



The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Water Voice - Accountability Session

Summary report

Water company: South East Water

Accountability Session date: 15.04.26

Delivered by Taylor McKenzie
Research & Energy Saving Trust

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Questions created and asked by community members



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Community members identified **two priority questions** they wanted to put directly to South East Water during the Accountability Session.

The questions were developed through a structured process involving the full Water Voice community (c.50 members). In January and February 2026, members collectively identified and refined priority themes through Spotlight surveys. These priorities were then shaped into draft questions during a dedicated briefing session, before being finalised and formally put to South East Water at the Accountability Session.

Each question was led by a community member and explored in depth during the session. South East Water provided on-the-record responses, with commitments and actions discussed in real time.

| | Topic | Community member question |
|----|---|---|
| Q1 | How Our Money Is Being Spent | <p><i>"Our bills have increased, but we cannot see what difference that investment is making, or how it will improve our water supply and infrastructure now and in the future. It also isn't clear to us as customers what our individual bills are spent on.</i></p> <p><i>Proportionately, how is our money being spent and what steps will you take to improve transparency and visibility of this for customers now and in the future?</i></p> |
| Q2 | Exec Pay, Shareholder Dividends & Performance | <p><i>"We don't have a problem with Executive pay being high, and performance bonuses being paid when the service we receive is good. Performance has clearly been very poor but - from the outside at least - it seems that Executive pay and bonuses remain high.</i></p> <p><i>What steps will you take to make bonuses more reflective of our experiences as customers and representative of company performance?</i></p> |
| | Ad hoc Action Plan review | <p><i>Progress on the ad hoc Action Plan was presented by South East Water, followed by a short Q&A with the company, providing community members with the opportunity to ask questions.</i></p> <p><i>The full ad hoc Accountability Session Action Plan discussed can be accessed on the CCW website.</i></p> |

The sections that follow set out each question in turn, alongside the actions discussed and the expectations community members have for delivery through the company's published action plan. This will be published on **Wednesday 27th May**.

Executive summary - insights by question



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The Accountability Session highlighted customers' need for clearer, proportional explanations of how bills are spent and what benefits investment will deliver, alongside greater transparency on how executive bonuses reflect service performance and customer experience.

Q1.

Bills, investment and transparency

The company said bill increases fund day-to-day operation and maintenance alongside investment in resilience and capacity, and referenced existing "Where does your £ go?" bill breakdown communications.

Customers accepted the need for investment but felt they still lacked proportional clarity on what individual bills pay for, where funding comes from (bills vs other sources) and how priorities translate into visible benefits.

The discussion focused on clearer funding/spend breakdowns, plain-English project updates with timelines and simple performance reporting delivered through channels beyond bills.

Customers wanted transparent bill breakdowns and clearer evidence of benefits

Q2.

Executive pay and bonuses

The company said executive base pay is set through third-party benchmarking and bonuses depend on meeting targets across service and organisational metrics, overseen by the remuneration committee and Ofwat.

Customers reiterated they accept high pay when service is good, but felt poor performance sits uneasily with continued high bonuses and wanted clearer proof that customer experience and outcomes drive reward decisions.

The discussion centred on publishing bonus metric weightings and thresholds, clearer year-end reporting linking results to payouts and stronger safeguards (including hold-backs and assurance against "back-door" payments).

Customers want bonuses transparently tied to performance and experience

Actions agreed during the Accountability Session



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Q1.

Bills, investment and transparency

- Publish a clear percentage breakdown of revenue sources and whether projects are funded via bills, private finance or both.
- Link customer bill spend to specific projects, timelines and benefits, with regular plain-English updates beyond bills.
- Explain investment priorities and company debt in everyday language, including what drives levels and customer impacts.
- Provide simple, visual performance metrics (e.g., traffic-light) in accessible formats and channels customers can choose.

Q2.

Executive pay and bonuses

- Publish clear bonus metrics, weightings and customer satisfaction thresholds, in plain English and accessible formats.
- At year-end, show performance vs targets and how this affected bonus outcomes, with short customer-facing summaries.
- Review whether bonuses are appropriate given performance and strengthen multi-year deferral and malus/clawback arrangements.
- Explain safeguards against 'back-door' payments and how remuneration committee can hold back bonuses post-award.



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Water Voice - Accountability Session

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Our findings in detail

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Q1. How our money is being spent

Calls for more transparent company spending



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Question asked by a South East Water Community member:

“Our bills have increased, but we cannot see what difference that investment is making, or how it will improve our water supply and infrastructure now and in the future. It also isn't clear to us as customers what our individual bills are spent on.

Proportionately, how is our money being spent and what steps will you take to improve transparency and visibility of this for customers now and in the future?

During the session, South East Water said bill increases fund day-to-day operation and maintenance of water assets, alongside investment in resilience and capacity projects. They referenced the existing “Where does your £ go?” bill breakdowns for spending allocations.

Customers accepted the need for investment but felt they still lacked proportional clarity on what individual bills pay for, where project funding comes from (bills vs other sources) and how priorities, including debt, translate into visible benefits.

The discussion centred on clearer funding and spend breakdowns, plain-English project updates with timelines and simple, accessible performance reporting delivered through multiple channels beyond bills.

Actions

- **Publish a clear percentage breakdown of revenue sources**, clarifying whether projects are funded via bills, private finance or both.
- **Link customer bill spend to specific projects, timelines and benefits**, with regular plain-English updates beyond bills.
- **Explain investment priorities and company debt in everyday language**, including what drives levels and customer impacts.
- **Provide simple, visual performance metrics** (e.g., traffic-light) in accessible formats and channels customers can choose.

“Sometimes you see on South East Water communications, “X project launched” it's unclear whether that's funded by bill payers' money or whether that's private money that's been invested.”

“As customers we don't necessarily.. know what we're paying for, even if that's based on usage or service or standing charge.”



Customers want clearer proportional breakdowns of bill spending and funding sources, alongside regular, jargon-free updates linking investment priorities to visible benefits and simple performance measures



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Q1. How our money is being spent (1/2)

| "You said" (Community member actions) | "We did" (Water company response on the night) | What is the 'Ideal' water company response? (In the eyes of our community) | Timescale / final comments |
|---|---|--|---|
| Publish a clear percentage breakdown of revenue sources and clarify funding source | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explained bills fund day-to-day operation and maintenance of water assets, including ongoing replacement. Said bills also contribute to future projects, and referenced dividends/shareholder debt in explaining bill components. Signposted existing "Where does your £ go?" communications to illustrate bill allocation. <p>Future plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Described investment programme targeting network resilience and capacity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify where funding comes from for projects (customer bills vs private funding, or a mix). Provide a proportional (e.g., percentage based) breakdown of revenue sources and link funding to specific projects. Communicate this clearly via public-facing channels, not only within bills. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan.</p> <p>Final comments from water company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company said points 1–2 were doable but needed consideration on the depth/detail that could be provided. |
| Link customer bills to projects and outcomes, with regular updates | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positioned bill increases as supporting improvements to resilience, network connectivity and water quality. Referenced current customer communications that explain bill allocation. <p>Future plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservoir development. Launching a smart meter programme to improve water resilience and reduce wastage. Upgrades to water treatment works to increase water capacity. Investing in network pipes and reduce leakage (target referenced as 1 million litres by 2030). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase transparency on how investment priorities are set and how spend is distributed across services. Provide clarity on future planning, including what areas are more/less funded. Provide regular, easy-to-read updates (e.g., monthly/quarterly) using real-life examples that show what customers are getting for their money. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan.</p> <p>Final comments from water company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company asked what communication methods customers prefer and noted bills may not be the most effective channel. Customer feedback emphasised using multiple channels (including online/offline) and enabling opt-in/choice, so information reaches those who want it. |

Note: This table is an excerpt from the full Action Plan. South East Water will provide formal responses to each action within 28 working days of the session date. The updated plan will then be shared with participating community members for review and agreement.

Q1. How our money is being spent (2/2)



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| “You said” (Community member actions) | “We did” (Water company response on the night) | What is the ‘Ideal’ water company response? (In the eyes of our community) | Timescale / final comments |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Explain investment priorities and company debt in everyday language</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referenced debt/dividends as part of explaining how bill income is used. Framed investment needs in the context of pressures such as growth and future resilience. <p>Future plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned investment programme areas were described (reservoirs, meters, treatment works, networks/leakage reduction). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain why debt sits at current levels, in plain English. Make clear how investment choices and financing translate into customer bill impacts and expected benefits. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan.</p> <p>Final comments from water company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company response indicated these areas are covered in existing reporting, but it should be communicated in a more regular and accessible format. |
| <p>Provide simple visual performance metrics</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pointed to existing customer-facing materials used to explain bills and performance information. <p>Future plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intend to communicate performance information more regularly and in a more accessible format (as part of improving visibility). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear, simple metrics for performance and progress. Use visual aids (e.g., traffic-light style reporting) across bills and other channels so customers can quickly understand performance. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan.</p> <p>Final comments from water company</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company said existing performance reporting covers these areas, but committed to make it more regular and accessible. |

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Q2. Exec pay, shareholder dividends and performance

More transparency and accountability; bonuses must reflect service quality

Question asked by a South East Water Community member:

“We don’t have a problem with Executive pay being high, and performance bonuses being paid when the service we receive is good. Performance has clearly been very poor but - from the outside at least - it seems that Executive pay and bonuses remain high.

“What steps will you take to make bonuses more reflective of our experiences as customers and representative of company performance?”

During the session, South East Water said Executive base pay is set through third-party benchmarking and that bonuses depend on meeting targets across service and organisational metrics, overseen by the remuneration committee and Ofwat.

Community members accepted high pay when service is good, but felt poor performance sits uneasily with high bonuses and wanted clearer proof that customer experience drives reward decisions.

The discussion focused on publishing bonus metric weightings and thresholds, clearer year-end reporting linking results to payouts, and stronger safeguards against “back-door” payments, with no timescales agreed.

Actions

- Publish clear bonus metrics, weightings and customer satisfaction thresholds, in plain English and accessible formats.
- At year-end, show performance vs targets and how this affected bonus outcomes, with short customer-facing summaries.
- Review whether bonuses are appropriate given performance and strengthen multi-year deferral and clawback arrangements.
- Explain safeguards against ‘back-door’ payments and how the remuneration committee can hold back bonuses post-award.

“It would be interesting to understand the weighting on customer satisfaction, but also as to whether or not as part of the bonus there is a gate, i.e. a minimum that they have to achieve before the bonus is even paid..?”

“I think we just need more transparency really, it just feel like all this is happening [is] behind closed doors. We’re not seeing what the weighting is or what thresholds you have to meet”



Customers accepted high pay in principle, but felt bonuses should visibly reflect service outcomes, with clearer metrics, thresholds and reporting to rebuild confidence.



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Q2. Exec pay, shareholder dividends and performance

| "You said" (Community member actions) | "We did" (Water company response on the night) | What is the 'Ideal' water company response? (In the eyes of our community) | Timescale / final comments |
|--|---|---|---|
| Make bonus rules transparent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Said bonuses depend on meeting targets across multiple metrics (leakage, water quality, interruptions, staff engagement, health and safety and environmental performance). Noted remuneration committee determines outcomes; Ofwat check referenced. <p>No future plans discussed in the session</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve transparency on metric weightings for bonuses. Clarify how customer satisfaction is weighted and what threshold must be met before a bonus is considered. Ensure the remuneration committee is explicitly sighted on these expectations. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan</p> <p>Final comments from Water company:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bonus breakdown is explained in Annual Accounts; company will consider making this more accessible. |
| Show how performance drives payouts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Described a metrics-based approach to bonus decisions, with targets across service areas. <p>No future plans discussed in the session</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a clear, easy-to-read year-end explanation showing which targets were/weren't met and how this affected bonus awards (with context). | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan</p> <p>Final comments from Water company:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company said it would consider improving communication of the bonus breakdown into a more accessible format. |
| Tighten safeguards and accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explained base pay is set via third-party benchmarking against job-market rates (not set by the company). Said remuneration committee can propose bonuses are not awarded where performance does not justify it (with Ofwat check referenced). <p>No future plans discussed in the session</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-evaluate whether bonuses are appropriate given current performance, including at board level. Strengthen how bonuses can be deferred/withheld over time and reduced if performance worsens. Provide assurance there are no alternative "back-door" payments. | <p>Timescale: Timescales will be provided in the company action plan</p> <p>Final comments from Water company:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Company assured customers there would be no "back door" payments and said it is complying with the Special Measures Act. Company also stated a proportion of bonuses can be held back over a two-year period after award by the remuneration committee. |

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What happens after the Accountability Session?

After the Accountability Session, there is a clear and structured follow-up process.



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Publication and transparency

Within 5 working days

A full (anonymised) transcript of the session was [published](#) on **Wednesday 22nd April**

Within 10 working days

A plain-English summary is published, setting out:
The questions asked.
The key points raised by Community members.
The actions agreed for inclusion in the action plan.
Anything recorded as *not yet agreed*.
Wednesday 29th April



Action plan

Within 28 days

The water company must share its **action plan**, setting out how it will deliver the agreed actions.
The action plan will be **shared with the Water Voice community on Wednesday 27th May**



Customer feedback

Participants will be asked, via a short survey, whether they feel the action plan:

- ✓ Reflects what was agreed in the session
- ✓ Goes far enough to address customer concerns

This feedback forms part of CCW's ongoing monitoring and follow-up with the company and helps inform future accountability work.



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Annex: Research approach

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Background



What is an Accountability Session?

An Accountability Session is a formal, facilitated meeting where **water consumers directly question senior executives from their water company** about performance, service failures and issues of concern – and **agree the actions they want the company to take**.

They sit at the heart of CCW's statutory role to strengthen consumer voice and ensure companies respond transparently and meaningfully.

Why do they exist?

Accountability Sessions exist because customers deserve a real say in how their water company performs. They give people a direct line to the people in charge – not through a survey, not through a complaint form, but face-to-face.

For years, customers have felt that water companies weren't listening closely enough. *Water (Special Measures) Act 2025** requiring a relevant undertaker to have arrangements in place for involving consumers in decisions of the undertaker that are likely to have a material impact on consumer matters.

These sessions make that happen. They create a space where customers can:

- Ask honest questions
- Raise the issues that really affect them
- Agree the actions they expect the company to take next.

It's all about making the process fair, open, and focused on what matters most to the people who actually use and pay for the service.

*<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2025/5/enacted>

Objectives

What the session aims to achieve



1. Give customers a real voice

These sessions make sure customers aren't just "heard" – their views actually guide the conversation and shape what happens next.

2. Make companies answer directly to the people they serve

Senior water company leaders must respond openly, honestly, and in real time. No hiding behind reports or press statements.

3. Agree clear actions that lead to real improvements

By the end of each session, everyone should be clear on:

- ✓ what the company will do
- ✓ how they'll do it
- ✓ how customers will know things have improved.

4. Build trust through transparency

Everything is published – the questions, the answers, the agreed actions – so customers can see what's happening and whether companies are following through.

5. Make sure all types of customers are represented

People from different backgrounds, ages, abilities and regions take part, ensuring the outcomes reflect real experiences across the community.

Outputs

By the close of the process, this Accountability Session will have:

- Provided CCW with **robust, publishable evidence** of consumer concerns and company responses.
- Established a clear and transparent set of customer-agreed actions that the water company must reflect in its published action plan. The action plan itself is published by the company following the session, in line with the accountability process.
- Given consumers confidence that their participation leads to **real scrutiny and follow-through**, reinforcing the credibility of the accountability process.
- Informed future regulatory engagement by highlighting **systemic or recurring issues** requiring wider attention.

Together, this ensures the session delivers both **immediate accountability** and **longer-term value** for consumers and the sector.

Methodology

How does it work?

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01



Prioritising what matters most

1. We listen to what customers tell us each month

Through Barometer & Spotlight surveys and the online community

2. We play back what they said

In the January Spotlight survey, we show customers the issues they raised & ask them to prioritise the most important ones.

3. Confirm their priorities

In the February Spotlight survey, customers confirm if they agree with which points matter most.

02



Getting ready (Briefing session)

Selected 12 customers join a 2-hour online (via Zoom) briefing before the main meeting.

Everyone gets clear, easy-to-read information beforehand so they feel confident and prepared.

The facilitator talks them through:

- How the session will work
- The issues they've prioritised
- How to shape their questions & come up with a set of questions for each priority.

We will brief the CCW Chair separately at this point & remind them on their role, share guide & prioritised topics / Priorities will be sent the Water Companies at this point

03



The Accountability Session (Main meeting)

12 customers take part in an online session (via Zoom) with a senior water company representative for 2 hours.

TMcK facilitator & Chair guiding the conversation:

- Customers ask their prepared questions
- Challenge the company's answers
- Explore what needs to change.

Live polls let everyone share honest views – even those who prefer not to speak out loud.

Welsh panels will be given the option of English, Welsh or simultaneous translation .

04



Agreeing what should happen next

During the main accountability session, after each issue is discussed, the facilitator checks whether customers feel the company's proposed actions are good enough.

Together, they work towards a clear **consensus** on what actions the company must take.

05



Publishing the outcomes and following up

A summary is produced showing: the questions asked, how the company responded, and the actions agreed.

- CCW publishes a **transcript within 5 working days**
- CCW publishes a **summary within 10 working days**
- The company must publish its **action plan by day 28**

Panellists are asked short follow-up questions about whether the plan reflects what was agreed.

CCW then tracks progress and updates panellists before the next session.

[Priorities will be shared with the ISG]

Sample

Who takes part in an Accountability Session



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We brought together a **small, representative group of around 12 people** for each accountability session.

This number keeps the conversation manageable and ensures everyone has the chance to speak.

Each person is selected by the panel manager from their panel of 50 participants.

Our panel managers are responsible for selecting a representative range of participants and ensure that anyone who has expressed a keen interest in taking part in an accountability session is included at this stage.

We make sure each session of 12 includes the following types of panellists:

- **Age** - younger adults, middle-aged adults and older customers (2 per age bracket)
- **Gender** - a balanced mix (at least 5 males & 5 females)
- **Income levels** - including low-income households (3 financially vulnerable, 3 x 20-40k, 3 x £40k-60k & 2 x £60k+)
- **Location** - Rural and Urban water users (different house-types represented)
- **Ethnic backgrounds** - reflecting the local population, 2-3 from an ethnic minority background
- **People with accessibility, neurodivergent or additional support needs** (at least 1)
- **Different customer types** - e.g metered/unmetered, renters/homeowners
- **Different attitudes** – including 3 x positive, 3 x neutral & 3 x negative customers
- **Bathing water users** – 3 regular users (for WaSC panels)
- **Welsh speakers** – at least 2 Welsh speakers within our two Welsh panels & options for accountability session language

This ensures all voices are represented, not just the loudest or most confident.

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Thank you!



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