

# To provide great water for a stronger, greener and healthier Lancashire

## Summary of the event

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 09 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 Lancashire 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 Officer
- James Bullock, Strategy, Policy and Regulation Director
- Mark Garth, Wastewater Services Director
- Mike Gauterin, Customer Service Director
- Iain Pilling, 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 Lancashire.

### Overview of plan for North West and Lancashire

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 Lancashire.

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
- 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 Lancashire, we will

- Support 55,300 people with affordability help, this will double by 2030
- We employ more than 860 people across Lancashire and plan to create more green jobs
- Promote sustainable development
- Invest £870 million to improve 35km rivers in Lancashire
- Improving fish and eel migration at Stocks Reservoir and the Calder River intake
- Work in partnership to improve rivers, coastlines and peatland with the Fylde Hub, Turning Tides, Ribble Rivers Trust, Wyre NFM, RSPB, and more
- Invest £729 million to reduce spills from 91 storm overflows
- Improve water quality, impacting on the taste, smell and appearance of water
- Invest £270 million to improve four bathing waters and protect shellfish waters
- Invest £1 billion to ensure resilient water supplies, by improving the Haweswater Aqueduct

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 Lancashire we currently support 55,300 customers through affordability schemes and 66,600 people with additional needs through 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 860 people across Lancashire 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.

This includes an investment of £1 billion to ensure resilient water supplies, by improving the Haweswater Aqueduct.

## 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.

## Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs)

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 rainwater, 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 Lancashire we are investing £729 million to reduce spills from 91 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 Lancashire 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.

### **Questions 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. In some cases, we asked customers to provide contact details so we could follow up on their question outside of the session – where we have received these contact details, we have responded directly to customers to deal with their individual customer service queries or specific question about our service.

#### **Q1. What are you doing about leaks?**

We've reduced leakage by more than a third over these past 30 years, but we need to go further, and we need to go faster.

We're on track to deliver reductions in leakage both this year, and into next year, so that we can ensure we reduce leaks by another 15%. But what we're doing is making sure that as we go forward, we're really stretching ourselves to deliver that further 50% reduction in levels of leakage by 2050.

We currently fix around 660 leaks per week. To give you an indication, that's the equivalent of about 17 Olympic sized swimming pools of water, every week, that we're finding, and we're fixing.

As well as having additional leakage crews out there fixing leaks across the North West, we're also using telemetry and data. We've been putting sensors into our water network so that we can identify and understand where those leaks are happening. That allows us to proactively ensure that those leaks are fixed before they cause any disruption to customers, or to highways.

The benefit of doing this means that we can start to understand how the network is operating and we will be upgrading our water mains across the North West with new pipe work too.

At the same time, we're also helping customers in their own homes because one of the challenges about leakage is that it's not just the leakage we lose in our pipes, it's leakages in customers' properties too. A third of leakage comes from customer's homes. One of the big things that we find challenging are dual flush toilets as well as taps.

Within the plan, we are proposing 900,000 smart meters to help customers identify leaks in their own homes and, at the same time, we're offering a comprehensive support package of water efficiency audits to help customers fix those leaks too.

It's a comprehensive programme to tackle leaks in terms of fixing them quickly when we find them, making sure that we're using data and technology to identify them before they happen, and at the same time supporting customers when we identify leaks in their own home. The meters that we're installing will really help with that identification.

**Q2. I want to ask a question about water quality. I don't understand how you can pass off a chemical called hexafluorosilicic as fluoride in people's water. Up to 10% content of people's water. How can you, as a water company, put chemicals into our drinking water without any consent, and then, apparently, just like big pharma, and UU, who are predominantly owned by Black Rock, not pension funds, have been indemnified against any possible legal action about the chemicals that you are dowsing our drinking water with. How do you explain that one?**

Fluoride naturally occurs in most water supplies. In some areas, fluoride is added into the water. It's not added in by water companies, it's added in specifically at the request of the secretary of state.

**Q3. So what you're saying is that it sits with central government?**

Well, it's actually not central government. It's the secretary of state that decides whether fluoride is added to water supplies.

**Q4. So why is this hexafluorosilicic being passed off as fluoride? I know for a fact that you recommended 0 point 7 milligrams per litre of water, and this particular type of fluoride, that's been put into our water, is nearly 10% which is not good for people at all.**

It's a very specific water quality and scientific question, we're talking about water quality, but not to that level, so we can get our chief scientist to call you.

**Q5. If we are talking about water quality, and the chemicals that you are putting in our water is not part of this conversation, then what part of our conversations now is going to be about water quality? What specifically do you mean by water quality if it's not what we're consuming?**

When we talk about water quality, we are talking about improvements that we're making in terms of access to water and the delivery of water to your home. You've got some very specific questions, and we don't want to give you any information that's not right in any way. What we're committing to do is that we will get our chief scientist to contact you and so we can have that conversation about the specific questions that you have.

In the interest of transparency, whatever conversation you have, if you're willing to do so, we will include those questions and our responses in the transcript that we send out after the meeting so everybody can hear those responses.

**Q6. Right, so, as far as water quality goes, it's about how much water you're getting pumped into your property or business, not the actual quality of water?**

It's the quality of water in terms of what we're doing to reduce discoloration, and all those types of factors. But the questions you've got are very specific, about processing. And so that's why we're saying, let us get our chief scientist to contact you, we'll have that conversation and then the interest of transparency we will also ensure that that's recorded in the meeting as well.

**Q7. I don't wish to trivialise the conversation after the important point made, which is fascinating, about actual water quality, but to go back to what was said about smart meters enabling the customers to be able to monitor their water usage, my smart meter is out on the street, 2 feet under the pavement. Even though it was installed by UU, they have consistently given me bill estimates because they can't find the water meter. So how is this going to aid the average person with their water usage?**

What we're proposing to do will help you greatly. Where we have meters that are in places that are not accessible, we're going to replace that meter and we're going to give you a small dial, or a display, that you will be able to have anywhere in the home that will be able to show you what your meter reading is.

That will also mean that we can pick that meter reading up electronically as well. We don't have to work on estimates, but you're absolutely right they shouldn't be in the road and that's why we want to change them all. That's what we're proposing to do.

Many meters we have in the North West are what we call AMR meters. We take a manual read of those meters and if we can't find the meter, we then give an estimate, or we give an assessed voluntary charge. In our business plan we will replace all those meters with what we call Smart Meters. The smart element is that they have a comms network on top, so they produce a signal to visualise that data for you.

We're going to start that roll out in around 18 months. We're doing co-creation groups of customers to ask them what would be useful to see. How would you like to see it? In what format would you like to see that information? If you want to give me your details, I'm happy to feed you into those co-creation groups about what will be useful for you to see. What we want to do is make sure it's a digestible and understandable for consumers so they can do something about it.

**Q8. It does help, but I'm one of the people that held off having a water meter for many years, even though it was costing me a lot more because I'm very careful and frugal with my water. The danger is, once everybody's water metered, then that means UU is in control and that's quite frightening. Really, because no matter how much you say you're the good guys, you're privatised, and your first duty is to the board, shareholders and profits.**

Customers are often concerned about water meters, particularly if there are bursts versus if they're not on a water meter.

We also offer a 'burst allowance' that essentially means if customers do have a burst or a problem, we give an allowance, so customers aren't billed for that. And what we typically find is that if there are more bedrooms than people living in a home, customers will typically save when they're on a meter.

One of the things that we're doing to give people confidence is something called 'the lowest bill guarantee' because we recognise that people don't trust us, and there is this real nervousness.

Lowest bill guarantee means, as we're installing these metres, you don't pay more than you're paying now - to give customers confidence to switch to a meter if that's what they want to do.

We're trying to address that with some of the schemes that we're putting in place to give people more confidence.

**Q9. Just one last point on water meters. Once you've jumped, you can't go back. Why is that?**

You have a 2-year window to decide whether you want to go back or not. They are the rules that are set across the UK. In the South of the country, there is compulsory metering – where everybody is metered. At the moment there is this 2-year window and opting for a meter is a decision, and you're not forced in any way in terms of whether you want to be billed on a meter or not.

**Q10. I have a water meter outside my property, and I submit my water readings on a very regular basis. A few weeks ago, I came into contact with a member of your staff. And he was messing around with water meters outside. I said, excuse me, what are you doing? We had a conversation, and in the conversation, he actually was laughing about the fact that it's remote reading of meters, remote reading is complete rubbish and doesn't really happen very often, if at all. I think a water meter is what it says. It metres your water so you can submit readings, but a smart meter is a two-way thing. And it's not a good thing for people to go for. And you can tell that it's a sinister plan because of the amount of coercion that the companies are trying to push these metres onto people.**

**You think I'm one of these tinfoil hat conspiracy theorists, but I can assure you I'm not. I've been off work for the past few years having had cancer and it's given me a lot of time to do my own investigations into all these corporations and companies. The fact that you've stated that pension funds are the main investors at 3.2% is rubbish because Black Rock own over half the company and we all know about Black Rock don't we? They own 8.7%, they're one of the largest stakeholders in your business.**

Firstly, we just want to come back to this metering point and coercion. We are not trying to coerce people.

It's mandatory in the South because there's a water scarcity. It's not what we're trying to do here. In the North West, what we're trying to do is give people facilities to lower their bills. It's hugely important to highlight the distinction between water and energy. From an energy company perspective, they have the ability to disconnect the supply for non-payment. We don't do that, and we won't do that. I do think that's important to say because they do operate very differently.

It's a choice whether you have a meter and you won't be coerced into having one in any way.

**Q11. If I lived down South, I wouldn't have a choice though, would I?**

We can't legislate for what happens in the South of the country because we're based in the North West.

**Q12. I think anyone with a little bit of insight into the way things are going within society at the moment can see there is a main, central government agenda here. It is about control. We all know that. We're not stupid. And I think that a lot of these meetings are incredibly patronising towards your customers. Considering the amount of dysfunction within UU and Black Rock and Vanguard. Black Rock and Vanguard are 2 of the main shareholders in every single corporation, they're massive, they own most of the planet, they've got their own agenda, water meters will become mandatory just like electricity and gas, the smart meters with the electricity companies. It's all about control and that's the way it's going, regardless of what you tell me at this meeting.**

We're really sorry that you think that these meetings are patronising. That's genuinely not what we're trying to do here.

**Q13. Well, it is patronising when we are told repeatedly how to scrimp and save on our water when there's trillions and trillions of gallons of water leaking all over the country, sewage being pumped into the seas. I mean, there's no accountability at all. And all these promises on what you're going to do in the future.**

**For a start, if you're going to invest £13 billion between 2025 and 2030 that's 5 years. So over 5 years is 13 billion, when you actually pay over £300 million to your shareholders per year. You know, I mean, it's 70% of your company is foreign ownership.**

**It says here in one year between 2021 and 2022 the main water companies paid out £966 million pounds of dividends to their shareholders. Now if you held back on all that lovely money that you dishing out to your shareholders and invested it in your business in the first place, we won't be in this mess, would we?**

It's important to note that what shareholders are enabling us to do is to make that investment now, but not reflect that immediately in customer bills.

So that's why, for example, with the new investments that we're putting forward, there's £7.5 billion of enhancement investment, but bills will be increasing over the same period by £1.8 billion. Its shareholders that are providing the difference between the 2 numbers. So, that's the approach that the financing of the industry takes.

**Q14. What about your regulators? What are they doing when all this is going on? You are going to put our bills up. How dare you even consider putting people's bills up when there's this absolute corruption and mismanagement, and all these shareholders are laughing all the way to the bank, and then you tell us you're going to put our bills up.**



The investment plans that we're putting forward for the next 5 years are with our regulators at the moment.

The regulators are looking at that, and they're probing whether the level of investment is appropriate, whether we are investing in the right things for customers, whether we are investing in the right things for the environment.

They'll also look very carefully at the level of return that would go to shareholders. These are all key considerations that Ofwat, the Environment Agency, CCW, are looking at at the moment.

They are keen to receive all comments on business plans as they go through their process so there are opportunities to put forward views directly to Ofwat, and they will ultimately make the final decision in terms of what we invest, the level of investment that's appropriate for the next 5 years and the returns that would go through to shareholders.

**Q15. I live in Blackburn, and I'm concerned about fluoride in the water because I drink about 2 litres of water every day. Do you fluoridate the water in Blackburn?**

In terms of Blackburn, we can get that tested for you specifically. We probably need to look at your address, but the initial view is we don't.

If you provide your address, what we can also do is not just look at fluoride, we can give you a composition of the water that gets delivered to you. There is a facility on our website where you can do yourself, but we can get that for you so that you can see the composition of your water, where it comes from, and what properties are in it.

You can simply give us your email address on the chat. We can contact you straightaway, this afternoon, and you don't need to share anything that's confidential.

It's important for everyone to understand that the Drinking Water Inspectorate specifies minimum standards for water quality right across the UK and, particularly in our area, we produce very, very high quality water which meets or exceeds all of those standards.

What we're talking about in this investment plan is making investments that improve further on those standards. You can be confident that all of the water that we produce right across our region is safe to drink and wholesome to drink. That's an absolute minimum statutory requirement. But in fact, we are going beyond that in this investment.

On the point of fluoride, if we do fluoridate the water, it's under the guidance and instruction of the local public health authorities.

**Q16. Is it possible to remove the fluoride if there is fluoride in the water?**

What we probably need to do is just have a look at your specific address. We can give you some water quality advice and get a water quality officer to have a look.

Your internal pipe work can make a difference too, so we can look at both of those things for you and give you some specific advice if that would be helpful.

**Q17. I didn't want to speak about fluoride or water quality but, coincidentally, I owned 3 of the dental practices in Blackpool. We were the major provider of dental care in Blackpool.**

**We saw that devastation of the poorer groups of people who didn't have access to dental care. For the people who object to fluoride in the water, they can remove it with carbon filters if they want. I was the dentist that took all the teeth out in Preston General Hospital when kids came in with multiple cavities from poorer families. These are the very people who would benefit from fluoride in water.**

**I was part of the group that tried to get fluoridation into the bigger council estates in Blackpool because of what we were seeing in the way of disease. But the people there voted not to have it. It's a misunderstanding, I'm afraid, and people don't understand the chemistry. It's a shame. I just would like to say we've seen the problems**

of non-fluoridated water, and I don't know what you do to persuade people and get people to understand the chemistry that's involved.

Thank you for sharing your perspective.

## HEALTHIER

**Q18. I'm chairman of Marton Moss Neighbourhood Forum. We've spent 4 years writing a town plan for the Marton Moss area. Historically, from the 1930s through to the 1970s, it was a horticultural area, and the land is drained by a series of dykes and soakaways that go into the main dike and the River Ribble at Freckleton way.**

**We've tried very hard to get Blackpool Council to enforce Riparian Law and keep these dykes open, but because there's no commercial use of the area now, and because the greenhouses have all gone, people have fallen out of the habit of digging the dike and keeping the water running and we're in a flood zone one/flood zone 2 area.**

**I wonder if UU could work with Blackpool Council to try and get Riparian Law, and the dykes that Blackpool are responsible for dug again to dry the land out. Then when it rains like it has done in the past few months, we won't get this localised flooding into people's gardens, which goes into storm water and your overflows.**

**You have dug 3 attenuation basins of an acre each, to take the surface water, but because the dykes don't flow well, those attenuation basins are just being grazed by horses. There's no water in them.**

We're trying to work with Blackpool Council, yourselves, and the neighbourhood forum, to try and get people to start getting the drainage right again as it was designed.

We work very closely with all of the local authorities across the North West, but particularly in Lancashire, we have pretty good relationships with Blackpool and Wyre Councils. There may be representatives of those organisations on the call today.

Particularly over last summer, we worked very closely with Blackpool, discussing how we could work better on integrated water management, such as water that's coming down the sewer, that's making its way into surface water sewers, but also generally about resilience and flood management.

We're very much keen to get involved in that and if there's more we can do, certainly we'd be happy to pick up with you.

It's possible that we may already have a relationship with the Marton Moss group but, in any case, we'd be very happy to pick it up with you and see if we can work more collaboratively with yourselves and the local authorities to achieve those outcomes.

**Q19. Blackpool Council did write to all the residents at our request saying that they had a legal duty to actually dig their section of the dykes and keep it open. But Blackpool Council point blank refused to enforce anything to do with that. They said it was too costly and it would take too much time. It's just trying to get a coordinated approach so that the dykes are maintained, and people understand their responsibilities.**

If we are to achieve the 60% reduction in storm overflows that we are talking about, surface water management is an integral part of that. So not only are we going to have to consider what happens with our sewage, but we're very much going to have to work (and we're already doing this of course) with local authorities and other stakeholders about how water is managed across catchments.

That includes water that doesn't, or shouldn't, come near our system and it certainly includes land management and all of the activities that go with it.

We're not going to be in a position where we can start enforcing laws that hold local authorities accountable, but we are very keen to get involved to see if there are some other incentivisation, or support, that we can give to make sure

that that water is managed in an effective way because, at the end of the day, that's going to help us reduce that water coming into our system which then, in turn, reduces storm overflows.

We're very happy to work with you and your group. If you want to drop your email into the chat, we can perhaps come up and meet you onsite. We're more than happy to do that.

**Q20. Given that 150 community groups all over the country are testing the quality of the waters in our rivers and finding that many would not meet bathing water status consistently, in the vast majority of places, can you give us an update on our Lancashire rivers? And what are your future plans to ensure that our rivers are safe from pollution for the people who use them and also the wildlife and plants whose homes they are?**

In the background, we've invested £20 billion over the last 30 years in a range of improvements. A large chunk of that has been in environmental improvements.

We are also proposing, going forward, to invest more than £800 million on the nutrients in our rivers, more than £700 million in reducing storm overflows, and a quarter of a billion pounds is particularly focused on bathing water quality.

We've got a whole range of bathing waters, right across the North West, and only 20% of those met the sufficient standard in 1988. However, as of last year, 97% of those now meet the sufficient standard, so it's been a dramatic improvement and increase in the quality of bathing waters across the North West. Some of those are now at the highest standard of excellence.

However, particularly in Lancashire, there are a range of bathing water qualities. We have one that's classified Poor at Blackpool North, but we have some Excellent rated at Bispham, which are closely aligned to where we've made significant investments at Anchorsholme.

You can be confident that we care very passionately about the quality of the rivers in the North West, and particularly the bathing waters.

We have pledged to support the designation of further bathing waters over the next few years, and we've got very intensive investment programmes which are aimed at bringing those bathing waters up to the highest possible standards achievable.

**Q21. I'm in Morecambe and, quite frequently, you do see baby wipes floating past you as you go swimming. I think the term storm overflow is a bit of a misnomer. Recently, I'd thought it was said that it wasn't just when it was raining that the storm overflows operated. It was found that numerous water companies had been dumping sewage into water courses, illegally.**

We're confident that we haven't been doing that.

It's a very complex science. When a storm overflow discharges, and under what conditions, is heavily regulated. We can hopefully give you some assurance that we understand those regulations and we follow them to the letter of the law.

What that doesn't mean though, for example, is that there is a specific criterion for when an overflow discharges. The majority of our sewers in the North West stem originally from Victorian heritage. They have been upgraded and improved over time, but still on the basis of that Victorian roadmap. What that means is that on a normal dry day, the sewers are only around 15% full because we have a very large proportion of combined sewers, which mean that they have capacity for the sewage, but they also have capacity for rainwater.

On a dry day they run quite empty, and that capacity is there to allow for when it rains for them to fill up. It's only when they fill up, and there's nowhere else for the rain to go other than to flood back into your homes, businesses, or into the streets, that's when storm overflows operate. So that could be after a very short, intense bout of rainfall, but it could also be after a very prolonged period of our average rainfall. It really is about how full the sewers are.

We're investing more than £700 million, targeted at improving and upsizing those sewers so that they meet the new legislative requirements which are for an overflow only to spill 10 times a year or less.

Progressively, all our overflows will be meeting that standard up to 2050 but we're getting going in the next regulatory period on the ones that spill the most and have the most potential to harm the environment. We'll be making a 60% reduction by 2030 compared to 2020 in the number of spills from our overflows.

On your point about wet wipes in Morecambe, and right across the North West, part of that investment is to install screens which filter out all of the debris. Whether it's wet wipes (which shouldn't really be in the sewer system at all - and I'd encourage anyone on the call not to flush wet wipes) or any other kind of debris that you might expect to be in a sewer, that will be captured by the screens.

This should end this scenario where you see wet wipes on the beaches or in rivers.

**Q22. When the water companies were privatised, surely the private companies knew that they were buying Victorian infrastructure and yet they have waited. They've taken out maximum profits for as long as possible before they have been forced into doing something. If I bought an old house, and I knew that it needed tonnes of things doing, I would sort out my own house before spending my salary on luxuries.**

We think that's a really important point. We really welcome the question because it gives us a chance to explain to everyone that when we talk about Victorian infrastructure, it's true that some of our pipes are 100 or more years old. However, what we're really talking about is the underlying plan for how the network was laid out.

Using your analogy about buying a Victorian house, you can repair the roof, you can decorate, you can perhaps build an extension, and you can do extensive modifications and upgrades, but it will always be a Victorian house. That is really what we're talking about here. Apart from knocking the house down and replacing it, which would require us to dig up every single road and every single driveway in the North West, we're talking about modifying, upgrading, and making fit for the future.

That's the key difference. We're not saying they're Victorian because we've done nothing with them. We've spent an enormous amount of money and done an enormous amount of work to make them fit for the future, but they are still a Victorian designed system.

In some places, it is appropriate to dig up the road and dig out the Victorian system and re-lay a new one. As mentioned, we spent £20 billion over the last 30 years in some places doing that, and that's led to dramatic improvements in bathing water quality. But right across the North West, we've got 80,000 kilometres of sewer, that's enough to go twice around the world, and we don't think it's appropriate to spend customers' money digging up that network because the disruption, and the cost it would take, would not yield the same benefit as it would to do the really targeted investment programme that we're proposing.

We hope that gives you an inkling that when we talk about Victorian sewers, we're not always talking about a pipe that's 100 years old, we're talking about a Victorian design of a network.

**Q23. First of all, you shouldn't be spending customers' money on making your infrastructure fit for purpose. You should be reducing the number of dividends you pay to your shareholders and using that money to sort out your business because in the year 2022, UU was responsible for 1 in 5 sewage bills in England and, so far, this year, UU is the worst water company in terms of sewerage spills. UU was fined £800,000 pounds for taking 22 million litres of water from an aquifer in little Lancashire.**

**An aquifer is where rock or the sediment that holds groundwater and rainwater, is held below the surface of the soil. Aquifers feed rivers and you need to keep their levels healthy or else it impacts and damages the rivers. UU was fined for illegally abstracting 22 million litres of water, causing damage to an important aquifer that will take years and years to recover and there was damage to all the rivers that were connected to it.**

Yes, we were found guilty. We found that issue. We reported it. We identified that the problem was there, and it was not deliberate. As soon as it was found, we reported it.

As well as the fine, we have also given £3 million as an additional contribution to the rivers of Lancashire.

Of that £3 million, we are working with different communities in terms of making that investment and there are various things that are happening.

We're giving a million pounds each to 3 of the Rivers Trusts in Lancashire. That's the Lune, the Wyre and the Ribble. Each of the Rivers Trusts have identified a range of projects to improve the local rivers, and the environment, and we'll be working with them and other stakeholders like the Environment Agency and local authorities to deliver those projects in the next few years.

For example, we've got schemes like wetland projects, we've got Room for the Rivers projects, and we've got projects where we're going to be developing wetland sites and slowing the flow of the water to help our systems cope with the heavy rainfall.

We're doing community catchments, where we're working with local communities to help us clean up the rivers together collectively.

And you also asked an additional question around UU being the company with the biggest number of CSO spills. Yes, we absolutely are. We've been very clear about that, in terms of the numbers that we have. Part of that is down to the fact that we have the highest level of combined infrastructure and rainfall here in the North West, but we've identified - and more importantly we are accelerating - the biggest investment programme to make sure we tackle that.

If you look at the volume of spill reduction that we've delivered so far, a 41% reduction and we're going further and faster. But it is going to take us time to do that because we're essentially going to need to re-plumb the North West. We have never shied away from the fact that, yes, we have more CSOs than anybody else. We've also got more rainfall in the North West, and we need to do more, and that's what this plan is proposing to do. We're trying to put forward a plan that addresses these issues and makes these improvements.

**Q24. I'm here on behalf of Surfers against Sewage. I do a bit of water testing along our coastline here. I've done it since about 2020/2021 to do with the water quality. I test for E. Coli, that kind of stuff. I was wondering how you test, and what do you test for in the water off our coastline?**

The short answer is we don't test the waters off our shoreline and that's not because we're not interested, it's because that role is carried out by the experts, the Environment Agency.

We support the Environment Agency so, for example, we report to them through our regulatory reporting process when overflows into the sea might be happening and that then enables them to take a judgment as to when to sample, where to sample, and what to sample.

As I'm sure you're aware, we're waiting for the results for 2023 which will be announced on 1<sup>st</sup> December and every year we review those results with the Environment Agency.

We'll see if there's been an improvement in the bathing water classifications, or a deterioration, and we'll try to establish if that is as a result of our activity, maybe an agricultural activity, or some other activity, and that in turn will guide our action plan for the following year.

The short answer is we don't, but it's not because we're not interested, it's because there's an expert who does it.

**Q25. Right, so that's the Environment Agency. So is it the Environment Agency that designates the bathing water quality. The poor status, the good status, that kind of thing. Is that the Environment Agency's classification?**

Yes. The classifications are made by the Environment Agency. They sample throughout the bathing water season, which is through to October, and then the results we're expecting to be published come on 1<sup>st</sup> December, for the 2023 season.

**Q26. The Safer Seas and Rivers Service app has just come back online. There have been alerts over the past couple of days. Some of them have been under maintenance since about September. I've been keeping an eye on it because obviously I am a water user. I've got a membership at Blackpool Lightcraft Club, I go out fishing as well and eat the seafood from our coastline.**

**Seeing that that there have been sewage overflows and knowing about the amount of crap that's washing up on the beach as well, I am sick of it. Obviously, everybody else is sick of it. I want to see this get shifted on as fast as possible, and get our waters cleaned up as fast as possible.**

**It's great that there's so much investment that's going into upgrading all the antiquated, Victorian pipes. One of my questions earlier on was, is there going to be any grants for homeowners to split the costs of pipe works as well, on their land? Is that a possibility?**

We fundamentally believe that transparency is important, and we are launching a new platform in the New Year that will provide you with real-time reporting. You will be able to see every CSO in the North West, and you will be able to see whether it's discharging or not.

**Q27. That'd be great. Will you be able to see how long for? And how much is getting let out?**

You'll be able to see that live because we think it's important that people can see that information. We're also working with your colleagues at Surfers against Sewage to provide a live data feed. Not only will you be able to see the information from our assets, but we'll be able to report it through the Surfers against Sewage App as well, as we've been engaging with Surfers against Sewage to ensure it's on both.

You've raised a really important point because when we talk about CSOs, we talk about 3 things: reduce, remove, and re-plumb. Essentially, we've got to reduce water usage because that is what's causing part of the problem. We've got to remove, and we've got to separate surface water. And that is a particular challenge for us in the North West.

If you look at the North West specifically, and even if you look at Lancashire, you'll know that many older homes have had their front driveways paved over, and we've all parked cars on them, because we live very differently than we did when these homes were built. As a result of that, that green space has gone, and essentially so has that natural sponge.

Currently, we're doing a series of projects looking at how can we help homeowners by providing grants, or support, to put in permeable driveways in the areas where we know there is flooding.

We're doing work with some schools in Lancashire where we've installed industrial sized water butts to collect the surface water and they are connected to our control room here in Warrington because the problem is that if you don't empty the butts, then they just overflow and don't work. We can send the butts a message a couple of days before a storm is due, so they can empty and make sure that they're then not causing a problem in terms of spills.

This is a huge area for us. We're doing some really interesting work in Greater Manchester, particularly in the Salford area, where we are putting in swales, and urban drainage, and going down streets that have been heavily developed, or concreted over, and putting in trees and sustainable drainage.

We're happy to reach out to you to show you some of those things because it's going to take a whole series of different interventions to solve this problem and we're committed at looking at all of them.

We can also talk to you about when the app is going live, but we can reassure you that there is a live feed that will come into your app too because we have been working with your colleagues at Surfers Against Sewage.

**Q28. Just to say Blackpool Central has had 117 alerts of overflows. Are they every time it rains, or are they dry spills?**

The alerts in your app come from the Environment Agency pollution risk forecast. So that can be either a combination of our assets overflowing, but sometimes it can be due to heavy rain forecast, but our assets don't overflow.

I'd have to go away and check how many times that our assets have actually overflowed of that 117, but it is quite right that when there is heavy rain, it is a potential that it fills up the capacity that's in our combined sewer system and in the Fylde Coast there's 200 million litres of storage, so there's a significant volume of rain that we can capture before anything spills. If it does continue to rain, and the tunnel fills up, then it's quite right that it is designed to pump out to sea. In Blackpool Central, that goes to 1 kilometre out to sea, further up the coast in Fleetwood it goes to 5 kilometres out to sea, and all of that is designed to try and minimise the impact on the bathing waters.

We work really hard to make sure that they only discharge at the absolute minimum of times, and certainly only when our permits allow that to happen.

## **STRONGER**

**Q29. UU's debt as of March 2023 was over £9 billion. If you've got £9 billion worth of debt, how can you justify wanting to implement all these changes? Things are coming from higher up, aren't they? From central government. For example, England's rivers are at risk as Michael Gove and Thérèse Coffey rip up the rules on new housing and water pollution rules. They're building new houses on flood plains. They're messing up all the natural drainage systems and dikes that the lovely gentleman mentioned earlier. It's like ministers have completely given up on saving the great waterways and wildlife that's going to be a lost to allowing house builders to cut corners.**

**Now all these new bills are going up, and the fact that local councils are passing the book to UU, and UU is passing the book back to local councils, it just equates to a total dysfunction in all areas.**

**I had my house flooded in 2020. My parents have lived in this property since 1979 and it has never been a flood plain around here. It's because of corruption from central government, they're not giving local councils the money that they need to maintain the infrastructure.**

**Everything's being run down into the ground, isn't it? I mean, I don't know how you can all sit there straight faced when you have got £9 billion of debt.**

The reason we have debt, and the reason we have shareholders as a result of that, the reason we pay interest and the reason we pay dividends, is to enable us to make investments now, when they're needed, and then effectively pay those off over the lifetime of those investments, the lifetime of the assets.

For example, where we're building a water treatment works that might have a life of 25 years, what we're able to do is to borrow that money or finance that money from shareholders, or from borrowing, and spread that over a 25-year period matching the lifetime of the asset.

It's a bit like people who buy a house, or if you take on a mobile phone contract. You might pay for that handset each month, over a number of months, over the lifetime of that mobile handset. Or if it's a mortgage, you might pay for that over the lifetime of the mortgage. What that enables you to do is to get the benefit of the handset - or the benefit of the house - today - but pay it off over the lifetime of the asset.

That's why we have debt, and that's why we have shareholders. The interest and the dividends that we pay are basically what the banks or the shareholders require in order to let us have that money upfront and make the investment.

The thing to think about with this is what would the alternative be? The alternative would be that we didn't have that investment.

If we didn't have the financing, we wouldn't be able to make those investments. Or alternatively, if we were going to make those investments, we'd have to bill customers upfront right now and have a very big bill increase.

The financing of the industry, the financing of this investment through debt, and through shareholders, is a way of managing the profile of the spend and making sure that across different generations of bill payers, the cost of that investment is spread fairly.

We're not a statutory consultee for planning. We do work with local authority planning departments to try and engage them to make sure they're putting in sustainable urban drainage to make sure that any flooding is mitigated but we're not statutory consultees in planning. If somebody wants to build homes for example, that isn't something that we have any regulatory powers over.

**Q30. You've mentioned the investment, the money put in by investors, but surely we are paying as customers. I've just got my bill in front of me, and it says: 'wastewater usage, the cost of collecting your dirty water, cleaning it, and returning it to the environment'. There's quite a lot of the money being paid by the customers, not just outside investment. I understand from a friend who did try to take UU to court, he withdrew the wastewater part of his bill because of swimming in faeces in Morecambe Bay.**

**The judge did point out that, unfortunately, it's something to do with the state of the contract. When you pay your bill, it's under contract law. I'm not a lawyer obviously. So that any customer saying I don't think you're cleaning the wastewater before you return it into the environment, they have no voice, they cannot withhold that part of their bill. They just have to suck it up.**

The bill reflects 2 things. The bills that come through reflect the operating costs, the day-to-day costs that the company is incurring. Things like chemicals, power, and the patch repairs that we make to the network.

The other part of the bill is that long-term investment that I was talking about. This means a contribution to those new wastewater treatment works, for example, or laying the hundreds of kilometres of new water mains. It's about contributing towards that today, but also the amount that's recovered from the water bill isn't the full cost today.

That cost is spread over the lifetime of the assets so there'll be a little contribution towards those big investments each year from the water bill. In the meantime, the financing is being provided by shareholders and through debt with the banks.

That's the way in which the bill matches up with the investment approach.

**Q31. I had an email from UU telling me that I haven't paid my bill this month. I went online to pay my bill, turns out I was still in credit. That's why I've stopped paying direct debits to companies like UU and British Gas because they end up with all my money in their account. And I can't get it back.**

If you wouldn't mind leaving your details on the chat, we can look specifically into the details of your account and in terms of both the credit and debit position.

If you just put your email address in, so there's no confidential information, after this, we can look into your account and contact you straight afterwards.

### **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. My question; I drink a lot of water and I'm concerned that, in the future, fluoride will be added to the supply. Are there any plans to force this medication on us and, if so, how can I remove the fluoride from my drinking water?**

Fluoride is tasteless, odourless, and invisible. Some water supplies naturally contain fluoride if they originate from sources that are underground where there are rocks and minerals that are prone to higher levels of fluoride. North West water supplies are naturally very low in fluoride. We're predominantly reservoir fed, and water normally contains less than 0.2 milligrams of fluoride per litre, which is very low.

The decision to put fluoride in the water rests with the Secretary of state. It is not a decision taken by water companies but something we must comply with. We are only required to add fluoride in a small number of areas. There's no fluoride added in Merseyside, Lancashire or Manchester. There is some fluoride added to water in Cumbria and in Crewe, Cheshire.

We want to assure everybody that water quality is something that's very heavily regulated and very heavily sampled. We pride ourselves on the quality of water that we deliver in the North West. Customers can view the quality of the drinking water in their local area at <https://www.unitedutilities.com/help-and-support/your-water-supply/your-water/water-quality/>.

**Q. As requested I do have a couple of questions, which would be good if these could be covered at the meeting. 1. You have stated you will be installing sustainable drainage solutions to reduce rainwater entering sewers. What does this entail please, as where I live a main road, and therefore the large main sewer, constantly floods through heavy rain; the resulting overflow water then flows into the local residents' streets and into our rain sewers. As new properties I understand rainwater is pumped into local streams/waterways, and therefore sewerage is then going in to them. How will this improvement stop this? 2. You have also stated you will be installing real time sensors across the network to spot problems before they cause pollution. How will this help if the current main sewers (as per Q1) can't take the additional flow or rainwater at present, no matter how many sensors the sewer will overflow. In case you need to understand the specific issue relating to my questions, I live in Kirkham and the specific main sewer referred to is on the A583, Blackpool Road.**

There is a recommendation, as part of a review that was undertaken about 10 years ago, that SuDS should become law, and that was enshrined in something called the Floods and Water Management Act. It has been largely implemented, but the elements around sustainable drainage has yet to be made law. The government has pledged that it will be made law, and we do expect that to happen over the next few years, but putting that to one side, this is where the value of us working very closely with local authorities is apparent because we can try and make this happen now. We want to encourage local authorities to push, as part of their planning requirements, that all surface water needs to go into sustainable drainage. By this, we mean ponds, swales, and areas that can be naturally flooded to manage surface water, which can then drain naturally into water courses. This would mean we're not mixing it with sewage, it's not escaping through CSOs, and, consequently, we're not paying money and using electricity to pump wastewater to treatment works when it's just not necessary.

Our strategy is all about keeping rainwater out of our sewage systems going forward. This is why the team has been out there working with local authorities to talk to them about why we think it is an important part of planning. When you drive past new housing developments, if you see what looks like a pond, it is usually a SuDS scheme for rainwater and, actually, it can quite often create a green space and a habitat where wildlife can thrive and where you can see great birds. We've all got to be advocating for these changes because they're going to make a huge difference.

Through our Dynamic Network Management initiative, we have put sensors into our sewer network to enable us to understand how the sewer network is working, and to take action if we think there's an issue because of the data and telemetry that we can see. It provides us with real-time monitoring of sewer levels and helps us 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.

**Q. Why are you asking for more money to improve the infrastructure re sewage when you have been charging for this separately on bills since your conception? Will you release untreated effluent and pollute for more or less than the 800,000 hours recorded last year? Do you feel embarrassed by your sewage effluent release record?**

In the North West, we have a huge pipe network - enough wastewater pipes to go around the world twice. We also have higher levels of rainfall than elsewhere in the country and higher levels of combined sewers which means we have more storm overflows.

Currently, we're at 35 spills per combined storm overflow and we were at 59 in 2020. That's a big step change that's already been delivered, a 39% reduction. However, we need to go further and faster. Essentially that means doing 3 things:

- **Reducing** the amount of water in the system
- **Removing** surface water, by ensuring we're using less
- **Re-plumbing** across the North West region

One of the biggest challenges we have is that we can't just turn everything off while we do the work. This isn't just like building a new road where you can divert the traffic. We must continue to make sure that we treat sewage and do that properly and safely.

This plan is going to see us work on over 430 CSOs overflows across the North West. We're investing £3.1 billion and it's the biggest plan of its kind in the sector. In terms of ambition, we've really challenged and stretched ourselves.

This will see us working on CSOs up and down the North West region. This is a huge amount of construction and intervention at the same time as delivering that service. Our target is no more than 10 spills per combined storm overflow by 2050 but we are challenging and stretching ourselves to go as fast as we can. It's a really ambitious programme and it isn't without its challenges. For more information see: [United Utilities - Storm overflows](#)

**Q. The plan talks about building a more resilient network, fixing, and replacing pipes and mains. How much of today's network vulnerabilities from storm overflow are due to combined surface water and sewerage? So, when you talk about replacing old pipes and mains what proportion of this is separating off the surface water run-off from the actual sewerage system?**

We have covered the answer to this question already - see the question above and also questions [19](#) and [28](#). In addition, we've got £250 million in the plan for this. It will help us to identify where surface water connects into our combined systems and where there might be opportunities to remove it. We can separate out surface water, put that through a sustainable, nature-based solution to treat it in a different way. That then limits the amount of flooding, but also the amount of water that discharges from overflows.

**Q. My question is when will the Thirlmere Road reopen for cyclists (the main road is dangerous for them) and walkers and have the plans for not allowing access to them being abandoned in the face of overwhelming public opposition to it?**

At this moment in time, we have an issue with the crag that overhangs that West Road. We are in receipt of some engineering reports that tell me that there is a risk to public safety, whether that be rocks or trees coming down and falling on that road.

As a result of that, the road has been closed. We are very clear that we want that road opening and are committed to making that happen. There are a series of meetings that have been going on with all of the relevant authorities to gain the permissions that we need, because we're going to need to scale that crag, and it is a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) area.

We are very keen to work with the Lake District National Park, Natural England, the Environment Agency, and the council to enable that work to happen. We have also been very clear with all stakeholders about our commitment to get that road open, but we need to make sure that we tackle the rock itself and make it safe. There are meetings

that are going on, and we're hoping to secure that position so we can then make sure that we can do that work, do it safely, and make sure it is protected for the future as well as enabling us to get the road open.

In case that permission cannot be granted, we have been working on a backup solution which is around putting in a cycle route and a pathway that would make it accessible whether that be to horse riders or wheelchair users. We've got a backup plan to what the primary focus is - to get the permission to do the work on the crag so we can get that road open.

**Q. At this meeting I would be grateful if you would address the following issues: 1. You say you have 79000km of wastewater pipes, and intend to replace 950km; over what period of time? If over 1 year, it would take 83 years to renew the network. What is the lifetime expectation of the current infrastructure network? 2. You say you intend to reduce storm overflows by 60% by 2030. This is in effect meaningless. Let's be clear: we are talking about sewage pollution here. Why have storm/sewage overflows been allowed to get into their current, totally unacceptable, state? Your ambition should be the total elimination of storm/sewage overflows. 3. Similarly, you state your ambition is ""to improve bathing waters"", again this is meaningless without specific commitments. You must commit to making the majority of our rivers and all the lakes clean enough for swimming.**

We have more combined sewer overflow spills than any other company in the country. In the North West, we have a huge pipe network - enough wastewater pipes to go around the world twice. We also have higher levels of rainfall than elsewhere in the country and higher levels of combined sewers.

Currently, we're at 35 spills per combined sewer overflow and we were at 59 in 2020. A big step change that's already been delivered, a 39% reduction.

However, we need to go further and faster. Essentially that means doing 3 things:

- **Reducing** the amount of water in the system
- **Removing** surface water, by ensuring we're using less
- **Re-plumbing** across the North West region

It's going to take time and many people have asked us to go faster. One of the biggest challenges we have is that we can't just turn everything off while we do the work. This isn't just like building a new road where you can divert the traffic. We must continue to make sure that we treat sewage and do that properly and safely.

This plan is going to see us work on over 430 CSOs overflows across the North West. We're investing £3.1 billion and it's the biggest plan of its kind in the sector. In terms of ambition, we've really challenged and stretched ourselves.

This will see us working on CSOs up and down the North West region. This is a huge amount of construction and intervention at the same time as delivering that service. Our target is no more than 10 spills per combined sewer overflows by 2050 but we are challenging and stretching ourselves to go as fast as we can. It's a really ambitious programme and it isn't without its challenges. For more information specifically on river health, we'd like to direct you to our [Better Rivers Report for 2022/23](#).

We are not in a position to give you advice on whether it is safe to swim or not. The Environment Agency, however, are in that position. The pollution risk forecasts created on the Swimfo website do take account of the likelihood of a storm overflow occurring because that is one of the factors that might influence bathing water quality. Those pollution risk forecasts also take account of, for example, agricultural runoff or other third-party pollution sources.

It's important to take advice from the Environment Agency. Early next year, we will be publishing live data on whether our overflows are discharging. It will be real time to within 1 hour and in many cases that will be to within 15 minutes. The public will be able to view when a CSO is discharging or has discharged.

For clarity, the 950km of pipes that we are upgrading relates to the clean water network, not the wastewater network.

**Q. Some potential questions for you to consider... What are you doing about leaks? How will you accelerate the installation of water meters? How are you taking measures to support the adaptation to climate change – i.e. infrastructure to deal with worsening weather events?**

Detecting and repairing leaks efficiently is a core part of our business. We have over 70 teams operating across the region fixing leaks, in a typical year this could cost around £50M.

Over recent years we have prioritised finding and fixing leaks and whilst doing so have further developed our learning on how leaks occur. Our water pipes are pressurised, and when a pipe is repaired to fix a leak, the risk is that a leak may then occur at the next weakest part of the water pipe. The challenge is that we have over 40,000 km of pipes, which means inevitably we will have issues from time to time.

This learning has informed our proposed plan for 2025 to 2030 and we intend to significantly increase the number of poor condition mains that we replace. We will trial replacing longer sections of pipe as part of our repair process, when we believe that the pipe is at risk of failing again in the near future.

We currently we offer a free meter option, which you can apply for today and smart meter installation will also be free of charge when we roll that out in 2025. We will have a rolling period of upgrades of the existing meters as part of the smart meter plan. 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 would not ever operate that way.

To give customers confidence if they'd like to move to a meter, we've introduced something called the Lowest Bill Guarantee. 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. It will then be the customer's choice whether they want to move to a meter permanently. 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.

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 put all of our plans onto our [WRMP website](#). You can view our proposed business plan in full and access the supporting evidence used in constructing the plan, see link [Business Plan link](#). You can also see how we're planning for the future, considering population increases and climate change in our Long-Term Delivery Strategy (page 18 onwards).

**Q. I would like answers to the following questions. I am unable to ask them at the event as I am hard of hearing. You are planning to increase the charge to customers at a time when they have already been hit by a steep rise in the cost of living. A third of your revenue (around £650 million) is profit. Why aren't you using more of that to fund what you call improvements, but which are, in fact, your failure, over the years to maintain the network and the services you are contracted to provide?**

We're very aware of the challenges people are facing because of the rising cost of living and that's why we're doing more than ever to help vulnerable customers and those who are struggling to pay their bills in this challenging period. United Utilities has the most extensive range of support schemes in the sector and in our business plan submission for 2025-2030 – we are proposing to increase support for customers who are struggling to pay – helping the one in six households facing difficulties with their bills through a £525 million support package. This is a large increase from the £280m support we are providing in the current 5 year regulatory period.

Since privatisation, we have invested around 3 times as much as we have paid as dividends. In the 30 years since privatisation we have invested around £22.6bn in customer service and environmental improvements and paid around £7.3bn in dividends (or, on average £300m per year). The sort of returns that investors receive, whether through debt or equity, is around a 4% return. The vast majority of the money that we get through bills is going into funding services and making new investments.

**Q. Your improvement targets are weak and in no way stretch your organisation. They seem to be set so low to ensure you pay your self-bonuses for achieving very little. They will have little impact on the lives of your**

**customers. Also setting targets as numbers (or percentages) means little in practice. Why not set targets that are more of a stretch and measured by their impact on customers rather than just a simple count of incidents?**

In developing our business plan submission, we engaged with more than 95,000 people across the North West, ensuring the plan addresses the things they say matter the most. We believe that we have set ourselves stretching targets for these customer priorities. Our targets for 2025-2030 are an important step towards our 2050 targets for customer priorities. If we look at the targets we have set with regards to reducing Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) spills, in 2020, we were at 59 spills per overflow. We are proposing to reduce this down by 60% to 24 by the end of 2030.

We think that a 60% improvement by the end of 2030 is a significant step towards where we need to get to by 2050. The challenge in delivering this and making sure all that investment is completed within the 5-year period is probably what limits our ability to go further. Nonetheless, we've already started. This plan doesn't get formally endorsed until 2025 but we're already on the ground now, making those improvements and we're seeking out the opportunities to accelerate some of those improvements further. The CSO programme involves an investment of around about £3 billion and that's the most significant investment programme we think for 100 years - and possibly ever in the North West. This plan will see us working on over 430 CSOs overflows across the North West.

**Q. An example of a weak target "25% reduction in the number of pollution incidents". One pollution incident could cost customers millions of pounds - another very little. How about a "75% reduction in the impact of pollution incidents" as more of a challenge? Aiming high instead of low!**

With regards to setting our targets for reducing pollution incidents, UU is the sector leader in this area with zero serious pollution incidents taking place in 2022/23. For other less serious pollution incidents, we have already reduced these by 39% since April 2020. As such, we believe we have set ourselves a challenging target on this performance measure.

**Q. What is being done re the very poor quality of water in WA3 3YJ area. I am having to buy bottled water to fill my kettle/drink, my appliances/plumbing is no doubt getting full of scale, I feel I shouldn't be paying for such poor quality. I work a mile up the road from my home and quality is same there. I need better quality if I will cease paying as I see that as the only way to get reaction.**

From April 2023, the area around Lowton and Golborne moved from a soft water source to hard water source. The water supply is blended with water from other drinking water in your area sourced from underground (known as aquifers). Water from aquifers tends to have a higher mineral content as it has passed through layers of rock, before being pumped to the surface, treated and then distributed into the pipe network. We have a vast integrated water network and from time to time we do move water around to help manage water resources to balance the needs of customers and the environment. During periods of high water demand, it was noticeable the pressure in the network in parts of Leigh was dropping, and to improve the pressure and manage the resilience in the network we brought water from an adjacent area, which has historically been reliant on ground water sources.

With an increasing population, and more homes being built, we have created a network which enables us to transport water from various sources across the water system. During periods of high demand, our integrated network gives us the capacity to use different sources of water to supply a particular area, which can mean a change to the hardness of the water. Customers can carry on using the water as normal. It will continue to be clean and safe, meeting strict standards set by the Drinking Water Inspectorate - it may just be a little different from what you're used to.

**Q. It has been announced quite recently that Lake Windermere has the poorest water quality that has been reported for decades. Why is this?**

Since 2000 we've invested more than £75m upgrading wastewater treatment sites, pumping stations and sewers around Windermere. £45m of that was only completed in 2020. Our two main WwTWs – Ambleside and Windermere – are now treating wastewater to the highest achievable standards using the best available technology. We're consistently achieving better phosphorus removal than our permit states and we also use UV treatment to kill

bacteria. We have announced an additional £41m investment into the Windermere catchment with £19m of that being bought forward to be spent over the next two years – this investment will further reduce storm overflows around Windermere at Elterwater, Hawkshead, Ambleside and Near Sawrey, reducing spills by 50% on 2022 figures.

We know there is more to do and that is why we are working with the Love Windermere partnership. We will prioritise further wastewater investment based on independent expert science and evidence being led by the FBA. Future improvements might include natural treatment solutions like reed beds or schemes to separate rainwater out of the combined sewage system. We are already funding reed bed restoration around Windermere by our partners the South Cumbria Rivers Trust. The challenges facing Windermere are complex and wastewater is only one part of the jigsaw. Without action on all the factors that contribute nutrient pollution, including septic tanks and agriculture, we will never see Windermere reach the water quality standards we all want to see.

**Q. Can you comment on the repairs at Fleetwood and provide assurance that 2024 will be free of pollution.**

This was a very unusual incident and our teams worked around the clock to minimise impact on the environment. The burst occurred on the large pipe which carries treated water from the plant out to sea. The location of the pipe 9 metres underground, and its strategic importance to the functioning of the treatment plant made the repair complex and challenging. We installed more than 2 kilometres of temporary overland pipework to bypass the burst pipe so that the treatment plant could continue to operate while the repair work was carried out. The bypass was in place and the treatment plant back to full flows in less than three weeks, which meant the system was operating as normal from that point onwards.

We take our responsibility to protect the environment from pollution very seriously and since the incident in June we have been replacing the rest of the pipe at the Fleetwood site to ensure we do not have any further bursts or incidents like this in the future. In total this work has cost more than £30 million and will be completed in early 2024.

There are many sources of pollution that can affect the bathing waters along the Fylde Coast, and we continue to work closely with the Environment Agency, local councils and other stakeholders including representatives of the tourism and agriculture industries to protect our coastline and make improvements to water quality.