (Mees et al., 2019). We contribute to this gap with a case study of water services in Scotland, which focuses on the central question: what does community engagement involve for frontline workers working in water services? Scotland was selected because community involvement in public services has been increasingly encouraged as a key feature in different policy fields (Holstead et al., 2018). Scotland is considered successful in water governance innovation and community involvement in policy design and delivery (Waylen et al., 2015; Holstead et al., 2018; Hendry, 2016b). Therefore, theoretically, practitioners have well-developed skills and wide-ranging experiences offering learning opportunities.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the literature on frontline workers in public administration and environmental governance. Second, we describe the policy context of water services in Scotland before moving on to the methodology for this study. The results explain how those working at the frontline of water services attend to and resolve tensions of their role through *biasing* services to control if, how, and when communities are involved in governance, *aligning* people and resources to enhance collaboration and participation and *negotiating* with colleagues and communities to meet their goals (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). Finally, we close with a discussion highlighting the paper's main contribution to the broader literature and future potential avenues for research.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FRONTLINE WORKERS AND COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS IN WATER SERVICES

It is not always self-evident how working more closely with communities can or should be achieved, and requires skill and throughout strategies (Mees et al., 2019; Wamsler et al., 2020). Organisational flexibility and institutional structures (Wamsler et al., 2020), diverging views on the role of participation (Mehring et al., 2021; Snel et al., 2021), feeling challenged or threatened (Bendz & Boholm, 2020), concerns around equity and equality (Mees et al., 2019), and perceptions around effectiveness and appropriateness of community action (Edelenbos et al., 2017) can stand in the way. While research usefully draws attention to practitioners' views, the intricacies of how frontline workers actually work with communities are often missed (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021; Holstead et al., 2021). If these actors perform a significant role – how do they do it? To answer this question, we look to public administration and policy studies literature, where there is an established tradition of examining the work of frontline workers in diverse areas of public policy, including security, health and education, which is also developing in the area of water governance.

The rise in interest in frontline workers is often credited to the seminal work of Lipsky on 'street-level bureaucracy'

(Lipsky, 1980/2010). Lipsky and subsequent researchers contend that frontline workers' decisions influence policy implementation and 'make' policy through interactions with the public (for a summary, see the edited collection by Hupe et al., 2015). These actors have wide-ranging influence even in instances where one may presume there is little room for variation or interpretation, such as in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive or water quality regulation (Sevä, & Jagers, 2013; Sevä & Sandström, 2017; Horne et al., 2016; de Winter & Hertogh, 2021). Contemporary scholarship on frontline actors interrogates their innovation and embodied experiences of 'street-level' work. In response, they have gathered a range of labels, including citizen agents (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), bricoleurs (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021), boundary spanners (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018) and street-level entrepreneurs (Arnold, 2015; Durose, 2011). Frontline workers emerge as significant actors in their own right; they skillfully negotiate public service provision in the context of tensions brought by their unique position at the frontline of the state.

Frontline workers, faced with work pressures and a substantial degree of autonomy and influence, develop operating procedures to make their day-to-day work manageable and enable them to meet their goals (Lipsky, 1980, 2010; Tummers et al., 2015; Tuominen & Hasu, 2020; Zacka, 2017). How frontline workers make sense of interactions with so-called 'service users' has been studied most readily in terms of coping strategies in public administration. In a comprehensive review, Tummers et al. (2015) summarise how frontline workers move towards service users (by using personal resources to support clients or prioritising among them), away from them (by rationing services or displaying ambivalence towards them) or potentially move against them (by the following rules rigidly). Others also working in public administration and public policy explore how frontline workers in participatory public service contexts do their work. Blijleven and van Hulst (2020) condensing significant research on frontline work, explain their activities in terms of how they (i) bias, (ii) align, and (iii) negotiate the provision of public services. These are discussed next, drawing on references from water governance literature, noting emerging interest in frontline workers and their activities in water services.

First, whilst working in participatory contexts, frontline workers can *bias* engagement outcomes by weighing up and choosing between different goals and priorities depending on the issues they see as most pressing (Bendz & Boholm, 2020; Lundmark, 2020; Maier & Winkel, 2017). They can guide the outcomes of interactions with communities by choosing how to 'process' them, which cases to spend more (or less) resources on and which cases to prioritise, thus ultimately shaping how much or which degree of state services certain groups receive (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). Frontline workers also guide communities through (state) funding processes and, in doing so, influence the aims, activities, and outcomes that are being achieved (Bartels, 2021). Second, frontline workers *align* resources. They bring together different actors and mobilise resources when required, pulling on various funds and organisations. This has been shown to take place in multiple ways; for instance, frontline workers make

decisions about whom to bring together, how to structure governance processes, through which means involvement should take place and which budgets should be used for different activities (Sevä & Sandström, 2017; Escobar, 2019; Funder & Mweemba, 2019; Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). They may align resources by reframing community-led activities to fit their own organisational goals and funding streams and encouraging others to undertake an activity that contributes to meeting their purposes (Funder & Mweemba, 2019). Frontline workers also rework what they and their organisations offer to suit the needs of communities (Bartels, 2021). In doing so, they align agendas, interests and responses. Finally, frontline workers *negotiate* with different actors to develop shared resolutions and answers to challenging concerns or meet their objectives. They forge relationships with colleagues and community members to create shared reference points and values (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). They use a range of means to persuade and negotiate with different actors to take specific actions, responsibilities, or accountability to enhance collaboration and meet their job goals (Horne et al., 2016). In some instances, frontline workers are a driving force of community engagement and confront colleagues who hold different views about the role of communities and public services (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). In doing so, they reframe engagement so that it is acceptable to colleagues and communities to deliver shared benefits (Bartels, 2021; Escobar, 2019).

More work is required to examine the 'actual everyday work' of frontline workers shaping participatory contexts (Escobar et al., 2018; Blijleven and van Hurst., 2021), particularly in water services and environmental governance generally (Brenz and Boholm., 2020; Mees et al., 2019; Holstead et al., 2021). A range of practitioner literature and networks exist that focus on and are tailored to the practice of practitioners (i.e. Fautre et al., 2018). However, practitioners and their practices are largely overlooked, and the realities of environmental governance for frontline workers are often ignored (Coffee, 2015; Mees et al., 2019; Holstead et al., 2021; Wamsler, 2016). In response, this paper uses the case study of water services in Scotland to understand the everyday work of frontline workers. We explore how frontline workers in Scotland's public water services respond to core challenges of their role using the concepts of *biasing*, *aligning* and *negotiating* public service provision (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). We next describe the policy context of water services in Scotland.

### 3 | POLICY CONTEXT OF WATER SERVICES IN SCOTLAND

In Scotland (as in other European contexts), water is the focus of multiple policies (Hendry, 2016a; Waylen et al., 2019). This has created separate institutions and initiatives oriented to delivering different policy goals, mainly (i) providing drinking water and wastewater services and (ii) the management of flood risks. Each policy area has its history and approaches to working with communities. Yet, increasingly in Scotland, public bodies seek alignment through partnership working, integrated projects that address multiple water concerns, as well as high-level government strategy (discussed further below),



aiming to encourage communities to play a more significant role in water service provision.

First is the provision of drinking water and wastewater services. In Scotland, this is the responsibility of Scottish Water, a publicly owned company (Hendry, 2016a). For centuries there has been recognition that water needs management to provide essential drinking and wastewater services provision. This has been accompanied by engineering and technological solutions to address water concerns such as water quality (for instance, through The Public Water Supplies [Scotland] Regulations 2014 transposing the EU Drinking Water Directive), often through centralised treatment entirely separate from communities in their design and geography. However, there is now a growing focus on the resilience of water systems and the prevention of problems at the source in light of fluctuating weather patterns and shifting water demand (Sharp, 2017). Scottish Environment Protection Agency (the environmental regulator for Scotland) published its first-ever water scarcity plan recently, outlining the need to take action now to respond to future water shortages (SEPA, 2020). As such public bodies seek to work with communities and encourage community action in response to evolving water concerns. Scottish Water, for instance, states that it commits effort and investment to involving communities in decision-making and is giving increased emphasis to working with communities to reduce water consumption. This is being done through an increased budget for education and engagement and new roles within the organisation that will focus on these issues (Scottish Water, 2019).

Second, is the management of flood risks. How flooding is understood, and the policies that target it have also changed significantly. The Pitt review in 2007 (taking place after severe floods in the UK) evidenced the importance of communities' involvement in flood risk management approaches. Subsequently, the Flood Risk Management Scotland (Act) 2009 (transposing the EU Flood Directive) approached flooding from a resilience perspective, where the emphasis was placed on community flood preparedness and personal protective building measures, citing communities as important actors in delivering flood risk management (Bracken et al., 2016; Nye et al., 2011). SEPA is the agency responsible for implementing this policy. However, it works in partnership with Local Authorities (local governments) to make plans for 14 'Local' Districts across Scotland, where Local Authorities design and deliver the flood projects on the ground. Despite the name, these each span a large area, but these plans are made for smaller Potentially Vulnerable Areas – areas at significant flood risk – so for this more local engagement is possible. Overall, the ambitions to enact resilience and community engagement in water issues are nested within the overarching Scottish Government Hydro Nation Strategy that aspires to increase the value of water in Scotland (Hendry, 2016a; Martin-Ortega et al., 2013), as well as general reforms across policy domains, which encourage 'community empowerment' (Holstead et al., 2018) and public bodies to play a more visible, integrated and preventative role in society (see Christie, 2011; Mackie, 2018). Thus, although Scotland is a small territory, it has a complex policy landscape. Public organisations increasingly interact,

work together and seek to align and coordinate ambitions to address wicked problems (Duckett et al., 2016; Hendry, 2016b; Waylen et al., 2019).

Community engagement in water services is distributed among various individuals within different agencies. Frontline workers' precise roles and tasks in Scotland's water services vary across public organisations. However, they typically liaise between their organisations and communities around encouraging community engagement in *decision-making* and *action on the ground* (Bakker, 2008; Mees et al., 2017). Examples of involvement in decision-making are public consultations, codesign and co-planning, such as plans to improve flood risk management, or decision-making relating to infrastructure (i.e. Scottish Water, soliciting local public input when planning the details of specific site interventions, or when local authorities design and plan a flood scheme). On the ground actions are where communities take steps, such as the purchase and use of property-level protection (e.g. flood gates) or reduce water consumption). In this study, we are interested in both categories, decision-making and action on the ground, where frontline workers conduct community engagement. The term 'public service' or 'water services' in this context refers to the avoidance and mitigation of harmful consequences of water concerns, including water scarcity and flooding in the context of Scotland. We interrogate state-led examples of engagement, where practitioners seek involvement across (often predefined) issues (as opposed to bottom-up activity or 'self-governance' where communities are the driving force of the interaction - although the two are challenging to disentangle in practice) (Mees et al., 2016; van Buuren et al., 2019).

In this study, we look across organisations and focus on frontline workers who come into contact with communities through the course of their work. The frontline workers involved in water services across public organisations in Scotland are in some ways distinct from those in other areas of public policy. The nature and organisation of water services, with a tradition of large scale and centralised infrastructure, which is risk-based and heavily regulated, mean that when compared to staff in other areas of public policy such as education or justice, they have more limited public interactions (Sevä, & Jagers, 2013; Sevä & Sandström, 2017; Lundmark, 2020). However, those who work in water services are expected to encounter citizens more frequently and seek their engagement to embed collaboration and engagement across water issues (Sevä & Sandström, 2017; Sharp, 2017).

## 4 | METHODS

To understand frontline workers' engagement work in water services delivery in Scotland, we used an interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). Interviews and participant observation were the main methods of data collection.

The lead author interviewed 14 frontline workers. Their interviews (15 in total, since we interviewed one person twice to ask follow-up questions) are the data analysed for this study. Our understanding was contextualised and enriched by the experiences of 16 other public sector actors involved in water service

**TABLE 1** Information about interviewees: Identifier and role. All interviewees are anonymised

Interviewee identifier in text	Role
Local Authority, 1	Flood officer
Local Authority, 2	Flood technician working closely with communities
Local Authority, 3	Engineer delivering community resilience work
Local Authority, 4	Engineer delivering community resilience work
Local Authority, 5	Engineer delivering community resilience work
Regulator, 1	Engagement specialist
Regulator, 2	Engagement specialist
Facilitator Organisation, 1	Engagement specialist
Facilitator Organisation, 2	Engagement specialist
Utility, 1	Engagement specialist
Utility, 2	Engineer involved in community engagement
Utility, 3	Engineer involved in community engagement
Utility, 4	Technical front-line staff
Utility, 5	Engagement specialist

delivery and planning who did not encounter communities in their work. Their data were not formally analysed for this study but were part of the wider project this paper is situated within. The interviews aimed to gain insight into actors' experiences of working with communities. The first author asked participants to talk about processes of engagement they had been involved in, seeking detailed accounts of the activities, surprises and challenges. The interviews sought to ascertain concrete examples and asked interviewees to elaborate on what they did and why, encouraging interviewees to reflect and explain their judgements (Soss, 2015; Wagenaar, 2014).

Interviewees were selected through a purposeful sample and held various positions within their respective organisations (Table 1). We looked for interviewees who carried out community engagement as part of their role. The ones we interviewed were selected to provide a range of community engagement experiences (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). To ensure a wide sampling frame, we asked interviewees 'whom should we speak to now?', we assessed who was represented in the sample, considered gaps and silences, and sought those who may offer contrary views (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Each interview lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. Interviews were primarily conducted in person; however, others took place online (via Microsoft Teams or Zoom) when necessary or requested (Self, 2021).

The lead author also undertook around 40 hours of participant observation in organisational settings. Observations were conducted to provide first-hand experience of practices and interactions with communities relevant to water services in Scotland (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). During the observations, the lead author was a complete observer (Byman and Bell, 2011). Observations took place in

various forums, including meetings and conferences where representatives of public organisations responsible for water services attended and where community engagement was carried out, discussed, planned, organised, evaluated, and reflected upon. The choice of observations was influenced by the research question and available access opportunities (Fine & Shulman, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). In terms of triangulation, the interviews and observations worked together. During the interviews, the lead author could discuss observational data ask follow-up questions and probing questions that were not possible during observations, whereas observations provided the opportunity to see naturalistic discussions around engagement (Kawulich, 2005; Spradley, 1980). The lead author took extensive fieldnotes during observations. In the fieldnotes, the author descriptively noted the who, what, when and how of the meeting and 'bracketed off' thoughts, feelings and observations relevant to the broader study (Emerson et al., 2011). This breadth of fieldwork and observation allowed us to access the nuances of frontline work in varied contexts whilst also balancing being time-efficient, acquiring a substantial degree of detail and understanding of the research question.

The data were analysed following Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), using Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis software MAXQDA (Verbi Software). Following Reflexive Thematic Analysis, we looked for codes and then built these up into themes. First, the lead author coded the data by sticking as closely to the words of participants as possible, coding mainly 'Invivo codes' (Saldaña, 2015). The first author also 'jotted' notes during this process, noting reflections, questions and initial 'surprises' in the data (Emerson et al., 2011; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). The codes were further developed and refined into broader 'themes' through the abductive process of moving between theory and literature, accompanied by 'conceptual leaps' and reflexive practice as standard in interpretive research (Klag & Langley, 2013; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Swedberg, 2017). The first author constantly reflected on choices throughout the process, discussed results with the co-authors, and reflected in a research journal (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Our data mapped well to the overarching categories of biasing and limiting, negotiating, and aligning (Blijleven and van Hurst, 2020). Thus, the data was coded deductively in a second phase, looking for examples of the three categories derived from public service provision in public administration studies.

## 5 | RESULTS: ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN WATER SERVICES

The results below are structured according to four key tensions that frontline civil experience in enacting community engagement in water services, namely: (i) managing relationships with communities, (ii) maintaining organisational legitimacy, (iii) goal conflict with peers and (iv) working with limited reach and resources. These challenges resemble frontline workers' difficulties in other policy areas (e.g. Funder & Mweemba, 2019; Lipsky, 1980, 2010). We use these challenges as a jumping-off point to explore frontline workers' responses and understand





how they interact with communities. Challenges or dilemmas are generative in that they both enable and constrain activities and interactions (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012; Funder & Mweemba, 2019). In response to the tensions, we explore the frontline strategies of *biasing* or *rationing* services and resources, *aligning* with colleagues and communities to help bring together people and resources and *negotiating* with colleagues and communities to meet shared goals.

## 5.1 | Managing relationships with communities

Participants commonly reported being in the “firing line” (Local Authority, 2) when they interacted with communities: working at the frontline of the state for improved services, yet feeling underappreciated by the recipients and in the instances of local authorities sometimes their organisations. Respondents across the sample described communities as generally uninterested and disengaged from water issues: “people don’t even think about flooding until they have water streaming in the front door, and then they look to us to sort it out” (Local Authority, 3). Interviewees explained that during interactions, communities would look to frontline workers in public organisations as state representatives of public water services to solve their water issues. However, frontline workers could not always do so. In this context, a key challenge for participants was an ambiguity that arose from contradictory expectations of their role. They were stuck between communities and the bureaucracy of water services, including the requirements and limitations of their job roles within their organisations. For instance, decisions about investment and policy priorities were decided by high-level processes according to predefined methodology, meaning that frontline workers often could not solve the water issues of concern or support the preferences of a community. Similarly, the dispersed responsibility for different aspects of the water and flood infrastructure meant that some areas were outside the participants’ or their organisational remit, would require complex collaboration with other public bodies or be too costly to fix. Participants shared emotive stories and fond memories of where they felt they had done a good job or made a positive change. However, interactions with communities could also be, upon reflection, variable, unpleasant or confrontational at times.

In this context, a common approach was that respondents invested in creating positive experiences and focused on enhancing relationships with communities. “Buy[ing]-into the community” (Local Authority, 1) and getting to know a local area through face-to-face visits, was one way that they created a feeling of reciprocity with communities. Participants *aligned* resources by using connections within their organisation and others to garner positive benefits for communities. One interviewee negotiated reduced rent and rates for a community resilience group (Local Authority, 5). Another used resources to organise quiz nights with prizes to enhance relationships between their organisation and local people (Utility, 1). A further means of fostering positive relationships with communities was to bring in colleagues from other organisations to “present a united front” to address a water problem (Local Authority 1). By bringing organisations together to work with communities, frontline workers

*aligned* interests and negotiated to create a shared resolution so that “we [communities and public organisations] can all work together as one” (Local Authority, 1)

Participants stated ambitions for communities to play a more significant role in water governance and that enhanced relationships with communities were necessary for this ambition to be realised. However, they often “made do” and, at times, limited their interactions because “we just don’t have the manpower” to facilitate more meaningful community relationships (Utility, 1). This approach was preferable in communities where frontline workers or their colleagues had bad experiences in the past or where they felt there would be limited interest or benefit. In these situations, they *biased* services to meet their organisational commitments whilst working somewhat collaboratively. A common strategy was to ration services by focusing time and building relationships with key individuals which they felt would be beneficial in future interactions, as evidenced by a participant when they said: “I have to keep him sweet because in the future I can go and ask him who owns that field over there” (Local Authority, 4). Other frontline workers limited face-to-face contact or suggested that community members come into their offices rather than the frontline worker making a visit because they felt their travel time could be better spent elsewhere. Finally, others opted to approach specific communities primarily (or only) when frontline workers had ‘good news’ or could solve a water concern.

## 5.2 | Maintaining organisational legitimacy and credibility

Working at the frontline of public services required balancing increasing demands and expectations of service delivery. Participants argued that communities desired water issues to be ‘fixed’ immediately, have emails and calls responded to quickly and have their requests and preferences undertaken. In this context, frontline workers aimed to strike a sensitive balance as demonstrated in the following quote: “we must always *look* like we are doing the job and being *seen* to deliver a service” (Regulator, 1). Thus, a key part of their role was creating legitimacy and credibility for their organisation and public service while also negotiating communities’ role within that. For example, public interactions and engagement frequently took place was online over social media. The utility conducted campaigns and aimed to raise awareness of the disposal of ‘unflushable’ waste (such as nappies or wet wipes). However, there was a concern that awareness-raising on this particular issue could cause critique around service provision. A participant reasoned that communities might question the organisation’s ability to deliver services if they knew the extent of pipe blockages caused by non-flushable items. Communities may conclude that water service infrastructure was not performing as well as it should be. This manifested in a reluctance from participants to appear to be asking ‘too much’ from communities. While the utility was developing work in this area, the following respondent argued that more was required:

*“We’re doffing our cap to the customer, and saying, thanks very much, we will do our best, and what you are*

*doing [flushing flushable leading to blockages] is no trouble, instead of actually saying you know what, people should step up and have an environmental responsibility as well as us and actually stop some of the bad stuff. [...] I think we are very nervous to do that, and I do not actually know what the backlash would be if we did do it (Utility, 3).*

Participants carefully *biased* how issues around which community engagement was sought were framed. They *negotiated* understandings of blame and responsibility and made sure to be “gentle” with communities concerning drain blockages (Utility, 3). Even where blockages could be traced to individual houses, they were gentler than they wanted to be. They were more ambiguous when suggesting the cause or responsibility for problems: “Even when you know that the blockage was caused by that house because there is only that house on the line, you can't say it” (Utility, 4). In other instances, maintaining organisational legitimacy could be interpreted as avoiding blame. For example, respondents from different organisations explained how there was an expectation to be physically present in the case of a water event (such as a flood) even if the issue was outside their organisational jurisdiction. The purpose was to ensure that the press or political figures understood that they were taking the issue seriously. In this instance, resources had to be organised and *rationed* away from one area to allow staff to be present at the water event.

Finally, frontline actors also carefully *biased* how water issues were framed. Some participants aimed to expand the scope and area where engagement and interactions could occur. They *aligned* resources to create opportunities to engage with communities around ‘good news’ issues, for example, by attending children's and university sports leagues, aiming to highlight the benefits of hydration (Utility, 5). Another participant provided advice to community-based organisations, for example, by establishing links with local charities and encouraging them to engage community members around issues aside from the water concern at hand. They reasoned this would increase support for the community group and allow them to have more significant input in public services (Facilitator Organisation, 1). By widening the scope of their remit in these instances, these frontline workers sought to enhance the organisational legitimacy of both their organisation as well as *negotiate* the relationship between communities and public organisations.

### 5.3 | Goal conflicts with colleagues

A key challenge of working at the frontline of public water services was tension with their colleagues in their organisations around competing visions of community involvement i.e. to what extent it should be a priority for public water services and at what cost. A familiar feeling in public organisations was that involving communities could be too “fluffy” (Utility, 1), “unscientific” (Regulator, 1) and could prevent prologue and complicate service delivery. Communities were

unpredictable and forming relationships, listening to views, and asking communities to take specific action (which one could not guarantee) took time and resources, which could be invested elsewhere. Moreover, it was unclear what benefits would be derived and if and how benefits outweighed costs such as resource intensiveness and difficulty producing concrete, tangible outcomes. Instances where project plans needed to change because of community views could be met with resistance. They were at times seen as inconvenient interruptions that slowed project management and increased costs, often without a clear benefit.

Participants had standard methods of dealing with colleagues who displayed feeling that they ‘were going a mile too far’ to incorporate community views or spend on engagement, and those who “just don't get it” (Utility, 5). How and to what extent communities should be involved in water services or how associated costs and preferences should be balanced against other assessment criteria were open to debate, decided on a project-by-project basis, and often depended on the project team and project manager involved. Participants *negotiated* with colleagues how much resources should be spent on community engagement and how and in which ways communities would influence the outcomes of projects or guide delivery. Such conversations could mean “putting your head above the parapet and getting it shot down by your colleagues” (Local Authority, 4). This perceived resistance could reduce enthusiasm for community engagement. In response, some *aligned* their behaviour to limit conflict with colleagues. They only argued for alternative courses of action or ‘extended’ engagement with communities when they strongly believed in and were potentially willing to create conflict in their team around the issue. As one interviewee reflected: “Regularly I got criticised [...] ‘I don't know why we're doing that, ‘why you doing that?’, ‘it's a waste of time’. And they probably still thought it was a waste of time at the end of the project, and that's their mindsets” (Local Authority, 4). Respondents had to develop self-confidence and belief in their work: “you just have to believe in yourself and your idea. You know that it's the right thing to do” (Utility, 5), and took time to *negotiate* expectations of engagement with colleagues to ensure that they knew what may or may not be possible from an engagement activity, as well as possible outcomes (Facilitator Organisation, 2).

Our participants acted strategically by carrying out extensive *alignment* work within their organisations to enhance support for their ideas to “bring them [colleagues] along on the journey with you” (Utility, 5). This could involve preparing visual and appealing documents to help others ‘see their vision’ for a project or activity (Utility, 5). They actively searched for people within their organisations and teams who had similar views as themselves or they felt may be possible to persuade, including more senior staff who occupied positions of authority. They would deliberately make strong relationships with project managers and other people who influence project planning to *negotiate* the desired outcome:

*“The best advice I've been given is the devil is in detail. [...] Spend time asking questions. [...] because that's the way you can start bringing out tippets of information that don't sit comfortably. And then once you got all the*



information, you can present a very reasoned argument that says this, you know, you said this this this and this, don't you think that sounds a bit crazy. And often people say 'ha, I hadn't thought of it like that.' (Utility 1).

In this quote, the participant persuaded a colleague of a particular course of action to reach a shared goal. This also involved *negotiation*, sometimes accompanied by an (often unspoken) agreement that they would reciprocate support in the future.

## 5.4 | Working with limited reach and resources

Participants often had a geographical area that bounded their work. This could be an administrative district or, in other cases, a much larger area (i.e. the West of Scotland) and involved working with communities that participants had not come into contact with in the past. Respondents *biased* resources by working through 'ready-made' organisations such as community councils, schools, water-related interest groups, or other community-led groups. Working with existing groups or a "captive audience" (regulator, 1), such as a school, was feasible to access with limited reach and resources. Working with these existing groups allowed *rationing* of services because by focusing on these groups, frontline workers would engage with a larger number of people, increasing the reach and impact of their work. Working with these groups also allowed frontline workers to manage "loud voices" and create legitimacy for a course of action (Local Authority, 5). Working with groups that were already well-developed or cohesive could quieten those individual members of communities who were more critical of a proposed activity or those with extreme views that either "love it or hate it" (Local Authority, 5). This was necessary because, contestation always existed within a community about the best course of action (Utility, 2). As a participant explains:

*You will never get 100% satisfaction across every individual, so it is difficult to deal with individuals with an individual issue. It needs to be at the community level because you just have not got the time to deal with... to sit down, discuss it with every individual in detail and also the community helps because the community will get to the individuals.* (Local Authority, 5)

However, through discussion it became evident that finding existing groups was difficult and time-consuming. Participants located groups via desk research. Some community-based groups did not have an online presence which limited potential interactions because they were not identifiable from offices of frontline workers. Non-water related groups were perceived as less interested in water services. They would require more time and resource commitment because the relevance would not be immediately apparent to the group members and would take more time to 'recruit' the group. In response, frontline workers *biased engagement by focusing on particular groups*. To identify groups, frontline workers *negotiated* aims and outcomes with other organisations with local level expertise, such as

facilitator organisations, or individuals within their own organisations who were known to be exceptionally skilled at engagement or well-networked. Respondents networked to develop relationships they could draw upon in these situations. They took the time to visit colleagues rather than email to establish good working relationships that they could later call upon when looking for possible communities to work with. In doing so they *negotiated* reciprocity with particularly knowledgeable and well-situated community 'anchors'.

Relying on existing and established community groups could lead to unintended consequences. These groups were often more prevalent and active in high-income areas. Although participants did not specifically target higher socio-economic groups, the associated costs of trying to work in places where community groups were limited were disproportionately resource-intensive and challenging to justify. This could lead to a disproportionate and unintended emphasis on specific areas. Participants expressed unease about this situation; however, at the same time, they perceived silence in certain areas, and a lack of community infrastructure was inadvertently accepted. Engagement with some communities was too costly to seek, especially given the unknown benefits of the investment (see section 5.3). In these instances, silence from a community could be taken as tacit acceptance, even in cases where participants knew that they were not reaching 'the right people'. In the absence of community input, participants could *bias* services by performing internally generated objectives and free up time for other duties.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

This study has engaged with a prominent research gap by conceptually and empirically exploring the practices of frontline workers in water service. We examined how they conduct their work in response to tensions in their role, addressing the question: What does community engagement involve for frontline workers in water services in Scotland? Frontline workers in Scotland are expected to come into contact more often and facilitate community involvement to address wicked water problems. Our research unpacks this assumption. Using interviews and observations, we demonstrate how engagement entails (i) *biasing* services to limit, shape and control engagement, (ii) *aligning* resources and people to enhance opportunities for engagement and (iii) *negotiating* with colleagues and communities to deliver their goals.

Our results elucidate *how* frontline workers influence community engagement and public services provision and distribution in water services. This contributes to the literature, given that there is limited insight into the work of frontline workers in the context of water governance (Holstead et al., 2021; Mees et al., 2019). In our study, they shaped the location of meetings, the timing, the benefits that a community would receive, the involvement they would have in decision-making and the resources that were available to support community groups. While frontline workers generally sought to work with communities and appeared to want to create meaningful relationships, an inevitable part of their work was limiting the distribution of resources. That involved directing public resources to areas where they felt



interactions were beneficial and would be most impactful and limiting interactions with others. Some were willing to go ‘the extra mile’ where they felt obligated to a community, had developed positive relationships or when they saw the interaction as enabling them to do their work more efficiently in the future. Thus, support for community engagement oscillated depending on personal experiences, interests and relationships, and pragmatic responses to key challenges they experienced in their unique position at the frontline of the state (Funder and Mweembe, 2017; Wamsler et al., 2021).

By drawing attention to the work that engagement requires, we advance understanding of the complex working practices for frontline workers in participatory contexts and how governance is enacted (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). While formal policies surrounding engagement existed in the public organisations where respondents worked, the reality of doing engagement work was contested, varied, and negotiated with communities and colleagues. This required substantial work by frontline workers. Debate existed around how frontline workers should interact with communities, the benefits, and how it should affect current organisational practice and priorities. These debates played out through negotiations with communities and with the colleagues of frontline workers around differing expectations about how much attention or value should be placed on community interactions and the expected results. So, while those within public sector organisations responsible for water services may explicitly state that they support working with communities, there is nuance in this support and how far it extends in actual practice. This support and the delivery of engagement are very much influenced by how frontline public actors perform their roles, internal and external to their organisation, and the relationships they develop along the way.

Community engagement and interactions are often understood in terms of benefits, degrees of participation, and the mechanisms through which engagement occurs (Baker & Chapin, 2018; Bakker, 2008; Wesselink et al., 2011). This provides crucial knowledge on ‘outward-facing’ aspects of water governance. In our study, the frontline workers not only worked outwardly with communities, community engagement also required work with and through colleagues, for instance, by choosing when and if to create tension in a team, resource allocation, seeking alliances and influence, and developing reciprocity (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2020). Thus, the idea of frontline workers as active and mediating actors can contribute to debate about how governance is enacted, demonstrating how governance involves more relational work with communities and colleagues than is often thought.

Our study makes two practical suggestions for policy and practitioners. First, there is a need to support and value the relational aspects of the role of frontline workers (Wamsler et al., 2020; Blijleven and van Hulst, 2021). As water services become more ‘outward orientated’, the requirement to become more community-focused presents challenges for those working in water services around how to present their organisations, themselves, and water issues. While water services are traditionally known as technical fields centring on engineering and natural science knowledge, these are insufficient to address challenges posed in water governance

(Turnhout et al., 2019). The relational and cross-boundary work involved in frontline work are often underacknowledged, but these skills affect service delivery, as well as how communities see their role in water services and water services and consequentially water governance. Second our findings reflect the importance of supporting community-based organisations. Because frontline workers choose to work with and through groups, the presence or absence and accessibility of these existing groups were consequential (Thaler and Levin, 2015). It is acknowledged that engaging with some areas will be more resource-intensive than others, but particularly ‘difficult to reach’ groups could be a focus going forward. As well as this, creating a public database of community organisations may reduce associate costs of locating these groups, which could ultimately lead to enhanced engagement across a broader range of communities.

Thinking now about future research. A research gap and a question arising from this study is how do communities perceive frontline worker–community interactions and how these are negotiated from the perspective of communities? For instance, what do communities think of the role of public organisations and frontline workers? How do they interact or seek to influence resource provision? More research could explore interactions between communities and public officials. How to shape the ‘public encounter’ and relationship building is insufficiently addressed in the literature (Bartels, 2013; Jakobsen et al., 2016), particularly in environmental governance and water services (Bendz & Boholm, 2020; Klein et al., 2017; Wamsler, 2016). Second, we found variations in how frontline workers conducted their work. While we did not set out to explicitly compare responses, future research could usefully explore styles of engagement and their associated outcomes (de Winter & Hertogh, 2021; Zacka, 2017). We suggest that observations of interactions between communities and practitioners and ethnographic approaches to research may usefully capture these interactions. Acquiring such access can be challenging and explain why such research is lacking. Frontline workers or public bodies may be less inclined to participate, especially if they suspect that it may attract critique of current practice. Undertaking this research will require sensitivity and the ability to show and attest to practical benefits.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Overall, these findings demonstrate the importance of the pragmatic responses and subjectivity of frontline workers which influence water service delivery (Holstead et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2020). Subjectivity shapes how actors involved in environmental governance understand their relations with others and see their role. In environmental governance literature, there is a particular focus on the institutional organisation of governance, with less emphasis on the activities of frontline workers and communities and their interactions (Mees et al., 2019; Wamsler et al., 2020). As this paper attests, community involvement in water services is not only about formal structures and policies but how people within public organisations who are charged with working with communities conduct their job and respond to



challenges (Holstead et al., 2021; Zwartveen et al., 2017). This brings to light the importance of examining their work as well as outcomes, to understand the consequences for communities as well as the environment and help address pressing water concerns.

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## ORCID

Kirsty Holstead  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5121-3098>

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