

Summary report

Ad hoc Accountability Session with Southern Water

This Accountability Session was triggered by low customer satisfaction with Southern Water, with the June Water Voice Barometer showing satisfaction at 29%, 31 percentage points below the wider community average of 60%.



Ad hoc Accountability Session | Tuesday 25th August 2026

Report published: Tuesday 8th September 2026

Community members had the opportunity to question Senior Executives at Southern Water directly and seek clarity on the issues contributing to low customer satisfaction.

They raised the issues that mattered most to them, including how repeat pollution incidents will be prevented, how the resilience of the network will be improved and what meaningful improvements customers can expect to see over the next 12 months. Southern Water responded to these questions on the night.

The questions asked by our community members are outlined below and the initial actions discussed in the session are set out on the following three pages.

Q1. Pollution prevention and repeat incidents

"Pollution of our bathing water and rivers remains one of the biggest reasons why we are dissatisfied with Southern Water. We have already raised these concerns, and the existing action plan includes reporting, monitoring and ways for us to raise issues, but reporting a problem is not the same as stopping it. As a community, we need to see that repeat and high-harm pollution incidents are being permanently fixed, not repeatedly managed. If our satisfaction is going to improve, we need clear priority locations, permanent fixes, named owners, firm deadlines and measurable reductions in pollution.

So, which of your most polluted bathing waters and rivers will you commit to permanently fixing, what measurable reduction in pollution will you deliver at each one and by when, who will be accountable for delivering it, and what will happen if those commitments are missed?"

Q2. Investment and future resilience

"It is difficult for us to feel satisfied with Southern Water when our bills keep rising yet we are being asked to conserve water, especially when we continue to see leaks and significant water loss across the network. It can feel as though customers are being asked to pay more but use less, while the underlying supply problems are not being resolved quickly enough. We want to see clear evidence that the extra money we are paying is strengthening the network, reducing leakage and making supplies more resilient before further restrictions are placed on customers

What specific improvements to leakage, infrastructure and drought resilience will our higher bills fund, what measurable reduction in water loss and supply risk will you commit to and by when, and how will you prove that Southern Water is doing its part before asking customers to pay more or use less water?"

Q3. General satisfaction

"Why do you and your leadership team think customer satisfaction with Southern Water is so low, what do you believe are the three main causes, and what are the three biggest improvements customers will notice over the next 12 months?"



What happens next?

CCW will send this report to Southern Water and ask the company to produce an action plan. This plan should set out how each point will be addressed and when action will be taken.

CCW will then share an update with the exact commitments made by Southern Water. After this, CCW will monitor progress against each commitment and provide monthly updates, so community members can see what has changed and help prioritise the issues that should be followed up at the Autumn Accountability Sessions.

Pollution prevention and repeat incidents

- Provide a clear map of key areas of investment, including what is being invested, where and when.
- Clearly explain how Southern Water will meet its 2050 pollution targets, including whether it can be brought forward and what innovation or longer-term solutions could help achieve this.
- Demonstrate progress at the three priority sites by setting up webcams, so customers can view recordings and see what is happening on the ground, what is being built and what is changing.
- Provide a clear, location-specific pollution improvement plan;
 - Identifying:
 - Pollution levels
 - Key problem sites
 - Causes of the issues
 - Permanent fixes and interim measures
 - Actions being taken
 - A named, accountable senior owner (with information with who to contact if issues arise)
 - Firm start and completion dates
 - What happens if commitments are missed
 - Report on these quarterly, provide tangible metrics (e.g., trend graphs) around improvements and investments.
- Ensure independent verification of Southern Water's improvement efforts and communicate results clearly to customers.
- Educate customers on behaviour changes they can do themselves (e.g. around waste disposal). Do so through the billing process, social media, workshops and events.
- Explain to customers how priority areas for investment are determined.
- Clarify what reactive measures are taken in response to spills/pollution incidents.

Investment and future resilience

- Clearly and transparently report failures and missed targets to build customer trust and buy-in
 - Use the interactive website map or text messages to keep customers updated, specifically for customers who have reported an issue.
 - Ensure leakage maps are maintained with up-to-date and correct information.
- Provide quarterly reports on leakage figures so customers can see how performance changes over time.
- Clarify how decisions are made around the prioritisation of leak repairs.
- Communicate with customers about potential AI plans and use cases.

General satisfaction

- Clearly outline how Southern Water intends to reclaim owed debts.
- Quantify the measurable improvements customers can expect to see as a result of increases in their bills and communicate these to customers in a digestible way.
- Look into ways of securing a greater proportion of external investment funding to reduce the financial burden on customers' bills.
- Show clearly how Southern Water compares with other water companies on key metrics, such as how money is spent, leakage, pollution, outages and resilience (both in areas they are doing well and areas they are doing less well)
- Communicate the positive changes Southern Water is making to customers.
- Continue to demonstrate that service investments are prioritised over shareholder profits.
- Use short, clear bullet points when communicating data and information to customers, with links to further detail for those who want to explore the information in more depth.

Session transcript

Attendance list

Lawrence Gosden	Chief Executive Officer of Southern Water
Tim McMahon	Chief Operating Officer of Southern Water
Samantha Hare	Senior Insight Manager at Taylor McKenzie Research (TMCK) – Lead facilitator
Alison Austin	Non-Exec Director and Board Member for Consumer Council for Water (CCW) – Chair
11x Participants	Water Voice Community Members under Southern Water

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Sam, for making us live. I would just like to say good evening and really thank you for joining us this evening. My name is Alison Austin, and I'm a non-executive director for the Consumer Council for Water and I'm chairing this evening's discussion because Rob Wilson, who is the chair of the Board who was here at your briefing session two weeks ago, unfortunately he is ill. I stepped in yesterday, but I've had a briefing session from the team in the afternoon and I spent part of today reading all the material and trying to bring myself up to speed, so please bear with me and I will do my best to give you a voice and a platform and justice to both sides.

Tonight's session is part of the Water Voice programme and the purpose of this is very simple, but very important: it's to give customers a stronger and more direct voice in how their water company performs, communicates and improves. So, this is an ad-hoc Accountability Session and it's been arranged in response to very low customer satisfaction with Southern Water. So back in July last month, satisfaction amongst Southern Water community members, of which you are part, was 31% lower than the wider Water Voice community average, that is for all of the water companies and all of the panels.

So, by "satisfaction" we mean how happy community members are overall with the water and wastewater services that they pay Southern Water to provide. And your pre-task and briefing session two weeks ago identified several drivers of dissatisfaction, of which pollution was the strongest concern, next to leaks and ageing infrastructure, rising bills, value for money and drought and future water supply resilience, which is not unsurprising given what we've been through. You also told us that the plans and investment are not enough unless you as customers can see real improvement.

Our aim this evening is to try and turn those concerns into clear, measurable and accountable actions; so, what Southern Water will deliver, by when, who will be responsible and how you as customers will know whether it's been achieved. And please, this is not a complaints hearing, it's not a technical enquiry. It's very much a structured, customer-led conversation focused on acknowledgement, accountability, learning and agreeing clear, practical actions.

The topics that we intend to cover have been shaped directly by your pre-task and briefing discussion that was two weeks ago, and that's really important because this is your agenda and will reflect the issues that you as panellists want to raise with Southern Water and you want them to address.

The first question is going to focus on pollution and permanent fixes at priority locations and the second is going to focus on how higher bills will deliver measurable improvements in leakage, infrastructure and drought resilience and the third one is going to focus on why customer satisfaction remains low and what improvements customers really want to see over the next 12 months.

I'm hoping that this is going to be constructive and challenging as a discussion, and you as panel members should feel able to speak openly and honestly about your experiences and expectations. And equally, we expect clear, direct and transparent responses from Southern Water's senior team, who are present here this evening.

As you know, the session is going to be fully transcribed and the transcript and the proposed actions will be published following the session and Southern Water is then asked to publish an action plan responding to those commitments that are made tonight. And this transparency is really a key part of what makes this process meaningful.

Session transcript

I'll just cover a couple of ground rules again: it's one person at a time, be focused on your contributions, let's concentrate on forward-looking actions, so what will change, by when, and how will you as customers know whether it's making a difference? We'll try and avoid unnecessary jargon, that includes me and pick me up if I do fall into that because the water sector is really bad at this. Where an answer is unclear, very technical or doesn't address the question, then I will ask Southern Water representatives to explain a bit more directly. And because we're online, if you could stay on mute when you're not speaking and if you can raise the hand function if you want to come in and use the chat if you want to add a short point or flag a technical issue.

I'd like to just kick off by briefly introducing those joining us this evening. And first of all, our independent lead facilitator from Taylor McKenzie, Sam Hare. If you just wave, Sam. And she's going to guide the discussion and ensure that everyone is heard. And we have Brad behind the scenes, acting as our technical supremo as well, which is very helpful. And representing Southern Water this evening, I'm really pleased that we have Lawrence Gosden and Tim McMahon, who I will ask now if you could just briefly introduce yourselves and then we'll get going?

Lawrence Gosden: Good evening, everybody, and thank you so much for your time this evening. I'm Lawrence Gosden, I'm the Chief Executive of Southern Water. I've been in post for about four years. It's been a pretty brutal four years, but we'll talk more about that as we go through the questions. I'm the CEO who sort of came into this company to get it turned around. Many of my friends and family said, "Oh my word, you must be mad, why would you do that?" That's simply because it matters and it super matters to all of you, and it's super actually really matters to us. I'm an engineer, I'm not a financier, I'm an engineer who's sort of in charge of a root and branch company turnaround and we'll get into that this evening.

Tim McMahon: Good evening, everyone, I'm Tim McMahon and I'm the Chief Operating Officer. I've been in Southern Water for nearly four years now and as part of that remit of predominantly in the water sub-business, but a few months ago we changed the operating model for me to look after water, so that's the drinking water side of the business, the wastewater side, so that's around the sewage services we provide and our customer service team, so the front end where customers talk to us and we try to resolve their problems. And very much looking forward to speaking to you tonight.

CCW Chair: Thank you, and just to thank everybody again in advance for giving up your evening. It's really valuable and we really appreciate it. So, I'm now going to hand the baton back to Sam, who will begin the discussion. Thank you, Tim, thank you, Lawrence.

TMCK Facilitator: Hi everyone, thank you so much for joining us again this evening and thank you Lawrence and Tim also for joining from Southern Water. As Alison mentioned, my name is Sam and I work for Taylor McKenzie who are responsible for the Water Voice and all the surveys that get sent out to you as well as facilitating Accountability Sessions and ad-hoc Accountability Sessions like this one.

Before we begin, I just want to explain a little bit more about how names and the transcripts will be handled. So, as you can probably see from the top of the screen, everything is being audio and video recorded currently and this evening we ask that only first names are used. However, all customer names will be redacted in the final transcript which is published. So, after the session, once we have the transcript, we will send it to you and you have the ability to review it and you can request that you have anything removed or redacted further or further anonymised if necessary.

Session transcript

The transcript is intended to provide an accurate record of the discussion today and the agreed actions that we've put forward to Southern Water and Southern Water has confirmed they're able to implement.

For each question we will invite one community member to ask the question. We'll then let Southern Water respond to the question and they will talk about the actions they're currently doing, which answers your questions, the actions that they're planning on doing in the future, so they've already got that in the pipeline. We'll also then discuss as a group any actions that are missing from what Southern Water has responded to your question.

In the background we're joined by two co-facilitators, Emma and Ryan, so you'll see their names popping up at the bottom. You won't get to see them during the session, but they're behind the scenes, typing up everything that's being talked about during the session, and once we've talked through the actions for each question, I will show what they've been typing up and recording, so all the actions that are put forward by Southern Water and by you as community members as well.

Southern Water will then have an opportunity to provide a response to these actions, so at that point they can sort of consider if anything we've put forward feels unclear or outwith their control or their remit and if there's any constraints or disagreements with anything discussed. As mentioned with the transcript, that means everything will be recorded transparently there as well.

I know that we obviously have done an Accountability Session before and we've come up with lots of actions. This isn't to go through and repeat the actions we've already discussed previously; this is to build on our current action plan with a real focus or lens placed on how we can drive your satisfaction as customers. As Alison mentioned, obviously that's currently very low as community members [in] comparison to the other water company communities within this research.

The webinar, or this meeting, is made available for live viewing, so there's another room on the other side with people watching, so I'll just go through who's watching. So, we have people from CCW, Ofwat, Southern Water, relevant Water Voice or CCW observers and other community members from the Southern Water CCW Water Voice Panel. The observers are only listening, so they don't take part directly in the discussion.

Lovely, there's a lot of things to go through there, so we'll get you all chatting now, and I'll do a bit of introductions, if that's okay? That's enough for me speaking just now. If I could just get you to introduce yourselves and just tell me whereabouts you live. We will start with Community member 1, please.

Community Member 1: Hi, my name is Community Member 1 and I live in Hove.

Community Member 2: Hi, I'm Community Member 2 and I live in Sittingbourne.

Community Member 3: Hi, I'm Community Member 3, I live in Margate in Kent.

Community Member 4: I'm Community Member 4, I'm in Hastings, East Sussex.

Community Member 5: Hi, I'm Community Member 5, I'm also in Hastings.

Session transcript

Community Member 6: Hi, everyone. I'm Community Member 6, I'm on the edge of the New Forest, just outside Southampton.

Community Member 7: Hi, I'm Community Member 7, I'm in Ryde in the Isle of Wight.

Community Member 8: Hi, it's Community Member 8, I live in a suburb of Southampton.

Community Member 9: I live in Patcham, which is a suburb of Brighton in East Sussex.

Community Member 10: I'm Community Member 10 and from Deal in Kent, on the coast.

Community Member 11: Hi, I'm Community Member 11 and I live in Winchester.

TMcK Facilitator: If you do have any questions, feel free to physically put your hand, or if you want to say anything, physically put your hand up or pop the little hand emoji thing at the bottom of your screen so I can see if anyone wants to put a point forward. Lovely, thank you so much for your introductions, everyone. I'll pass back over to Alison to introduce our first speaker and I will pop the question up on the screen in one moment.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Sam. So, the first question is on pollution prevention and repeat incidents, and Community Member 1 is going to ask this question, so over to you, Community Member 1.

Community Member 1: So, the question is about the pollution of our bathing water and rivers remain one of the biggest reasons why we are dissatisfied with Southern Water. We have already raised these concerns, and the existing action plan includes reporting, monitoring and the ways for us to raise issues, but reporting a problem is not the same as stopping it. As a community, we need to see that repeat and high-harm pollution incidents are being permanently fixed, not repeatedly managed. If our satisfaction is going to improve, we need clear priority locations, permanent fixes, named owners, firm deadlines and measurable reductions in pollution.

So, which of Southern Water's most polluted bathing waters and rivers will Southern Water commit to permanently fixing, what measurable reduction in pollution will Southern Water deliver in each one and by when? Who will be accountable for delivering it and what will happen if those commitments are missed?

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Community Member 1, that's really helpful. So, in responding, it would be really helpful, Lawrence and Tim, if you could be really specific about the bathing waters and rivers that you want to prioritise for permanent fixes and avoiding focus on any monitoring and reporting? And please be clear about what action can be taken and be specific and what measurable reduction customers should expect and by when and who will be accountable for delivering it?

And if you could explain what happens if these are missed? I mean people expect things to not always go to plan in a business, but it's then how you deal with it and how you catch up. And most importantly, how customers will be able to judge if those promised improvements have actually been delivered? So, I'm going to pass the baton to yourselves, Lawrence and Tim, to give a response to this question, please?

Lawrence Gosden: Tim is going to pick up first. Can I check how much time we have?

TMcK Facilitator: So you have five minutes to answer the question, but we can give you an extra two minutes if needed. We'll pop a timer on the screen in a minute.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Good to ask. It's a big and broad question, and it's hard even when you're on the radio to have to answer this in a very short time. So, please, 7 minutes and if you're going really well, we'll keep you going. If you're waffling, we'll stop you.

Tim McMahon: It's a great question and look, to be clear, pollutions are unacceptable. We know to customers and for customers that we shouldn't have pollutions. And we are absolutely committed to reducing them to zero by 2050, but it's going to take time to get there. And we started that journey already. If you look from where we were from 2019 to today, we've reduced pollutions by 40% in that timeframe. But it is going to take time to achieve. I'll give you a couple of facts as to why.

If you look at blockages on the sewer network – that's obviously the pipes that will take your waste away or customers' waste away – we have 12,000 blockages on that network a year, of which 60% is related to fat, oils or grease [FOG] from customers' homes or non-household homes and businesses. That equates to about 9,000 tons of wet wipes as well, as part of that fat and grease, so that is a big problem and it's going to take time to educate and get support from customers to change habits, but also for us to put activities and actions in place to address.

Or if we look at storm overflows, this is where when it rains, rain is collecting in our sewer network, which is therefore combining with the sewage and therefore is overloading our network and we then have to put it into the environment. Obviously diluted, but we have to put it into the environment to protect customers' homes from being flooded. That is specifically a very difficult problem for the United Kingdom, where 70% of our sewers are combined by rainfall and sewage.

When if you compare it to the Nordic countries, it's less than 20% and when we compare it to Europe, it's about 50%. As you can imagine, trying to separate that system will be incredibly disruptive to customers, you'd have to dig up all the roads, it would be incredibly expensive as well for customers. So, we need to think of different innovations and different ideas to solve these problems.

But in answer to the how do we stop these high impact events, our strategy is very much around prevention, so how do we stop them from occurring? So, things like having an always on response, so making sure our control room, which looks after our system 24/7, we've got data going into it. So, we have 32,000 sewer level monitors, these are monitors that are pinging information to us so we can understand have we got some issue in our network so we can send our response teams more effectively. Because otherwise you're blind to knowing what's going on. We were one of the first companies in the UK to do that and have very much led the way in that area and we're looking to increase that further going forward.

We do 200km of sewer cleaning a year. So using those monitors, we have planned preventative maintenance where we go and clean the sewer to stop build-up of things occurring in the sewer, that fats, oils or grease or wet wipes occurring, so really trying to prevent it from occurring. An area that we've really challenged ourselves on this year is containment, so when we do have a burst on one of our network assets, we need to really quickly respond. So, we want to do it in four hours and contain any spill before it gets into the environment. And at the moment we do that about 52% of the time, we get there within four hours.

Session transcript

Six months ago, it was 20% and we're actually aiming for doing that for 90% of the time because that will have the biggest improvement at preventing any release from the environment. Also bathing water, so we have – sewage pollution isn't just around necessarily because of the sewage that might go into the seas or rivers, it might be because of the loss of amenity because there's a risk to customers. And having better information, so we can share that with the local authorities and environmental agencies to prevent and mitigate that risk but also assure them there has been no impact to the environment and therefore no risk to customers.

And finally, in terms of stopping those high impact events, we have 700 big pipes that are called "rising mains" which is where you pump sewage up a hill, these are under high pressure and when they burst, they can have an instantaneous impact to the environment. It's going to take us a long time to replace those assets, a lot of them are old and are impacted by the sort of gasses that get created by sewage. But as part of that, we're looking at the top 700 rising mains, to give it a clear MOT, so fixing the pumps, so reducing pressure that those pumps are causing that can cause bursts. Fixing things called "air valves" which is where the release of air comes out of the pipe, that's bad for pipes if that causes that hammer effect. And really, just trying to make sure they're maintained as effectively as possible. So, it's very much around stopping those high impact incidents.

In terms of repeats, that's a really big area of focus for us this year. We believe we can reduce the number of pollutions by 20% by stopping repeat offenders, and again that takes time. A key area of focus for us this year is around our Go to Green plan, where we have 46 pumping stations which are stations that pump waste up a hill, and the waste treatment works, which treat the wastewater that we get. And there's 18 of those that we are doing an MOT on to make sure that their asset plans are in place and the fixes that are needed to make them more effective have been done, and we're 70% of the way through that programme.

Also, we have control system failures, this is where we are using telemetry into our control room, that 24/7 team. There are five sites that are having their communications upgraded to enable better data to be going into our control rooms so we can respond more effectively. And in an area that's been a hotspot, I know there's a customer there for the Isle of Wight, we're spending £1.5m upgrading 30 sites to improve the power resilience on those sites, because that has been a problem on the island particularly in the spring, early summer of this year.

Moving on to storm overflows, which obviously links closely to pollutions and very important to our customers, we have 37 of 120 overflow systems that are of the highest importance, and this is where we need to reduce the amount those spills are occurring on those overflows. And of those 37, we're aiming to complete five this year, and there's about £100m investment tackling and investing in 26,000 metres cubed of equipment storage and 35km of sealing the networks; that's stopping rainwater getting into the sewer.

CCW Chair: Tim, can just stop you a second? That is the most extraordinary summary of what is clearly an enormous business operational plan, but actually the crux of this question is about, in a sense, your panellists and your customers know that's all happening. What they want to know is which of the most polluted bathing waters and rivers are you committed to permanently fixing?

So, within that business plan that you've just identified, there would be stuff that you have to do to respond to things that happen, that go wrong, but there will also be strategic things that you're trying to fix because they're the worst ones.

Session transcript

I think this panel of customers would like to know, what are those top five that you're trying to really fix, because you know they're that bad or that likely to fall over? And when and what are you doing and who's responsible?

Tim McMahon: Yeah, I think the first thing is the top five is quite hard to prioritise because there's such a broad area.

CCW Chair: I only picked five, so cut it a different way, it's just that people are looking for what keeps you awake at night rather than just the unforeseen events?

Tim McMahon: Yeah, I think if I could probably pick on the two that are the most pressing at the moment in my mind. Firstly, it's the Isle of Wight. Reason being is we've had just under a handful of big ablations on the Isle of Wight this year, all in the June period, all due to a number of reasons, and that's why we're committing to the £1.5m to upgrade the power supplies on the island because that is a problem with the Isle of Wight and therefore we're installing at 30 key sites these power batteries that can live when you have a power interruption.

CCW Chair: So that's you're investing in your power-

Tim McMahon: Indeed.

CCW Chair: -supply because it's a bit dodgy on the grid on the island?

Tim McMahon: Correct.

CCW Chair: Lovely, that's really helpful, that's what we'd like to know more of.

Tim McMahon: Right, okay. I think one of the things we definitely need to commit to then is we need to share a clear map of all the investments we're doing, because obviously there's lots of customers in all the different areas who will regard their areas of importance. We can definitely show that and commit to sharing that. Another key area for me is Broadstairs and Margate, so it's the northern eastern tip of the Thanet area; that is a particularly challenging area. If we have an asset failure or a power failure in that area, it's an instantaneous release to the environment, which is a pollution, and we do not want that.

We've invested a lot in the past around improving the resilience of those assets and making them 24/7 manned, so there's always someone there to respond quickly. And again, we're doing more investment in the power supply, in the grid, in that area and wider investments around the pumps to make that more resilient as well.

The other key area around storm overflows, the biggest one this year is actually around Portsmouth Harbour and of the £100m the majority of that is actually going into that area. So, we are effectively installing big tanks which replace 29 hectares of impermeable surface. So, you're in a position where you're stopping that rainwater getting into the sewer, so that will be the third one.

But as I was saying, in terms of the action plan, we can absolutely look at how can we communicate those bigger investments accordingly.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: I mean Community Member 11 has just raised in the chat that a clear map of the investments would be incredibly helpful. But again, a number is one thing, it's about – I think we all accept you have to do things in an order because you've got finite capacity of people and headspace, but it's knowing what's being done and that really gets done. It's this level of detail that people are really beginning now to ask for in terms of accountability.

Community Member 7 has just raised a very quick point that I'd just like to pick up on, that your 200km of sewer cleaning per year out of a network of 40,000km, that's less than half a percentage point each year, that's 200 years to clean the whole system. Some parts of the system will need it more often and more frequently than others, so again could you touch a little bit about where the worst bits are for FOGs and blockages and is that where you're putting your effort and how would a customer know that?

Tim McMahon: So, 12% of our network accounts for 100% of our pollutions, so it's not the full 40,000km, so it's about 5,000km. And that's where our sewer level monitors are targeted and that's what we use to really pinpoint our sewer cleaning to make it as effective as possible. Otherwise, it would be inherently, it would be hugely expensive. So that's why we use our data to really pinpoint and make that really effective and make that a much more effective activity.

In terms of where the biggest areas are, those 12% of our postcodes are scattered across our estate, but they're predominantly in the sort of the city or the urban areas near kebab shops and restaurants, where you get a bigger build-up of fat, oils and greases, which collects all of the wet wipes and has a bigger impact. Then obviously those that are therefore close to important rivers or ditches.

CCW Chair: Thank you, it goes to show that there is a lot more information when you get down to some of the granular level, which is what our panellists are really looking for and we'll come onto what that means in terms of how can you better communicate that. But that's really heartening, thank you. I'm going to pass back to Sam, who's now going to take on this next bit of the session, and I've eaten into it and I'm really sorry, but it was really helpful to hear you go from strategic down to a bit more of the granular priorities.

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, exactly what you said, Alison, that's what this community is looking for. Perfect, thank you so much for the response there. I'll start the conversation just, I mean, for this section we're sort of focusing on the reaction that you've just heard, so we're not looking for new questions at this point but we want to sort of think about the actions that Southern Water have said that they're doing in response to your question surrounding sewerage. We'll go to Community Member 1 first of all, if that's okay, since you asked the question. I mean what are your thoughts there, did it answer everything perfectly, or what gaps, what actions were we really hoping to hear that we didn't quite touch on?

Community Member 1: Well, we haven't been told about the named owners of these actions. The deadline for 2050, I am so shocked by. If there's only 12% of the whole – I know that there's other problems, other issues, if you're talking about 12% of what we were talking about, why is it going to take that long and where are the measurable reductions in pollution currently? You know, there's no, we haven't really heard about accountability, I don't believe, we've just heard about the issues, which we totally understand, but you talk a lot about cost, but this is costing the earth.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you, Community Member 1. What actions or things were you hoping that Southern Water are currently doing or planning on doing that you really want them to be thinking about?

Session transcript

Community Member 1: Well, the things that we've asked tonight, things about the permanent fixes, who's the named owners, what departments are these? Where's the accountability? Why is it going to take until 2050? I won't be alive by then, so you know, it's just, I just don't think it's ... I think it's outrageous that we're still being polluted in 2026.

TMcK Facilitator: We'll start with the named owner part then; what action would you like Southern Water to do for that, what could they do?

Community Member 1: Well, they're telling us as well as their map, who is responsible for this? We haven't heard about what happens if this isn't – you know, the end of the ... what happens if the commitments are missed, things like that, you know? Any fines, the customers are paying for that. So I just think, yes, we've learned a lot about the structure and the issues and everything, but we haven't really learned a lot about realistically why this can't be stopped earlier, other than cost.

TMcK Facilitator: How could they give you an explanation then about the deadline of 2050? What could they do then to help, I guess, give you the information?

Community Member 1: Well, I'd love them to tell me what innovations they can bring in to – why are they not looking ...? They're talking about how other structures are different in other areas of the world, yes, it's the same as any infrastructure, rail, whatever you want to look at, but let's talk about what innovations can you bring in to bring that level of 2050 down to something much, much faster than that?

We definitely need to stop all this pollution. We're losing so much of our plants and wildlife and things, so I think basically for them to tell me where else are they looking for solutions for this, rather than going down the same old roads of, "We need to clean this, this is going to cost us a lot of money"?

Like, you know, I mean any other company, I believe, well not any other company, but a lot of the companies are looking outside of the old-fashioned, "Let's get it cleaned." I'm sure there's new ways of doing that and I'm sure they're implementing them. But we really need more innovation and it would be great to hear about how they might be looking for that?

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much Community Member 1. Community Member 6, you've been patiently sitting there with your hand up for a while, so I'll come to you next.

Community Member 6: Thanks, Sam. Yeah, I've put a couple of things in the chat but I put about the repeat and heavy pollution areas. And I'm only going off Google, so Tim will know about this more than me, but he did mention Sandown on the Isle of Wight, which I'd found river tests, you know, it's reasonably close to me and it's a protected chalk area. And they keep being in the news, I think, King's Somborne and Fullerton are treatment centres, treatment works, keep getting in trouble for pumping undiluted and solid waste, obviously excrement, into repeat areas.

So, trying to go back to the action plan, I think my ideal, you know, it's good to hear all the things they're doing, but the action plan would be naming three or five sites; he talked about Margate, Portsmouth, Sandown, River Test hopefully in there. But I think to help us understand it is a big issue, I think if they could say what the average pumping is now of pollution say this year or this quarter, I don't know, outlying what they're doing. He's mentioned about power on the Isle of Wight, he's mentioned about the wet wipes, you know, it sounds like there's an issue in King's Somborne and Fullerton, these plants, so what are they doing to fix those treatment plants and when, and then quarterly reporting thereafter?

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And hopefully we can all see, “Do you know yeah, however, 20,000 litres goes down to 10,000 litres.” Yeah, it’s still 10,000 litres, we’re not going to be overjoyed, but we will be able to see progress and actually say ... And I think then our satisfaction will go up. It just seems a little bit like we’re in the dark at the moment; we’re hearing some nice words and not seeing facts and figures.

TMcK Facilitator: How do they show that to you, how do they communicate that with you?

Community Member 6: I mean I think we’d see like the action plan, I think naming the whatever three or top five sites, however they determine the priorities. I mean I would say, you know, the ones where the most dangerous pollution, because I’m sure there’s more serious ones rather than the lighter ones, do you know the most litres of dangerous stuff and perhaps the repeat incidents rather than just one-off catastrophe that isn’t likely to be repeated again. So, name those five, then in the action plan, and these are probably already underway, I’m sure those two treatment works I keep mentioning, I’m sure there probably is an action plan because I think they’ve been legally challenged. So, advise what they’re doing to those treatment plants and when.

And whether or not this comes on the website, I do go looking for things on the website, I feel that I have to find information more about Southern Water rather than what they’re telling me, even though I’m part of this panel. So, an average customer, I think, you know, would probably be even more in the dark than I feel I am. So, whether or not it’s with your bill, whether or not it’s monthly or quarterly updates via email or on the website, you know, some kind of trend graph.

I do love facts and figures, if they say to me, “River Test had 20,000 litres pumped in it last year, this year it’s 12,000,” I would say, “Great, we’re making progress, they’re making progress.” Some of my bill increase has gone towards helping the wildlife in the River Test, and then I’d be happier. As it feels now, it feels like my bill has doubled and I can’t see any improvement anywhere.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Community Member 6, [they’re] really good points. I can see my team writing down lots of the points that you’ve made and the actions that you’ve put forward, so thank you so much, Community Member 6. Community Member 7, I’ll go over to you now?

Community Member 7: Thanks, Sam. I think when we met a couple of weeks [ago], we sort of expressed that we were quite frustrated about the broadness of this action plan and the fluffiness in a way, sort of thing. I think we all agreed we want it to drill down on detail to make things a bit more realistic and a bit more apparent to us. I agree with what Community Member 6 is saying, “Let’s take three sites, let’s take three projects, let’s really, Southern Water, use these to show their customers what is actually happening on the ground.”

You know, perhaps help set up some webcams at the sites so that people can tune in and see what’s happening, what’s being built, what’s being invested, what’s changing. Because Tim’s talked about some vast sums of money here being invested, but to be honest, that means very little, I think, to people because it’s sums of money that we don’t really know. How much does a sewer cost to repair? I’ve got no idea, so throwing figures of billions of pounds about, I think it’s a little bit meaningless.

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But if you took an example, and I'm going to say Sandown because I live near Sandown, and Sandown and said, "This week we're spending £550,000 and we're getting these cranes in and they're doing this job and we're cleaning this," and to set that out for people, I think people would notice what's happening. And I think it would be better for Southern Water than just going, "We're spending £6bn across the region." I think people want to see that their increased bills are actually having an impact locally and are affecting the pollution that they see every day and that they read about every day.

I think the public engagement by Southern Water has been very poor in the past and I think they've got to be a bit more hands on and focused on small-scale wins and small-scale projects that people can relate to. You know, people can see a sewage works and see, "Oh right, that's part of the works that's being replaced because that doesn't work." That's how I see it.

TMcK Facilitator: Lovely, thank you Community Member 7, and you've got Community Member 9 agreeing with you there as well.

Community Member 7: Oh, that's good to know.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 3 as well, so you've got agreement there, thank you so much for sharing all that, Community Member 7. Community Member 8, over to you next, please?

Community Member 8: Very quick point, what Tim was saying was actually that customers are contributing quite a lot to the sewage through wet wipes, putting fat down the sink, etc. I'd be really keen to understand how they are changing, trying to change customer behaviour in terms of their attitudes towards waste? Because yeah, from certainly what Tim said, it's quite a major or significant contributing factor to the problem they've got?

TMcK Facilitator: I'll flip that back to you then Community Member 8, how would you want them to be telling customers to change their behaviour, how can we make that an action for Southern Water?

Community Member 8: Yeah, so I think they need to be, in broad terms, trying to educate customers through the billing process or through workshops or events and things like that. But yeah, just really trying to change the way customers treat waste, really. So yeah, that's so, I'm quite interested in that.

TMcK Facilitator: Perfect, thank you so much, Community Member 8. Community Member 2, you've had your hand up for a while, sorry about that.

Community Member 2: That's all right. Since I've put my hand up, other people have covered the subjects, really. I'd just like to emphasise I think for me Southern Water is a bit like high-speed rail, you know, billions of pounds goes in and we don't see anything come out of it. I think one of the most positive things or suggestions that came from our briefing sessions were with regard to telling us what's going on, and I think we highlighted that in so much as what we'd like to see is a permanent improvement plan for all locations. You've highlighted four. I knew about one of those, the Isle of Wight, but not the others.

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It should really set out the cause of the problem, the permanent fix, any interim measures, a named senior owner and a firm start and completion date. And added to that, and I think this is just as important, is somebody independently verifying that the fixes have been delivered and that what you say has happened, has actually happened. Not that we don't believe you, but it's nice to see it come from a third party. I don't know who that third party would be, but I think that's what I'd like to see, certainly, and I think that's quite a strong incentive for the public to perhaps change their minds or change their attitude towards Southern Water.

TMcK Facilitator: So, they shout about what they're doing, but have that independent check in to make sure what they're doing is what they're doing?

Community Member 2: Yes, indeed, yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Absolutely Community Member 2, thank you so much. Does anyone else have anything else they want to add before I show the actions that my team have been typing behind the scenes? Everything's covered?

I won't focus too much on what Southern Water say that they're doing or that they will do in the future, but I want to focus on the fourth line there, which is "What would an ideal water company response look like?" So that's all the actions that we've been discussing at the moment. I'll read them all out and then I'll open up conversation just to see if we've missed anything or if anything feels a bit vague, or we want to add anything to any of these actions before we ask Southern Water to make some final comments on them.

CCW Chair: Sam, could you put it on large presentation format, would you increase the resolution a little bit so that we can see the ideal company response column? That's lovely, because I can see your other slides on the left-hand side, so if you go to presentation mode?

TMcK Facilitator: I'll read through them and then I'll open up the room again to see if anyone wants to change any of the wording or make anything a bit more specific or add anything at this point.

So, ideal water company response.

[A] So company will commit to providing a clear map of key areas of investment.

[B] Clearly provide information of who is responsible and what happens if commitments are missed.

[C] Clear expectations around the 2050 deadline. What innovation can be brought into this to achieve the target sooner and where else are you looking for these solutions?

[D] Set up webcams at the three priority sites to demonstrate to customers what is actually happening on the ground, see what is being built, what is being invested and what is changing.

[E] Provide a permanent improvement plan for all locations. This plan should clearly set out the cause of the problem, the permanent fix, any interim measures, a named senior owner, firm start and completion dates.

[F] Communicate clearly around improvement efforts with independent verification on these efforts.

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[G] Explain the average level of pollution in each area, even highlighting the top three to five sites for pollution and spills, outlining key issue areas and what actions are being taken to resolve these and ideally report on these quarterly.

[H] Make investment figures and plans feel tangible and meaningful to customers.

[I] Communicate behavioural change efforts. So, educate customers about waste disposal, for example, educate customers through the billing process, workshops and events.

Lots of actions that we've put forward there for Southern Water. Anything we want to add or change, make more specific or anything that needs a bit more input?

Community Member 6: You could say in [G] Sam, you've put report on these quarterly, and apologies if I've missed it, but I think ideally the proof of the pudding would be actually reporting on how many litres, millions of litres or whatever of pollution actually is still being pumped. So rather than just a quarterly update of what they're doing to fix the pumping station or to clean the pipes, let's see the tangible results of that, you know, it's actually fallen from 18,000 to 16,000, to 12,000. And that's obviously going to take a bit of time to come through, and I get that, but that's ultimately what we all want, and I'm sure that's what Southern Water want as well. So, let's celebrate in the success when it starts happening.

TMcK Facilitator: Perfect, thank you, Community Member 6, and that's what you're talking about, the trend lines and having the figures, so it's a lot easier to see the changes there. Alison, are you okay?

CCW Chair: Can I pose a question to the panellists, please? Our question was about the priorities and giving more information about the priorities. There's such a tension between wanting to see big things done on the biggest problems versus something being done in every area. Now I know that Southern Water characterises its area into five sub-regions, but I'd just like to just pose the question back to the panel: how do you want Southern Water to deal with big priorities versus something everywhere?

Community Member 6: My view, and I've talked about the River Test and that's reasonably near where I am, I'd much prefer Southern Water to focus on the biggest hitters first, and if that is Portsmouth or Margate because they've got 30,000 litres of pollution being pumped and the River Test has only got 10,000, I've made those up, I can understand that, that's a business decision. The resources, time, money, it's more limited, so where they can think they can get the biggest bang, the biggest improvement, the biggest reduction in pollution, I would say go for them. And if that means my corner of Hampshire doesn't get anything this year or next year, well, that's life.

CCW Chair: That's really helpful to hear because when you're managing big budgets, it can be challenging when what you think is a sensible plan doesn't match what other people want, so thank you for that, that's really helpful to come back. There's a point that Community Member 7 has raised, Sam, that is worth picking up about prominence of owners of projects, so giving identify of people.

TMcK Facilitator: Yes, I was just coming to that, my chat was up on the screen too. So, Community Member 7, you said that more prominence is needed on the named owners of projects?

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Community Member 7: Yeah, I think it was quite an important point that came out of our discussion that we wanted some sort of accountability because Southern Water is a huge company and people come and go, and things like that. And I think through all of us it was quite important that it's highlighted that somebody is ultimately responsible and is contactable by customers, sort of thing. Not just for individual hands-on projects, but for all of the commitments, that they come down to individual people who can be taken to account in the local press or whatever media we feel fit. Just a little bit of that accountability and I think flagging it up might make it more possible. So, I thought it just might have got lost without that.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 8?

Community Member 8: Yeah, I've got nothing really to add. The only – going back to your point about where the investments are, they should really be based on some business case and whether you could share the business case with this particular community?

TMcK Facilitator: So, use one example as a business case and then base the other ones on that, is that what you mean?

Community Member 8: No, so Alison raised a question about, I think about the priorities and how the investment goes into the priority areas. I would suspect that it's based very much on return on investment is how you share that information about how you'd determine the priority areas and the return you're getting on that money spent. Do I make sense?

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, okay.

Community Member 8: So that could be shared either amongst the wider general public, or this particular consumer community.

TMcK Facilitator: How would you want that information to be shared with you?

Community Member 8: It would be in some sort of written or presentational format, to be quite honest.

TMcK Facilitator: Anyone else got anything they would like to add about the actions that are on the screen just now? Community Member 5 has popped her hand up.

Community Member 5: I'm not sure if it's necessarily about the actions, but one thing that came up that I was just interested in a little bit more information on is when Tim says about talking about responding more effectively, I kind of wondered what that meant? Because obviously you can't put a genie back in the bottle once there's been an outage, so I just wondered what that looks like, what is a "responding effectively", what does that actually mean?

TMcK Facilitator: What would you want an action to be about that, what can we pop in the action plan, how do they respond?

Community Member 5: Yeah, I mean when incidents happen, what do they ...? I mean is it just going, "Oh well, we'll try not to let that happen in the future and we'll rush down there and look at the data." I just wondered what actually is done in real time to do something about that incident, or is it just, "Oh well, that's happened, so we'll try and learn a lesson from it." Or is there an actual – what do they do, what do they mean by "responding effectively"?

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TMCK Facilitator: And how do they give that information to you?

Community Member 5: By telling us what they do.

TMCK Facilitator: Okay, thumbs up there. Alison, anything from you before we go back to Southern Water?

CCW Chair: No, but I would really like to give the opportunity to Lawrence and Tim to provide a brief response back to this. In particular, to be clear about what you think's achievable and when you could set to achieve it by. And if there are things that are just impossible, to explain why and what consideration is needed, and we'll record everything transparently. So please, I'd like to pass the baton to both of you.

Lawrence Gosden: I so wish we could have a conversation because there are so many answers we can provide in dialogue, so a different format would help so much. But we have the format we have. So firstly, I have no problem with any of the actions, we can answer all of those, nothing is impossible, it's all very, very straightforward for us to deal with.

I want to pick up just a few quick points though, just indicators. So, in the last three and a half years we have reduced pollution by 40% from where we started this mission. Over the coming year, we will reduce it by a further 20% on the way to the 100%. Now the reason why the rest of it takes a much longer tale, is because we're dealing with these sort of wet wipes across a whole massive area and that takes a while. But the good news is, that the government has backed banning wet wipes and that's what we needed to happen.

The industry has lobbied for plastic wet wipes to be banned because they're the ones that mix with the fat, oil and grease and cause the blockages. Now, that is expected to come into force in about six months' time and when that comes in, we'll be watching our systems very carefully because we hope we're going to see a radical reduction which will bring forward that 2050 date. If that happens, we can make much faster progress, so I wanted to make that point.

There was a quick point around accountability. I'm accountable and Tim is the accountable director for delivering our pollution reduction plan, and then below Tim we have all of these different workstreams set up under different accountable managers. So, we have a very clear accountability structure to that, but ultimately in terms of who gets beaten up in the papers if this doesn't work, it's me.

Our penalty structures are very severe. So, our penalties work by every sewage pollution is a million-pound penalty. Now, that comes off of your bills, because it comes off our revenues, so you don't pay for it. If anything, it actually reduces your bills. Now, that gives me a headache because it actually takes away some of the money we need to solve the problem in the first place, but the important point is, you're not paying for fines or penalties, they come off revenues.

There was a brilliant question about new ways and that's such an important point. We've installed these 34,000 sewer sensors, we use artificial intelligence to learn when, how the water level is moving within different parts of the network.

CCW Chair: Lawrence, there's a really key issue I'd like to pick up from the chat. Before you go into the AI, just hold that thought, there is a comment about the fine still affecting the customers. Could I just ask you to row back and explain very clearly if you are fined, does that affect the customer bill?

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Lawrence Gosden: So unfortunately, you won't notice it because by the time you take five million people's bills and break it all down, it's a tiny amount of money, but to us it's huge. So, the one million pounds per serious pollution that we get, which is effectively a fine, it reduces our revenues, which means that that reduces by a tiny amount everybody's bill. But you're not paying for it, that's the major point. Does that make sense, Alison?

CCW Chair: Thank you, it's just it's a sort of very sensitive issue that being very clear about language, really helps customers trust and satisfaction.

Lawrence Gosden: There's no way customers should be paying for fines or penalties, that's for water companies and shareholders to shoulder. It gives us a headache because it takes away the life blood, which is money that I need to do the turnaround work, but it is what it is.

CCW Chair: Thank you, go back to your AI.

Lawrence Gosden: So just very quickly, so the artificial intelligence is governing these 34,000 sewer centres. They understand how the network is working in this crucial 12% of the network that causes all of the misdemeanours and the blockages that can cause the pollutions. So that is one big innovation, we've only put that in place in the last two years. That is leading the way globally, let alone in the UK, it's a very significant shift. Wet wipes being banned, I know it's not an innovation but it's so important, I talked about that earlier.

You may have seen, for the gentleman on the River Test, that we've introduced SOMs^[1], which are these water quality measures all the way up the River Test now, and we've got a whole load of them planned to put into rivers right across the region. And these are going to measure the actual water quality of the rivers, so that we can track over the next few years the outcomes of the pollution reduction work that we're doing on actual water quality in rivers.

One of my big fears is, that we're going to eventually get to a point where we solve everything to do with sewage and water, and we're going to see that there are lots of other things we need to fix as well. But you know this, agriculture, etc.

CCW Chair: Well, I'm heartened by what you've been saying in that there's lots that you can provide back in terms of your action plan and communication and information, so that's great. I'd love to hear more, but I'm very anxious that we give Community Member 3 time for her question as well, so please bear with me and give me leeway to say I'm going to have to move on, if you don't mind? I'm conscious of everybody's time.

Lawrence Gosden: Super, super quick, our pollution incident reduction plan is published on our website, and it has all of the specific details that the panellists are looking for, it's fully published. I will pause again, it's too involved.

CCW Chair: Yes, I think we come back to an issue that I'm encountering on other Accountability Sessions, which is communication is key, how do you put things out and in human terms, in customer terms, rather than in asset operator terms? So that, the language that you're using this evening is really helpful. So, thank you for that. I am going to call a halt here and draw a line, and we're going to move on to the second question, which is from Community Member 3. So, Community Member 3, are you there and would you please ask the second question?

1. Self-Organising Maps: a type of artificial network used in data visualisation, pattern recognition and clustering tasks.

Session transcript

Community Member 3: I'm here. So, it's regarding investment and future resilience. It's difficult for us to feel satisfied with Southern Water when our bills keep rising but yet we're being constantly asked to conserve water. Especially when we continue to see leaks and water loss across the network just locally when we're out and about. And it can feel as though customers are being asked to pay more but use less, while the underlying supply problems are not being resolved quickly enough.

We want to see clear evidence that the extra money we are paying is strengthening the network, reducing leakage and making supplies more resilient before further restrictions are placed on customers. So, what specific improvements to leakage, infrastructure and drought resilience will our higher bills fund? What measurable reduction in water loss and supply risk will you commit to and by when? And how will you prove that Southern Water is doing its part before asking customers to pay more or use less water?

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed for that, Community Member 3, that's very helpful. So, I'm really just going to ask if Lawrence, Tim, I don't know who wants to answer this question, but if you could respond and be as clear as you can about what customers' higher bills will actually deliver in terms of reducing that leakage, improving infrastructure, and making water supplies more resilient? And again, it's about ... specific about the measurable reduction that will be delivered and by when. And I think this key thing about how customers will see tangible improvements from this additional money that they're paying?

Lawrence Gosden: I'm going to do a quick 30 second overview and I'm going to hand to Tim. Okay, so our region, we've got four major areas: Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight. Kent and Sussex are in really good shape, so water supply is very good, reservoir stock is very good, groundwater stock is very good. We've run through this drought period with no temporary use bans or hosepipe bans at all, and they run reliably and resiliently. We had to do a lot of investment to do that over the three years, but they are running and running well.

Everything, all of the water stress in our area, and it is whole area is a water stressed area for the UK, that's the South East official designation is all of the stress associated with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight and that's because of the Rivers Test and Itchen, which is where we withdraw currently the majority of the water for that area. Now we are significantly in line with the Environment Agency's requirements, reducing the amount that we abstract in that area. To solve that, we are replacing the supplies from the Rivers Test and Itchen with a new reservoir, the first to be built in 30 years at Havant Thicket, and that will be constructed by about 2030, and it will be filling up with water to be operational by about 2034.

And then secondly, we are also building a water recycling plant, the first in the UK, because we've got to stop throwing away water into the sea and reusing it to get ahead of climate change. And that we're going to be building by about the mid-2030s, that will be concluded. And then that will top up Havant Thicket in extreme droughts, we're talking 1 in 500-year droughts. That will make the west of our region super resilient to drought. Now, alongside that, Tim has made incredible progress on cutting leakage, because we're not just waiting to build these big projects, we're also cutting leakage and we are now at, we're about third in the industry on leakage reduction compared to being last in the industry three years ago. And at that point I'll hand over to Tim to talk a bit more about it.

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Tim McMahon: Thank you, Lawrence. So, as I was alluding to, in terms of our leakage reduction, if you look at April '24 to April 2026, we reduced leakage by just under 30%, which is a seismic reduction and we are very much one of the leading companies in the UK now at leakage. We repair about 22,000 leaks a year of which about 70% are underground, you can't see them, so that's what our leak detection teams, we have about 150 people walking the streets day and night using different technologies to find those leaks to practically repair them before they become visible leaks.

It's a bit like an iceberg, most of the leakage is underground, you can't see it. As part of our plans this year, we're installing 360km of new pipes, that's our biggest mains replacement programme ever, and we're building that up to do about 1,500km every five years thereafter, so we're very much building a big programme to start replacing the assets because we have the second longest asset base in the UK.

As part of that, some sort of key metrics with leakage, in terms of those leaks we find and fix every year, that's equivalent of about 70 Olympic-sized swimming pools of leakage activity that we do, so we're reducing leakage by about 70 Olympic-sized swimming pools, and that deals with that sort of break up you get when it's cold or when it's very dry. We know that visible leaks in a time of drought is really important to customers, we have to be on it, we have to repair them quickly.

And visible leaks we repair under two days on average. There are some outliers, sometimes that's because we have to shut a pipe in and that can take thousands of people, so it takes time to plan that in to re-route our water around the system. Or it could have massive traffic management impacts, so we do have outliers on that. But at this time of year, we aim to do visible leaks within two days.

In terms of the wider investment and how that's supported us, an area that we've sort of really worked on hard is supply interruptions, so that's every time you turn a tap, you've got water coming out of your tap. Last year, we actually had our best performance ever and we were second in the industry in terms of that performance, and that is because we are rebuilding our biggest water supply works. That's the two water supply works that feed Southampton are very old, about 80% of their assets are beyond life, we are replacing those assets and rebuilding them.

But it's very hard to do that, it's a bit like driving a car and trying to change the tyre at the same time because you've got to keep the asset running and keep the water in supply whilst rebuilding it. We're rebuilding the big site that feeds Sussex North, a place called Hardham, which feeds all the way up to sort of the Crawley area. And then our key site in Kent called Burham, which feeds the Maidstone area, we're rebuilding that as well. So that's all having a part into reducing our risk, which is improving the resilience of our asset base and therefore security of supply for our customers.

In terms of reducing usage and helping customers have greater control of that, we've got 88% of our customer base, our properties are metered, so that is where every twice a year we'll go and read the meter outside your property and that's what you'll – you'll get charged for what you use. What we're now doing is installing these meters that gives data to customers every 15 minutes, and what that will help customers is reduce their usage and therefore reduce their bills and obviously reduce the amount of water we abstract from the environment. And as of July, we've installed about 160,000 smart meters and by the end of March of this year ...

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CCW Chair: Tim, I'm going to interrupt you there because we've got about a minute and a half to go. I was very struck by your point about a lot of the problem with leaks is underground and you don't see it?

Tim McMahon: Yes.

CCW Chair: How do you communicate, how do you demonstrate to customers that you're dealing with something that can't be seen and is very disparate and is around the different areas? I mean the question was, what specific improvements [are] being done with our higher bills, how do we know that the additional money we're paying is going to fix things permanently rather than just fix a repeated leak? I'd just like you to switch to how are you communicating the outcome, the impact of all of this amazing investment programme?

Tim McMahon: Yeah, I think there's more we need to do in this area. We've had to move our water business into a position where we're hitting our targets more effectively because we start communicating it. So as Lawrence alluded to, we were really one of the last, worst performing water companies in the industry three years ago; last year we were third out of the 17 companies. And now we are starting to talk more about it by sharing information through various platforms. But we need to do more of that and as part of our reputational strategy, as an example, we just recruited a social media manager to start sharing more information on social media. Because we've been very quiet on that and we need to be more vocal to talk about some of these good news stories, because there are good news stories for Southern Water.

CCW Chair: I agree because we're here tonight because Southern is minus 31 compared to the rest of the country in terms of satisfaction. It sounds like you're doing good stuff, but it's not getting through and people aren't believing it because they're not seeing it. Okay, I'm going to have to stop you there. So, thank you very much for that. I'm now going to pause and hand back to Sam to take on the next stage.

TMcK Facilitator: Lovely, thank you and thank you so much for the response there. The same as what we've done, and you've done so well with the previous question, I really want you to have a think about the question that we just put forward and the response that you received and I want to know what felt clear and concrete and what was vague and what's still missing from our action plan?

I can see some people popping in the chat in response to the under two-day leak fix targets. Well, that's not always what's happening with our community members. So, I guess what can they be doing when targets are missed, what can be done there? And there's lots of really interesting things being popped in the chat now. So, I'll pass back over to the community members. We'll start with Community Member 3 first of all, since you asked the question, if that's okay? How was the response you received?

Community Member 3: Well, it all sounds very good and so yes, I was the one who said about the leaks, it's all very well if you're saying that it's attended within two days, but I saw one where they'd repaired it recently and as we were going out, when we came back it was tarmacked over, but the water was still bubbling up. So, it's not always as one's told, so yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Is there anything that we could put forward for Southern Water to do when these targets aren't being met?

Community Member 3: I'm not sure, really. It's just not honest, is it, so what can I say?

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TMcK Facilitator: Anyone got anything they want to say about the response? I'll open it up to the rest of the community members. Community Member 7, your hand went straight up there?

Community Member 7: I think well, in response to your question, you know, what happens when things aren't being done, I think the answer is tell us. I think, I mean I went on Southern Water's website recently and looked at their leak map of where I live and there's ones there that were reported four weeks ago and I'd like to know does that mean an engineer has been there, he's had a look at it, scratched his head and gone, "Oh, I'm not going to get that one"? What does it mean? It's fine having these leakage maps and they're great, and I think they're good and I'm not against them, but I think it's a bit frustrating when you report something and you expect some action within a published time period and nothing happens. You know, tell us why, just be a bit more honest that this problem is worse than you thought it was at the first inspection, or "We're waiting for an engineer to come over from the mainland." Whatever it is, treat us like adults and tell us what the problem is, rather than ...

What will happen is, people will stop reporting leaks because they see inaction by Southern Water. That's the last thing we want, we want people to be proactive because it's a very important thing that we've noticed in this drought that there's water gushing down the road and we're being told where I live, not to use hosepipes and things like that. So, I think a bit more transparency and a bit more openness about what are the problems with these leaks, why aren't they being sorted as fast as we expected?

TMcK Facilitator: Okay, so you kept saying "tell us," so you gave an example that you report something. How did they tell you, what action can we put on our action plan that would cover that off?

Community Member 7: Well, I mean there's a great interactive map on Southern Water's website that tells us where the leaks are and when they've been reported. So, give us an update on there, if it's passed two days or two weeks or whatever, let's have an update as to, "Engineer attended, problem with the broken sprocket, will take 10 days to fix," let us know. And that will also stop people reporting the same leakage again and again, as well.

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you Community Member 7. Community Member 9 has just popped in the chat as well, "You could use text messages that you already use for bills to address that as well." So, thank you both. Community Member 6, you've got your hand up?

Community Member 6: I'll try to be quick. I think I've read somewhere that there's still 89.8 million litres a day being leaked by Southern Water, which obviously sounds a lot. I mean I agree with Community Member 7, I've looked at the leak map and to be honest I was shocked at just how many leaks there are within walking distance of where I am. But then I think, like with the pollution, I think some clarity about it would be understandable I think if one of these leaks was a fountain, it really was gushing out, we would expect Southern Water to get to that first. If one of them was just one pipe going into one house, that takes longer, completely the right decision. So, I think some clarity around that would be good.

But again, I'd come back to I think the action point and the response should have some quarterly reporting of these figures. If it is 89.8 million litres a day, now let's see that coming down. It may well need to be seasonally adjusted and compared to last summer, because I have read some Southern Water stuff that says when it's a drought like it is now, the ground contracts more and it breaks the pipes more. So, you probably need to compare a hot summer with a hot summer, last year or something, rather than comparing it quarter on quarter. I'll leave that to Southern Water to think out, but I do still think we need to see some enhanced communications and reporting about it.

Session transcript

TMCK Facilitator: When you say it's similar to what we were talking about with the pollution, is that in identifying the key areas when you're talking about not a leak towards someone's house, but the bigger ...?

Community Member 6: Yeah, when I was saying, when we got asked about which one was prioritised and I say it's understandable to go to the biggest ones first. So, what I was just saying is, go to the one that you've got a fountain shooting up in the air and fix that. If that means you leave three people's houses that have got one little pipe leaking for a week or two, which is what Community Member 7 was saying, that's understandable and probably is the right decision, but maybe just explain that a little bit to us more rather than just leaving us in the dark.

TMCK Facilitator: Thank you so much Community Member 6. Community Member 2?

Community Member 2: Yeah, just very briefly on the back of what Community Member 7 was saying and showing the importance of verification. If the public is told lots of things by Southern Water that they are doing and how things are improving and yet when they walk down their street, they see that there's the leak that they reported two weeks ago, etc, that hasn't been fixed, how can they believe anything?

TMCK Facilitator: So that comes back again to the transparency that Community Member 7 was talking about. Okay, thank you, Community Member 2. Anyone else got anything they would like to add?

I mean, part of this question is surrounding our higher bills and specific leakage and infrastructure improvements. Have they covered enough about how our bills are being impacted with the improvements? All happy with what's been discussed so far then? Nodding, I've got Community Member 9 nodding, Community Member 4 is nodding, thumbs up. Okay, Alison anything else you would like to add?

CCW Chair: No, it would be just good to see some time commitments, service level agreements to turn round visible leaks because that is something that consumers see.

TMCK Facilitator: Perfect, thank you so much, Alison. Okay, I'll share my screen again and we can have a look at the actions that have been put forward for this question. Again, I won't delve too deep into what they're currently doing or what they say they'll do in the future. We'll look at the three main actions that have been put forward by you as community members.

[A] Owning and clearly, transparently reporting failures and missed targets. So crucially to earn customer trust and buy-in. So, use the interactive map that's currently on the website to update customers or use text messages. I think actually it's Community Member 1 that's popped in the chat a few times that she's looked at leaks in her local area from March and from June, and it's still saying, "Status in progress." So, we're at the end of August now, so obviously more needs to be done there to keep it up to date.

[B] Provide quarterly reporting on leakage figures, so customers can see the numbers coming down over time. And again, talking about the trend lines and really communicating that with you in a way that you understand the key changes there.

[C] Clarify decision-making around the prioritisation of leak repairs, so what are the big areas are you going to prioritise, or identify the main concerns and the big areas and how you prioritise them and what you're going to do in those priority areas.

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Lovely, okay, some good actions there to add to our plan. Does anyone have anything they want to add or change or expand on further out of the actions that we've built this evening? Community Member 11?

Community Member 11: Yeah, I just felt this slide could benefit because Tim's warming to the theme when he talks about AI and how it could be applied, and I just think this slide could contain and I put in the chat, any AI plans and investments in potential use cases?

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you, Community Member 11. Anyone else got anything they'd like to add about the actions that are here on the screen? Are we all happy and feel like this addresses the question? I'll hand back over to Alison then, as we're all happy with the actions outlined here.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Sam. Really, before we go any further, again this is the time for, Lawrence and Tim, for yourselves to response to what customers have said and to confirm what you're prepared to commit to. And again, please be specific about visible outcomes about delivery, progress and missed targets; how do you report missed targets and what's your recovery processes? Who's going to be accountable for delivery? What are the consequences that follow if you don't meet a commitment, including position on executive reward because that has been brought up before? And if there are things that you can't commit to, please explain why and what the alternatives are? It may be a better version of what we've got here. And when customers can expect a firm decision. So again, all of this will be recorded and is transparent as said before. So, Lawrence, the baton is yours.

Lawrence Gosden: Thank you. I think the actions are brilliant. I think one thing we are definitely guilty of is being too focused on the sort of operational improvement of things like leakage and building these big new resources, new reservoirs, and the thing we really need to improve is how we communicate that to you, that's coming across loud and strong. The two-[day] point is a brilliant example, because that two [day] is an average. But of course, either side of that is a tailored, more difficult jobs. Just very simply updating that map with the exact reason why is something we will get on to and do it really quickly, because that's a blindingly simple but highly effective suggestion. So, we've got no problem with any of the actions. We think they are super specific, we're really happy with them and there's nothing we see as difficult to implement.

Tim McMahon: Just to build on Alison's question, so in terms of the accountability, clearly, it's very similar answer to pollutions, I'm the accountable director. If we do not hit our leakage target, we get penalised by our regulator Ofwat for every megalitre that we miss. And that also has wider implications on our water resource management plan, which is our key statutory plan that could lead to licence breaches if you fail it significantly. So, it is a significant impact to us if we do fail. But more importantly, we know on the water side of the business it's the most important measure for customers, so getting it wrong has wider impacts for us as a business.

Just to answer one of the points at the end around AI: we do use AI and different innovations in leakage, just to name a few. Believe it or not, dogs – dogs had an impact, we found nearly 30 leaks this year with dogs finding leaks in rural areas, all the way through to a tool that we built which helped identify leakage more effectively using all of the data that we've got, which has improved our productivity of our staff by over 10%. And we're just trialling a new technology on fibre optic cables, that's the fibre optics that's taking your broadband down your street, we're using that fibre optic cable to try and find leakage, which we're very excited about, we think that's the new way of finding the harder to find leakage.

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So, we're doing lots of activity in that plan of which AI is integral to both the tools we're using from improving the productivity and that fibre optic technology.

Lawrence Gosden: We've also tried satellites as well, but that was less effective. We really thought satellite technology would be a gamechanger, but to be honest with you, the biggest gamechanger on leakage reduction has actually been those smart meters. Because then we'll have a meter where we put the water in, and a meter where you put the water out, measuring the water every 15 minutes, and we will be able to know precisely where all the water is going in the network. That will be a gamechanger on improving leakage again.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much for that response, that's really helpful. Can I ask our panellists, having heard that response, is there anything that anybody wants to raise? Sam, will you let me know if anybody wants to response to that, otherwise I'm going to close this section and move to our last and third question, which is the shortest but I suspect will be the most difficult to address as it's the crux of what we're about. I don't see any hands up. Okay, in that case I'm going to say thank you very much indeed to everybody for giving that topic a really good going through. And we're going to move to our third and last question, which is going to be posed by Community Member 5.

Community Member 5: I guess this is kind of in some ways a sort of summarising what we've already talked about in the last two questions in a way. But what I would like to know is, why do you and your leadership team think the customer satisfaction with Southern Water is so low and what do you believe are the three main causes and what are the three biggest improvements customers will actually notice over the next 12 months?

So, it's not about success being measured by how many actions appear on a tracker but where the customers are actually having a better experience and how their experience is improving as a result of your actions?

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Community Member 5, that's really helpful to have set that out so clearly. So, Lawrence and Tim, I would be really glad if you would respond to that and be as open as you can about why you think that customer satisfaction is so low and rather than just focusing only on what is already being done but to look forward about the top three things that you believe are driving that dissatisfaction and the three biggest things that will address that? I think again, I keep coming back to what are customers going to visibly experience and see themselves, and what is that change by when? Could I ask the panellists to listen very carefully and reflect about whether that will impact on your experience and your environs and address what matters to you most? So, I'm going to pass the baton to Lawrence first.

Lawrence Gosden: Okay, thank you very much. Why do I think it's so low? I think it's more than three reasons, I'm afraid. I think it's about five I've summarised it at. Firstly, I think there's history, so the company has massively failed in the past; its performance has been totally unacceptable, I've been very publicly clear on record as to what we believe in the company on that and we've made some significant steps in terms of setting ourselves away from the past. That's not just improving performance but that's also replacing management, ethics and transparency training across all staff every year. I do it as well. It's all sorts of things that we've had to do to separate from some of the very significant and unacceptable history that this company has. So that's the first reason.

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The second reason is the base service. So, when you phone up or when you contact us on the website, your water, your wastewater, your billing service is not as good as it should be. Most people wouldn't guess this, but wastewater actually scores the highest, so typically customers score us 8 out of 10 on wastewater. It's only 6 out of 10 for water and it's about 7 out of 10 for billing. That's much lower than the rest of the industry. I'll talk to you in a minute about what we're doing to improve that. So, the second reason is the base service proposition.

The third reason is the performance of the company. When we, all my colleagues, and there must be about 50% new people in this company now, when we stepped into this company four years ago to get it turned around, we knew we had a hell of a job in front of us, because the company was at the bottom of every single metric that you can think of. But now we stand with some very significant improvements on water, 40% reduction in pollutions, we're now at the top of the industry on reducing supply interruptions, that's very different to a year ago.

So, the performance has changed but we've got to find a way of communicating that to five million people because it's great when you can have a conversation, it's really hard to replicate the dynamic of the conversation amongst five million. So, communication on that performance change, and what we've still got to do as we are nowhere near yet where we expect to get to. So that's the third area.

The fourth area is investment. So, we have got a very large investment programme, that's a big chunk of what your bills are going towards, and that investment programme is largely about three big things. One is building those new sources of water in the west of the region to protect the Rivers Test and Itchen, and that's the water recycling plant at Havant Thicket. Secondly, it's about cutting storm overflows, so that's about 120 of the – there's about 1,000 overflows in total, 500 don't have any impacts at all, 500 need work, 120 of the 500 are the highest priority, and that's what we're doing in this next three- or four-year period, with the rest of them being done in the following five-year period. So that investment programme to cut overflows. And then really importantly, but a lot of this is talked about in the press, is the nutrient removal.

So nutrient removal is critical because that's basically building new technology on the end of our wastewater treatment works to further clean the water that we recycle back into the environment, the clean water we recycle back to the environment, to strip out nutrients and that stops algal blooms in rivers and really contributes to river health. So those three big investment programme points are the fourth area.

Then the last one is the narrative. It's a really unpopular thing for me to say, but in the UK we produce the best drinking water quality in the world. If you go and Google the Harvard University in the US do a global index of water quality and the UK is one of only about six countries in the entire world that produce to the standard that we do in this country. So, we have made huge strides in water quality in this country, what we've now got to do is build the infrastructure to make sure that safeguards against climate change and water resources and cutting leaks and all the things that are really important.

So those big five areas, what are you going to see in the future? Over the next year, I think, was the timeframe. So, over the next year, when you phone us, you will see a significant improvement in wait times. So, the average wait time last year was very, very high. Going off the top of my head, and I can't access it quickly in my notes, but it was something like – but it was measured in 30 or 45 minutes, it was horrific.

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Now, 80% of calls have been answered within 120 seconds and we expect to half that over the coming year. So, when you phone up, you you'll be able to get through to somebody much quicker who can resolve the problem that you're looking to resolve, whether it's billing, wastewater or water. So that's the first thing. Service improvement, now we're going to have to do a better job at telling you this stuff, sure, and I'm really taking that feedback onboard, that's the biggest thing we're going to really deal with, I think, on the back of the call today. But service improvement through either overflow reduction over the next year, pollution reduction by about 20%. A further 10% reduction in leakage over the ...

CCW Chair: I have to say I'm really impressed, Lawrence, at how much you have at your fingertips because if you have got it on notes, then it's brilliantly put in front of you, but I suspect it's coming from the heart, so I applaud you for that. But I would like to just say thank you for that quick response, and there's masses of information in there, but I think I need to rather than give any views, I want to go back to our customers on the panel and ask them what they feel about that and to pass the baton back to Sam?

TMCK Facilitator: Thank you, Alison, and thank you, Lawrence and Tim, for your response. Community members, they talked about five satisfaction drivers, I guess we could call them, during their speech there. So, we've got history, base service, communication, investment they're doing and then the narrative, so building the infrastructure for the quality of water that they have. I mean do these reflect your experience of being Southern Water customers? I mean have they given you things, improvements that you'll be able to see over the next 12 years? I want to hear your thoughts on what you've just heard there, does it reflect your experience, importantly? Community Member 10, you had your hand up straightaway there, so I'll come straight to you.

Community Member 10: Yes, so I say this on a personal level as someone who's retired on a fixed income but also as a retired [Citizen's Advice Bureau] advisor. I'm really very surprised that the top five reasons why people aren't very satisfied with water is that we've got the highest bills in Britain in Southern Water? I think that's really important. And I know you have to make investments, but is there any possibility that once those investments have been made, that bills might fall down towards more an average level of what water costs in Britain generally?

TMCK Facilitator: Thank you, Community Member 10. What were you hoping for them to say surrounding bills and investment?

Community Member 10: I suppose I'm really hoping for them to say that there's an end in sight to this, that the fact that it was agreed that our water bills would go up to pay for this investment, which we all agree is needed, but it has also caused enormous hardship to a lot of people. I know that many of your customers get a discounted rate because they're in poverty, and I think that's really good, but actually a lot of us are just struggling to make ends meet day-to-day and at what point is that going to end, if ever? Or at that point will you start paying dividends out to shareholders because I appreciate they haven't had any for a while?

TMCK Facilitator: Okay, thank you so much, Community Member 10. Community Member 8, you've got your hand up?

Community Member 8: Yeah, so coming back on Community Member 10's point, I'd be very interested to understand why they could get a greater proportion of external investment. So, in essence, there's a reliance on increasing customer bills to pay for the investment. Can there be a lesser reliance on customers to foot the bill and greater proportion come in from externally?

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TMcK Facilitator: We'll definitely put that forward as an action and we'll wait a response from Lawrence and Tim. Thank you very much, Community Member 8. Community Member 2?

Community Member 2: Yeah, I mean maybe it's controversial, I don't mind paying the extra money if it's going to make the service better. But what I don't like is feeling that I'm subsidising other people who don't pay their share. I got the AI Genie to go through your public main accounts as far as possible, and it looks to me like you've got something like at any one time something between £250m and £300m owed to you. I realise some of that is going to be people who are on a payment plan, etc, which there's no issue with, but people who quite simply say, "I'm not going to pay it," and then walk off, what's being done about that to recover it? I think the amount you've currently got outstanding, if these figures are correct, of course, would pay your interest bill for the year.

TMcK Facilitator: What action could be put forward for that then?

Community Member 2: I think, and again it would be controversial, but I'd like to see Southern Water showing how they – what action they're taking to recover the money that they're owed.

TMcK Facilitator: Anyone else got anything to add here? Community Member 5, you've got your hand up there?

Community Member 5: I think it's, I'd sort of like to bring it back a little bit to a very tangible what ... I mean obviously we all understand that investments cost money, but I think, it's like Community Member 10 was saying, when you're being asked to pay more money without seeing any results, it's kind of what specific benefits will a household, an average household notice in say three months, six months, nine months, twelve months? And almost a kind of, for every extra £10 increase in a bill, what measurable improvements will we see, or for an extra £50 or whatever it is, be much more specific so that we have a kind of ... So rather than just a sort of, "Well, we're reducing this, we're improving that," but actually very specific ...

Things like how many complaints per 10,000 customers or how many in every 1,000 were affected by leakages or how many people are affected by ... I don't know, but you know, number of supply interruptions per 1,000 customers or something, so that you can put it against what you're paying for. Sorry, it doesn't make much sense, but, you know, or the average duration of the interruptions or the average duration of the percentage of customers affected by unplanned outages, you know, that sort of thing?

TMcK Facilitator: No, that completely makes sense, Community Member 5. So how the household is ...

Community Member 5: Quantifying it more, yeah. I think a lot of the action plans, there's a lot in those, and really most people will go, "Hmm, I'll read that later." There's a lot in there and I think people need much simpler indicators when you look at your bill and you think, "Well, this is what we've done in the last three months and actually this has improved by this much. Three months ago, this many people were affected by this, this is now down to this and we predict this." And then report on it every three months.

TMcK Facilitator: So, I guess more digestible way of what the improvements are?

Community Member 5: Yeah, and a much simpler, less wordy ... A progress report is fine if you've got a couple of hours to really go through it, but it's not really very, I don't find it that helpful. It needs to be a bit more in your face, I think.

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: Thank you so much, Community Member 5. Community Member 7, over to you?

Community Member 7: I'd like to think that Lawrence has been very honest there about the challenges, and I think as a Southern Water customer, I'd appreciate knowing a bit more about how my water company compares to everybody else. I think, I don't know if this is an industry thing, we don't say Southern Water is the best, we don't say Severn Trent is the worst, whatever, but I think as a customer in my area, I'd like to know that my money is being spent wisely and my bills are being pared back as much as possible because my water company is number 1 in the UK for this. I'd like to see Southern Water telling us a little bit more about that.

And also, if they are number 10 in the country for something, then what's going to happen about that? I think a bit more industry-wide honestly about how you compare to others. I appreciate that point about history, we're very aware of the stories of shareholders and CEO's pay and things like that, and there has been a change. But I don't think you're shouting about it enough to get through to the customers about we are a different company now, we're not doing these practices.

Because we do tend to think, "My bill's gone up because of that history, now we're paying for these infrastructure changes, it should have happened 10, 15 years ago but didn't because the industry was very different." I think, in a nutshell, tell us how well you're doing compared to other people in the industry and if you're not coming up to scratch, then we can have these conversations and drill down on those individual bits. But I think customers would feel a bit more confident if they know that Southern Water is top three companies in the UK and it's progressing well.

TMcK Facilitator: I can turn that back and say that there's benchmarking, I guess, against other water companies out there, that information will be public for other people, for people to see. But I guess importantly you haven't accessed that information, so I guess my question to you is what sort of benchmarks or what sort of things should they be communicating with you that they're doing better or worse at?

Community Member 7: I think that comparison of when I go online or when I get my bill, I see a paragraph of how the money's been spent, I think that's a good benchmark to compare that to other water companies. I think we can talk about things like leakages and outages and pollution is a key thing.

And that point that Lawrence made about resilience that in large parts of the Southern Water area, reservoirs are coping, you know, some sort of indicator of that. Because I think a lot of people throughout this summer felt, "Oh, this is only going to get worse, the water is going to dry up and this is the end of the world," sort of thing. And I think there was a bit of panic because TV stations were showing shots of dried-up reservoirs. Tell us everything's okay, how are the water stocks, those sorts of things, I think would really give us confidence.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 1?

Community Member 1: Yeah, I think it would be great if Southern Water could prove to the customer or stakeholder that the service investment comes first before the shareholder dividends.

TMcK Facilitator: How do they prove that; how do they show that?

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Community Member 1: That's exactly what I'd like them to do, so I don't know how they would do it, but I would like some proof that their priority is the pollution, the bringing the bills down, the leakage, and not just, "How can we save money to give back to our shareholders?" So, we want to prove that we have changed and it's more about being truthful and this is where our hearts are, rather than ... Because obviously Southern Water have taken huge investments from loads of different other companies and they need to prove to those investors they're going to get a profit. So, if they're profit, where do we come in? I'd like them to prove that the priorities of changing the pollution, changing the leakage, all these things come before paying back their investors.

TMCK Facilitator: How do they share that information with you?

Community Member 1: Well, that's what I'm saying, I don't know how they're going to do it because I don't know that they've ever done it before, I've never seen any proof of it. So, it would be great if they could come up with a way to show that that's their priority and not their shareholders.

TMCK Facilitator: Community Member 6, did you put your hand up there?

Community Member 6: Yeah, it was just to reply to Community Member 1 quickly, I'm pretty certain Southern Water haven't paid dividends since 2017 and have committed to not paying them until at least 2030. And so, I think obviously the environment they're in, they're aware of how that might look, so that was it, really.

TMCK Facilitator: I'm going to share the actions that we've been talking about based on this question in one moment. Before I do, does anyone have anything they want to add? So, we asked Southern Water to identify what they think are the three key reasons why you're not satisfied with Southern Water and they came up with five which are displayed here. As mentioned, history, base service, performance of the company, investment and narrative. But a big thing that was pointed out by you was the bills: why are you the highest bills in England and Wales? So, some actions that have been put forward by as community members I'll just talk through just now.

[A] Outlining how the company plans to claim owed finances.

[B] Quantifying measurable improvements, so what the average household could expect to see as a result of X amount of pounds increase on your bill.

[C] Explore securing a greater proportion of external investment funding to reduce the financial burden on customer bill and also communicate with you about how they plan on doing that.

[D] Show how Southern Water compares to other water companies on key metrics, so how money is being spent through leakage and outages, pollution and resilience, and communicate that with you clearly.

[E] Communicate to customers the positive changes that Southern Water is making.

[F] Prove that service investments come before shareholder dividends. A note there to the fact that Southern Water has not paid dividends since 2017.

Session transcript

Another good amount of actions there to put forward to Southern Water. Now that I've gone through them all, does anyone have anything they would like to add? These actions, do they cover what you feel is important to drive satisfaction as customers? Community Member 6 has got a thumbs up, okay? Anyone else want to add or refine any of these or expand on them, even potentially put a timescale in front of them and see if Southern Water is able to commit to those timescales? All happy with what's been put forward? Thumbs up from Community Member 11, some nods, a thumbs up from Community Member 5. Okay, I'll move over to Alison then.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much indeed, Sam, and thank you to everybody. So, this is the opportunity really to allow and ask Lawrence and Tim if they would like to respond to this. Just a brief opportunity to respond to what customers have said and confirm what you're prepared to commit to. And as always, I ask for specificity about visible outcomes, delivery, progress and so on. And if there's anything that you feel you can't commit to, perhaps explain why and what alternatives you can offer?

But I think just come back to the key issue which is this incredibly low level of customer satisfaction and I would make the point that I think our panel really does understand that you're making considerable investment and that it takes time to do that, but they're looking for more detail and more deliverables, more transparency on what you're delivering. So please, the baton is yours to come back and respond to what you've heard just now?

Lawrence Gosden: Again, no problem at all, I think there's some really interesting points of insight there, many of which we can answer really quickly, particularly some of the ones about how we finance the investments that we're doing, etc. But I won't do that now because I know you're pressed for time. Tremendously great insights. I am very happy to commit to moving, particularly the ones that we have here – some of the ones on the other pages are going to take a little bit longer, because we need to do a little bit of work our side to do those – but the ones here, we can deal with those very quickly and provide the answers that you're looking for. It is so good just to hear what you think, this has been such a helpful and inspiring, to be quite frank, just listening to the insights and the quality of interest from all of you, and you've really made us think.

If there's one thing, and there's many things that I'll take away, but the biggest point I'm going to take away is really about how we communicate better. It's always on every to-do list, how we communicate better, but there's something about more simplicity, yet more local, yet more detail but not too much detail. So, there's a sweet spot that we need to be – but the local application of communication, so you can see what's going on in your area and how that compares to the wider industry. I think how we get that sweet spot right is the biggest thing, that's what I'll be waking in the night thinking about tonight for sure. But the quality of the insight questions has been outstanding, thank you so much.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much for that really positive and very upbeat ending. I think it is a challenge because some customers won't want much detail, no detail at all; other customers have a great appetite for knowing more about what's happening across the whole region and within their locality. So, there's a real conundrum for your comms people, but also actually everybody in the business, everybody to have a role in communicating internally and externally what they're doing. But there is an appetite to have more tangible, transparent information, so I'm going to leave you with that.

So, having heard that, are there any immediate responses from our panellists or can I begin to wind up? I don't want to end this positive session without giving our panellists one last chance to have a voice, because this is your session. Community Member 6, I can see your hand?

Session transcript

Community Member 6: I'll be quick, it was just a thought on the communications. I do like a lot of detail but they're on a lot of websites, and the NHS is one in particular where as soon as you land on something, it goes number 1 symptoms? Number 2 what causes it? Number 3 prognosis? Number 4, all the rest of it, and you can even just on a phone screen, you can very quickly navigate to where you want to go to. And then it's bullet point summaries. But they make great use of links to more detail. So just picking up on what Lawrence said and other people have said, some people will just want a high-level summary, maybe national, maybe just Hampshire.

Some of us will want to drill down. I'd like the detail of how many litres, stuff like that, so maybe that's something for them to bear in mind is bullet point summaries but have links, you can quickly read it, but I will click on the links, I will be interested in reading what's happening at the River Test, but other people might not want to. So, it doesn't have to be page after page and you're just scrolling and reading it, just make use of those links, that could work, I think.

CCW Chair: Thank you, Community Member 6, that's really helpful. And I would just like to pick up a comment in the chat that Community Member 5 put there, which I think is very valuable. And she talks about how do you distinguish between improving trust, and I'd also like to add satisfaction for tonight's purposes, and improving PR? So just by improving PR you don't necessarily improve trust or satisfaction, and tonight's session was all about improving satisfaction from customers.

So, I'm going to leave you with that thought and I just want to say I am so impressed with the way everybody has discussed a number of really important issues linked to this low level of customer satisfaction amongst Southern Water community members. And the actions that have been captured live during this session will form the basis of Southern Water's formal response.

So, the next steps, much as Sam said at the beginning, a full transcript will be published on CCW's website within seven [working] days, but before that, an early draft is shared with you as participants so you can review it and raise any concerns relating to personal comments. And a list of proposed actions will be published within seven working days, and Southern, we ask you Lawrence, Tim, to publish an action plan within 28 [working] days, setting out how you're going to deliver the commitments agreed tonight. And I think some of the information, the narrative that you put around that, will be very important as well to set the context.

Customers on the panel are then asked whether the action plan reflects what was agreed, and CCW will monitor progress and report publicly on delivery. I'm really sorry that I'm going to have to hand the baton back to Rob Wilson for future Accountability [Sessions] with Southern because I'm now very invested in being part of discussions going forward, so I may put my hand up to become an observer because I think there's a lot planned, a lot to be delivered, and it's whether that will impact on satisfaction for customers. So, I am optimistic.

This whole process is designed for transparency and follow through, not just discussion, so tonight is only one step in the longer process. So again, I am going to really thank every single one of you panellists for your time, your contribution, your discussion, your respect for everybody else and for Lawrence and Tim and for myself, and support and help. And thank you so much for that input, because it just makes such a difference for us, and thank you for your engagement.

Session transcript

And a very big thank you to you, Lawrence and Tim, for having so much information at your fingertips and conveying that with passion. It makes a difference. I've sat in on two others and they weren't like this, so I'm really grateful to have had this positive experience. So may I say thank you very much indeed and go and have a lovely rest of the evening, and we're not for once sweltering in 32 degrees, which I did for my last two panels, and enjoy the rest of the week. But thank you once again. So, I will say goodbye and leave you all to sign off. And thank you again to Sam and Brad for managing all the technical and bits behind us, thank you.

[CLOSE]