Summary report

Autumn Accountability Session with Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water

As part of CCW's Water Voice programme, Accountability Sessions allow community members to challenge water company performance, question senior representatives and agree actions to enhance customer experiences and drive meaningful improvements.

Accountability Session | Monday 2nd November 2026
Report published: Wednesday 11th November

Community members questioned senior representatives about financial transparency, environmental performance, leakage, executive rewards and drought preparedness. They wanted clearer explanation of existing work, evidence of benefits and confidence that commitments would be followed through.

The Action Plan Review focused on how customer research will improve financial communications; the Performance Review on local environmental priorities, delivery and accountability. **Waste water discussions concerned Northumbrian Water, not Essex & Suffolk Water's drinking water services.**

During the Q&A, members challenged prolonged leak repairs, executive retention payments and unclear restriction information. The following pages distinguish customer requests, existing activity and undertakings made during the session.

Q1: Action Plan Review
Making financial information understandable

Members wanted research findings, clear decisions on recommendations and evidence that revised information works for customers.

The company reaffirmed its timetable and commitment to sharing findings. Requests focused on simpler explanations, useful detail, customer testing and making existing accessibility features easier to find.

Q2: Performance Review
Environmental improvements customers can track

Members wanted to know which local problems would be prioritised, when improvements would be delivered and who would be accountable.

The company explained its existing pollution-reduction plans and regulatory oversight. It agreed to make relevant information more accessible, including through localised newsletter updates.

Q&A Q3:
Leak repairs and keeping customers informed

A six-week leak repair prompted questions about company standards and changing expectations.

The company apologised, described its existing average repair target and explained prioritisation. Members sought prompt explanations when repairs are delayed, with the company accepting the need for clearer communication.

Q&A Q4:
Executive retention payments

Members questioned the justification for retention payments alongside higher bills and performance concerns.

The Chief Executive distinguished the shareholder-funded retention payment from performance bonuses. Questions about fairness remained, but no additional action or change to remuneration arrangements was identified.

Q&A Q5:
Clearer restrictions and future supplies

Members wanted clearer exemptions and more visible information about whether restrictions remained in force.

The company described ongoing winter recovery work and committed to making restriction information more prominent. Further information about a possible Suffolk reservoir was captured for follow-up.

What is the purpose of this report and what happens next?

This report records the discussion and actions raised by Water Voice community members during the Accountability Session with Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water on 2nd November 2026. The actions outlined reflect improvements that community members would like this company to make. These are community-led requests, and do not represent confirmed commitments from the company at this stage. The company will create a formal action plan by Thursday 10th December 2026, setting out its response to each action, what it intends to deliver and the proposed timescales.

This plan will be published by CCW, who will monitor progress against the company's commitments and provide monthly updates, allowing our community to track changes and to continue to hold the company to account.

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Q1: Action Plan Review

Strengthening the company's existing actions

Actions 2[1], 3[2] and 10[3] aim to explain where customers' money goes and how financial decisions are made, informed by customer research now underway...

Once the research is complete, will you publish the key findings and set out which recommendations you will implement with clear timelines for what customers will see change and give details on any recommendations not being implemented?

Context from the session:

Members welcomed the company's commitment to sharing findings from its financial-communications research. They supported simple charts and concise explanations, while recognising that some customers want access to more detail.

The discussion highlighted difficulties finding financial information, navigating the website and identifying accessibility tools. Members also wanted to understand who was participating in the research and how the company would establish that revised information was clearer. Their focus was on **making the research lead to usable improvements**, rather than completing a research exercise without explaining what customers would see change.

Regulatory and existing activity context

N02[4] and N10[4] are In progress; N03[4] is Not started, covering the financial information review and its application. Clear, accessible customer information and meaningful consumer involvement already sit within Ofwat's customer care and consumer involvement requirements[5], alongside duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled customers. The company also publishes a WCAG 2.2 AA[6] accessibility aim. The requests therefore focus on **showing how this research changes communications, demonstrating that customers can understand them and addressing practical access barriers**, rather than introducing customer engagement or accessibility for the first time.

Actions requested by community members

1A. Publish the findings and explain what will change

Share the key findings and recommendations from the financial-communications research, together with a clear response explaining:

- **Recommendations taken forward:** What will change and when customers will see the changes.
- **Recommendations not implemented:** Which suggestions will not be taken forward and why.

Build on the research and implementation commitments already recorded under **N02[4], N03[4] and N10[4]**, rather than introduce a separate review.

Requested actions continued overleaf...

[1] N02 - *Revisit "Our Finances Explained" to explore with customers how we could further enhance the information that we provide for them and ensure that this is written in plain, easy to understand, English. To include how we explain where customers money is spent and how bill increases are calculated.*

[2] N03 - *Build-in recommendations from "Our Finances Explained" research to our annual billing preparation for 2027 and beyond*

[3] N10 - *Build on existing work, and "Our Finances Explained" research to improve how financial information, investment, performance, dividends and executive reward are communicated to customers, on our website and in future annual reports*

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

[5] Core customer information guidance | Ofwat

[6] WCAG 2.2 Level AA is an international set of digital accessibility standards published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) in October 2023

Q1: Action Plan Review

Strengthening the company's existing actions

Actions 2[4], 3[4] and 10[4] aim to explain where customers' money goes and how financial decisions are made, informed by customer research now underway...

Once the research is complete, will you publish the key findings and set out which recommendations you will implement with clear timelines for what customers will see change and give details on any recommendations not being implemented?

Actions requested by community members

1B. Combine simple financial explanations with access to further detail

Use the research to develop clear language, concise explanations and understandable visuals, while retaining access to further detail for customers who want it.

Members suggested interactive charts allowing customers to explore spending categories. The company should explain which presentation improvements it will introduce; **a particular interactive format was suggested, not agreed**.

1C. Show how customer testing informs the revised approach

Use the independent research already underway to test proposed information with an appropriate cross-section of customers before finalisation.

Share enough information about participation, the approach and the findings for members to understand whose views informed the changes and what the testing showed about clarity and usefulness. **The request is to demonstrate how existing research informs delivery, not automatically commission another exercise.**

1D. Make financial information and accessibility features easier to find

Address the difficulties members described in finding and navigating financial information.

Make existing accessibility features more visible and explain any further changes proposed following customer feedback. Distinguish **better signposting of current provision** from changes needed to address practical barriers, rather than present accessibility as an entirely new service.

Company response and follow-up

The company committed to sharing the research findings and explaining the recommendations taken forward. It reaffirmed the existing timetable and described testing alternative presentations to inform billing communications from February onwards.

The Chief Executive said the published research would include information about participants and that professional agencies would determine the appropriate research approach. She also explained that website navigation was already within the research and that accessibility tools and external accreditation already existed.

The company considered the captured proposals feasible and said it could explore the interactive-chart suggestion through the research. **No fixed sample size, six-week publication deadline or specific interactive feature was agreed.** The formal response should identify what the existing programme will deliver and any additional improvements arising from the discussion.

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

Q2: Performance Review

Challenging the company's performance and service delivery

Northumbrian Water's environmental performance fell to a 2-star Environmental Performance Assessment in 2024...

Over the next 12 months, which problems and locations will you prioritise, who will be accountable for delivering measurable improvements and what actions will be taken if progress starts to fall behind?

Context from the session:

Members wanted to connect the company's environmental performance with local improvements they could recognise. The company described reductions in storm-overflow spills, improvements in coastal bathing-water classifications and investment in network management.

Members welcomed more information but continued to ask why the environmental rating was disappointing, which locations would receive attention and when benefits would become visible. A reported coastal incident illustrated difficulties understanding warnings and the company's response. Discussion also explored river habitats, fish stocks and comparisons with other providers, with members wanting **practical outcomes and accountability alongside clearer communications**.

Regulatory and existing activity context

N07[4] and N08[4] remain In progress, while existing delivered actions cover investment information and newsletters. Pollution reduction also sits within legal duties, environmental requirements and existing regulatory commitments. Northumbrian Water's statutory Pollution Incident Reduction Plan[7] already sets out measures, expected effects and delivery timings, alongside separate enforcement undertakings.

The requests should therefore **make the relevant local priorities, outcomes and delivery responsibilities clear and open to scrutiny from customers**. Any additional or accelerated work should be distinguished from delivery already required.

Actions requested by community members

2A. Explain environmental performance

Provide an accessible explanation of the environmental rating discussed, including the areas falling short and the work intended to improve them.

Set this alongside the improvements described during the session. Keep **pollution incidents, storm-overflow spills and bathing-water classifications distinct**, so customers can understand improvements and weaknesses without confusing different measures.

2B. Identify near-term priorities, delivery responsibilities and expected improvements

Show how the existing environmental programme will address priority problems and locations over the **next 12 months**, including:

- **Work and timescales:** The problems being addressed, planned interventions and expected delivery.
- **Expected improvement:** The measurable difference the work is intended to make.
- **Accountability:** Who is responsible and what action will follow if progress falls behind.

Use the statutory Pollution Incident Reduction Plan[7] and other existing regulatory delivery commitments as the basis for this explanation.

Distinguish existing regulatory commitments from any new or accelerated environmental commitments resulting from Accountability Sessions. Members sought both a clearer account of the programme and evidence that it delivers - not another plan in place of action.

Requested actions continued overleaf...

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

[7] Pollution Incident Reduction Plan | Northumbrian Water Group

Q2: Performance Review

Challenging the company's performance and service delivery

Northumbrian Water's environmental performance fell to a 2-star Environmental Performance Assessment in 2024...

Over the next 12 months, which problems and locations will you prioritise, who will be accountable for delivering measurable improvements and what actions will be taken if progress starts to fall behind?

Actions requested by community members

2C. Bring local environmental plans and progress to customers

Use existing communication channels to make local schemes, river protection and environmental investment easier to understand without relying solely on customers finding technical reports online.

Members suggested bills, regional newsletters and straightforward visual information showing what work is happening, its intended benefits and how it relates to investment and bill increases. Build on the channels already introduced, rather than record another newsletter or website as a new deliverable.

2D. Follow up the discussion about river health

Share the further information offered during the session about investment in, and monitoring of rivers, helping members understand the differing accounts presented.

Respond to the suggestion of working with local fish farms on ecological improvement. **No new partnership, restocking programme or numerical fish-stock target was agreed.**

Company response and follow-up

The Chief Executive explained that the company is legally required to publish a Pollution Incident Reduction Plan[7] covering measures, locations, timings and expected effects. She described regular Environment Agency reviews and agreed that relevant information could be shared directly with the community and through **localised newsletter updates**.

The company described existing and planned work, including network-control schemes and work concerning Cullercoats and Littlehaven. These were explanations of the current programme, not new projects agreed during the session.

The company accepted the direction of the captured requests, subject to the existing regulatory framework. Its formal response should bring together the relevant near-term priorities, expected benefits and delivery responsibilities, **identifying where existing plans already answer the requests and where further explanation or action is needed**.

The Chief Executive disputed the account of declining fish stocks and offered further information. The report records this as a matter for follow-up, not a resolved finding about river health.

[7] Pollution Incident Reduction Plan | Northumbrian Water Group

Q&A: Q3

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

I had a leak outside my home that I reported repeatedly, but it still took six weeks to repair... What repair standard will you commit to for reported leaks? What, and how, will you communicate to customers when standards are missed?

Context from the session:

The questioner described a visible leak that took six weeks to repair despite repeated reports and changing expectations about when it would be fixed. The company apologised and explained that abnormally dry conditions throughout summer have increased failures and required prioritisation. It described additional resources, including staff moved between regions, but acknowledged that repair performance had not consistently met its expectations.

Members wanted to understand the standard being applied and, particularly, **why promised timescales changed without a clear explanation**. The discussion focused on meeting existing expectations and keeping affected customers informed when that is not possible.

Regulatory and existing activity context

Leakage reduction is already subject to regulated performance commitments[8], while the five-day average described during the session is the company's own repair target - not a universal statutory deadline. Separate customer-service standards apply where relevant, and Ofwat's Customer focused licence condition[9] require proactive communication. The request concerns **clearer repair expectations and timely explanations when individual repairs are delayed**, rather than creating a new general communication duty or five-day guarantee.

Action requested by community members

3A. Work to the existing average repair target and explain delays

Work to the company's existing average leak-repair target and make clear how individual repairs are prioritised.

Where an expected repair date changes or a repair remains unresolved, explain the reason and next steps promptly to affected customers. Members wanted information reflecting the current position, particularly where earlier expectations had changed.

General leakage updates should support, not replace, communication about the reported problem. The average target should not be presented as a maximum repair time applying to every leak.

Company response and follow-up

The company apologised for the questioner's experience and described its existing target of repairing leaks **within five days on average**. It explained prioritisation by factors including water lost, the importance of the supply and the complexity of the work, alongside pressures caused by dry conditions.

The company accepted the need for clearer communication and described existing infographics and opportunities to share further information through newsletters and the community.

No new universal five-day repair guarantee or action specific penalty was agreed. The formal response should explain how customers will receive clearer expectations and updates when repairs are delayed, rather than treat general performance information as sufficient.

[8] Ofwat | Supply and Standards - Leakage

[9] Ofwat | Customer Focused Licence Condition

Q&A: Q4

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

Reportedly, between 2024 and 2029 you will receive an annual retention payment, separate from your salary and not linked to performance conditions...
How are you going above and beyond 'business as usual' to justify this significant additional payment each year?

Context from the session:

Members questioned the justification for an additional retention payment when customers face higher bills and areas of performance require improvement. The Chief Executive explained that the payment was a shareholder decision intended to retain her services and distinguished it from salary and performance bonuses.

Follow-up questions explored bonus restrictions, stretching performance measures and how remuneration is benchmarked. Some members acknowledged the explanation, while concerns about the fairness and scale of executive pay remained. **The discussion did not produce a request for a specific new action or a change to remuneration arrangements.**

Regulatory and existing activity context

N10[4] remains In progress and covers clearer communication about executive reward. Remuneration is also subject to existing disclosure requirements and Ofwat's rules on performance-related pay[10]. Whether a payment is permitted, who funds it and how a retention arrangement is justified are distinct issues.

The company's explanation is recorded here **without treating it as an independent assessment of regulatory compliance**. No new payment condition or remuneration-policy change was agreed.

Company response

The Chief Executive said the retention payment was a shareholder decision intended to retain her services, funded by shareholders rather than customer bills. She distinguished it from salary and performance bonuses and said it was not intended to circumvent restrictions on bonuses.

She described performance-bonus measures as reflecting customer priorities and stretching beyond routine regulatory requirements. **Those conditions were discussed in relation to bonuses, not as conditions attached to the retention payment.**

The company also explained the use of remuneration comparisons when setting pay. Some members acknowledged the explanation, while concerns about fairness and the scale of payments remained.

Additional actions requested by community members

No additional action or change to remuneration arrangements was requested or agreed. Relevant financial communication improvements remain covered by Q1 and the existing **N10[4]** commitment.

The company's explanation should remain attributed to it; **the session did not establish an independent finding about regulatory compliance**.

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions
[10] Ofwat | Remuneration and Governance Rules

Q&A: Q5

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

I found the hosepipe restrictions confusing and only later realised that I was exempt...

After this summer's hosepipe restrictions, what will you put in place before summer 2027 to reduce the risk of another ban, and how will you make exemptions clearer for customers?

Context from the session:

The questioner explained that uncertainty about exemptions had made the restrictions difficult to understand. The company acknowledged the learning from implementing restrictions and described its existing questions-and-answers information, customer service support and coordination with drought management partners.

It explained that work to replenish reservoirs and reduce leakage and consumption would continue through winter into spring. The questioner indicated that the answer addressed their question.

Further discussion identified difficulty finding out whether restrictions remained in force, the need for an accessible indication of likely duration and interest in longer-term supply proposals.

Regulatory and existing activity context

Drought preparedness and longer-term supply planning are already covered by statutory drought[11] and water resource planning requirements[12]. Restrictions operate within an established legal framework, alongside customer-information and accessibility duties. **N04[4] and N05[4] already cover newsletters and printed copies.**

The additional request is to make the applicable rules, exemptions, current status and likely changes easier for customers to understand. Further information about the Suffolk reservoir should explain the existing proposal, not imply that a new infrastructure commitment or delivery date was agreed.

Requests and follow-up identified during the discussion

5A. Make restriction rules, exemptions and likely duration easier to understand

Build on existing restriction information and communication arrangements to make clear:

- **Who is affected:** Where restrictions apply and which exemptions customers may be able to use.
- **Current position:** Whether restrictions remain in force and the best available indication of when they might be lifted.
- **Accessible information:** Make the information prominent and understandable through the website, newsletters and other appropriate channels.

Explain uncertainty where timing depends on rainfall and recovery. A visual presentation may help, but **should not suggest a fixed countdown where the company cannot reliably give one**.

5B. Provide further information about the possible Suffolk reservoir

Provide further information about the possible Suffolk reservoir, explaining the proposal's current position and intended role in meeting future demand.

This follow-up was identified in the facilitator's closing action capture. Keep it distinct from the company's ongoing winter recovery work: **no new-reservoir delivery date or commitment to make it available before summer 2027 was agreed**.

Continued overleaf...

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

[11] DEFRA | Water company drought plan guideline - 2025

[12] Ofwat | Water resources planning guideline

Q&A: Q5

Further questions about the company's services and accountability

I found the hosepipe restrictions confusing and only later realised that I was exempt...

After this summer's hosepipe restrictions, what will you put in place before summer 2027 to reduce the risk of another ban, and how will you make exemptions clearer for customers?

Company response and follow-up

The company explained that drought management would continue through winter, seeking to maximise reservoir recovery while reducing leakage and consumption. It described existing reservoir transfers and longer-term options, including potential water reuse in Essex and a possible new reservoir in Suffolk.

The questioner indicated that the response addressed their question. A subsequent contribution identified difficulty finding whether restrictions were still in force. The Chief Executive **explicitly agreed to make that information more prominent through newsletters, the website and social media**.

February or March 2027 was given as an indicative possibility for lifting restrictions, dependent on weather - not a guaranteed date. The company did not agree a precise countdown.

Further information about the Suffolk proposal was captured for follow-up, but its format and delivery date were not established. **The discussion did not create a new drought planning programme or a guarantee against restrictions the following summer.**

Existing Action Overview

Existing Action	Action Statement
N01	*Review how investment stories, Local Action events and community activity are promoted, and gather customer feedback on Community Hubs.*
N02	*Revisit "Our Finances Explained" to explore with customers how we could further enhance the information that we provide for them and ensure that this is written in plain, easy to understand, English. To include how we explain where customers money is spent and how bill increases are calculated.*
N03	*Build-in recommendations from "Our Finances Explained" research to our annual billing preparation for 2027 and beyond*
N04	*Create and share a quarterly newsletter across all three operating regions to provide customers with regular updates.*
N05	*Make printed copies of quarterly newsletters available at events and engagement sessions, such as with our Customer Heroes and at our Local Action and wider stakeholder events.*
N07	*Review whether there is an opportunity for more information on all pollution events to be added to the website, and / or if there is more we could share to help customers understand the information shared and published by the EA, which we will continue to link and reference so there is a single version of information shared with customers*
N08	*Review where and how to provide more plain-English information on storm overflows, pollution terminology and responsibilities on the website during 2026.*
N09	*Include appropriate coverage of wastewater issues in the new quarterly company newsletter shared across all operating regions.*
N10	*Build on existing work, and "Our Finances Explained" research to improve how financial information, investment, performance, dividends and executive reward are communicated to customers, on our website and in future annual reports*

Attendance list

Heidi Mottram	Chief Executive Officer Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water
Andrew Beaver	Regulation and Assurance Director Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water
Stephen Bond	Head of Wastewater Compliance & Performance Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water
Katie Davis	Head of Water Service Planning Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water
Clare Glen	Session Lead Facilitator Qualitative Research Director, Taylor McKenzie Research
Hilary Florek	Session Chair Board Member, Consumer Council for Water
10 x Community Members	Water Voice Community Members Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water Community

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Good evening, everyone, and thank you for joining us. My name's Hilary Florek and I'll be chairing tonight's discussion. I'm a board member at CCW. Tonight's session is part of our Water Voice programme and the purpose of Water Voice is simple but important, to give customers a stronger, more direct voice in how Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water performs, communicates and improves.

This session is about accountability. It's an opportunity for community members to question senior leaders from Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water directly about the issues that matter most, what needs to improve and what will change as a result of this discussion. Please note that Northumbrian Water does not provide wastewater services to Essex & Suffolk Water customers. Any points about wastewater services therefore apply only to Northumbrian Water customers.

This is not a complaints hearing, and it is not a technical inquiry. It's a structured, customer-led conversation, focusing on accountability, learning and agreeing clear, practical actions. The topics we'll cover tonight have not been chosen by the company, they have been shaped by community members through the pre-task briefing session, Spotlight research and wider Water Voice discussion, so this is your agenda.

I want to set a clear tone at the outset; we expect this to be a respectful but challenging discussion. Community members should feel able to speak openly and honestly about their experiences and expectations. Equally, we expect clear and transparent responses from Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water's Senior Team. When you're not speaking, please keep your microphone muted to avoid any background noise and playback for other people.

The session is being fully transcribed, and the agreed outcomes will be published. Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water will also be expected to publish an action plan responding to the commitments made. That transparency is a key part of what makes this process meaningful. In terms of ground rules, we'll take one person at a time, keep contributions focused and concentrate on forward-looking actions, what will change, by when and how customers will know.

I'd now like to briefly introduce those joining us this evening. First, our independent facilitator from Taylor McKenzie Research, Clare Glen, who will guide the customer discussion and assure all the voices are heard.

Representing Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water this evening we have Heidi Mottram, the CEO, Andrew Beaver, Stephen Bond and Katie Davis, so thank you very much to all of you for joining.

I'm going to hand over to Clare now who's going to take us into the first session, and I'll rejoin you a little bit later, okay, thank you.

TMcK Facilitator: Brilliant, thank you so much, Hilary. Thank you everyone for joining and for getting into the session on time, which is brilliant. Just before we begin, I just wanted to briefly explain how the names will be used on the transcripts and how that will be handled.

In the room you'll see this evening we're just using first names, and in the published transcript and report, customer names will be anonymised. So, after the session, community members will have the opportunity to flag anything personal that they would prefer to be removed from the transcript or further anonymise before the transcript is published.

The purpose of the transcript is to accurately reflect the discussion and actions we've agreed, and it's not designed to single out anyone in particular. There are three main parts to tonight's session, so it runs in a very similar format as we've talked about in the briefing session.

First of all, we'll review parts of the action plan and challenge Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water on the actions or actions the community agreed needed to be strengthened.

Secondly, we will ask one new performance or challenge question, and that's been developed from the issue that the community members prioritised during the briefing session. And thirdly, we'll move on to a shorter sort of quickfire Q&A where the community members will ask additional questions prioritised during the briefing session. For each part of the first two questions, we'll use the same accountability cycle, so the community member who we've agreed to ask questions will ask the question, and Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water will have approximately five minutes to respond, and I'll put up a little timer, so that we can keep on track.

Community members will respond to that response and identify what's clear, what's missing and what needs to be strengthened from what they've heard. In the background we'll create a live document and that will capture the specific actions and outcomes that should form part of the Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water's follow-up action plan.

Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water will then have a short opportunity to explain if any proposed action is not feasible and why. Then during the Q&A, we will use a lighter version of that process, so the nominated community member will ask the question, and the company will respond. And whoever's asked the question can respond, the water company can follow-up and then additional questions or commitments can be followed up by the community. Any additional commitments that we capture within that Q&A will also be captured live on that same document.

So, lots of smiling faces at me, so I'd love to get started and just to kick off, I'd love to get a round of introductions, brief introductions, so if everyone could just tell me your name and where you're based or what area you live in?

Community Member 1: Hi there, I'm Community Member 1, I live in Newbrough in Northumberland.

Community Member 2: Hi, my name is Community Member 2, I live in Stockton-on-Tees in the North East.

Community Member 3: Hi, I'm Community Member 3, I live on Norfolk/Suffolk border, which is all up Bradwell, near Great Yarmouth.

Community Member 4: Hello, I'm Community Member 4 and I live in the Essex, East London borders.

Community Member 5: Hi everyone, I'm Community Member 5, I live in Grays in Essex.

Community Member 6: Hi, Community Member 6 and I live in Romford, which is East London.

Community Member 7: Hello, my name's Community Member 7, I live in the North East of England in Newcastle.

Community Member 8: Hi everyone, I'm Community Member 8 and I live in Romford, East London.

Community Member 9: Hiya, I'm Community Member 9, I'm from the North East, from Newcastle as well.

Community Member 10: Hi, I'm Community Member 10, I live in Beccles, which is in Suffolk, which is quite close to the Norfolk and Suffolk border.

TMcK Facilitator: Brilliant, that just gives us a bit of a picture of where everyone is in the country, given the spread of what we're covering tonight, so thanks very much. I'm just going to hand back to Hilary.

CCW Chair: Thanks very much and nice for everyone to introduce themselves, thank you. We're now going to begin with our first question, which looks back at the commitments already made in Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water's action plan. During the briefing session, community members agreed that how and when Actions 2[4], 3[4] and 10[4] will help people understand where their money goes needed further scrutiny. I'm going to ask Community Member 1, to ask the agreed question.

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

Session transcript

Community Member 1: Once the research is complete, will you publish the key findings and set out which recommendations you will implement with clear timelines for what customers will see change and give details on any recommendations not being implemented?

TMcK Facilitator: I just wonder whether you could read the first part as well, Community Member 1, would that be all right?

Community Member 1: Actions 2[4], 3[4] and 10[4] are intended to make it easier for customers to understand where their money goes and how financial decisions are made. Northumbrian Water Group is now carrying out customer research to improve this information. In our briefing session, members wanted the findings to be shared, and clarity on which recommendations will be taken forward and when customers will see changes and evidence that the revised information genuinely improves customer understanding.

CCW Chair: Thanks very much Community Member 1, that is great. Okay, so in responding it would be helpful if Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water could be as specific as possible, ensuring your response is to the point and if possible free from jargon. And to the community members, can you listen carefully, make a note of anything that feels unclear, incomplete or not strong enough.

Now, I understand that I think it's Heidi and Andrew who will be answering this, forgive me if I've got that wrong?

Heidi Mottram: No, that's right.

CCW Chair: Okay, thank you, Heidi.

Heidi Mottram: Shall we kick off?

CCW Chair: Please.

TMcK Facilitator: I'm going to put a timer up for you, Heidi, just to help you.

Heidi Mottram: Yeah, no bother at all. Thank you for the question from the community and for Community Member 1 for making that clear for us. I can answer your question incredibly simply, that of course we will publish the key findings and tell you what recommendations that we will implement and why. But to give you a bit of context about what's been going on since the last time we had the conversation with the group, so we could wind the clock back actually quite a number of years because Northumbrian Water, Essex & Suffolk Water have been publishing our financial information for customers for quite a number of years now, probably well over a decade.

When we initially did that, we did that with the help of customers, and we talked to them about how best to do that. If you've looked at some of this stuff, which you may well have done because it's on your bill, you'll have typically seen one thing that customers really like, which is a pie chart which says how much your bill costs a day and what that money goes on. So, you might have already seen something like that.

And then you can carry on past that on the website, if you like, and see some extra information. So, this is something that customers originally devised and I think it's generally had a lot of support.

When we ask people if this is good, they tend to give us about 80 to 85% support, so I think that's a positive thing. But as a result of the conversation that we had in July, the community asked us if we would revisit this and have another conversation with people to see if it still worked for everybody and if anything could be done better. So that's what we've been doing since with an independent research company, having that conversation and seeing what else could be done.

We haven't finished that yet, but as I said at the beginning, we're very happy to share that with you once it's completed because that will then lead us into the second action, which is how will we communicate that when we go into bills in February? But largely what's coming back from that so far, I can tell you is that customers still like the pie chart because it's a really simple way of seeing the different elements of what the money goes on.

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

But they probably find some of the information that we've got underneath there a little bit long-winded, so we're working with them to see if we can make it more punchy in some way or more understandable.

They've given us some ideas about how we might do that, so we've gone away to give them some – having listened to what that kind of thinking is, we're coming up with some visualisations of a number of different ways about how that could be done, so that we can see which way that they would prefer. But this is largely about, I think, I'm fairly certain the pie chart is going to stay because everybody likes that, but it's how we carry on elaborating a little bit on that and how best to do that without it becoming too long-winded.

So, they'll get a few options, the groups, they'll probably settle on an option and think tell us why that option is the preferred one, and that's where we'll be happy to share that with the community about what's coming through. But that's, from what I've seen of the group so far, that's what I'm expecting to happen by the time we get to the end of the year, which is when we said we would do this by, and we absolutely will meet that timescale, that's no bother. So hopefully that's helpful?

CCW Chair: Did Andrew want to add anything else at this point, or are you just going to respond when we get further discussion, is that right?

Andrew Beaver: I don't think I've got anything useful to add to the question.

CCW Chair: Thank you very much.

Heidi Mottram: I'll be keen to know what the members think and whether or not they're happy?

CCW Chair: Absolutely, well thank you very much indeed. So, if we can now pause, and if members can actually now come back and test whether what you've heard explains some of the concerns that we were talking about. If you'd like to come into the discussion, Clare, I think you're going to lead this part of the discussion?

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, thanks, Hilary. So just opening up to the community, I probably want to go back to Community Member 1 first, but I'd love to just hear everyone's thoughts and opinions on what you've heard. As you listen to each other talking, it would be great to understand, do you understand what's changed, what's moved forward from the last time we spoke? Do you understand what still needs to happen, do you know when it will happen, have you got a clear idea of the timeframes, and does this go far enough?

Is there anything else you would like to see developed from this question?

I'd also like to hear if you felt that everything you heard from Hilary[13] there was clear and concrete, if there were any other uncertainties or anything missing there and what specific commitments you feel would need strengthened? If you find yourself wanting to ask another question, which is often the case, let's try and turn that into what do I still need it to do or what do I still need to hear within this commitment, what else would you like included?

Hopefully, that's clear on what we want to discuss for the next 10-15 minutes, so I'll hand back over. I don't know if Community Member 1, you want to pick up on anything you've heard there, or we can open it out further to the community?

Community Member 1: Yeah, well I think, I mean I haven't been in business myself, the most important thing for any information, documents, whatever which has been prepared is simplicity. Because if people don't see simplicity in something they will get bored after reading the first paragraph or looking at the first pretty picture, so that I think is the most important thing. Also, the fact that from what Heidi was saying, there's a team there that are working on this and they are evolving it to find the best way of presenting it, so that's my comeback on that.

TMcK Facilitator: Is there anything in particular you would like to see being developed in terms of how it's explained, when you say it's "simple", is there anything in particular that would help you?

[13] "Hilary" accidentally referenced by the session facilitator. "Heidi" should have been stated.

Session transcript

Community Member 1: Graphs and charts are often the best way because people can look at something and they can say, "Oh, that's what's happening there, that's where my money's going there, that's this, that and tother." They speak a thousand words just by the presentation, rather than having half a dozen paragraphs on the subject. So yeah, that's it from me, I think.

TMcK Facilitator: Can I open it up to the rest of the community, how did everyone feel with that response and what other commitments or actions would you like to see coming from this?

Community Member 6: I'd like to say something. I do agree with what you said about pie charts and I think they're very good for a simplistic view – for the majority of people. But I found it very hard to get financial reports on your website, I found it took me ages to find it. I was wondering, if when you're doing a pie chart on digital format, if you could not have it so when you hover over a section it gives you a breakdown of what that section is? Because sometimes I found the pie charts, just for me anyhow, too simplistic.

TMcK Facilitator: Some action around building the detail behind, so the usability piece in terms of making it easier for you to access that information and that detail when you want to, Community Member 6?

Community Member 6: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Anybody else got any thoughts on what Heidi said or any other builds or actions you'd like to come in on here?

Community Member 3: I'd just like to say I think pie charts are a good idea because I know it is just a snapshot and it's just quick information, but I think pie charts are just simple to view and with colours, different colours, it just gives you an instant idea. Then obviously, I don't know, maybe click on something and it gives you more information inside it. But obviously, it's still a work in progress, I appreciate that, but for me, something like that it just works quite easily.

TMcK Facilitator: Is there anything from what you've heard Community Member 3, that you would like to see develop from this action going forward?

Community Member 3: I think like Community Member 6 said, more information, more context, but obviously it is a work in progress anyway at the moment to see what members want and the public needs. But I think at the moment it's currently working okay.

TMcK Facilitator: Who else would like to come in there?

Community Member 2: You've said that you've got a customer base that's testing these, what type of sample range and how are you going to prove that it actually is clearer, what type of statistics or sample group to show that it's worked?

TMcK Facilitator: Okay. So, developing an action around testing those revisions with a customer sample, so we want to find out more about how they're responding to those changes and if those changes have …?

Community Member 2: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Does anyone else agree with Community Member 2 on that one or any other points to add on that?

Community Member 1: No, I think that's a good idea, so like beta testing it.

Community Member 5: Yeah, we need to know how big that sample size is, at least 1,000.

TMcK Facilitator: Any other thoughts on this one, any other commitments you would like to see? I think we talked about timelines and things on the briefing session, I wonder if you feel that's been covered?

Community Member 4: Yeah, well we're not far from the end of the year now and I think that was made clear that it will be achieved by the end of the year, unless I got that wrong? But yeah, I agree with what everybody else has said, a pie chart is basic and then we need a little bit, if we need a little bit more give us something that we can click on in clear, concise language, so that we can understand. Financial jargon for me is a bit tedious.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: When you're looking for information, how do people feel when they're looking on the website to try and find it? Are there areas where people find that easy or any areas that you want to talk about?

Community Member 10: I think their website is quite confusing, you can't really find anything in particular. It's kind of like as if it's hidden, it's not like really accessible for everyone to just be able to click on and think, "Oh, well that's where I find that information."

CCW Chair: It takes too long Community Member 10, to actually get to what you want, is that what you're saying?

Community Member 10: Yeah, to find what you want you're going through various other pages to get to where you need to be, it's like too many clicks, it's not like an instant thing when people want to check things quickly or want to look into something quickly, they don't want to be having to go through loads of different pages.

CCW Chair: Is that something you'd like to see the research look at too, how do people access information?

Community Member 10: Yeah. Also, my other thing would be that so myself, I'm partially sighted, so sometimes information on a website, I can't always read all that information anyway in one go. So maybe having it so it's accessible in the fact that you could audio it because some websites now have done it, so it reads it to you.

CCW Chair: So, accessibility information?

Community Member 10: Yeah.

CCW Chair: How people are able – because people have different needs, don't they?

Community Member 10: Yeah.

CCW Chair: Okay.

TMcK Facilitator: Is there anything else that you find more sort of challenging in this area in terms of navigating the information that you want or any other thoughts on what you would like to see on the website?

Community Member 9: I think more use of AI, so if you are stuck and you are finding the navigation really hard, then you should have something that's [inaudible 00:25:04] and it should be able to then point you in the right direction. So instead of going from click to click, and finding the website is such a large website because it's a massive business, the AI is literally there to interact, and it will allow you to gather the data.

If you've got an account with them being able to save that data. So, if someone's trying to track something in the knowledge base, the AI should be there on the website. It would be a great help to have it at the front, so it's helping all types of customers, from people that are partially sighted to old customers who aren't IT literate. People should be able to interact at every technical level.

TMcK Facilitator: How do you feel that they should share that information on those recommendations not being implemented? So obviously they're going to, the company are going to get some recommendations on what should be put forward in terms of building on that, Our Finances Explained research. There are things that are going to be recommended as actions for the water company to do. How will we share that information, is that important that they share the recommendations that aren't being put forward as well as what they are being recommended?

Community Member 1: Very much so yeah because they will put forward and I mean not everybody is going to agree with what's been asked for. But yeah, justification as to, not justification but the reasons why those points are not being looked at.

TMcK Facilitator: Are we happy with the end change timeframe, is there any other timeframes we would like to put into this commitment or are we happy with the timeframe that has been committed or would we like to see any others? I think we talked about it in the briefing session maybe the possibility of different milestones being set?

Session transcript

Community Member 8: Can I answer this?

TMcK Facilitator: Yes, please jump in.

Community Member 8: I actually like the idea of milestones just to see where you're at. It just gives you time to reflect on if you're going in the right direction with those, with the action plan. Because it could be things that have changed and it could be mitigating circumstances where you'd have to reassess or if there's a new risk that came along.

TMcK Facilitator: In terms of the timings on the action plan, on the log it looks like the research will be completed by the end of December with updates to the website by the end of February. I wonder if that's a bit different to what we've heard tonight? No? Heidi is shaking her head, yeah, that's correct, okay. Are there any other areas of confusion, concern that you want to clarify?

Heidi Mottram: I mean just on timescales Clare, we do put an update every month on the action tracker, so community can see where we are, but those timescales are the ones that we'll definitely meet.

TMcK Facilitator: Okay.

CCW Chair: And was that something everyone was aware of that there was a monthly update, do people realise that?

Community Member 1: No, I don't think so.

Community Member 5: No, I was not made aware, no.

Heidi Mottram: We wouldn't be making you aware of that; I guess CC Water would be making you aware of that in the community. But we're asked to give an update on a monthly basis on all our actions, so we do. How do CC Water share that with the community because we don't have that direct link with you? Does anybody know, it sounds like …? (overtalking)

Community Member 7: No.

TMcK Facilitator: I think there's updates provided in the community.

CCW Chair: And I think where we're getting confused is the sort of the public platform, Heidi, even to customers and I think possibly we're talking at slightly cross purposes. So obviously I think you're talking about updates between your people and CCW. I think this was sort of a broader sense of how progress is communicated.

But what you're saying is, you're giving the date of the end of the year and then you're committing to the website being updated by February, so those are the sort of timelines that the community we are talking to now should be aware of, is that right, Heidi?

Heidi Mottram: Yes, because obviously we're working with the community on this action plan, not with the wider customer base, we're working with you on it and CC Water are asking us. This particular action is one we're talking about, but there's some other ones as well. So, we are giving a monthly update to CC Water, so thought they can share that with you, that's what's happening.

CCW Chair: Yeah, there are various channels that happens through, but I think we just need to keep focused on this particular point. Okay, that's really helpful.

TMcK Facilitator: Great, so in the meantime as we've been chatting, we've captured some of the actions that we've been talking about, so I'd love to share that and the wording. As you can see, we're typing as we speak, so it's very much a live working document. Some of these actions will build on those existing commitments and others may strengthen and combine with what we already know.

Session transcript

I'm going to read through each of the actions here, but you'll see this is the first time everyone's seen this format, but you'll see that we've got a column of what Heidi's explained, some of the highlights there in terms of what's already happened, some commitments to what's going to happen in the future including publishing the key findings once the engagement piece is complete. Dedicated to meeting the stated timescales against those actions, testing out different methods for communicating where the bill money goes and customer groups to give feedback on different visualisations. Updating financial information will feed into the bill communication styles from February onwards.

That's what has been talked about by Heidi, and in terms of any further commitments, you'll see on the right-hand, this column here.

[A] Make sure that the key findings are presented in a straightforward, easy to read format.

We talked about using pie charts and graphs and visuals to help with that understanding. Secondly to provide interactive visuals, so pie charts enabling further breakdown for customers interested in more granular detail and background context.

[B] Ensure the documents and outputs are tested across a representative cross-section of customers before publication; we'd love to see some information around that.

[C] Expand the scope of existing consumer research to include user experience with the company website to seek to improve how easy it is to navigate that website and the simplicity of that.

[D] To improve the experience of the website for those with accessibility needs, so audio elements for those perhaps that have visual impairments.

Some of the actions we've just captured there, I just wanted to read those out to see whether it's clear, whether you feel it's specific enough, whether the timeframes are what you would like to see there, and whether they're meaningful changes that you would like to see happen. I suppose I'd like to now go back to the community to see what you think and review these. Does it capture everything that we've discussed, is there anything you'd like to change, adapt or expand or reword on that? Then we'll go back to Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water for final comment.

Community Member 1: Can I ask a question of Heidi, please?

TMcK Facilitator: Could we review these Community Member 1 and then come back to that?

Community Member 1: It was to do with this.

TMcK Facilitator: Oh, I see, right, okay, please do then?

Community Member 1: What's your view on AI incorporation on your website for helping, well, navigation but also helping for presentation?

Heidi Mottram: We already have some of those uses in, I was obviously waiting until Clare gave me the floor. Some of the things that you're talking about we already have and there are some things that we're almost required to have for example, around accessibility and some of the things that community members were talking about there, so I can share some of that.

Some of the things that were being talked about in terms of AI do exist within the website as well, so I was going to come back and talk about some of those things. But you're also suggesting ideas that the group that we've been talking to so far haven't come up with, so we can feed that in to research as well. I think that's a good thing that the community has provided some extra ideas that could be talked about.

When we're doing market research, because you asked about the credibility of market research, we have to work with professionally accredited market research companies and they tell us what the right sample sizes are and how to do it properly to comply with market research standards, we don't decide that. Obviously, it has to be done properly and they're the experts on how to do it, so we follow their guidance.

All of that will get done absolutely properly and we've committed to giving you all the research back, you'll see who it's been tested with and how many people and what the demographics are and all of that because market research companies always give us that as part of their report, so you can see it, you'll see everything.

I would also say typically we don't disagree with the research because the point of doing it is to try to do it the way that customers want it done.

We largely do agree with what the customers want us to do in the end because that was the whole point of doing it in the first place. You'll see that, you'll see that, I mean there's sometimes an element that we can't please all of the people all of the time, but you'll go with the majority of people, that's normally how these things work.

That's what I would expect to happen as we go along. I'm conscious that we do have some features on the website, it feels like the community members have not realised we've got there, so you can get the website to read out to you. We have very high levels of the latest accessibility, it meets the very highest standards, so I'm kind of thinking, "How do we make that more obvious potentially to people as well?"

All of that was going on in my head when you were all talking is that quite a lot of this we're doing, you're giving us some new ideas, some of this stuff is already there. I was listening to the point particularly about how easy it was to find things, I think that was Community Member 10 that was talking about that, and there's search functions to find things.

But part of the research that we're doing with this is how to make it as easy as possible to find things as well because our website is very geared up to the most common transactions because that's what customers want us to do typically. So, when you're going for this extra information, it sometimes takes a few moves because customers have always said they want the whole website to be dominated with the most common transactions that they do with us, and that's why it is how it is.

I've given you lots of different bits of feedback, but hopefully that was helpful? But equally listening to you was really helpful to help us shape what we're doing with the customers and giving some new ideas and thinking about the bits of feedback that you've come in with. I totally agree with you Community Member 1, simplicity is king. But I liked but Community Member 6's idea for example, about hovering over and being able to get some extra stuff. We've done things like that before for other reasons, so we could explore that and see what the research group think?

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 10, you've got your hand up, please come in?

Community Member 10: My issue with the AI thing, we're saying use more AI on the website, is that I personally don't have an issue with using AI, but a lot of people which are younger than myself, I'm not exactly old but they didn't like AI, they don't like the generation, and it actually stops people using websites or anything if they use AI because they're really conscious of obviously the amount of water it uses. So obviously in my opinion it's quite hypocritical of a water company to use AI with the amount of water that it's apparently using to generate it.

Heidi Mottram: We don't use it, if you like, as the primary source Community Member 10, but we are typically trying to design things in ways that appeal to most people, so I think that's the first thing. The second thing, I guess, on water is to give you some reassurance that in our country it's not like America, what is being done water is being very highly controlled by both the water companies and the government to make sure that the things that have gone wrong in America don't go wrong here, so hopefully I can give you a bit of reassurance there.

TMcK Facilitator: Is everybody happy? It's interesting to bring in the comment about AI, it's not captured here, I don't know whether that's something that you would like to know about on how they're using AI online or whether that's just an information point, but we don't want to create an action around it? Does anyone have any strong feelings on that?

CCW Chair: It's quite a big conversation possibly for another day, but we're very happy to have it?

Session transcript

TMcK Facilitator: How did we feel when I read those out, has that captured everything that we've talked about? Is there anything missing or anything you'd like to add to that?

Community Member 1: Nothing I can think of.

CCW Chair: It looks like people are happy, Clare.

TMcK Facilitator: Everyone's happy, yeah?

Community Member 1: Hmmm.

CCW Chair: I'll step in at this point then to say that before we finalise the actions I'm going to give Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water a brief opportunity now, if you wish, to highlight any of those commitments you think aren't feasible and explain why. And if there are constraints whether they be regulatory or financial, operational or legal, if you can just set out for us now why that might be and that will obviously be recorded as part of this session? If you'd like to come back in?

Heidi Mottram: No, not particularly, Hilary, I mean everything there sounds pretty feasible to me. The only thing I'd probably mention, which I did when I was talking a minute ago around accessibility, is that we do that with recognised bodies who give guidance on how best to approach accessibility. Our website has been accredited at the very highest levels for that. So, we don't do that in a way that is something that we would do off our own back, we work to agreed external standards on that. I think that's right because we wouldn't claim to be experts, it's important that we work with experts to help us on that to make sure we consider all different needs because they are many and varied, yeah, to get that right.

CCW Chair: So, from your perspective, Heidi, there's nothing else that's contained there that you want to challenge in any way?

Heidi Mottram: No, I don't think so, we're very happy with how this is going, I'm glad if the community are and hopefully we'll get some improvements as a result of the conversations we're having.

CCW Chair: Clare, do you want to just clarify one of the points about information flow, did you just want to clarify that? I didn't know if you wanted to clarify because I think what we can do at the end then is just go through because I know Heidi asked the question about how communication to community members happened, and I didn't know whether you wanted to clarify that or you just want to leave that until the end?

TMcK Facilitator: We can leave that until the end then.

CCW Chair: Shall we go then to the new performance issue that community members have chosen to challenge Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water on? This topic was prioritised through our pre-task and briefing session because community members remain concerned about pollution in local rivers and coastal waters and wanted measurable improvements with clear accountability. I'm going to ask Community Member 2 to ask the agreed question.

Community Member 2: Northumbrian Water's environmental performance fell to a 2-star Environment Performance Assessment in 2024 while community members continue to see and hear about storm overflows and pollution affecting local rivers and coastal waters. This is something I've experienced locally too. Following a recent pollution incident affecting our coastline, I had to check for myself whether a warning not to swim was still in place before a planned beach trip.

While Actions 7[4] and 8[4] focus on improving information about pollution and storm overflows, we want to understand what measurable improvements will actually be delivered and how progress will be held to account.

Over the next 12 months, which problems and locations will you prioritise, who will be accountable for delivering measurable improvements and what actions will be taken if progress starts to fall behind?

[4] See Slide 10 for a comprehensive overview of all referenced actions

Session transcript

CCW Chair: In responding, if you could be as specific again as possible about what's been done, what will be improved and by when, and to community members again, if you'd like to listen and make a note of anything that feels unclear or incomplete or not strong enough. I think again it will be Heidi and I think Stephen who will be answering this question, and Clare will be putting her timer up on the screen, so if we could possibly attempt to stick to five minutes that would be great. So, thank you very much, Heidi.

Heidi Mottram: Okay, so thank you very much for the question, Community Member 2. I guess I want to start by saying that our responsibilities to the environment we take incredibly seriously. It's at the very heart of what we do because we take water from the environment to treat it and give it to you as drinking water, and we really want to make sure that when we return that water having treated it, that we do that in a really high standard way as well.

So, the EPA[14] assessment is a mixture of different things that the EA[15] are looking for, but it gets amalgamated into a star rating, and we were not happy to be at that level. We were very close to their higher levels, but we just slipped into a couple of lower categories, and we have to now get back off that to improve because it's not where we would like to be, but we work incredibly hard.

Now, you were talking about things, for example, to do with bathing waters, so one of the things that we're really proud of in the North East, there are a lot of very beautiful beaches, as we all know. I'm not one of the people who swims in the sea, I'll be honest with you Community Member 2, because it's too cold, I'm a bit of a softie, but I do understand why people want to do that. Of course it's an amazing thing to do, particularly on a sunny day, so we want to make sure that our beaches are of the very highest standard and through the bathing season they are monitored and measured by the Environment Agency independently of us to give the beach ultimately a rating.

Of the 35 bathing waters that we've got in the North East, 33 of them are rated good or excellent, which is a really high standard. If you go back 20 years that would have been about 6 or 7 of them, so there has been a massive increase in quality. That's brilliant because that allows people to know that they are swimming in the sea and being safe. So, I can assure you that that is the case, okay?

We do publish information about what's going on in the environment because, particularly if it's been raining very heavily, there can be some impact to the beach but it's typically when it's raining really heavily and not at other times, so that's normally what's going on. We are working hard to reduce those storm overflows, so we were really pleased, we averaged that out over the course of the year, so in 2024 the average spills per storm overflow in our operating area was about 26 in the course of the year, and in 2025 that went down to 17.7. So that's a massive decrease and we're really pleased with that. Obviously, in 2026 we'll be looking to push that down further if we possibly can and we're on a trajectory to ultimately get that down to 10 or below for all of them and on beaches for 2 or below, that's the target that the government's set us to get to by 2050.

We're very keen to try to get to that sooner than that with the work that we're doing, but it does take an awful lot of work because really the big challenge is a function of these very high downpours of rain. We have a combined system in the UK, so all of that runs off the roads and the fields and everywhere and goes down into the sewer system and that's the thing that causes the problem.

What we really need to do is to try and keep that water out, but the problem is that if it stays out, it's got to go somewhere because if it doesn't go down the sewer, we don't want it running down your road or over land or any of those things. We've got to do this responsibly and with deep thought to make sure that it's all done properly and we don't just go, "Well, it's not our water so somebody else can have it," because you wouldn't want us to do that, right?

So, this is what we're working on, and all these other things in the EPA as well, so we're very proud, for example, we haven't had serious pollutions in the Northumbrian Water area for many years, whereas you hear these frequently in Thames Water's area. This is what tends to make people think this is going on everywhere, but it isn't in the North East, we work incredibly hard to stop that happening and to make sure that we protect our rivers and we protect our beaches.

[14] EPA – Environmental Performance Assessment
[15] EA – Environment Agency

So, there is a huge amount of work going on, partly this is why your bills have gone up recently because a lot of money has been spent to protect the environment and to hold on to that water in a myriad of different ways to make sure that we don't let it go into the sea in an uncontrolled or untreated way. That's what we're working on at the moment to get that better. It's going well, but it needs to go further and that's what we'll be doing in the next few years.

I hope that answers the question, there are a number of different elements to it, it can be quite a complex area, but I'm very happy to come back Community Member 2 and give you some more extra conversation, because I can see the little thing gone red, so I'll shut up. But this is an area that we work hard on, we're making very good progress on, there is more to be done at the moment, but it needs to be done in a responsible way to make sure that we don't get unintended consequences of where that water might go that it shouldn't go.

CCW Chair: Okay, if we can pause at that point and go back to the community members now. Basically, what I want you to do now is really test whether what you've heard answers your concerns. Clare, I think you're going to lead this discussion, aren't you?

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, thanks, Hilary. I'd like you to cast your minds back to what we discussed in the briefing session and compare that with what you've heard in response just now. Think about what sounded positive, what gave you confidence, is there anything that still feels unclear or a bit vague in the response? Is there anything that hasn't been addressed that you would like addressed and does what they have described go far enough for you? Most importantly, what would you now like the company to commit to off the back of what we've just heard? I'd love to go back to Community Member 2 since you asked the question, I don't know how you felt about what you heard and what the response was?

Community Member 2: Yeah, I've got a couple of notes. Obviously, it was positive that you said along the network we've got 35 bathing waters and 33 are good or excellent. You said that one of the main pollution issues was the heavy rainfall and then getting into the sewers and things, is that the only issue, is that the main issue?

Heidi Mottram: That's the main issue, yes. I mean it can also happen – one of the challenges we have, for example, is with wet wipes in the system, they can cause blockages, other things can cause blockages, people put things down manholes that they shouldn't. So, we can get blockages but it's really the heavy rain that typically causes the primary problem.

Then about your bill because you've commented a few times, so this is something that we have tried to do in a number of different ways. On your bill that you're getting it is explaining why bills are going up. Interestingly, for Northumbrian Water because we have been working hard to be very efficient, in the previous five years we'd put your bills down by roughly the same amount, so you've got to remember that bit.

But they are more or less coming back to where they were in 2019 because of this new investment, so you've had a down and an up in that time, but now we are doing this investment. But at the last community we got asked to do some newsletters and to try to use that as a way of communicating more things with people, so we put some stuff in there about all of this. I think we've shared that with the community as well, but that's another way.

We're always so conscious, you've very busy people, but trying to tell you this stuff when you've got so many other things going on in your life, but we try to do it in a … You know, a bit like we talked about with the research, in a high-level way, so it's not boring, a quick snapshot, particularly what's happening in your area, so there is a newsletter specifically for the Teesside because you're not bothered about what's going on necessarily in Northumberland.

So, we're doing it that way so you can read about things that are happening and likewise obviously there's one for Northumberland and one for Newcastle and Durham and so on and so forth. So, you can go and have a look at those and see what's happening in your area and what we're spending money on.

One of the things I couldn't mention, for example, before is that we've come up with a really good way of using our sewer capacity more efficiently, this is what they did in Paris. Do you remember in Paris when they were trying to protect the Seine for the Olympics?

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So, we are doing something very similar, we've done it in Newcastle and it's working really well, where we can move water around underground, so that it doesn't come out using sensors and things like that. We're now starting to do that in Marske and Redcar, which is your part of the world, and then we'll go to Berwick and then we're everywhere, so this is another really good thing that will help.

CCW Chair: I think Clare, do you want to carry on going through that?

TMcK Facilitator: I was just going to jump in here. I'd love to hear from the community members if we could and restate the question really, do you feel that this question's been answered? So, we asked over the next 12 months which problems and locations will you prioritise, who will be accountable for delivering measurable improvements and what actions will be taken if progress starts to fall behind? I just wanted to put that back to the community; do you feel that you've heard an answer to that question?

Community Member 5: No, as it pertains to London and the South East, especially Essex, no, I've not. I have a few areas I'd like to ask a few questions on?

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 5, come in please, yeah?

Community Member 5: I'd like to understand what's been done with quite a few areas like the Hanningfield Reservoir, that's down 38% for water levels. We've got a hosepipe ban for Essex.

TMcK Facilitator: Sorry Community Member 5, could we move on to the hosepipe questions later on, we are definitely going to ask a question on that, but just if there's anything specific around this particular question that we posed to Heidi about the environmental performance and is there anything specifically on that one, Community Member 5?

Community Member 5: Well yeah, regarding that, I would like further clarification on why it's gone down from 3 stars in the EPA in 2024 down to 2 stars, that being a failing of Essex & Suffolk Water?

TMcK Facilitator: Just so you know, Essex & Suffolk Water they provide a water only service, so it's actually Thames & Anglian I think that deal with the waste, so I suppose Community Member 2 is further up north, so Northumbrian Water provides the water and wastewater services to the North East, so that's the difference there. Can I throw out to anyone else, does anyone else feel that that question's been answered, or are you left with anything else you would want to know?

Community Member 6: Yeah, I'd like to say something. Basically, you've explained that you're not happy with a 2-star rating, but you've not actually told us what you did wrong to get that rating or what you're going to do to improve it in the future?

TMcK Facilitator: That's a great point Community Member 6, so what's actually been done, what are the actionable, measurable changes?

Community Member 7: You didn't mention who would be accountable as well, I know that was at the end of the question, but there was no mention of accountability.

TMcK Facilitator: What would you like to see there, Community Member 7?

Community Member 7: Just who they'd answer to if things aren't met, goals and decisions. Obviously, who would they have to answer to as to why and what's going forward how that's going to be improved and in what sort of timeframe it will be done in?

TMcK Facilitator: You're looking for more specific accountability and who's accountable for what?

Community Member 7: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: And specific timeframes?

CCW Chair: Community Member 2, you said in your question you wanted to know which problems and locations will be prioritised over the next 12 months, do you feel like you now know that?

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Community Member 2: I mean there was mention obviously of the 33 out of 35, so there's still obviously a couple of locations that need to be prioritised, so yeah. And 33 out of 35, did you say they were good or excellent, like what's got them from what they were before as well, what's made that happen?

TMcK Facilitator: Are there any others we talked about in the briefing maybe? It seems like a big task, doesn't it, but is there anything specific we would like the water company to commit to? I think we talked about maybe focusing on maybe two or three priority areas, I don't know who mentioned that in the briefing session, Community Member 1, was it yourself?

Community Member 1: Yeah, I think I mentioned them in the briefing session and the subject of the rivers, what Heidi was saying about the sea, but the subject of the rivers, I mean as Hilary knows, I live on the North Tyne as you do, and fish stocks in the Tyne have dropped dramatically over the past 10 years.

I was talking to a neighbour of mine the other day, he's a salmon fisherman, and he said, "There just is not the level of fish and the belief is a big reason for that is pollution." Wild water swimming groups, swimming in rivers and swimming in lakes, they now all, or pretty much all of the ones that I know of, they all have this absolute rule that you never put your head under the water anymore. Again, I'm guessing, I believe this is pollution issues in the waterways.

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 1, what would you like to see committed here?

Community Member 1: Well, I think the condition of the rivers is UK wide, where we live the condition of the rivers is not the best. As I say, we've got declining fish stocks, we've got people that advise, "Don't put your head under the water." What sort of improvement plans are there for reducing pollution levels in the rivers? I know it's a big issue because Heidi says you get massive downpours, you get lots of run-off from the fields, God knows what the farmers are putting on the fields that runs off into the water, but that's kind of my question.

TMcK Facilitator: So really prioritising specific areas and seeing that as a measurable outcome?

Community Member 1: Yeah, in general improving the quality of the water in the rivers.

TMcK Facilitator: Anybody else like to come in, who's not had a chance to talk tonight?

Community Member 9: I think what we said in the discussion group with regards to you know, net zero, we were talking about carbon, every other company that has a target for net zero, and I think that's the same with Northumbrian Water, we should be looking at a zero target. But if we've got the city centres and we've got other things in place, one of the things we should be focusing in on is not allowing that water to leave until it's fresh.

I think using these storm overflow drains and things like that -they should never be an option [inaudible] that's what the government should be placing Northumbrian Water and other companies having net zero. If we're looking to go up [inaudible] what is the water company going to do, why is it not the focus that this should not be at 1%, there should be somebody set with a target to really get this down to zero.

TMcK Facilitator: Anyone else like to add, who have we not heard from?

Community Member 3: I was just going to say about the timescales because no other people have mentioned it, but Heidi just said in the next few years, and given the extremities of weather that we're experiencing, going from really hot and then a downpour, which is the cause of floods, should the timescale be brought forward rather than over a number of years? What actually are the timescales?

TMcK Facilitator: We talked about in the briefing, didn't we, whether we'd want to have some priority areas or communication around priority areas and specific timeframes. I think we talked about a 12-month timeframe on the updates in the briefing session, would that be something you'd want to hear about Community Member 3?

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Community Member 3: Yeah, just more specific about how long, rather than saying a number of years - a year, two years, three years?

TMcK Facilitator: Anybody else got any other thoughts in this, any other commitments you would like to see made in this space, do we feel we've answered the question there? Over the next 12 months, which problems and locations will you prioritise, who will be accountable for delivering measurable improvements and what actions will be taken if progress starts to fall behind? Do we feel that question's been answered?

CCW Chair: I think maybe if we start to look at the actions Clare now?

TMcK Facilitator: Lots of information there from Heidi up front about what's being done already and what's going to be happening in the future, but in terms of focusing on the key actions that we want to take from tonight the first is:

[A] Clearly communicate current environmental schemes and works to customers using multiple communication channels, not just social media. Can mention this on bills, listing specific projects contributing to bill hikes.

[B] Explain why the company's EPA rating has gone down this year, what the main causes were and what is being done to fix this.

[C] Identify and communicate planned investments in priority areas with explicit timelines and named individuals accountable for their timely delivery.

CCW Chair: Was there another action around rivers, were we going to talk about that?

TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, I think Community Member 1 mentioned the rivers, what would you like to capture there Community Member 1, was there anything specific you wanted to see on that one?

CCW Chair: Is it more about what the plans are for that, what actions are being taken?

Community Member 1: Yeah, what the plans are for reducing pollution in the rivers, I mean that was the general thing.

TMcK Facilitator: Any specific intervention Community Member 1, at that point?

Community Member 1: Hmmm, yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: As there's timeframes highlighted on there, do we want to have any specific timeframes on that?

Community Member 1: I don't know, what's a reasonable timeframe?

TMcK Facilitator: I know, it's challenging.

Community Member 1: I think knowing that it's being worked on is an acceptable timeframe type of thing.

CCW Chair: It's maybe asking them to set a timeframe that they can communicate with you?

Community Member 1: Hmmm.

CCW Chair: Is that the sort of thing you mean?

Heidi Mottram: We have to work to a legal framework on this, so we have to agree with the Environment Agency what the plan is and what we do by when, and we have to publish that. This is a regulated plan that we do, so I'm just conscious we would have to comply with that plan. We're very happy to share that plan with you, Community Member 1, it's in the public domain, but that's how it works. The government is regulating timescales on this.

Community Member 1: Okay.

CCW Chair: And so, you're clear Heidi, obviously at the end of this session when everyone's contributed, you'll have the opportunity for that to be captured in the document that results from this, so I do appreciate there are often reason why things have to be done in a particular way.

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TMcK Facilitator: Yeah, we talked about timeframes in the briefing session - we talked about when timeframes aren't met, and I wonder whether there's anything that anybody wants to raise on that?

Community Member 6: I'll tell you what I think would be really interesting is, you're doing local newsletters, why not have, because I agree with Community Member 1, the level of our rivers are going down, and fish stocks are going down, if we could have some pie charts locally to how our rivers are doing? Because there was a lot in the press about a year or so ago about we're going to run out of water eventually because we keep taking water from the rivers. So that would be interesting to have a localised thing on your news sheets or whatever, websites.

TMcK Facilitator: There's a couple of actions already, 7 and 8, which focus on improving the information on pollution and storm overflows, so it's definitely captured on those actions. I suppose what the focus was that we wanted to raise today was about the measurable improvements and what will be actually delivered and how that will be accountable in the briefing session, wasn't it? I don't know if there was anyone else that had any other thoughts on this, or any other actions that we'd want to capture?

Community Member 9: If they are seeing the fish stocks declining maybe that's where the measurable point is. You know, if they're working with local fish farms and saying, "Right, this is how we've noticed [inaudible 01:14:09] we're going to make a target of 5%-10% and this is the fish farm that we're working with."

Then it's measured locally. I think that's the way probably to do it, because I know [inaudible 01:14:26] how much water fall [inaudible 01:14:25] but stuff out of our control, but fish, if that is actually them directly linked to pollution then they can say, "Right, we've cleaned up the pollution, now we've noticed a lot of fish coming back or the next spawn of fish."

But at least we would know they are working with it. I think they know what the measurable target is that's set now, what the baseline is, to then working with the fish farms locally to get that baseline up by 5%, up by 10%, so legally they know exactly what they're working to. Then everyone can actually see the measurable difference.

TMcK Facilitator: On the actions there on the screen, is there anything else that we want to clarify or add to? Are we happy with what's there, is there anything that's missing?

Community Member 4: I just wondered whether not having my wastewater dealt with by Essex & Suffolk Water, obviously that's Thames, it's not really a relevant question I suppose, I just wondered if they have the same way of dealing with things? Because I find this a little bit irrelevant to me because of the local rivers are not dealt with, so I just wondered if it was the same sort of way of dealing with things?

TMcK Facilitator: More comparing how they benchmark themselves against other wastewater companies?

Community Member 4: Yeah.

TMcK Facilitator: Do you want to have more information on that Community Member 4, is that something or the rest of the remaining community as well would like to see?

Community Member 4: Yeah, 100%, that's one of my biggest bugbears and it's difficult for me because it's not being handled by Essex & Suffolk Water, so I can't really get it there.

TMcK Facilitator: But the point of comparison is an important one, yeah?

Community Member 4: Hmmm.

TMcK Facilitator: Would anybody else like to come in on this, are we happy with the actions, shall we move back to Heidi on that for a response? Okay, we'll move back to Hilary.

CCW Chair: Thanks very much Clare, and obviously it's the same situation that we had last time, if Heidi and her team would like to just have a look at those actions and let us know if there are any that they don't feel are reasonable or there are various constraints which if you could articulate those, we can capture them, that would be really helpful?

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Heidi Mottram: Okay, so I think that's what I was trying to mention before, so in the world of our regulation on the reduction of pollutions, we have to publish every year, and it's a legal requirement, a Pollution Incident Reduction Plan which outlines in a lot of detail what we're going to do, where and when and what impact we think it's going to have, and the EA comes back and tells us if that plan is adequate.

We work to that plan, and we have monthly meetings with the EA, and we explain to them where we are against that plan. So, I'm sorry if I came in a bit too soon, but was trying to sort of explain when colleagues were saying, "Could we have timescales?" The answer is yes, but they will be those legally compliant. But they're very frequent and we can definitely give information to the community either directly or I think we also had a suggestion that perhaps we could put some of that information into our newsletters. And of course, we can do that and we can do that in a localised way. So that's what I was thinking around all of that.

I think there were a few other things that you asked me as well. On the thing about the fish going down, I'll be honest with you, I was a bit confused about that because in my world, and the information I have, it's the complete opposite, the fish is going up. So, I'm asking my team in the background about that, and I think what might have caused the problem here Community Member 1 is, apparently the EA have got fish counters on all of the rivers, and the fish counters are broken.

There are literally articles about this that aren't being shared with me, so the counting has been wrong. The Anglers' Federation have published an article about the state of the fish in the Tyne and where they're saying it's the complete opposite, it's getting better and better, and it's now better than most of the Scottish salmon rivers. So, we'll maybe have that conversation offline, but I think there is some miscommunication going on about the fish stocks in the rivers because the Tyne is one of the best rivers in the country, it is improving and the fish are improving in it, not the way that Community Member 1 was coming across.

So there are potentially other issues in other rivers in other parts of the country, but not that river, So I think this could be something to do with the way things are being monitored, but I'm very happy to take that offline and provide a bit more information to the community offline, but I think that's not true, the fish stocks they're actually going up not down at the moment. I just wanted to come back on that.

I think we were getting asked about the locations, the two beaches that we need to work on, one of them is Cullercoats, which for those people in the North East, they'll be familiar where that is. We've done some actions there which we think are now going to make that beach pass next year because the bathing season has just finished.

Then we've got a new beach which hasn't had any work done, it's just recently been designated as a bathing water, so we're at the beginnings of studying that one. I think Cullercoats will be fixed, everything will be going in the right direction, and then we'll work on this new one. So that's what's happening there.

CCW Chair: Heidi, could you possibly tell us what that new one is?

Heidi Mottram: Yes, it's called Littlehaven, and it's the south side of the Tyne, so on the South Shields side, but it's at the mouth of the Tyne and it was only designated as a bathing water this year. Then I think it was Community Member 2 that was asking us what have we done over the years? Well, a heck of a lot is the answer to that, all sorts of work to keep, to intercept flows, to improve flows, to keep water away from the beaches.

A million different things to get that good and excellent rating, which everybody should feel really pleased about. Because the beaches in the North East, we all know are the most beautiful in the country and I'm really pleased that we can have that accolade as having the best beaches in the country, that's really good.

CCW Chair: So, you're happy with the provisos you've made, Heidi, with the actions that have been outlined?

Heidi Mottram: Yes, I think it's just that legal plan that we have to comply with, yeah.

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CCW Chair: Clare, is that everything from you?

TMcK Facilitator: Yes, thank you, and we can move on to the Q&A now, we've got some time for that.

CCW Chair: Brilliant. We've now completed our new challenge question; this will all be added to the company's action plan alongside the commitments we agreed in that first session. We're now going to move on to the final part of the session which is your Q&A with the company. There's not going to be a timer in this section, but we are asking whoever is answering from Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water to keep your answers preferably to no more than three minutes.

We're going to start with our first question that I think is coming from Community Member 4?

Community Member 4: I had a leak outside my home that I reported repeatedly, but it still took six weeks to repair, and a significant amount of water was wasted. Customers report visible leaks being left for weeks while being asked to save water, what repair standard will you commit to for reported leaks, what and how will you communicate to the customers when standards are missed?

Heidi Mottram: You've heard a lot from me, so I'm going to bring one of my team in to answer this, because this is her area of expertise, so I've got Katie Davis on the line, so I'm going to ask Katie to come in because this is what she manages.

Katie Davis: Hi everyone, really lovely to meet you. I have a really wide role, but I live in Essex, so hello to those that are based in Essex and Suffolk, I live south of Chelmsford near our Hanningfield Reservoir actually that got mentioned earlier.

If you want to talk about Hanningfield Reservoir, I think we'll get on to that? But yes, I also look after our leakage strategy, and as you'll be aware it has been a really tough summer for us, this year in particular.

We don't want leaks running any longer than you do, so please be assured of that. But the challenge we've had this year in particular has been that it's been so dry and the moisture in the ground has reduced so much, that we've had a lot of significant movement particularly in the clay soils that we get in Essex. So, we have been having to, unfortunately, prioritise and not get to everything as quickly as we'd like to.

Of course, we want to be there as quickly as possible, but we've had to go through a prioritisation process because of the volume of leaks that were being created by the drought really escalated, particularly in July and August. So, we look at a number of different factors because some leaks are more complex, the accessibility of them, the material we need to do the repair, what part of the network that leak is serving.

But most importantly, it's about the amount of water that that leak is letting in to the environment, so we go after those leaks that have the biggest benefit in terms of keeping all of our precious water in our pipes.

That's how it kind of works and you will have seen, unfortunately, more leaks left than ever before, we don't normally work in that way, but this summer has just been an exceptional challenge for us, so it's been that prioritisation really that's led to some being left longer than normal.

Heidi Mottram: It's probably worth adding, when things are not as extreme as they are, we normally work to an average of fixing leaks within five days, so you can see why your six weeks is really unusual for us, we would not typically go that long, it's just been the extreme circumstance.

The other thing we're very proud of is that the leakage levels in Essex & Suffolk are the lowest in the country, they're really low, and significantly below what you'd see in Europe and other places. We're normally very good at this but you get extreme conditions and it's really hard to keep on top of it, so we've been working hard. It's beginning to come back down to our normal levels now, it's calming down a bit, but July and August were just a bit of a pig for us.

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Katie Davis: Also, all of the leaks that we go out and fix, not all of them are visible as well, but we know that for customers the visible leaks are the ones that are important to you. So, whilst we're also doing a lot of detection of leaks that can't be seen on the surface, we do make sure, as Heidi says, that that standard of service is maintained as much as we possibly can for things that matter to you, where you can see them.

CCW Chair: Community Member 4, do you want to come back on that?

Community Member 4: Yeah, there was one thing, I came home one day and there was a big, blue circle round the mains outlet, which the leak started from, and I didn't know what that was until it started leaking. It was a fountain actually, a small fountain. I rang up and a gentleman came out and he said, "Oh yeah, this one's been earmarked because we listened to it and we could hear gushing. We'll get someone out to you within three or four days."

Which didn't happen, so I just wondered if it had been earmarked, perhaps before things got busy, it might have been wise to address it then and not leave it until it was a fountain. It actually got worse, I was abroad and my daughter rang me and she said while she was here checking up on things someone knocked and said, "Has anyone reported this leak outside your property because it's getting really bad?" She had to disturb me on holiday, and I had to ring from Spain to find out what was going on. Then it still took another five weeks after that.

Katie Davis: Brilliant that it had been marked up, and yes, we do listen to leaks, so we actually have people going round and listening because it's quite easy to hear that gushing as soon as you've got a connection to the main. But we also do it with technology as well, so we have loggers that are doing that kind of acoustic monitoring as well and looking out for leaks.

Yeah, that's absolutely what we want to do Community Member 4, is get to those leaks before they get worse because that can be how they progress, once there's a small amount of water escaping, then that condition can deteriorate. We do want to do that and absolutely in times where we haven't got a lot of large and visible leaks, they're all the leaks that we're going and fixing, and that's how we have achieved that 11% which is the lowest amount of leakage in the country is by doing it proactively. So totally agree that we do need to be – we're doing that proactive stuff as much as possible, and therefore the visible leaks will reduce as a result because we get in there early.

CCW Chair: Heidi, did you want to come in?

Heidi Mottram: No, I think Katie's answered that really well. I just probably might quickly add what was really – I mean we were hiring more people to do all of this work, but quite a number of our people in the North East where it wasn't quite as problematic volunteered to go down to Essex as well.

I think that just shows how committed people in the company are, that they would want to go and help their colleagues in Essex, so they did that. We are largely back on top of it now, but it did peak, but we get it back down as quickly as we can. Even with everything that's going on we're still confident with the work that we do that we'll meet our targets by the end of the year because we'll just keep working and keep working to get it back underneath again. Because obviously the restrictions are still there and we want to get those off as soon as we can.

CCW Chair: Are there other members of the community that would like to come in at that point, anything they'd like to add? Community Member 4, one of the things you were asking for is about repair standards, so did you want something that was more generic that you understood that actually committed to a certain number of days or weeks or a target, is that what you were looking for in your question?

Community Member 4: Well, I was given these targets repeatedly and then it just didn't happen. So, I think there were about three or four phone calls where it was first a few days, then it's a week and then I was given a date and then I got, I can't remember if it was an email or a text message to say, "Really sorry but we're going to have to move the repair date," and that happened twice.

It seemed like – I know there were a lot of leaks going on and obviously mine was one of the smaller ones. It didn't look that small to me but compared to a lot that I know were going on and had major roads shut while they were fixed, so I do understand that.

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Heidi Mottram: I'm sorry we did that to you. As I said, our normal standard would be five days, and we do typically meet that but yeah, it just was a bit of a bad couple of months.

Community Member 4: Yes.

Heidi Mottram: And I'm sorry we disturbed your holiday, can I apologise.

Community Member 10: What happens if they don't meet your targets of the repairs?

Heidi Mottram: So, the target of five days is one we set for ourselves because we know that that's really important, so we want to do that. But then the leakage amount is something that we are regulated on as we've talked a few times about by the agencies Ofwat and the Environment Agency, but across the year we are being very successful at meeting our leakage targets and our reductions.

As I said, in Essex & Suffolk, that's the area where we are the best in the industry and we're not that far behind in the North East actually, we're very good in the North East as well. Not all companies meet their leakage targets and we're very proud that we do. But it does mean that if we go up in July and August then we just have to work like hell to get back underneath again, so that's what we do.

Katie Davis: And it's always the weather at different times of year causing different problems with leakage because of course we go into the winter, and we have the freeze thaw effect that also can cause ground movement and pipes to burst. So, it's kind of a year-round challenge but leakage never sleeps, we are on it literally every day. There are a lot of people in our company getting out to bed to ensure that leakage is as low as possible.

We do find that customers always ask us about this and you want us to play our part while we're asking you to play yours in terms of reporting leakage but also in terms of your consumption. So, we do take it incredibly seriously, so yeah, please rest assured that we want leakage to be as low as possible.

CCW Chair: Is there a point possibly community, around communication then, how far you feel communicated with around this sort of issue, is that another point you want to talk about? Katie, it sounds like there's a lot of issues that play into it, and I suppose it's people understanding that, isn't it, when you say the two months were very difficult, it is immensely difficult, and I think this was your point Community Member 4, wasn't it, that there you were not able to water your tomatoes, there was a small fountain outside your front door, which I know is just the nature of the beast, isn't it, Katie?

Katie Davis: Yeah, so my team are looking across all of demand, so they're looking after leakage but they're also looking at how do we work with households and how do we work with businesses to reduce demand?

It is all part of that bigger picture, so whilst we're trying desperately hard to keep leakage low, we're also simultaneously having, as you say Hilary, that conversation with customers about using water wisely, particularly in years like this year where we have been under such water stress. We do share some statistics within the infographics that we've been publishing on a monthly basis that actually links to the conversations that we're having, like the beginning of this session where a picture speaks a thousand words.

We've been trying to give some statistics on how much rainfall we've had compared to normal, how our reservoir stocks are going, but also how many leaks we've fixed, to try and give a balanced view of how we are from a resources perspective but also a leakage fix. So, if there's anything leakage statistics that would be helpful, then yeah, we'll be able to discuss that.

TMcK Facilitator: In the background we've captured an action here I could share with you, is to adhere to company leak repair targets and if not possible, to explain the reason why it can't be met clearly and as soon as possible to the affected customers. That was one action that seemed to come out of what we were talking about just now, and I wonder if that's something that the community agrees with?

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CCW Chair: Yeah, I can see nodding.

TMcK Facilitator: I won't share but if you agree, it's communicating this target and the reason why it can't be met clearly as soon as possible, so around missed (overtalking)

CCW Chair: Heidi and Katie, are you happy with that?

Heidi Mottram: Yeah, absolutely, I mean we can certainly put that into our newsletter, some extra stuff there, although I've seen it, so I know it's already there. And with those extra elements to it, Clare, and we can feed back into the community of course, as we've discussed before. But we are definitely getting back to normal at the moment and now we just need to fill those reservoirs up.

One thing I just wanted to mention because I think this is a real positive for people in Essex, that we did significantly increase the holding capacity of Abberton Reservoir back in 2015, and that's one of the reasons why Essex is in a much better position than it otherwise would be in terms of its security of supply. So, they're down a bit on where they normally are, but without that investment that we put in it would have been a lot worse.

We hope now we can fill the reservoirs up in the winter and everything will be fine for next year, and you shouldn't be worried about it at the moment. But we all need to be sensible with water, that's just a general thing that we should be, we should respect it.

CCW Chair: Clare, shall we move to the next question? I'm now asking Community Member 1, I think he wants to ask the next question, is that right, Community Member 1?

Community Member 1: I have a real concern about how executive rewards and additional payments are justified when customers are paying more and areas of performance still need to improve. Reportedly, between 2024 and 2029 you will receive an annual retention payment separate from your salary and not linked to performance conditions. How are you going above and beyond business as usual to justify this significant additional payment each year?

Heidi Mottram: I'll explain how my remuneration works in the round in a moment, but one thing I guess is probably really important to make clear is that customers are not paying for that retention payment, that payment is coming from the shareholders, so customers don't cover that at all. That doesn't mean to say that I shouldn't perform or have targets set because I absolutely should, because that was the shareholders wanting to make sure that I stayed in the business, and you're not paying for that in any way, shape or form.

Normally what is built around my pay is my salary and then a performance bonus, and that is set against the criteria that customers say are the most important to them. So, we research that and we continue to research it to make sure that they're the most important criteria. And they're all the things that you would expect, some of them that we've talked about, for example, leakage, customer service, environmental performance, all of those things, exactly the things, I think, that you'd expect to see there.

We set the goals and targets at very stretching levels, not just to meet government or regulatory targets, but to beat them and to be the best in the industry. We have to perform really highly in order for that performance bonus to ultimately be paid, and that's how that works, so I hope you find it reassuring that that can only get paid if we are providing the very highest levels of service to you, and I think that's absolutely as it should be.

Our targets are significantly higher than many other water companies because we perform highly and we push ourselves hard. I don't set those targets for me, I'm not allowed to do that in the way that remuneration works, they're set for me by the board, but I think that they are right to push me to go further. And the retention was just because they wanted to make sure because we generally do perform well, we're not perfect but we generally do perform well, they wanted me to stay in the business so they decided that they would pay that additional money to keep me in the business, but that's not being paid for by customers.

CCW Chair: Community Member 1, do you want to come back on that?

Community Member 1: Yeah, I know everybody's got to take with a pinch of salt what's printed in the press and correct me if I'm wrong, my understanding is that bonuses per say were, I don't know if the word is "banned" or "stopped" in 2024, 2025, am I correct in what I'm saying there?

Heidi Mottram: Yes, kind of. So, the government decided, it created something called the Special Measures Bill, it was a smaller, additional piece of legislation that said if certain things happened in water companies, then no bonus could be paid at all in that year. And they were things, for example, like a Category 1 pollution and we haven't had a Category 1 pollution for many years, it's something we work incredibly hard not to have for obvious reasons, that would be a serious pollution happening.

But one of those criteria would be if a regulator took an action against the company and they did do in 2024, they've done it again to all the water companies for exactly the same reason, so we're not alone in that. They decided to do an investigation in to companies, it was quite a technical thing, I could try to explain it to you.

But imagine that they looked at lots of different things and decided that things were not as they should be, and they levied what's called an "enforcement undertaking", it was actually not a fine that went away from the company, it was actually a payment where they asked us to invest in some additional things in the company. But because we had that, that was one of those criteria which meant for me as the chief exec, I didn't get a bonus in that year.

Community Member 1: Can I come back again, is that all right?

CCW Chair: Please do Community Member 1, yes.

Community Member 1: This leads, what you just said Heidi, thanks very much, I understand exactly what you say. As I said, what you read in the press has got to be taken with a pinch of salt, it was reported in the press, and I'm sure you will have seen this as well, that it was a get around bonus, a way of paying a bonus in a roundabout fashion. It was reported in the press that it was a get around bonus, it was a means of giving you a bonus indirectly when bonuses had essentially been stopped.

Heidi Mottram: It wasn't intended to be that at all, it was a – and bearing in mind, I don't make these decisions, the way it works for chief execs is that the boards think about the person that they've got and what they think they ought to pay them and how they think it ought to work. I am not allowed to be party to that in any way, shape or form, and I think you should be reassured by that, because that's exactly how it should be.

They look at, it's awkward for me to answer these questions Community Member 1, but they made a decision particularly because I am the most experienced CEO in water now and they wanted to keep me, that's obviously very nice to be wanted in that way, and they decided that they would do that this way. But they were determined not to be devious about it, or not to make it incredibly clear what they were doing, and to make it very public what they were doing because in some other places things have been surfaced that were not very transparent, and I think that's caused a bit of upset in certain places.

So, our board decided that they were going to tell me about what they were doing, and why they were doing it, and then they've done it. So, it wasn't intended to be a get around or a do anything, it was their concern that I might consider moving elsewhere or doing something because it's not always necessarily the easiest thing to be a chief executive in water just now. But I love it, right, and I really care about what I do, and I work incredibly hard and my team work incredibly hard and I'm very proud.

We're not always getting it right, but I can tell you, we put our damndest into doing this and they wanted to keep me doing that, so that's why they decided to do that. I didn't ask them to, that's what they decided to do but it was intended to be very transparent and it is, which is why you know about it.

CCW Chair: Does anybody else want to come in on this point? No? I think Community Member 1, your question was really, there was also a part to your question, wasn't there, about how far going beyond business as usual to justify additional payments?

I suppose that's another part of it Heidi, isn't it, because obviously people are very well paid for doing a very difficult job, however going that extra mile and as you say, being retained, I think that would be quite an interesting point for you to just focus on, is what is business as usual and what is going beyond?

Heidi Mottram: That's what I guess I was trying to say when I was explaining how the performance criteria and the bonus work. So obviously there was quite a penalty there for having that enforcement that it all went, but when we set targets for me, they're not set at the regulatory level, which would be, if you like, almost we would consider that the least we could do, if you like, so we set our targets above and beyond that. We've had praise from Ofwat back that our targets are set considerably higher than most of the other companies because we want to make sure that our idea is to be industry-leading at everything that we do.

When we're industry-leading, which we are in quite a few things already, then we say we don't just sit there and go, "This is great, we're better than everybody else," we then push ourselves to go further and further because we want to give you the best service that we can give you. So, they've written back to us and said that they're impressed with how stretching our targets are, we can see everybody else's targets, so we can see our targets are more stretching than the vast majority of other companies.

So, places are targeted zero, so you can't beat that, that's quite difficult to beat that, but for example, serious pollution, the target is to have none, we can't go lower than none. So, I think we push hard, it's not what I would call business as usual Hilary because that would be regulatory standards, we push ourselves beyond that and we don't get the reward unless we get beyond that.

CCW Chair: Is there anything else anyone wants to say on this, or shall we move to the next question?

TMcK Facilitator: Community Member 6 has got his hand up there, Heidi Community Member 6?

Community Member 6: Yeah, I did some research on board members' pay rises, and when they were sold off the water companies, the study here I was looking at said the pay rises for board members went up from 156% to 200%. I really can't understand why there is such a disparity whether it's a government-run company or whether it's run by private enterprise, why is there such a disparity in pay for board members and water companies?

Heidi Mottram: So, Community Member 6, I have got absolutely no idea of what went on back 30 years ago because I wasn't here, but the way the remuneration looks at things they will look at what do people get paid now in jobs that look like mine, that's what typically remuneration committees do because you can gather up all that information. So, they might look at what water companies pay people or they might look at what senior people do in government and all these different things and try to work out what they think an appropriate level would be across all of those different benchmarks. And they make that decision; I don't make that decision.

It's like anything, we make those decisions for when we're employing people inside our company, and we do it much the same way, if I'm looking for people to be leakage technicians, for example, we would look at what would somebody doing that job typically get paid across a variety of different places. It's no different for chief execs really, remuneration committees just look at who gets paid what for doing what and draw a conclusion about what they think the right level of pay for me is, and that's their decision, not mine.

CCW Chair: Community Member 6, did you want to come back?

Community Member 6: No, that's all, it just interests me because I remember at the time one of the chairmen of one of the water companies, his pay went up overnight by 20%, you know, and I thought at the time, "That don't make sense, you're still doing the exactly the same job, you've still got the same job title."

Heidi Mottram: It's difficult for me to know. I typically get the same pay award as the employees every year, that's what we do in my company. You know, whatever we give them, I get.

CCW Chair: I think if everybody's happy, I think we could move to the next question, and I think Community Member 10 is asking that, aren't you?

Community Member 10: I found the hosepipe restrictions confusing and only later as it went on, I found that basically because of my disability I was exempt. It made me realise how difficult it can be for customers to know what applies to them. After the summer's hosepipe restrictions, what will you put in place before summer 2027 to reduce the risk of another ban and how will you make exemptions clearer for all customers?

Heidi Mottram: Thanks very much for that question, Community Member 10, and I think there was a fair bit of learning in this if I'm getting this right. So, I'll bring Katie back in again because it's definitely in her space, but we were working hard to get this clear, but I think there's more work we need to do here for sure. Obviously, we're going to try really hard not to have any restrictions in the future but it's important that people know what's relevant to them, I totally get that. So, Katie, do you want to come in and explain a bit about how we went about doing that?

Katie Davis: I certainly can, thank you, Heidi. So, another part of my role is I chair our Drought Management Group internally and then liaise with regulators like the Environment Agency and other water companies as we work through what is pretty much a national challenge really this year. So, in terms of how we work preparing and communicating the temporary use ban - it's the first time we've put a temporary use ban in place since 1998. So, as Heidi's mentioned we've got learning to take from this year because it has been thankfully a really rare occasion that we've needed to put these restrictions in.

Lots of consideration went into making sure that we were doing it at the right time, for the right reasons, primarily to make sure that we were playing our part in protecting the environment as well as adhering to what we had in terms of our drought plan actions and monitoring our reservoirs and rainfall levels. So that was a kind of starting point there in terms of where we were approaching a temporary use ban.

Then we had teams from across the business getting that ready for communication and we wanted to make it as clear as possible, and we also knew that there had been some companies that had introduced the temporary use ban before us, so we tried to gather as much learning as we could from what they'd done to make sure that we provided things like a comprehensive Q&A section for customers to access.

So, any kind of common questions that had come in through customer contact centres, we were able to address in the first instance, rather than waiting for those questions to be asked. But we do recognise that we have had customer contacts on specific circumstances or specific parts of the temporary use ban that we have been then fielding through the customer contact centre.

There's a whole host of us on a group chat that can all input into answering any of those sorts of questions if people have any kind of queries on whether or not it applies to them. I'm really sorry that you found it difficult to find that in the first instance, but pleased that you've got that clarity now and that we can make sure that we make it as clear as possible if, and when, we need it again.

To come to your point about what are we doing to make sure it doesn't happen next year. So, in order to get ourselves into a good position across the country, the Environment Agency as you may have seen in the press have said 120% of our long-term average rainfall is required in order to fully replenish all of the water stocks that we've lost through this year. That's because when the rain does arrive, it has to first saturate the ground, then the river levels need to come up and then enable that to then refill the reservoirs.

We're looking at that kind of amount of rain albeit that it is different in different areas and depending on the set up. So not all water companies have got the same types of resources in the same places, some rely more on reservoirs and surface water, some are more groundwater, so it will be different per area and according to the weather that they've experienced.

In a nutshell, we're going to be continuing to manage this drought throughout the winter period because we need to be in a really positive position at the spring time of next year, so we'll be doing absolutely everything we can to maximise the refill of our reservoirs and also keep demand down, which we were talking about earlier in terms of leakage and consumption.

CCW Chair: Community Member 10, would you like to come back, did that answer your question?

Community Member 10: Yeah.

Session transcript

CCW Chair: Community Member 5, I think you're looking like you'd like to come in and then Community Member 6?

Community Member 5: Yes, only quickly, I want to see if there's confirmation of how large the investment will be into Hanningfield Reservoir to combat the water scarcity levels, can you commit on that, Heidi?

Heidi Mottram: Yes, so at the moment we think that we've actually got enough resources to get Hanningfield back to where it needs to be for next year because we invested about, I'd say £150m about five years ago in Abberton Reservoir, that really helped everything. We built a transfer pipe between Abberton and Hanningfield so that we could move water between the two reservoirs.

We're hopeful that we'll get ourselves into a decent position, but we are now looking at potentially some extra resources into possibly what they call "effluent reuse" where we can partially treat effluent and then put it into the raw water system to use as well, and that will be the next thing that we look at in Essex. And in Suffolk I'm conscious with community members there, we're walking our way towards the possibility of a new reservoir in Suffolk. Suffolk's got a lot of new businesses coming in that are using a lot of water and we need to respond to that, and we will probably build a new reservoir in due course in Suffolk.

CCW Chair: Community Member 6, can I bring you in?

Community Member 6: Just a quick one, we've got a hosepipe ban around here and I find it really hard to find out whether it's still in place. Would it be possible to put an ETA of when it might be lifted in the newsletter and on your website, but on the main page, because I really find it hard to find out whether it's still in place or not?

Heidi Mottram: Definitely in place and probably not going to come off until February/March next year.

Community Member 6: Could you put that on your website and newsletter?

Heidi Mottram: Definitely we'll put it everywhere, we'll put it in the newsletter because I think this is working well for people, but there are various other places we can put it on our website and on social media to try and give people a clue about what's going to … If there's a massive, unprecedented downpour, it will come off sooner and we'll let you know.

Community Member 6: Why not put a clock on there, a countdown to how many days until we can use it? Because I'm dyslexic and I find where you put things in print, sometimes I lose it.

Heidi Mottram: Okay, well let's think about that then. At the moment it's a bit difficult to be very specific because unfortunately, we can't predict the weather, it feels like nobody can predict the weather at the moment and it really is very weather dependent.

TMcK Facilitator: There's a couple of actions there, just letting customers know the ETA of when that ban might be lifted, so making that clear, and looking to build information around the reservoir in the Suffolk area will be interesting for people, but that was just the two actions they've covered there. And just to touch on the point about communication before Hilary wraps up, I know that the monthly updates provided by Northumbrian Water are fed through to the community through the traffic light systems, the action plan that you receive from your panel manager, so that information is passed on to you every month, so that's just to touch on what was mentioned in Q1, just to let you know.

CCW Chair: I'm conscious of time for everybody and we did say we'd finish at 8, so if I may, unless there's anything absolutely pressing, can I just give you a few more follow-up actions, so you know what's going to be happening? The actions you've seen on screen have been captured live as you saw and form a basis of the Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water's follow-up action plan. So, in terms of next steps for everybody, a summary report which will be a fully anonymised transcript, and a full list of actions will be published within seven working days, which will be by Wednesday 11th November.

Session transcript

Before publication, session members will have the opportunity to request changes such as redaction of personal information. Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water must publish its action plan within 28 days, so that takes us to Thursday 10th December, setting out how it will deliver against the agreed actions and CCW will publish this on their website.

Once the action plan is published, community members will be sent a link and a short survey asking whether the action plan accurately reflects what was agreed and whether it's enough to address the concerns, and you'll have 10 days to respond. CCW will then track progress against the action plan through the Water Voice process. This process is designed to make sure tonight leads to follow through, not just discussion.

Finally, I want to thank all of you, all community members for the time, thought and challenge you've brought and I'd like to thank Northumbrian Water and Essex & Suffolk Water, which I have to say for the last time, which is a huge mouthful, for engaging in the process, your input is what gives these sessions their purpose and we're very grateful indeed to everybody. So, thank you all very much indeed, and good evening.

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