To provide great water for a stronger, greener and healthier Merseyside

United Utilities has submitted its draft business plan for 2025-30 to Ofwat.

The plan we are proposing is the largest investment in water infrastructure for over 100 years and has been shaped by our customers and stakeholders.

We recently held a 'Your water, your say' online open challenge session on 10 November 2023, where we invited household customers, businesses, and those representing regional and national interest groups to attend.

The session allowed us to go through that plan and explain how customers and stakeholder views, particularly from the last Your Water, Your Say session, held in June, have been considered in the final business plan.

The session is also part of the Price Review process known as PR24. It is designed to enable people in Merseyside to hear about our plan, including the challenges we are facing as a sector and the different ways we're working with communities and stakeholders, to deliver more for customers and the environment.

It was an opportunity to put questions directly to the company's Chief Executive and other senior directors, as highlighting issues, challenges and opportunities they want us to consider.

The event was hosted by independent facilitator Bernice Law, Chair of Your Voice, the independent challenge group representing United Utilities' customers and stakeholders across the North West.

Members from our Executive Team included:

- Louise Beardmore, Chief Executive
- James Bullock, Strategy, Policy and Regulation Director
- Mike Gauterin, Customer Service Director
- Mark Garth, Director of Wastewater Treatment
- Mark Booth, Area Engagement Lead

This is a summary of the discussion which centred on the three themes of our plan, which is to make the North West stronger, greener, and healthier.

Following a welcome and introduction by the independent chair, Chief Executive Louise Beardmore gave a 15-minute presentation on the company's proposed draft plan for 2025-30 and what it means for customers and stakeholders in Merseyside.

Overview of plan for North West and Merseyside

We serve 7 million customers in the North West, supporting over 200,000 businesses.

We are also a huge employer in the region, employing over 5,000 people and supporting more than 22,000 skilled jobs through our supply chain, both in terms of delivering our services, but also in terms of improving our infrastructure across the 5 counties, including Cumbria.

We want to ensure it delivers a plan for the North West that improves the services for customers and for the environment.

It is time for a step change to deliver an ambitious plan that benefits everyone. We are embarking on the largest infrastructure investment in the company's history to help reduce the use of storm overflows. We have already acted and have delivered a 39% reduction in spills since 2020 – but we want to go further and faster.
Across the North West we plan to:

Invest £13.7 billion as part of the plan, in the next 5 years. That's the largest investment in the North West for over 100 years. This will enable us to:

- Safeguard water supplies to 2 million people - halving the chance of a hosepipe ban
- Improve water quality for 1.4 million customers
- Reduce spills by 60% (decade to 2030), the biggest in the UK and an investment of a £3.1 billion.
- Improve 500 km of rivers, not just protecting but also enhancing rivers across the region
- Support 30,000 jobs, 7,000 of which are new roles
- Offer £525m affordability support, helping one in six customers
- Install 900,000 smart meters in homes, with more allocated for businesses
- Invest £247 million in rainfall management to deliver a 32% reduction in sewer flooding incidents

Through our plan for Merseyside we will:

- Double our support to help 170,000 customers with affordability help
- We employ more than 1,580 people across Merseyside, with plans to create more green jobs
- Invest £210 million to improve 26km of rivers in Merseyside
- Invest £166 million to reduce spills of 20 storm overflows
- Invest £12.7 million in coastal defences at Crosby to protect the network from erosion and protect up to 169 homes from flooding
- Improve river water quality in the Mersey Estuary
- Invest £151 million to improve 65km of the Vyrnwy Aqueduct to ensure resilient water supplies in Merseyside
- Invest £85 million to improve the Merseyside coastline and benefit bathing and shellfish walers
- Protect drinking water quality now and in the future, by investing at two of our largest treatment works

Next steps

The plan we have submitted will be reviewed by water industry regulators:

- Ofwat
- Drinking Water Inspectorate
- Environment Agency and Natural England
- Consumer Council for Water

It will receive an interim review from regulators in May / June 2024 and a final decision will be made by Ofwat in December 2024. The new five-year regulatory period begins in April 2025.

Summary of main topics of discussion during Q&A section

Long-term water supply

Water is a vital but limited natural resource. The pressures of population growth, climate change and environmental considerations mean that it's now more important than ever to plan how we will manage water resources. With careful planning we can continue to deliver a reliable supply of water for customers in the future, while protecting the environment.

With increasing pressure on water resources across the UK, our Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP) defines our strategy to achieve a long-term, best value and sustainable plan for water supplies in the North West.

We produce a WRMP every five years, and this sets out how we intend to achieve a secure supply of water for our customers. When testing the plan, we consider a range of scenarios and options taking account of uncertainties around climate change, water transfers, and the amount of water needed, population growth and environmental changes.

This helps us to understand what the risks are in the short, medium and long-term to our water supplies across the region.

As part of our plans being put forward for the Price Review, we are looking at how to drive improvements in leakage, how to reduce customer demand so people are using less, and how to develop new sources of water.

Reducing Leakage

We're increasing our efforts to find and fix leaks, using new technology where possible to help us reduce the level of leaks faster.

Water is a precious resource, and we plan to reduce the level of leakage by at least 13% and have set targets to reduce leakage by 50% by 2050.

To meet these stretching targets, we are increasing efforts to find and fix leaks on our own network. We continue to innovate and have been installing a series of sensors across the North West to understand how our pipework is performing, where leaks may be occurring, and, more importantly, how to get out to fix them more quickly.

Reducing customer demand

Making the best use of our water is a major part of our plan to ensure there is a sufficient supply of water for the decades ahead. To address challenges around future supply we need to lower demand and create new water sources.

We are working closely with customers to help support them to use less water by raising customer awareness about the importance of saving water. We know customers genuinely care about how much water they are using and would like to understand more.

As part of our plan, we will install 900,000 new smart meters that will give customers information about their water use, giving them confidence to move to a water meter and become more water efficient.

Bills and affordability

Customers want us to spend money wisely and efficiently, so we can make sure that we keep bills affordable. The average annual bill today is £417. Going forward that bill will increase, before inflation, to £556 by 2030, a £22 increase each year for the 5 years.

Affordability is also a hugely important issue for many people in the region and lowering bills and helping customers out of water poverty is a priority.

Although 74% of all customers support our plan, 43% were concerned about affordability.

Therefore, we will double our support package to £525 million, supporting 1 in six customers with their bills, £200 million of which will be funded by shareholders directly, so that no customer is left behind as a result of bill changes. We recognise the social and economic challenges of a region that includes some of the most deprived areas in the country, so it is more important than ever that we are doing what we can to help those customers who are struggling with payments.

We currently offer six different help to pay schemes, dependent on their needs.

In Merseyside, we currently support 86,300 customers through affordability schemes. This will increase to us supporting 170,000 customers with affordability help.

We also support 63,900 people with additional needs through our Priority Services.

Supporting jobs and local economy

As we embark on our largest ever investment programme to deliver environmental improvements, this will stimulate greater employment opportunities directly, and through our supply chain, contributing to local economies across the North West.

We're proud to invest in young people, offering several opportunities including graduate, apprenticeship and intern schemes. We employ 1,580 people across Merseyside and our increased future investment will create more green jobs. In addition, we're providing award-winning training schemes to drive skills development.

Infrastructure investment

We understand that our customers and stakeholders want us to do much more to protect our natural environment. In response, we are embarking on the largest investment programme since privatisation to ensure our plan makes the North West stronger, greener, and healthier.

We are investing £151 million to improve 65km of the Vyrnwy Aqueduct, to ensure resilient water supplies in Merseyside.

An additional investment £12.7 million will go to coastal defences at Crosby to protect the network from erosion and protect up to 169 homes from flooding.

Protecting the environment

As a trusted company, we're committed to improving the environment across the region.
We understand we need to invest in our system, and work closely with customers, stakeholders and partners to protect and enhance the long-term resilience of the environment for future generations.
We plan to invest £210 million to improve 26km of rivers in Merseyside and £85 million to improve the Merseyside coastline and benefit bathing and shellfish waters.

Storm Overflows

Storm overflows are an important part of the sewerage network and include combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and storm tank discharges.

They act as a pressure relief valve when there is too much rainfall, allowing rain water, mixed with sewage, to rise inside the sewer and eventually enter a separate pipe which flows into a river or the sea. Sewers operate this way to help prevent the flooding of streets, homes and businesses.

When CSOs operate, they can sometimes affect river and bathing water quality, albeit usually temporarily.

Our plan embodies a step change in our approach to combined sewer overflows, working towards new long-term targets embodied in the Environment Act: eliminating harm by 2035 and achieving 10 spills per year at all sites by 2050.

Our rainwater management strategy forms an important part of our plan, reducing storm overflow activations and delivering long-term resilience to climate change by managing rainwater before it enters the sewer system.
The plan that we are putting forward for the next 5 years is going to see the company reduce storm flow activations by 60% (decade to 2030).

In Merseyside we are investing £166 million to reduce spills of 20 storm overflows.

Reducing the risk of flooding

We have got some of the biggest and most ambitious targets across the sector to reduce the number of sewer flooding incidents that happen, whether these are outside homes and businesses (external flooding) or inside them (internal flooding).

Essential to this is a partnership approach to tackling flooding to ensure we can respond quickly and thoroughly. In Merseyside we are working closely with our partners including the local authorities to protect residents and businesses during adverse weather.
In addition, we've been investing in technology across the North West and installing a series of sensors in our network so we can monitor and understand how our sewers are performing.
This will help to identify problems with blockages or issues sooner, so that we can get to customer's homes quicker, and fix the problem before it occurs.

Executive Pay

Our executive pay continues to be firmly aligned to the performance of the company with respect to delivery for customers. The senior team is incentivised on the issues that are important to customers including reducing leakage, reducing combined sewer overflows, and pollution events for example.

Full Q&A and our responses

Greener

Q1. Will you supply water butts at cost price, to encourage more people to use them? Also, could you advise on the best position to place them, particularly in smaller properties?

We have a huge opportunity to collect rainwater because the more we do to get that rainwater out of the system, the more benefit it creates to help improve the environment and reduce storm overflows.

There's a huge opportunity to get water butts at a better price and so they look visually better in people's gardens. We've been carrying out a series of pilots on this, and what people have said to us is that those 'ugly, green plastic water butts' aren't a great encouragement for many people who love their gardens.

Consequently, we've been doing some work on designing some nice water butts that look like pots, which are great. There are also some new schemes where we're going to be discounting water butts, and more importantly, not only just getting those out to customers if they want them from that discounted perspective, but also working with them as to where best to place them in terms of capture.

This is not only about what people can do at home. We've been doing some fantastic work in Lancashire, where we've been putting industrial-sized water butts into schools which are linked via solar panels into our control room here in Warrington. That means we can send them a message, 24 hours in advance, if we know there's going to be a storm coming so that they can empty the water out.

Q2. At the recent Cheshire session, you mentioned the availability of smart water meters. Smart meters have been the subject of much controversy recently, particularly in terms of other utilities. They've been regarded as spies in the home. Your assurance that they won't be a means to restrict our water usage would be helpful.

Many customers are concerned and nervous about having a water meter. Here in the North West, meters are not compulsory because we have enough water. But we think there are opportunities for customers to save money. For example, if a customer lives in a house where there tends to be less people than bedrooms, the chances are you can save on a meter.

We also know there's a nervousness because in the North West we have one of the highest levels of prepayment electricity and gas meters than anywhere else in the UK. Therefore, there is a nervousness that if you go on to a

water meter, we could use that in a way that disconnects your water supply. We can assure you on behalf of the regulation and controls that are in place, that will never happen.

We cannot, and we would not, ever disconnect any domestic customer's supply because of anything to do with payment. Water is a requirement and it's a right that we all have. I know there's a real nervousness from speaking to many community groups in Merseyside, and that is why sometimes people are a little bit hesitant about taking them up.

We're implementing something called our Lowest Bill Guarantee to give people more confidence. On average, we see people who take up metres saving around about £170 on their bill. On adoption of a meter (with Lowest Bill Guarantee), we guarantee that for 2 years, you will always pay the lowest bills. This means that we'd put a meter in, and we would shadow bill you so you can see the bill that you would have paid on a metered charge against the bill you paid today. We guarantee that the metered charge will always be lower. After 2 years, you then have a choice of whether to go to a meter charge or to stay unmetered, but you'll know you have that guarantee that you'll always save money on a metered charge.

This is not about control. This is presenting an awareness than if you're on a meter today, you probably get 2 reads a year. If you're not on a meter, you don't get any reads. All smart meters do is present the information about your consumption, more times. People are often distrustful of the word 'smart', and we may have to look at the branding of that, but we are running co-creation groups with customers at the moment about how we go about delivering the rollout in a year's time.

Q3. Climate change has shown that we will continue to get less rainfall. Will you consider looking into desalination plans, considering we have the biggest coastline?

Our water resource management plan forces us to look not only over the next 5 years but over the next 50 years so we can understand how much water we're going to need and what's likely to happen to that water supply as a result of climate change.

The changes that we've talked through to you today, in terms of between now and 2030, like those additional aqueduct supplies that we're putting in, boreholes that we're bringing in, and more importantly the new treatment works that we're bringing in, will see us provide an additional 22 million litres of water between now and 2030 into the North West. In other words, we're increasing the amount of water that we have access to that we can then clean, and we can then deliver to your homes.

Desalination tends to be more commonly used abroad. There is one plant in the UK and the process is very energy intensive requiring a lot of energy to evaporate the water to separate the salt from it. It's not something to be taken lightly.

Climate change projections are an important part of our forward planning and making sure that we've got the correct amount of water, as well as making sure that we can predict where the rainfall is going to fall, and how the 60% reduction in storm overflows that we're going to make includes an assessment of climate change as well.

Going forward, there are lots of options and lots of possibilities for how water will be secured, but you can be assured that we have robust plans for how to cater for climate change.

Q4. What are you doing about the emergence of forever chemicals in water? PFAS for example.

PFAS is a term that you may have heard used. It is a form of forever chemical that's found in things like firefighting foam. It's also found on fast food packaging, in pesticides and paints and the other places that you find it is on non-stick saucepans and frying pans.

It's a certain type of chemical that's used in a lot of manufacturing processes as well as something that's put into chemicals specifically. All our untreated water sources are monitored for PFAS. We do risk assessments, and we work

with the Drinking Water Inspectorate which, as the regulator, plays a really important role in making sure that we are working to the right standards and assessing water quality.

In most cases that we see, those substances aren't present here in the North West compared to where they are elsewhere in the country. In terms of in the water supply, we've got very low levels detected. What we then do is ensure that we treat the water that is supplied to customers to the necessary regulatory standard.

There is a PFAS working group that's been established across the UK because these forever chemicals also find themselves in products. We often hear them referred to as 'beads,' or 'plastic beads', as they're tiny, microscopic beads that can be found in things like washing powder or shampoos.

The testing for this is improving all the time, and there will continue to be new standards - not just in terms of our drinking water, but also how we treat this stuff as well when it finds itself into the drain.

It's a really emerging area in terms of focus. From a drinking water specific perspective, it's something that we test for all the time and if it's there, it is then treated in the raw water quality before it comes to people's homes.

Q5. UU now and again puts out TV adverts, and other sources of media, on water use but I think the message needs to be stronger on simple things like not running the water while you're brushing your teeth. I witnessed one of my family members, at my own home, doing some washing up for me and running the water. So even an adult of my age is not getting the correct education on water usage. Another way of getting the message across on how to save on water in your own house, whether you're on a meter or not, is to start with kids at school. School kids, when they're taking something on board, will often come home and start nagging everyone else in their house. The other thing I wanted to ask, and I'm sure I'll find this information if I researched it more, but does UU help third world countries with tapping into getting clean and fresh water.

One of the things that we've been trying to do, both on radio and on TV, is talk to people about water efficiency. Even that simple action of turning the tap off when you clean your teeth. If you've got a family of 4, and you're doing that in the morning and in the evening, you can save yourself over £100 pounds, so there's real benefits not just in terms of reducing water usage, but also in terms of reducing bills too.

We're trying to do a huge amount in terms of promoting water efficiency. One of the things that we've been doing is a lot of direct messaging, working with customers where we see that they have high usage, offering them water efficiency audits in their home.

This plan will see us delivering 75,000 audits where we can go in and help people if they've got, perhaps, a dripping tap or a leaky loo.

We run a school programme where we engage children, and this year we've already done 10,000. We talk to school children as part of their curriculum about water efficiency. We recognise we need to do more, so we're doing more in the digital space in terms of games and how children learn about water efficiency. We are trying to make it fun.

In terms of helping other countries, we have in the past supported charities such as Water Aid who provide help and support in other countries around the world in terms of access to clean, fresh water. If you'd like us to send anything to you, pop your details in chat and we can do that.

You sound like a fantastic advocate of water efficiency, and we completely agree with everything you've said. We'd like to send you more information about water efficiency because we could turn you into a promoter! It's about sharing the message across the North West.

You also may want to join any of our research groups as well, to give us more flavour about what we're going to do going forward.

You asked a question in the chat about Leak Line, and before about water butts. Let's link the two. We've done some pilots where we're going out to work with people with allotments. There's an allotment in Birkdale and one in

Netherton that we're working with. We've done some work to try and harvest water to reduce bills and to really support their efforts.

They invited us to a family day in Birkdale and we took all our information and packs, including 'toothy timers' and we found that it was lots of kids that came to the stall but then the adults came too. So, you're absolutely spot on about engaging with children. We got the opportunity through working with the allotments but it was through the kids that we were able to promote water saving more broadly.

Q6. With regards to advertising, if I see an animal or something humorous it makes me watch the full advert. It draws people in. Or even some little jingle that's not going to get on your nerves, but you're going to remember it.

We had a customer who wrote to us last week about our current advert because, as you know, we sponsor the weather report. We've tried to link the advert to the weather. The customer said they were annoyed (about the TV advert) because they don't like the grammar of the young boy we use, and how he speaks. We picked up the phone and had a conversation with this customer. She said, 'it really annoys me when I see it', and we said, 'but you're remembering it'!

We both smiled, and she also gave me some feedback. She said, 'when he comes on, he's enthusiastic but I just don't like the way he pronounces the words'! You can see it's an emotive area, but we're keen to take all feedback so thank you, and we'll take that on board too.

Q7. I was just a little bit concerned when you said that you're going to be providing more water. Is this from boreholes? Have you done any kind of public consultation? Have you thought about the streams, or rivers, that you might impact? And the effect on farming? What impact studies have been done to ensure that you don't trigger drought conditions, which possibly might even see streams of rivers being reduced down to a trickle. It does happen in parts of the country. I'm thinking about Cambridgeshire, and all the ecology that they've got there, but they've barely got any water now in their river.

To assure you, we can't extract any water until we've done some very clear modelling and we've got the relevant permissions to do it. We can't, and we shouldn't, and we wouldn't, just take water out of the environment in that perspective.

One of the things about the North West is that it's slightly different than the rest of the UK, as we have more reservoirs in the North West than anywhere else. This is good because we've got great tasting water and it's much softer compared to elsewhere in the country. We've also got opportunities in terms of those borehole supplies as a result of the fact that we've got more rainfall.

We can talk you through some of that planning, how we build that into our Water Resources Management Plan, but also how we step through that in terms of getting the consultation and getting those permissions. We've got a comprehensive plan that shows you what we're proposing to do. If you want to pop your details in chat, we'll get that sent out to you because it's very North West specific, so you can look at specific communities and areas.

I think you've got a very good handle on all the relative factors that are taken into account. Exactly as you suggest, the environmental factors, the climate change projections, the state of the rivers, the state of the aquifers - which are the underground stores of water - these are all things that have to be considered and they are all consolidated into our Water Resources Management Plan, which looks at water demand over the next 25 years.

All those things must be considered and, as you would expect, they are heavily regulated by the Environment Agency, Natural England, Ofwat, and many other stakeholders across the North West and country. You can also download it from our website and if we can help in any way in interpreting that, then we'll be very happy to.

If you want to pop your details into chat, we can get that over to you this afternoon and, if you've got any more questions, we can answer them specifically.

Healthier

Q8. I would like an explanation as to how sewage has been allowed to get to the point where we are now at - where public pressure has been the catalyst for action to be considered? Why didn't management intervene at an earlier stage?

There's been a huge amount that's been written and talked about in terms of combined sewer overflows. Here in the North West, we have more combined sewer overflows than the rest of the country. There are a couple of reasons for that. One is we have a huge network. Secondly, we have more of a combined network than elsewhere in the country and, most importantly, more rainfall.

The way that the combined sewer overflow works is it operates like a pressure release valve. When those systems become overwhelmed, they then release. Since 2020, we've put monitors in so that we can understand more, and we can see how they are performing. What's really clear now is that we need to step up. We need to go further, and we need to go faster, in terms of reducing their use.

We read the headlines, all the time, that we're 'dumping sewage'. To some degree, we wish we had a button that meant that we could just turn it all off. However, we are going to have to re-plumb the North West.

When we talk about combined sewer overflows, we talk about 3 things. The first is reduce the amount of water that we have and the amount of water that is going into our network. The second is to remove and take that surface water out so there's less getting into our sewers, which are never more than 15% to 20% full. Thirdly, we need to re-plumb. That means that we're going to need to build huge storage tanks so that we can store all of this water when those storms come and when we see that demand increase. Then it needs to be released into the treatment works when there's capacity. It's a bit like the transition from diesel to electric cars, it's going to take time.

We know there's a huge amount of anger out there about why we haven't done it before now. Combined sewer overflows are not new. This is the way the system has been designed to work and it works like this across the UK, and across other the parts of the world too. However, this doesn't make it right. We've been very clear, that we need to go further, we need to go faster. We share people's concerns and that's why we have put forward the biggest plan in the country to reduce storm overflows.

Since 2020, we've already reduced spill duration by over 40% and despite the rainfall, we're on track to see a significant reduction as we go forward. But we are having to build, and more importantly, we are having to re-plumb to enable that to happen.

Q9. Thanks for that but I don't really feel it's answered the question. The question is why has this been allowed to happen? The various factors that you've mentioned would have pre-existed anyway, some of these preconditions would have existed for 100 years and more. We've always got farming, we have always got problems about where the water is running too. It just seems to me that it's been a rather lackadaisical attitude about how it's affecting your customers, and if there were more competition in the water authorities, I think this wouldn't have happened. It seems like the shareholders are being regarded as the customers, and not the public.

We recognise that customers are very, very passionate about the environment. Lots of work has been ongoing on for many, many years and the River Mersey is a great example of where, over the last 30 years, significant improvements have been made.

For example, Liverpool didn't have any form of sewage treatment in the 1980s and that has been installed and upgraded over the past 30 years. In 2016, we opened the new treatment works on the waterfront, at a cost of £200 million. There's a raft of other similar investments that have occurred to the point where the Mersey was ecologically dead in the '60s and '70s and we're now routinely seeing dolphins, seals, salmon and others.

A large chunk of that has been because of water company investment. So, we haven't been resting on our laurels, but we do accept that we have much further to go. The 60% reduction in overflows that we're committing to, is our bid to try and be really ambitious about how we move that forward.

Liverpool and the Merseyside area is going to get 20 of those overflows, which are already in progress, improved. There's £166 million allocated to resolving those, and a further £210 million allocated to improving discharges directly into the Mersey as well.

Q10. My observation here is you've gone 10 steps forward, and you've now gone a load of steps backwards. All that work that you did, to improve the Mersey is now under threat because of all this sewage that is going out and that is a shame. I think that is something that really needs to be looked at in your planning strategy because as you go forward, you could also be going backwards. That's my observation.

The last time we had one of these events, some swimmers dialled in, and they had the perception too that the water that they were swimming in was getting worse.

We explained to the swimmers, an organisation called the Blue Tits, and to people in New Brighton, that it is safe to swim. We know 4 of the bathing waters in that area are all regarded as excellent by the Environment Agency. We've had to try and get the right picture over to those swimmers and to tell them that things haven't really deteriorated. We accept there's more to do, but the bathing waters they are swimming in are safe.

Q11. When the Surfers Against Sewage app reports there's been a discharge, we've been told, basically, not to swim for 48 hours after a discharge. I'm just wondering if that's an accurate suggestion because I know there are people in our group who swim every single day (I know it sounds a bit crazy, but they want to swim all winter)! I just want to know how we can stay safe, and how can we know if we're safe swimming.

A lot of this is about transparency, and we have therefore been working with Surfers Against Sewage on a new app that is going to be launched at the start of the New Year. This is going to give you real-time data and information so you will be able to see, wherever you are, if those combined sewer overflows are activating and what that means.

That data will also link into the Surfers Against Sewage app. We've been working with them so that they get a live link at the same time because we want to give people all the data and information, they need to be able to make informed choices, as well as to be more transparent as an organisation. We're looking forward to getting that launched and we will make sure that you've got all the links.

The Environment Agency issue bathing water advice. They are the appropriate authority to give advice on the public health issues on bathing water. In terms of bathing water classifications, some of that is due to storm overflows. There are also many, many other reasons why bathing waters may or may not be appropriate for public health.

We're not in a position to give advice on whether you can swim or not, unfortunately. However, we will be providing real-time data and information to help you make your choices.

Q12. We have had some involvement from a local headteacher, local MPs, and local councillors, so I'm speaking on behalf of a number of people. We have been asked to feedback to our local MP and a local headteacher with regards to your response. We are hugely concerned about our community's welfare and have been affected by regular flooding on our streets. This is flooding that can come up to thigh high level. We've had cars written off; we've had damage to our properties. We are concerned (particularly considering recent events in Mossley Hill, which I'm sure that you're all aware of) about our community's welfare.

There is a primary school on our street with 300 students. There is another primary school around the corner where there are hundreds of children who use our road as a thoroughfare to reach their destination. Not only are they at risk of wading through sewage (as we've got a combined sewer here) and traipsing it into those places, but they are also at risk of actually being involved in an accident.

We have elderly residents on our street who are UU priority customers who've fallen over because when the flooding occurs, they cannot see where the road meets the pavement. People have tripped over. They've sustained injuries. It's your duty of care to ensure, the community's welfare and safety with regards to this. So, the 2 questions I want to pose are, do you have a policy which protects vulnerable members of society in terms of

the elderly, and young children, with regards to flooding and exposure to sewage? Secondly, do your current plans include our current situation on this street in terms of the funding?

You have put in a series of questions, and we think that what we need to do is come and see you, and your community group, so we can go through that.

We're going to need to bring others with us, such as the local authority, because from our understanding of what's going on, one of the challenges is that we've got surface water flooding that's happening and it's a combined response that we're going to have to make.

On your second question, in terms of the plans, we have proposed £250 million specifically at working with partners and trying to identify opportunities to separate out surface water. Where we've currently got combined systems, we're looking at opportunities to separate those into a surface water system and a foul water system.

That allows us to make sure that the foul system that we're looking at is very much capable of dealing with the foul flows. And then the investment will be to deal with the surface water flows and convey those away from where they're causing harm, usually through some kind of nature-based solution, a swale or some other attenuation pools.

We're very much looking at opportunities for where we're going to invest that £250 million and we're already looking at this for your area.

Regarding the policy, we don't particularly have a policy that distinguishes between young and vulnerable people and others because our policy really is to avoid flooding at all costs. So, the policy is to try and minimise foul flooding wherever it occurs.

We also use technology called Dynamic Network Management which is about real-time monitoring of sewer levels and trying to detect, for example, where blockages might occur that might cause flooding. We have already started our journey in deploying Dynamic Network Management and we will be looking for opportunities to expand that and to use it more extensively. Also, we need to come and have a look and see exactly what's happening and talk to you and your community to look at the options.

There isn't a CSO in the area, so it's not a CSO issue. It is the rainfall that is coming, and the fact that it is a combined network. We've got your details and we're going to contact you this afternoon. We need to come out and we're going to do some surveys of the area. We need to work with the council, and we need to work with the other drainage partners too and carry out a drainage review of what's going on.

We've been dealing with something a little bit similar in Salford recently. One of the challenges we've got is that many of our gardens have been concreted over because people are now parking on them and the natural drainage that used to be there is gone. In response, we've been putting in permeable driveways and what we've called 'the road of trees' so literally taking up some of the pavements and planting trees, and that acts as natural drainage.

These only sound like little things but they make a significant difference - when that sudden rainfall comes, that water has got somewhere to go. That is why we've put this £250 million in.

We are also working with Steve Rotherham, and the team from the Liverpool City Region to develop an integrated water management plan.

We've already kicked-off with a workshop that took place at the beginning of October with the Liverpool City Region, local authorities, and the Environment Agency, and we've pulled together a Memorandum of Understanding.

We've also put into the plan some specific money, and it's just over £11 million, for investigations across the Mersey Estuary to identify future rainwater management projects.

We get it, we hear you loud and clear. Let us come out, let's understand what's going on, let's get those drainage studies done with the other authorities too so we can understand, and then start to look at what that plan looks like.

Q13. We'd welcome that. It would be great to meet with yourself or whoever it would be who would come out in that scenario. There will be a number of people who would be keen to be involved in that, from the local community. This situation has been gone on for a number of years. We have had contact with Steve Mogford in the past. It's very much been something that has gone on for a number of years and we need action now to be perfectly honest.

We will be in touch this afternoon. Let's get that work done, let's understand it. It may require an element of compromise, and change more broadly, because we don't understand what the configuration is until we see it. But there are things that we can do, and things that we can try that would hopefully make a difference. Also, it's important that we get some facts because there isn't a CSO in the area - so we don't want people to think it's a CSO that's causing a problem.

What we also find is that anybody can connect into a wastewater drain. We can look at if there are any businesses that have connected in, which may be causing a problem as well.

Q14. What is UU's perspective on the proposals to expand the chemical recycling plant in Garston - which for those who may not know, is right on the river. What kind of considerations have been taken so far by UU, in terms of the riverside location. Has there been any kind of in-depth analysis about what we might expect in terms of sea level rises and storms surges on that site, over the next several decades?

I do believe it's the case, but please correct me if I'm wrong, that UU has said that it is acceptable to have a larger than current wastewater flow from this site into the river under certain conditions. I would hope that UU, in gathering cutting edge science and research on these issues of sea level rise and storm surges, is talking to the National Oceanography Centre, world leading experts in this field, based in Liverpool.

They're on the campus of the University of Liverpool. So, I would hope those conversations are happening. And I'm hoping that corporate decisions on these issues are being informed not by models that may be 10 or 20 years old, but on what's happening here and now.

In terms of the chemical plant, we're not a planning authority, we can't restrict where they build or what they're proposing to build.

What we can absolutely restrict is their ability to discharge into the sewer. So, they would be known as a trader, they would have a trade effluent permit, which is the waste that they would discharge to the sewer.

Both the volume and the contaminants within that trade effluent permit are something that we accept and approve of or disapprove of accordingly. We are obliged, if we can accept it, to accept it. We can find out the details of this trader and get back to you with those details this afternoon. But if you say that it's been accepted, then we'll make that assumption.

To explain the process, we would review the length of sewer that it's going to travel down to make sure that it can be hydraulically accepted, and we'd review the treatment works which it's going to be received at, and treated, to make sure that we can treat to the required standard to protect the environmental impact in the river. If both of those aspects are satisfied and we can justify that no environmental harm is caused, then we are obliged to permit that trader to do what they need to do.

On the point about sea level rise, we absolutely do get involved in those conversations. It is a major consideration for us. Similar to how we described our Water Resources Management Plan, which is a 25 year look ahead for water resources, we have a Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan which is a 25-year look ahead for all of the impacts on our wastewater network and treatment works, including those on the coastal areas of which Liverpool is particularly exposed to coastal discharges.

The Drainage and Wastewater Management Plan has recently been published. It contains the latest climate change and other resilience projections.

Q15. Until last month I sat on the Liverpool City Region Climate Partnership, I am the Friends of the Earth representative. Responding to what you've said so far, do you specifically have conversations with this world leading body which is based in Liverpool? Because I think it would be a wasted opportunity if you weren't having ongoing conversations with them to review where the science is at.

Just for general information regarding the site in Garston, I recognise that it's a local authority decision in many respects. That decision, as I understand it, I believe will be made by Liverpool City Council's planning committee on Tuesday if anyone's interested. It's all on the Liverpool city Council website. We'll come back to you this afternoon because we don't want to mislead, so we will double check.

STRONGER

Q16. Is the company looking after its shareholders more than its customers?

It is important to understand what shareholders provide and what they receive in return. Effectively, shareholder investment allows us to make investments today and pay for them over an extended period.

One of the analogies that's often thought about here is that it's a bit like buying a house with a mortgage. What the mortgage allows you to do is to buy the house, live in the house, and enjoy the house over a 25-year period - paying for that over the 25-year period.

The model of funding in the water industry is similar to that, as shareholders, or investors, will provide money upfront - allowing us to make the environmental improvements today, and then extend the repayment of that over a long period of time.

Take, for example, a water treatment works investment. It might be a 25-year life for that works before it needs rebuilding and what the investment does is it allows us to invest from day one, run the plant for 25 years, and effectively charge customers over those 25 years for that investment.

Now shareholders don't put that investment in for nothing. They expect a rate of return, just as a building society would expect a rate of return on a mortgage. That rate of return is around 4% - so not dissimilar to typical savings rates that you can get on the high street, for example. That is the level those shareholders are expecting to provide that investment upfront.

The other aspect that is important to think about is what would happen if we didn't use shareholder money. If we didn't use shareholder money, we would have 2 alternatives for that investment in that water treatment works. Pay for it all on day one which would mean a noticeably big increase in bills in the short term, and it would hit bill payers immediately and it wouldn't be spread over future generations of bill payers. Or the alternative is we don't build it today and wait until we have saved up enough money to build it in approximately 25 years' time.

The issue with those options is that one has a very unacceptable impact on bills, the other isn't delivering the improvements that you want to see.

This is the reason why we have five-yearly reviews of the plans. It is to balance the pace of improvement that people want to see and what we need to deliver for the environment versus the impact on bills over the same period.

One of the things that has come to light from all the research, and all the conversations that we have with customers over the past 5 years in particular, is that customer attitudes are changing. Environmental concerns have really increased in terms of importance and there is a greater willingness now to make those investments that benefit the environment, so this is what you're seeing reflected in the plans. That's why the level of investment is going up, to meet stronger environmental targets. That's why we have this bill impact that we talked about in the presentation.

However, it's not the case that we've diverted money to shareholders that was allocated for investment at each 5-year period. When we look at the investment that is required, we talk about that with customers, it's scrutinised by

our regulators and our regulators will set what they think is a fair level of return to facilitate that repayment of the investment.

Q17. Thanks for all of that. I knew all about how shareholders work but the thing is, it's the accountability. Sometime ago, I read an article. I can't remember the exact figure, but it was roughly £7 million up for investment in the water industry and only £2 million was actually used as investment because £5 million had been diverted to shareholders. My concern is: how can the public know how much of this money is going into investment and how much is going to shareholders. That is the crucial issue.

There are 2 elements of protection. The first is the rate of return that shareholders can expect is set at around 4%. We've got some really strong governance. We're a listed business and as a result of the fact that we're listed on the stock market, we have to work to set rules and provide greater levels of transparency. That's really helpful for customers here in the North West.

In addition to that, our regulators also have put protections in place. That's important, particularly in a business like ours. Another thing that's important is that when we make commitments to you upfront about the things that we were going to deliver such as reducing leakage or reducing sewer flooding, and if we don't deliver those targets, there are penalties.

If those penalties are applied, refunds come back into future customer bills. Again, we think that's a really important mechanism because it provides an element of assurance that if we don't deliver those targets that we've set out here today, and the funding that's associated with it, there's a protection in there that comes back in customer bills in terms of rebates that happen over the following years.

To provide you with a little bit of a guide about how that's likely to be reported over the next 5 years, every year we publish our Annual Performance Report. This will provide some insight in terms of how we've been performing against the performance targets and whether we've been delivering the levels of investment that were expected when bills were set.

The second element of reporting is that because of a new license condition that Ofwat introduced this year, Ofwat itself is going to report every year on dividends that have been paid to shareholders and the extent to which Ofwat believes that those dividends have been justified by best practice. It will also cover the standards Ofwat expects in terms of a need for shareholders to earn a reasonable rate of return. It's also to ensure that the company is making the right investments for customers in terms of the environment. That reporting hasn't been there in the past, it is going to be there going forward. We look, every year, at our annual reporting and how we can make it more transparent and clearer.

When we are stepping into a big investment programme like this one, it's a reasonable comment to say we do need to make sure that we're clearly communicating what it is that we're doing with the money and whether we're on track with investment. This is something you can expect the company to be accountable for every year as we go into the into the next regulation period.

Q18. What methods of communication would you be using to get that information out to your service users, the customers?

We’re doing a couple of things. In terms of the bills that we send out to you, we've got leaflets in there that are going to provide that information.

There’s comprehensive information on the website. One of the challenges is that sometimes these documents can be too complicated to understand. So, we've committed to using plain English standard and we're producing customer-friendly documents that are easier for people to be able to understand so they can access this information.

Q19. Would that be issued out automatically or not?

Yes, in terms of the information sent with the bills, you will see the easy, accessible headlines. And in addition, that information is available on our website.

Events like this are also important. The approach that we've taken to build this plan is we haven't just submitted one plan for the North West. Each community within the North West is different, so it's really important that we've got that local visibility and that you can hold us accountable.

These sessions are going to be something that we continue to do. You know we advertised this session in the Liverpool Echo, and on the radio, but we've also been out in talking to people in community groups.

If you've got any suggestions, we'd love to hear them. You are going to get the opportunity to keep coming to sessions like this, assuming you'd like to, to be able to talk to us and challenge us.

We're going to be out too. Our area engagement teams are out talking to groups such as the Women's Institute, NGO groups, local authorities, and other community groups, talking about how we're performing, how we're delivering, and more importantly how we're addressing the issues that you care about in Merseyside.

Q20. How can I leave a question or suggestion on an ongoing basis?

If we can get your details in the chat, we can send you the links to the existing information. Whenever we publish information, there's always an email address on there that allows you to provide feedback, or comment, and also ask questions. We always monitor that mailbox and we do respond to anything that comes in. If you're okay to leave your details with us, we can get back to you and point you to that place on the website.

For anybody else who's listening, or who's got any feedback, we do have a 'leave your feedback' function on our website, because feedback is hugely important to us. If there is anything, about any topic, we're always keen to have it and we'll try and act upon it.

Q21. There are so many people who won't go into debt. They cut their cloth according to their income. Who qualifies for the affordability support that you are talking about. Is it just those people who are in debt?

A lot of people are concerned about the cost-of-living crisis. We have a huge package of social tariff schemes available and it's worthwhile pointing out that we've talked about the £525 million investment in the next AMP, of which £200 million is shareholder support. However, we're currently supporting around 200,000 customers on social tariff schemes at this point in time. We believe that will increase by about 300,000 with our new schemes.

But we don't have just one scheme for one circumstance and it's not just for customers who are in debt today. Our schemes are for any customer who feels worried and has concerns about paying their bill. This could be because you had a high paying job and you lost that job, so you want to take a payment break. We have a range of different social tariffs, for a range of different situations, and a range of different ways of investigating what the best tariff is for you.

We also use open banking if you want to use that on your account as well. You can find lots of information about this on our website but what we always advise, if you are concerned about your situation, is to call us. Our advisors are all based in the North West, and all our advisors are customers too, and they will guide you and point you to the right place for the right tariff for you. We have a huge package of support and we're very, very proud about how much we are supporting customers in the North West.

We're really clear that many customers do make individual sacrifices because they don't want to get into debt. We have a tariff scheme for pensioners on pensions credit - they might not be in debt - but they could be in a lower tariff.

We even have a charitable trust, whereby we can help customers if they need assistance with things like white goods and that's chaired independently. It's run as a charity by a lady from Merseyside called Debbie Morton. She does a

fantastic job in terms of chairing this charitable trust. We put over £3 million a year into that to help customers in lots of different circumstances. It's not a one-size fits all because we're all individual and anybody can find themselves experiencing difficulties and challenges.

Q22. Do you expect to have CEO, and other executive bonuses, cut because of poor performance?

From an executive pay perspective, what is important is that pay needs to be linked to performance that matters. Pay needs to be linked to things such as delivering good customer service, outcomes for the environment, and more importantly, it needs to be set and managed by an independent committee.

In response to the overwhelming feedback that was heard about rivers, and more importantly about combined sewer overflows, our executives did make a decision to forgo 25% of their performance related pay, last year.

One of the things that we have done, coming in as chief executive, we have changed the performance related pay structure. That will see performance related pay now focussed on the things that customers have told us really matter. That's environmental performance. It is the utilisation of combined sewer overflows. It is leakage and, it's about providing affordability, vulnerability support and great service to customers.

It's important that there is absolute transparency over pay and performance. Pay has been reduced because of that performance and more importantly as a part of the CEO appointment in April we have strengthened that further.

Q23. Does that mean then that if you don't achieve your targets and your performance falls below those targets, your bonus and, that of your colleagues, is reduced?

Absolutely, and there is full transparency of that reported every year too. We've set those targets out not just for now, but into the future and we will be a held account as to whether we deliver against them or not.

Questions not answered during the session

The following section includes our response to questions we received in advance of, during or after, the meeting, but did not have time to answer during the session. Where we have contact details, we are also responding directly to people who raised queries or made comments.

Q. Will UU ramp up their TV and any other media to educate (maybe starting at school age as kids tend to nag their parents, carers into concerns regarding the environment), on best ways to reduce water. I am always nagging my friends and family when I see them wasting water.

For the last three years we have been running a 'business as usual' approach to communications regarding saving and not wasting water, utilising ITV weather sponsorship, radio (e.g., Heart), digital TV and social (Instagram, Twitter) as part of the media mix. Awareness of the need to save water is running around 75%. In parallel, we run a schools education programme where we talk to 10,000 children a year about the water cycle and the need to save water. In addition, we carry out over 8000 water efficiency home visits every year installing devices to make homes more water efficient. For more information see United Utilities - Education

Q. I would like to know the best way to report leaks when I come across them out and about in my neighbourhood. I believe this reporting process should be as simple as possible to carry out and included in educational and media coverage.

Leaks can be reported via our website Leaks | United Utilities or on free leak line – 0800 330 033.

Q. We would like to hear how UU are planning to use the floor storage basin around Lunt Meadows in the next 5 year plan. In particular, we would like to hear about how you are working with Lancashire Wildlife trust.

This is part of a partnership at river Alt crossings and lower Mersey catchment hosted by the Mersey Rivers Trust. We are making an important contribution to this – more details can be found at: Mersey Rivers Trust - Mersey Estuary

Blueprint For further detail on our proposals to work in partnership, including with nationally important organisations, please see the United Utilities partnerships working webpage

Q. The recent Cheshire session mentioned the availability of smart water meters. Smart meters have been the subject of much controversy recently, particularly in terms of those other utilities, gas and electricity. They have been regarded as 'spies in the home', something I consider a piece of nonsense. Your assurance that they won't be a means to restrict our water usage would be helpful. On a more practical level, I have had a water meter for a lot of years (and have benefitted from it) My questions 'can I now exchange it for a smart meter? If so, will I be charged for the fitting?

Smart meter installation will be free of charge when we roll that out in 2025 – we plan to install 900,000 by 2030. We will have a rolling period of upgrades of the existing meters as part of the smart meter plan. It is free to have the smart meter installed and we commit that we won't charge customers more than they are currently paying as they get used to having the meter. Our overarching aim is to help customers feel more confident about smart meters as they hopefully witness a reduction in their bills as well as a reduction in their water usage.

In the North West, we have one of the highest propensities of electricity and gas pre-payment meters and sometimes customers are concerned that if they have a water meter, and fall into financial difficulty, we could disconnect their supply. Importantly, we promise that we cannot, and we would not ever operate that way. To give customers confidence if they'd like to move to a meter, we've introduced a scheme called the Lowest Bill Guarantee.

Q. Will UU supply water butts at cost price to encourage more people to use them. Also, advice on best position to place them particularly if they have a small outside property area.

We have a huge opportunity to collect rainwater because the more we do to get that rainwater out of the system, the more benefit it creates to help improve the environment and reduce storm overflows. There's a huge opportunity to get water butts at a better price and to make them look visually better in people's gardens. We've been carrying out a series of pilots on this and what people have said to us is that those 'ugly, green plastic water butts' aren't a great encouragement for many people who love their gardens.

In response, we have been designing water butts that look like pots. We are developing some new schemes where we're going to be discounting water butts and, more importantly, working with customers on where best to place them in terms of capture.

These can be ordered through our website. Advice on siting and installation is available, however this is being reviewed to make it as straightforward as possible. For more information see Water saving tips | United Utilities

This is not only about what people can do at home. In a project in Lancashire, we've installed some industrial-sized water butts into schools which are linked, via solar panels, to our control room in Warrington. If we know there's going to be a storm coming, we can send them a message, 24 hours in advance, so that they can empty the water out.

Q. Very interested in discounts on water butts and advice on best places to install. Can you let me know which department I need to contact to ask advice on flooding which occurs in my back garden which I believe is because paving flags have sunken therefore rainwater is not flowing naturally to my outside drain, thank you. By the way a lot of the roads local to me have cobble stones which have been covered over with tarmac for many years. I believe UU working with council highways could potentially alleviate some flooding and of course ensure a more natural draining system?? Just a thought

Water butt information is shown in response to the question above. Sewer flooding in your home or garden should be reported through our website https://www.unitedutilities.com/emergencies/got-a-problem/flooding/ or by calling 0345 672 3723. Our website also has a link to report more general flooding in the area. This is directed to the Environment Agency.

Q. Why is the standing charge in Merseyside the highest in the UK?

The standing charge across our region is consistent - it is not split in any way. For more information on bills see: https://www.unitedutilities.com/my-account/your-bill/

Q. For open water swimmers, when a sewage discharge is reported, how can we know if it is safe to swim? This is a big concern, as the risk of bathing in sewage is very dangerous for human health and for dogs too. Without accurate reporting and without water testing, wild swimmers are making decisions based on limited information. Do you advise to avoid swimming 48 hours after a discharge? Or is this arbitrary advice? People want to be free to swim every day in the sea without worrying about sewage. What advice do you have for daily swimmers?

This was answered in the session - see questions 10 and 11. It is the Environment Agency who provide advice on bathing water safety as the quality of water may not solely be influenced by wastewater discharges from assets operated by United Utilities. For more information on bathing waters see: https://www.unitedutilities.com/help-and-support/wastewater-services/wastewater-pollution/about-our-bathing-waters/

Q. I live in Freckleton. Sewage is frequently taken in tankers through the village. Is that a long term solution to avoid putting sewage into the sea at Blackpool? What's the plan? Why has the river Ribble not been dredged for years? Who is to be held responsible? Thanks for your time.

The tanker movements you refer to are likely to be the transportation of solids, or sludge - this is one of the by-products of wastewater treatment (in simple terms the used water we receive from customers is made up of liquids and solids) and we move it around the region to specific sites where we have the treatment facilities available to treat it.